

Lesson 28 – COURAGE – The Story of Sopaka

A little boy named Sopaka was born to parents who were very poor. He was a very kind-hearted and innocent boy. When Sopaka was very young, his father died suddenly. Later, Sopaka's uncle married his mother and became his stepfather. The stepfather was an angry, cruel man who always scolded and shouted at Sopaka, and even beat him, thinking that Sopaka was just another responsibility that he didn't want to have. He knew Sopaka's mother loved the boy very much, and this frustrated the stepfather even more.

One day, Sopaka got into a quarrel with his cousin, which infuriated the stepfather. That evening, the stepfather told Sopaka to go for a walk with him. Sopaka noticed that he had a kind voice, and thought maybe his mother had asked the stepfather to be nice to him. He innocently hoped that his stepfather was in a better mood.

He went with his stepfather out of the house. There was a cemetery nearby. As they approached it, Sopaka walked closer to his stepfather because he was scared of seeing the awful-looking dead bodies there. Instead of passing by the graveyard, his stepfather walked directly into the graveyard. Sopaka wondered why he was going there, but he dared not wait alone outside. So he walked in also. The stepfather walked near some dead bodies and took out a rope. Sopaka wondered what was going on, but he was so afraid of the dead bodies that he went very close to his stepfather. He watched his stepfather tie the rope around one of the dead bodies. What was he doing?

Suddenly, the stepfather held the other end of the rope toward Sopaka and grabbed Sopaka's hands. In horror, shock and confusion, Sopaka watched his stepfather tie the end of the rope tightly around both of Sopaka's hands. He was tied to the corpse!

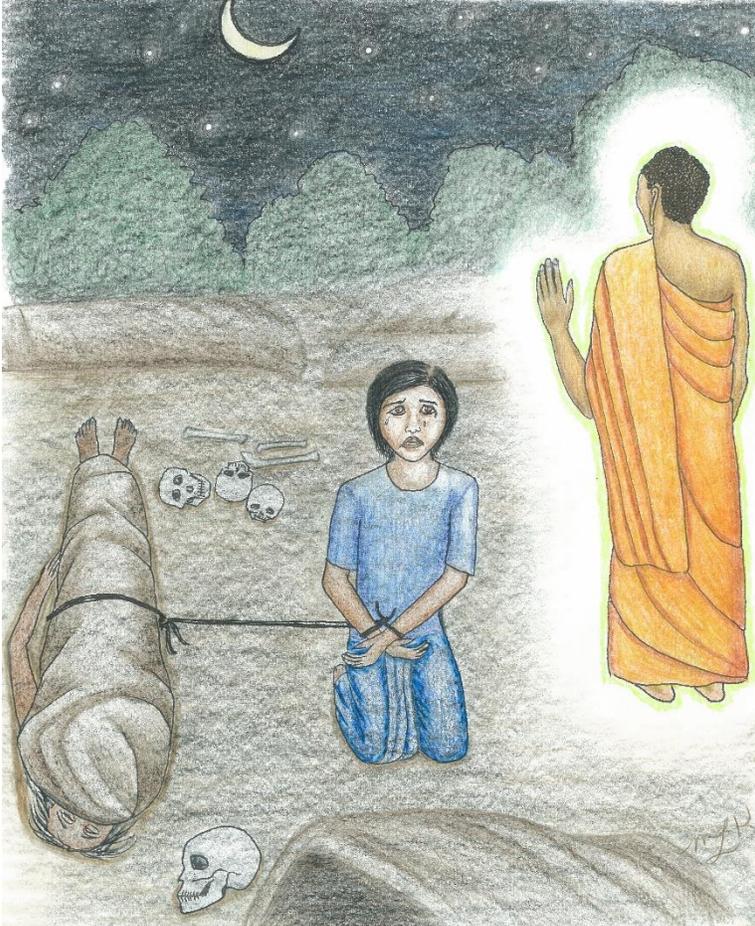
He wailed, "Oh father, don't do this to me, please! I'm scared!"

But the stepfather walked away.

"Don't leave me here, I'm scared!!" Sopaka cried.

He tried to break free, but the rope was very thick and tightly tied around his hands. He tried to walk away, but he couldn't pull the heavy dead body on the other end of the rope. He was stuck there, and absolutely terrified.

It was very dark, and there were noises of animals nearby in the jungle. He saw jackals prowling around. He cried louder and called out as loud as he could for help. But there was no one. He was totally alone.



But through his tears, he saw a bright light. Was it his imagination? Or could it be someone coming with a torch? The light was much brighter than a torch. Then he heard a kind voice calling his name, “Sopaka.” Was he imagining it?

The kind voice called his name again, saying “Don’t be afraid, I am here to help you.”

Then suddenly the rope that bound his wrists so tightly became loose and fell off. He saw a holy man in robes, with long earlobes and the kindest, most loving face he had ever seen, surrounded by a bright light.

He thought that he was in the cemetery, but suddenly he was sitting in a building with the holy man. It was the Buddha, who by his supernatural power had broken the ropes and suddenly transported Sopaka to the Jetavana Monastery, far away from the cemetery.

He was given clean clothes and food. He was silent, amazed, and couldn’t believe what had happened.

Meanwhile, the stepfather had returned to the house.

Immediately, Sopaka’s mother asked, “Where is my son?”

The stepfather acted surprised and said nothing.

The mother was terribly upset. She looked everywhere for him, calling out for him over and over again. But there was only silence in the dark night. She felt helpless and cried all night.

Finally, she thought, “People say that the Buddha knows everything, the past, present and future. Maybe he can tell me where my son is.”

She went early in the morning to Jetavana Monastery, and walked into the temple. The Buddha saw her worried, sad face with tears running down her cheeks.

He asked, “Sister, why are you crying?”

She answered, sobbing, “My only son, he went with my husband for a walk last night but didn’t come home. He’s been missing all night.”

The Buddha said softly, “Sister, your son is here, safe with me.”

But where was he? Sopaka’s mother didn’t see him so she didn’t understand what he meant.

The Buddha said, “I will show you.”

But first he taught her the Dharma. He taught her that sons are not a protection, and family members are not a refuge from suffering. Instead, the Dharma protects us from suffering and is a refuge from suffering, fear, grief and sorrow. He said that it is no use looking for children or family members without looking for the path to Nirvana. She deeply understood what he was teaching her.

He led her to another room and pointed to a young boy with a happy radiant face, sitting with monks dressed in robes. It was Sopaka! She was so relieved that he was safe, and gave her permission for Sopaka to become a monk and join the other monks living at the monastery. His mother was so happy that he could live a holy life free from the abuse of the stepfather.

Sopaka’s mother, now a devoted follower of the Buddha, went home alone but feeling peaceful.

Questions:

1. What type of person was Sopaka? (kind-hearted and innocent)
2. Why didn’t Sopaka run away from his stepfather when they went to the cemetery? (he was scared, so he stayed closed to the stepfather)
3. What did the stepfather do to Sopaka in the cemetery? (tied him to a dead body)
4. What did Sopaka see after he called for help in the cemetery? (a bright light, and then a holy man in robes, the Buddha)
5. What did the Buddha teach Sopaka’s mother about sons and family members? (that they don’t protect us from suffering)

6. What did the Buddha say is a protection and refuge from suffering? (the Dharma)

What the Buddha said:

“Pāṇimhi ce vano nāssa, hareyya pāṇinā viṣaṃ, nābbaṇaṃ viṣamanveti; natthi pāpaṃ akubbato.”

“If on the hand there is no wound, one may even carry poison in it. Poison does not affect the hand without any wounds. In the same way, no evil happens to one who does no evil act.”

Dhammapada 124 (9:9)

Dharma discussion - Courage:

The Buddha protected Sopaka from terrible suffering

Poor Sopaka was trapped in a cemetery where he could have suffered for days in anguish and horror and died. But suddenly, his unfortunate situation changed.

The Buddha protected him - saved him - with miraculous powers.

Did the Buddha go in person to save everyone who was unhappy or suffering?

No, he went out and saved the people whom he could help not just with a particular problem, but with the way end all of their suffering: those who were ready to learn the Dharma.

Who is ready to learn the Dharma? Some people are not interested in it or don't understand it when they hear it. But those who have enough merit - enough good karma from past lives – are interested in it and understand when they hear it.

Sopaka must have had a lot of good karma - made a lot of merit in past lives – to be saved by the Buddha and become his student.

He must have had negative karma also, to be abused by his terrible stepfather.

But he only had to suffer a little while before the Buddha saved him, and he was then fully protected; the cruel stepfather could never again hurt him.

Everyone experiences some suffering as a result of negative actions we have done in past lives, our negative karmas.

Dharma can't prevent the results of our past karmas.

But the Dharma can protect us from harm and give us courage.

How can the Dharma protect us? Can you think of any examples?

When we are mindful, when we practice mindfulness, then we're more aware of what is happening around us, and we're more careful, which protects us from dangers and accidents.

When we're kind and compassionate, others are less likely to be angry with us or want to harm us.

When we are kind to someone, they feel happier and kinder toward others, and those others feel happier and kinder to other people, so we are spreading kindness, like a domino effect. Remember, kindness is contagious!

When we are in danger and we chant a mantra, for example, “Namo Buddhaya,” or “Om Mani Padme Hum” then the merit of chanting may prevent us from being harmed.

When we can calm our mind with mindfulness and what we learned from the Dharma, then we have less stress in our body, which protects us from illness.

When we're afraid, worried, angry or upset, our negative thoughts come into our mind again and again, repeating over and over.
We may be trying to find a solution to the problem, but anxiety doesn't help us.
What can we do to calm and comfort our mind?
We can take a walk, read, or talk to a friend.

But is there something in the Dharma that can give us courage?

And we can do prayers, Buddhist chanting (silently or aloud), practice mindfulness. or meditate to make our mind more calm, clear, and confident, so our fear and worry fade away.

How can we practice mindfulness? Close your eyes and be aware of what you hear and what you feel in the body, right now at this moment, and then at the next moment, and so on, moment by moment.
While we do this, upsetting thoughts disappear.
And we are less likely to say or do something that we regret later.

We can visualize the Buddha – imagine him in our mind – while we chant a mantra.

Doing something to help others also takes our mind off our worry. For example, helping a parent, sister, brother, other family member, teacher or friend distracts you from upsetting thoughts, and also makes merit.

Remembering that everything is impermanent, that whatever problem we have will be gone soon, helps calm our mind and gives us courage.

Feeling compassion for all beings - even bullies and troublemakers - wishing that they be free from suffering, reduces our hatred and fear of others, and then we don't feel that they are so threatening.

We can feel confident knowing that we are now making merit by learning and following Dharma, and not creating negative karmas, so we are creating a good future for ourselves.

What if something seems unfair, and we need courage to fix the problem?
If we feel angry or hateful, then we suffer with those negative emotions and may do something we regret later.
Instead, we can remember that everything happens due to causes and conditions: past bad actions - negative karmas - are the cause for unpleasant situations to occur, resulting in suffering.
So rather than holding onto anger and hatred, you can work toward a solution:
If someone treated you unfairly, when your mind is calm, you can explain to them how you feel and try to come to an understanding.
If others were treated unfairly, you can try to help them so they don't continue to be treated unfairly. By helping them, you make merit which helps both of you.

Activity:

Choose a favorite mantra or Buddhist chant and write it on paper and decorate it as you like. then post it in your room or someplace where you see it, so you remember to chant it often. It helps you to remember it when you are feeling afraid, worried, or upset.