

THE DEATH OF THE KING (Dasaratha Jataka)

This is a story very similar to a very famous Hindu story from India called the Ramāyana, but there are some differences. This is the version of the story as passed down through time from the Buddha.

Thousands of years ago, there was a well-known and good king named Dasaratha. As was typical in those days for kings, he had more than one wife. With his first queen he had two sons and a daughter. The oldest son, who was very wise even as a child, was named Rama and the second was named Lakshman. The daughter's name was Sita. The three children and their mother were very dear to the king.

After some time, the first queen passed away. King Dasaratha for a long time was crushed by sorrow. But one day, another one of his wives gave birth to a son, who was named Bharatha. King Dasaratha loved the queen and their son very much, and one day he said to her,

“Dear lady, I will grant you a wish. Choose a wish and I will grant it.”



She accepted his offer, but wanted to choose her wish later on. Years later, when her son was seven years old, she decided to tell the king what she wanted. Making sure she had his full attention, she said,

“My lord, you promised you would grant a wish for my son. Will you give it to me now?”

He replied, “Choose a wish, my lady.”

She said clearly and assertively, “My lord, give my son the kingdom.”

This was an extremely bold request. Rama, the eldest son, was the crown-prince, the next ruler when the king retires

or passes away. Everyone admired the loving and wise Rama, and he surely would become a wonderful king.

The king in anger snapped his fingers at her and said, “Get out, you terrible woman! My other two sons shine like blazing fires – would you kill them, and ask for the kingdom for a son of yours?”

She fled in terror to her magnificent room in the palace. But, determined to get her wish, she waited until days later, when she felt the king may have calmed down. She asked again for her son be the next king.

King Dasaratha definitely did not want to grant her this wish, but he was worried that she wouldn't just take “no” for an answer. She had nothing to lose and everything to gain if her son became king - she would be the proud mother of the new king and have a higher status, and her son would have all the power to protect her. She might even try to get rid of his other two sons so her son could be king. He thought to himself, “She is ungrateful and treacherous. This woman might use a forged letter or a treacherous bribe to get my sons murdered.”

So he called for his two older sons, Rama and Lakshman, and told them all about it, and in conclusion, he said:

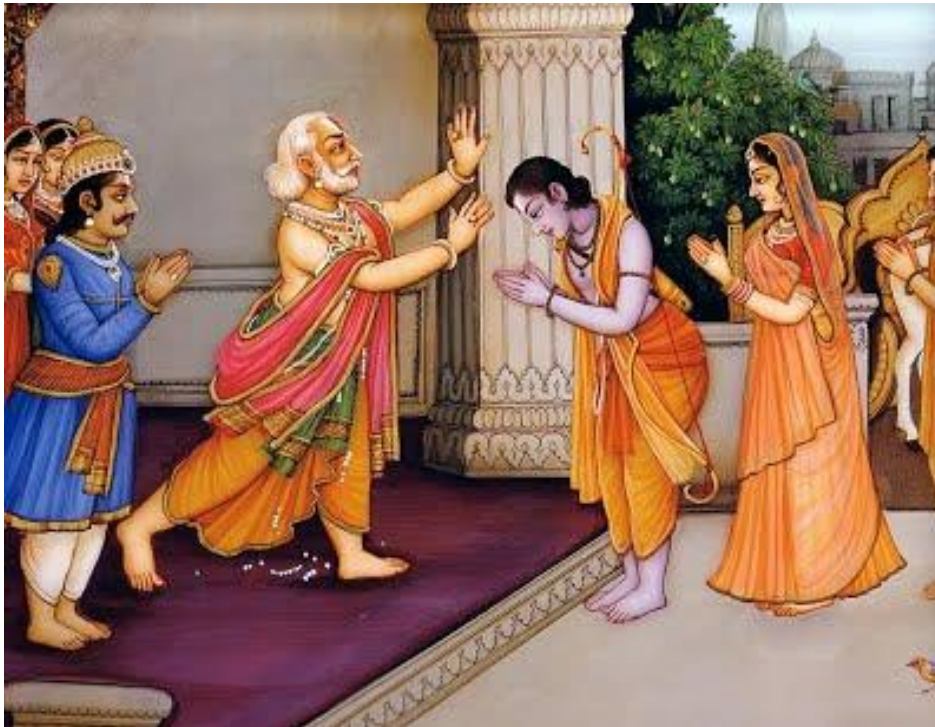


“My sons, if you live here, some disaster may happen to you. Go to some neighboring kingdom, or to some forest, and when I die and my body is burnt, then return and inherit the kingdom which belongs to your family.”

He wanted to be able to tell his sons how long he would live, so they would know when they should come back to the palace - at his time of death. So, he invited to the palace people who had psychic powers, and asked them to look into his future and tell him how long he will live. They told him that he would live twelve more years.

He talked with his sons and told them, "Now, my sons, after twelve years, you must return and take on the responsibilities of royalty."

Rama and Lakshman loved their father dearly and didn't want to leave, but also respected his wish that they stay away. They promised to go away to a forest and then come back after twelve years.



They prepared to leave, and sadly said goodbye to everyone, including their father. Sita decided to go with them, and she wept as she said goodbye to her father. Then she joined Rama and Lakshman as they left the palace.

They brought almost nothing with them except bows and arrows. They left their elaborate royal clothing and jewelry behind, and dressed in simple clothes for living as yogis in the forest.

Word traveled fast in the kingdom, and soon a large crowd gathered near the palace to see the last glimpse of their dear princes and princess for several years.



The three traveled until they came near the great Himalayas, the huge snowy mountains of India. They found a place by a river and near many fruit trees so they could easily find food. They built a simple hut to live in, like yogis who lived in the Himalayas.

Lakshman said to Rama, “You are like a father to us, so you should remain in the hut and we will bring wild fruit and feed you.” He agreed, and Lakshman and Sita brought fruit for him to eat. They lived there, surviving on wild fruits for several years.

Meanwhile, back at the palace, King Dasaratha missed his children so much that he died after only nine years. After his funeral was performed, his queen gave orders that the king’s umbrella should be raised over her son, Bharatha. She meant that he now should become the king, as an umbrella is held over a king whenever he goes outside the palace. But the palace advisors wouldn’t allow it. They would follow the rule and intent of King Dasaratha that the eldest prince becomes the new king. They said,

“The lords of the umbrella are living in the forest.”

Prince Bharatha was kind-hearted and virtuous, not selfish and power hungry like his mother. He said, “I will bring back my brother Rama from the forest and raise the royal umbrella over him.”

He took the five symbols of royalty: a sword, umbrella, crown, royal sandals and fan, and the property of a king - war elephants, chariots and soldiers – and went along with the palace advisors to offer them to his older brother, Rama. When they were close to the hut where his brothers and Sita were living, he had everyone set up camp. Then he went with a few of the palace advisors to the hut at a time when Lakshman and Sita were away in the forest.



Rama sat at the door of the hut - noble, still, and at peace, like a statue made of gold. Bharatha approached and greeted him, and then told him of all that had happened in the kingdom, including the death of their dear father. He fell at the feet of Rama, bursting into tears of grief. The advisors also started weeping, deeply missing the good king who was so caring and close to them.

But Rama didn't shed any tears and didn't even look sad. He just looked serious and peaceful. With a few deep, sobbing breaths, Bharatha finished crying and sat down. Toward evening, Lakshman and Sita were on their way returning to the hut with fruits to eat, and Rama thought,

"These two are young and haven't yet developed deep understanding and wisdom. If they are told all of a sudden that our father is dead, the pain will be greater than they can bear, and who knows – their hearts may break. I will persuade them to go down into the pond, and then find a way of letting them know the truth." The pond's cool water would calm them in their grief.



He pointed to the pond nearby and said to them as they approached,

"You have been out too long. Let this be your punishment – go into the pond and stand there."

Without any question, Lakshman and Sita went into the pond and stood there. Then he told them the news:

"Bharatha says that King Dasaratha's life is at an end."

When they heard the news of their father's death, they fainted with shock and grief. When they were conscious again, he repeated it, and they fainted again. After he told them and they fainted a third time, the palace advisors lifted them up out of the pond and set them on the dry ground. Then Lakshman, Sita and the advisors all cried and wailed in grief together.

Bharatha thought, “My brother Prince Lakshman and my sister Lady Sita can’t control their grief when they hear of our father’s death, but Rama doesn’t cry out or weep. I wonder, what can be the reason that he doesn’t feel any grief? I will ask him.”

He asked Rama, “Tell me, by what power do you not grieve, when you should have grief? Though I have told you that your father is dead, grief doesn’t overwhelm you?”

Rama explained the reason that he felt no grief. He said, “When you never can keep anything, though you may cry loudly, why should you torment yourself? One who is young, older, wise, rich or poor, everyone will die. As sure as a ripe fruit will fall from a tree, a person will have to die.

“A person seen in the morning may be gone by evening, and a person seen in the evening may be gone by the morning. By crying and tormenting yourself, you become pale and thin, but it doesn’t bring the dead back to life. Tears won’t bring them to you.

“One being dies, and then another being is born to family and friends. Each creature’s happiness depends on those beings he is attached to.



“The strong person, therefore, who learns the Dharma, carefully contemplates this world and the next world, so he isn’t upset in his mind or heart.

“So, I give and take care of my family and friends. I will take care of all those who are left behind. This is what a wise man does.”

When everyone heard this explanation of impermanence, their grief disappeared. Prince Bharatha bowed to his brother Rama and begged him to return to the palace and rule the kingdom.

But Rama said, "Brother, take Lakshman and Sita with you, and rule the kingdom yourselves."

Bharatha said, "No, my lord, you take it!"

Rama replied, "Brother, my father commanded me to receive the kingdom at the end of twelve years. If I go now, I won't be carrying out what he wanted. After three years I will come."

Bharatha wondered, "Who will rule the kingdom during all that time?"

Rama said, "You do it."

Bharatha refused, "I will not."

Rama had an idea. "Then until I come, these sandals shall rule the kingdom." Taking off his sandals made of straw, he gave them to Bharatha. Then the two younger brothers and Sita took the sandals, and saying goodbye to Rama, they went back to the palace with the advisors, soldiers, and all they had brought with them.

The sandals, which represented Rama, were placed by the advisors on the royal throne. When decisions had to be made for the kingdom, they looked at the sandals, and if their decision was wrong, the sandals moved. When their decision was correct, the sandals lay quiet.

After the sandals remained there for three years, Rama returned from the forest and entered the park near the palace. Prince Bharatha and Prince Lakshman heard that he arrived, and with a crowd of people they proceeded to the park to welcome their brother. They performed a grand ceremony to welcome him as their new king. Then he entered the city on a magnificent chariot and entered the palace to rule as the great King Rama.

After the Buddha told this story, he said that his father, King Suddhodana had been King Dasaratha in a past life, his mother had been Sita in a past life, his great devotee and assistant Venerable Ananda had been Bharatha, and he had been Rama.

QUESTIONS:

1. What wish did the queen, Bharatha's mother, ask from the king? (for her son to be the next king)
2. Why did the king tell his sons Rama and Lakshman to go to the forest for 12 years? (to protect them from getting killed)
3. Why did he say they must stay away for 12 years? (the king would die after 12 years)
4. Why did King Dasaratha die after only nine years? (he missed his children)
5. How did Rama react when Bharatha told him their father died? (he was serious and peaceful, and didn't cry)
6. How did Lakshman and Sita react when Rama told them their father died? (they fainted three times and then cried)

DHARMA DISCUSSION: Death and grief:

Have you ever experienced the death of a loved one - a close family member, relative, or pet?

Almost everyone at some point will experience death of a loved one.

Even if you haven't experienced it, you can help others if you have an idea of what to say to comfort them through their grief.

Grief can feel not only like sadness, but also like loneliness, feeling left behind, or feeling regret you didn't do more to save or help the loved one.

We might feel okay sometimes, but other times we might cry, feel depressed, or feel uninterested in things that used to interest us.

It's a process of healing that takes time, like the healing of a wound.

Anytime you feel overwhelmed with emotions, try practicing mindfulness.

Close your eyes and be aware only of what you are experiencing this very moment. Notice anything you hear, and whatever you feel in or on your body - your eyelids on your eyes, clothes on your skin, fingers and toes touching each other, movement of the chest and belly as you breathe.

You can also do some long, slow gentle breathing to feel more peaceful.

It's best not to just ignore, deny or push aside your feelings.
It helps to share your feelings with others.

It helps us to heal, and not be overwhelmed with grief, if we remember what Rama taught in the story.

He pointed out that a person is strong when he learns the Dharma and thinks about this world and the next world.

Just as birth is part of life, death is part of life.

There's a beginning of life when we're born into the body, an in-between while we are living in the body, and an end of life when we leave the body.

And then we are in the bardo, which is between one life and the next life.

And then we are born into a new life, on earth or in a heaven-world, and on and on, we leave one life and go to another,

When our body gets too old, or ill or injured, it's time to change the body, just like changing clothes.

When do you change your clothes? When they are too old, dirty or torn.

When we die, we get a fresh new body, like fresh new clothes.

When we are born it's like walking into a room, and we stay there for a while, and we walk out when we die, changing our clothes (our body), and then we walk into another room where we live the next life.

So, our loved one isn't gone, we just can't see him or her.

She or he is getting ready for a new birth, or is born into the next life.

For every being who we love, we enjoy them for some unknown length of time, but there will be a day when we must say goodbye.

Rama mentioned that death may be sudden and unexpected – everything is okay and then by evening or morning, they pass away.

Some humans and animals have a short life - they stay in that body only for a little while. We don't know why they leave us so soon, and it might seem very sad or unfair that they died so young.

But causes and conditions brought you together, and causes and conditions brought you apart at the time they died.

Maybe they were close to you and died unexpectedly so you would learn about death and impermanence, because it was the right time for you to learn this, although it's so painful for you.

You can look at it in a positive way by thinking that you were fortunate that they gave you love and affection, but then they had to leave because it was their time to take their next birth, in a precious human life or heaven world.

A pet will now be in a better situation, being born as a human rather than an animal, because a human can earn merit and gain wisdom, which leads to real happiness and Enlightenment.

You may wonder if the loved one will see you and recognize you again in his next birth. He probably wouldn't remember his past life, but if you see him in a new body, you might feel a familiar kindness with each other. It's best not to be overly attached to a particular being; instead, be attached to the kindness of a being, knowing there are countless other kind beings.

Rama pointed out that crying, letting yourself be miserable, doesn't bring back our loved one.

It's okay to cry, express our feelings, but when we let ourselves cry on and on, we are dwelling on our sad thoughts too much and stressing out our body, wasting our energy. As he said, our body becomes thin and pale. How would your loved one feel if they see you crying so much? He wouldn't want you to be miserable, stressing your body. Instead, he'd want you to do activities that are healing and good for you. For example, you could go to a temple to feel more peaceful.

It's helpful to make a little shrine with candles or butter lamps, a picture and belongings of your loved one, or a written prayer for him. Make that a place to celebrate his life, offer merits, and thank him for being a part of your life. You can help your loved one by praying and offering merits so they have a good rebirth - a healthy precious human birth. And as Rama suggested, we should help others, which earns merit, and then we can dedicate it to our loved one that passed away.

Is there anything we can learn from experiencing grief?

Also, when someone we love dies, then we can really understand sadness. If we don't experience it ourselves, then we can't have true compassion for others who are experiencing sadness.

When we think about death and dying, we think about impermanence, and also about suffering, and about how precious life is.

We might also think about karma, cause and effect – the good karma that your loved one has that will cause him to have a good rebirth as a human or in a heaven-world.

These are the Four Thoughts that turn our mind toward the Dharma! So, grief helps us practice Dharma and reach happiness and Enlightenment!

We also learn how important it is to show your love and appreciation for your loved ones while they are alive, because one day they will be gone. We don't want to regret that we didn't pay enough attention to them.