

Kisa Gotami and the Mustard Seed

Translated by F.L. Woodward, Adyar, India, 1925 (1994), p. 32-36

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 honour to a sister who wore coarse garments. So she made a vow that she too would aspire to that honour.

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 honoured.

When her son was of an age to run to all kinds of places, he one day fell and died. She was very sad. She thought about the scorn she had received and that her son would be thrown out. So in her sorrow she took the dead body on her hip and roamed the town, going from door to door asking for medicine. But people mocked her 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. He of the Ten Powers 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 Master was teaching nearby, she went where he was staying and said: 'Oh Lord, give me medicine for my child.' And the Master, beholding her destiny, replied: 'Go to town, and beg a mustard seed in a house where no man has died.'

She did so and at the very first house asked: 'I would like a mustard seed as medicine for my child. If in this house no one has died, please give me a mustard seed.'

The answer was: 'Who knows how many people have died here'.

'Then what use is such a mustard seed?' she said and went on to the next house, and the next, never getting what she asked.

Her sorrow had abated a bit, and she came back to her right mind. She thought: 'All over this town it must be like this. The Buddha must have known this and in his wisdom made me see.' She rejoiced and threw the body out in a field and sang this verse:

This is no law for village or town, No law for any single family. Through all the world of devas and men This law holds good: *All is Impermanent.*

Content with her insight, she went back to the Buddha and he said: 'Have you found your mustard seed, Gotami?' She said: 'Done is the business of the mustard seed. Please teach me.' So the Buddha sang this verse:

Care-stricken, with his thoughts of sons and herds, Attached to life, Death comes and seizes man, Even as a flood sweeps a slumbering village away.

When the verse was ended, Gotami was established in the fruits of Stream-winning, and asked to be ordained as a nun. The Buddha agreed. Gotami worked with the Sisters and grew in insight. Then the Buddha sent forth a radiance and sang this verse to her:

Though one live a hundred years And see not the Deathless state, It is better to

live for a day And see the Deathless state.

When this verse was done 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 honoured the Sisters, proclaimed her foremost of those who wore rough garments. Thus was her vow fulfilled.