

Loss, Grief, And The Buddha: A Story

Prince Siddhartha Gautama, who, after his compassionate struggle to understand the nature of life, suffering, and truth, came to be known as the Buddha, the "Enlightened One", was loved and admired by those who had the privilege of knowing him. Here was a man who could have spent his life sheltered, in the luxury of a palace, from the misery, squalor, and despair of the masses who lived beyond the walls of his royal home. Instead, he chose to go out among them, to live with them and learn what their lives were like, and to know their pain: which became the driving force behind his own spiritual search. Eventually, the Buddha "awakened" to the truths which underlie existence, and gave to mankind a far greater treasure than he could have given them as a prince, for whatever wealth he might have been able to hand out to the poor from his palace coffers, would have been as a single drop of water in the desert - used up in an instant, reaching almost no one. On the contrary, his spiritual message has reached and served countless millions throughout the ages. As he, himself, said: "I teach only suffering, and the transformation of suffering." That was his great lesson, embodied in the "Four Noble Truths" and the "Eightfold Path", which were alloyed, in the consciousness of his followers, with many of the metaphysical and philosophical concepts of the deeply spiritual Hindu environment out of which Siddhartha Gautama had emerged, like a brilliant new flower rising up from a rich and ancient soil. Simply speaking, the Buddha sought to understand the nature of the Universe and life; to dispel illusions, and teach Humanity ways of ceasing to pit its heart against the inevitable; and to save men from entrusting their happiness, and the meaning of their lives, to that which was beyond their control. He did not dare to say that he could remove, from the world, the external events and conditions that caused men to suffer, only that he could show men how to transform their suffering into understanding, and liberate themselves by changing the way they perceived and reacted to what happened beyond them, and to them. This liberation - this path, illuminated by the Buddha - was accessible by means of certain concepts, which could help to reorganize the way one thought about life, and to provide a framework of guidance for attaining enlightenment - but much more than that, it was to be reached by the discipline, will, and personal effort of the individual human being who wanted to be free. The Buddha provided tools and encouragement, but it was up to each individual person, working with the material of his own life - his own feelings, his own attitudes, his own experiences, and his own wounds - to turn that inspiration and guidance into genuine vehicles of liberation. (For more on basic Buddhist teachings, see *The Heart Of The Buddha's Teaching: Transforming Suffering Into Peace, Joy, And Liberation* by Thich Nhat Hanh; or <http://www.buddhanet.net/index.html> or <http://buddhism.about.com/> .)

In the days that the Buddha lived, he was known to teach in many ways, sometimes directly discussing the intricacies of his path, at other times resorting to parables and actions to lead people to the insights he wished to reveal, and always giving others glimpses of how to live through his own example of compassion, kindness, patience, solidarity, and courage. Following, is one of the greatest lessons he ever gave, in which he led a student, who did not yet know she was a student, to become her own teacher:

It so happens that there was once a woman named Gotami, whose young child had just died. The woman was absolutely grief-stricken, thinking of how, only hours before, she had been holding a living, beautiful child in her arms, dreaming of their future together, all the more precious since so many other aspects of her life had been so hard. But now she was going to have a true friend, at last, and a reason to live. For nine months, Gotami had carried this child inside her womb, talking to it, even singing to it. And she had borne a terrible pain to bring it, crying, into the world. Hearing it cry, she had soon forgotten her own ordeal of giving birth, her heart running towards the pain of its crying, to comfort it. She had given it her breast, fed it, soothed it; and looking down at it, as it nursed, she had fully experienced, in her heart, the miracle of what life is. And experienced pride and a sense of self-worth, for the first time in her life, for being a part of this miracle. Feeling her baby's vulnerability and dependence on her, she was overpowered by sentiments of tenderness, love, and motherhood, which seemed to rush towards the child's need as naturally as water flows downhill. "We're going to be happy together. So happy," she told her tiny offspring, measuring the smallness of its fingers, which made her grow larger as a mother. "From now on, we will be inseparable. I will love you ten times more than I have been loved by this world, and you will have the beautiful life I only dreamed of." But then, Fate, cruel and merciless, had come, hunting down her helpless child like a cat that creeps through the brush to pounce upon an injured bird. Suddenly, sickness had struck her child, and in a few short days, the beautiful young life that was the center of her world had faded away. "No!" Gotami had cried out, her tortured mother's voice piercing the air like a knife, as she discovered that her child breathed no more. "No! It can't be!"

In the village, Gotami's neighbors came by to express their sympathy. But she heard nothing, they were like ghosts, shadows only, at the edge of her excruciating pain. "No, my baby can't be dead! It's not fair! My child won't die! No, I won't let it happen!" Little by little, the neighbor's sympathy turned to concern for Gotami, then, finally, to horror. "Cremate my child? Bury it? No, go away! Don't touch my baby!" And she began to talk to it. "You're all right, sweetheart, you're going to be all right. I promised you that we would stay together, and I meant it. I won't abandon you, no, not me. No one's going to take you away from me - not even death." And the neighbors watched, helplessly, as she wandered back and forth with her dead baby in her arms, or on her back, drawing water from the well, sometimes sitting down on a hill by herself, alternately crying or talking to it, her clothes dirty, her hair wild and uncombed, like a jungle without any order. They saw scratches and wounds on her body, and wondered if she had cut herself in grief, or merely fallen down, or passed through bushes of thorns, in her distraction. Plainly, Gotami's pain had driven her mad.

At last, a neighbor finally came up to try to do something. "Gotami," she began to say.

"Don't say it!" she screamed. "My baby's not dead yet!"

"But Gotami - "

"I'm praying. I'm praying. I know my child's life can be restored. My love is too great for it to be taken away from me. My love will save it. I know. My prayers will be answered."

The neighbor, knowing she did not have the power to take away Gotami's grief, or to restore her reason, said, "Gotami. Why don't you go to see the Buddha? It's plain to see there's nothing we can do to help you. But the Buddha is a very powerful and wise man. Maybe he can help you."

At that, a spark of hope jumped into Gotami's eyes, which had been vacant, yet intense with desperation. She thanked her neighbor, and getting to her feet, walked for some time until she finally reached the place where the Buddha was sitting beneath a tree. Seeing the spectacle of the grieving, disheveled mother with a dead baby, which should have been buried some time ago, still in her arms, the students attending to the Buddha stepped back to clear a space for her to approach.

"Great Buddha," she wept, suddenly moved to tears as she came into the presence of the one man in the world who could help her now. "Have pity on me! My child - look! Just the other day, my baby was so beautiful! The light of my eyes! Now - now - it breathes no more - I can't bear it!" As the tears poured down like rainstorms on her cheeks, she thrust the baby forth, towards the Buddha. "My heart is broken into little pieces - like a jar of clay hit by a hammer. Not once, but over and over again! You must save my child! You must bring my innocent, beautiful child back to life!" And she sobbed something else, that was incomprehensible, because her words were swallowed up by the ferocity of her weeping. But it must have been something like: "I can't live without my baby. I just can't."

For a long time, the Buddha looked at her, his eyes compassionate and moist, yet also deep with something not quite hard, not quite stone-like, yet infinitely durable - perhaps like the earth, which thousands walk upon without ever destroying. "Gotami," he said at last, quietly, while she looked up, like a cat that pricks up its ears, waiting to hear something that might save her child. "You ask me to save your child, to bring it back to life?"

"Yes, yes," she nodded, desperately, hopefully. "You're the Buddha. Everyone talks about you. You must be able to do it!"

"Well - I'll help you," he said. "On one condition."

"Yes, yes, anything," she begged.

"To bring your child back to life, I will need one mustard seed..."

Gotami's eyes lit up. Mustard was nothing but a common plant, here, a spice known and used by all.

But the Buddha was not yet finished. "... which must come from a house where no one has ever died."

"Yes, yes, fine!" cried out Gotami, joyfully certain that she would soon encounter such a seed to bring back to the Buddha, who would surely use it to perform some kind of life-restoring magic upon her dead infant. "I'll be back soon! Thank you so much!" And carrying her deceased child with renewed hope and vigor, she headed back towards the village to procure a seed.

As soon as she appeared before the door of one home, she told a woman of her conversation with the Buddha, and asked that she be given a mustard seed. "Gotami," the woman who met her told her, "I would be happy to give you a mustard seed. In fact, I would be happy to give you whatever you wanted from my home - anything that could help to ease the pain of your grieving heart, or bring back the life of your child. But the truth of the matter is, last year I lost my husband. How I'm able to live without him, I don't know. But here I am."

"I'm sorry," Gotami told her, adding, "I'll have to look elsewhere for my seed, since someone has died here. I'm sorry for your loss," she said again, as she left.

At the next house, the woman who met her was, likewise, eager to help. "Well - but no seed I could give you from my house could bring back your child," the woman said, sadly, after hearing of the Buddha's condition. "Someone has died in my house, too. Several years ago, I lost my daughter. I used to tell her, 'Let princesses have rubies and emeralds. I'm richer than all of them, because I have you.' You could tell she was going to be beautiful, you could see the woman beginning to come out of her girl's form. She would have had a fine husband, too, I'm sure of it. But now - poof! - just like a puff of smoke, she's gone. Was she ever here? I wonder. Now, all I have is memories. But they're so weak, so faded - like the surface of a stone, or water, that you're trying to use as a mirror, but it only reflects the crudest image of your face... In the same way, I keep trying to find her, and to be with her in my mind, but my memories don't give her back to me, just this shadow of her, that isn't the same. I want to feel her touch [the woman caressed her own shoulder, as her daughter once had], and to hear her voice, right beside me, and her beautiful laugh. But this is all I have: shadows of someone who was once as real as you and me."

Moved, Gotami offered the woman her heartfelt condolences, and then moved on to a third house. There a woman, with tears in her eyes, who looked so much like herself, said, "Sister of grief, my dear brother died just yesterday. Didn't you know?"

"No!" gasped Gotami. "I'm sorry. So sorry," she said, as she began to wipe away some tears that had begun to fall for the woman who had lost her brother, mixed with the tears she had shed for her own child.

And so it went. At every house she called on, she was offered sympathy, but also informed that that house had lost someone they had loved, someone precious to them, someone who they would never forget. "Dear Gotami, we would give you a seed, but..." Some of the houses offered her other things, while some tried to get her to accept mustard seeds, in spite of their own tragedies. "Well, why don't you take the seed anyway? Could it hurt?"

"No, you don't have to prove anything, I can see how generous you are," Gotami replied. "The Buddha was very clear. The seed must come from a house that has never lost anyone. Otherwise, it will not work." And so it went, until she had gone to every house in the village, and seen that there was not a single one where the people had not lost loved ones, and had their hearts broken.

It was some time later, as the Buddha sat with a group of students, that Gotami finally returned, strangely calm, her wild, haggard appearance now pacified. She did not walk with joy, but

neither did she come to him with the madness and confusion of before, like a storm destroying itself. There was a kind of grace in her sadness, and it seemed as though her soul was years older.

Again, the students parted to allow her to approach the Buddha.

"Welcome back, Gotami," he told her. "You have been gone a while. Where is the mustard seed? And why haven't you brought your child?"

Gotami looked at the Buddha, and fully grasped the radiance of his heart this time, which had so much more light than magic. "Buddha," she told him, humbly, "I could not find any house which has not been touched by death. Everywhere I went, people have lost a loved one. I'm not the only one. I'm just one of many. We all share this: this love that turns to grief; this loss; this human fate. No one escapes it. No one is too big for it, or loves too much for it. We're all in this together," she concluded.

"And your child?" the Buddha asked again, with infinite gentleness.

"Buried. I understood. This is life. I have no choice but to accept what has happened. My heart cannot change it. I must learn to live with what is, not with what I want but what cannot be."

The Buddha nodded, and his students marveled at the way he had brought Gotami to understand. He had led her into a situation in which she was certain to discover that death is one of the inescapable laws of life, and that no one can evade it. As the power and universality of that law began to impress itself upon her, the obvious futility of her rebellion against it had begun to quiet her. In the same way that people do not spend their lives lamenting the fact that they cannot fly like a bird, but come to accept the overwhelming law of gravity, which binds them to the earth, so knowledge of a law - real knowledge, that penetrates to the center of one's heart and consciousness - tends to decrease resistance to that law. Just as much as that, the task that the Buddha had set Gotami to, brought her into contact with other people who had suffered. The weight she felt that she, alone, in her grief, was carrying, was, she came to realize, actually shared by the entire world - which somehow made it lighter - not light - but lighter - and possible to bear. From being a lone victim, she was suddenly made part of a great family of suffering, and bound, in solidarity, to the whole of the wounded human race. She was exposed to the compassion of others, who were moved by her loss; and drawn to others by her own compassion, which their losses elicited from her. Hearts were tied together, solitude was ended, and she became part of a collective force of love and tenderness, stronger than death, which preserves the beauty of life, even in the midst of its greatest tragedies and limitations. Darkness may steal almost everything we know and own: our loved ones, our home, our food, our clothes, our life - but it cannot steal the jewels of compassion and nobility, which shine more brightly than diamonds in the hearts of those who have learned to love. Once we come to understand life and life's laws and life's potential, the tragedy of what we lose, and cannot keep, only increases the beauty of who we are. There is meaning and hope, no matter how dark.

Gotami now understood this. But she also understood that her journey had just begun. "Please," she asked the Buddha. "I know that I am no one. I have no right to ask you. But I wish that you

would teach me more. I want to learn. I want you to help my mind to open up to the truth, like a flower opens up to receive the rays of the sun."

"Gotami," the Buddha said, "you are someone. I would be honored to teach you. I long for you to be happy, and it *is* possible, even here, in *this* world." And he added, "Though you are just beginning, now, like a flower, opening up to the rays of the sun, one day you may be like a sun that helps to open up a flower!" And through Gotami, the Buddha spread more light into the world.