

Kisa Gotami and the Mustard Seed

Kisagotami Theri (ThigA 10.1)

Kisa Gotami had in a previous lifetime been born in the days of Padumattara, a Buddha. One day she went to hear the Master preach the Truth. There she saw Him give the highest honor to a sister who wore coarse garments. So she made a vow that she too would aspire to that honor.

After many rebirths in the worlds of devas (gods) and mankind, she took birth during the time of the Buddha Shakyamuni at Savatthi in a poor household where she was called Gotami. She was so lean that they called her Gotami the Lean (Kisa). When she married, her new family scorned her, but when a son was born she was honored.

When her son was old enough to walk, he suddenly fell and died. Kisa Gotami was filled with anguish, and in her love for the child she carried the dead body clasped to her hip and roamed the town, going from door to door asking for medicine. But people thought she was mad, and asked her: of what use is medicine? She was so deeply lost in her sorrow that she did not understand what they meant.

Then a certain wise man thought: 'This woman is distraught with sorrow for her child. I know of a doctor who will know how to help her'. So he said to her: 'Good woman, go to the Buddha, the Enlightened One, and ask Him for medicine for your child.'

So when the Buddha was teaching nearby, she went where he was staying and said: 'Oh Lord, give me medicine for my child.' And the Buddha replied: "I do have medicine for your child, but first I require some mustard seeds taken from a house where no son, husband, parent, or slave has died."

Kisa Gotami said, "Very good," and went to ask for some at the different houses, carrying the dead body of her son astride on her hip. The people said, "Here is some mustard seed, take it." But she asked, "In this home has there died a son, a husband, a parent, or a slave?"

They replied, "Lady, what is this that you say! The living are few, but the dead are many."

Then she went to other houses, but one said, "I have lost a son"; another, "I have lost my parents"; another, "I have lost my slave." At last, not being able to find a single house where no one had died, from which to procure the mustard seed, she began to think, "This is a heavy task that I am engaged in. I am not the only one whose son is dead. In the whole of the Savatthi country, everywhere children are dying, parents are dying." Thinking thus, she acquired an understanding of the Dharma, and laid her dead child to rest in a forest.

She then went to Gautama and paid him homage. He said to her, "Have you procured the handful of mustard seed?" "I have not," she replied; "the people of the village told me, 'The living are few, but the dead are many.'"

The Buddha then sang the following verse:

Care-stricken, with thoughts of children, herds, and possessions; Attached to life; Death comes and seizes everyone; Even as a flood sweeps a slumbering village away.

When he finished singing the verse, Gotami became an Arhat. She became famous in her practice and way of life, going about wearing the three coarse garments of the mendicant. Then the Buddha, as He sat in Jeta Grove and honored the Sisters, proclaimed her foremost of those who wore rough garments. Thus was her vow fulfilled.