

## Kisagotami and the Mustard Seed

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### Keywords

Buddhism; Beliefs: impermanence, suffering

### Notes for teachers

This famous story tells of a bereaved mother's despair and how this is transformed by an encounter with the Buddha. The mother, a woman called Kisagotami, cannot accept the reality of having lost her young son. Instead of simply *telling* her the truth, the Buddha allows her to discover it herself, and this process of discovery is in some way curative.

The story teaches the inevitability of death, which is a part of the central Buddhist belief in **impermanence**. The Buddha taught that everything is impermanent, nothing stays the same, because everything is part of an endless causal chain. This impermanence is the main reason for another difficult aspect of our experience: **suffering** (Sanskrit: *duḥkha*; Pali: *dukkha*). These two features (suffering and impermanence) along with the lack of an essential soul or self, make up the **three marks of existence**, a key set of Buddhist concepts. All existence within the cycle of rebirth and redeath is characterised by these three marks.

According to Buddhist teachings, the suffering of existence can be allayed in part by accepting the impermanence that characterises our lives. In other words, it is not the constant change itself that is the problem, but our desire to keep things the same, to hang on to the people and pleasures around us now.

The story also tells us about how the Buddha was viewed as a teacher. Instead of teaching by preaching, he has a clever ruse to enable poor Kisagotami to learn through her own experiences. This eventually results in her overcoming her grief and becoming a Buddhist nun. She is later said to achieve nirvana, the only escape from suffering and impermanence available.

## Questions for Discussion

### Comprehension of the story

- Why can't Kisagotami understand that her son is dead?
- Why doesn't the Buddha just tell Kisagotami that everyone dies, rather than sending her off on the impossible mission?
- What does Kisagotami learn as she goes house to house seeking a mustard seed?
- What effect does Kisagotami's lesson have on her?
- What does she achieve as a result?

### Application to other contexts

- What are the advantages of learning from experience rather than from being told something?
- Can you think of an example of something important you have learnt by discovering it yourself?
- Why is it important to be able to accept the death of loved ones?
- Is there anything that can make it easier?

### Reflecting on wider Buddhist issues

- What do Buddhists believe about impermanence, and how does this story demonstrate this?
- What do Buddhists believe about suffering, and how does this story demonstrate this?
- What does the story tell us about the relationship between these two beliefs?
- What do we learn about the Buddha as a teacher?
- How does he choose to teach his followers?
- What is the significance of Kisagotami eventually achieving nirvana?

## Sources / Further Reading

This story is retold according to the Pali commentarial traditions surrounding the verses of the elder nuns. On the transformative power of maternal grief see Reiko Ohnuma, *Ties That Bind: Maternal Imagery and Discourse in Indian Buddhism* (OUP 2012), chapter 2. There are lots of youtube videos of various Buddhist teachers talking about impermanence and death, as well as other helpful conversation starters, for example a short meditative film here <https://youtu.be/u5d8NnvZvHU> or Hugh Laurie singing a blues song here <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O1gVpmIy6TE>

## Kisagotami and the Mustard Seed

Once upon a time there was a young woman called Kisagotami. She married and had a son, a lovely little boy. Disease struck the village, and the young child got sick and died. Kisagotami was distraught, and could not accept what had happened. She carried her child from house to house asking for medicine to cure her little boy. Time after time the people tried to tell her the child was dead, but she would not believe them.

Eventually a kindly villager told her, "I can't give you medicine, but I know a man who can. Go and visit the Buddha in his monastery." Kisagotami followed his directions and approached the Buddha.

"Please give me medicine to cure my son!" she entreated the Buddha. The Buddha replied, "I can cure your son if you can fetch me a mustard seed." "Of course!" responded Kisagotami, delighted by how simple this requirement was. "One thing, though," added the Buddha, "the mustard seed must come from a house in which nobody has ever died."

So off Kisagotami went again, knocking on the doors of the village, asking for a mustard seed. Everyone could spare her a seed, but when she asked if anyone had died in the household, the reply every time was: "Yes, of course."

After a while, the truth began to dawn on Kisagotami. Death was everywhere. Everyone had lost somebody they loved. She was selfish to think she was special, or that her child could be spared.

At last Kisagotami was able to accept that her child had died. She had a funeral performed, then returned to the monastery, where she thanked the Buddha for his teaching, and asked to become a nun. She was ordained and became one of the most high achieving nuns in the Buddha's community. After diligent practice, Kisagotami achieved nirvana, and was thereby freed from the cycle of death and rebirth.