

## **Lesson 25 – MEDITATION – Sona Tries to Meditate**

In a village in the land of Magadha in the northeast part of ancient India lived the Kolivisa clan. A millionaire in the Kolivisa clan had a son named Sona. From the time he was born, little Sona received lavish gifts and had a luxurious lifestyle. He lived with his family in a big mansion and had many servants to take care of him.

Sona had very soft and delicate skin even as a teenager. And there was something extremely unusual about his feet. Not only were they completely soft, like silk, but he had very soft hair growing on the bottom of his feet! No one had ever seen anyone with hair on the bottom of their feet before; people were shocked and amazed when they saw it. His family wanted him to remain special and unique, so in order to protect his feet from getting rough and losing the hair on them, his parents didn't allow him to walk on the ground. He never had to do any kind of work, except learning to run his father's business so that he could take over when it was time for his father to retire. He had a lot of free time to do as he wished, and he enjoyed playing his lute, a stringed instrument with a shape similar to a guitar.

King Bimbisara, who ruled over the 80,000 villages in the land of Magadha, planned a big meeting to discuss some matters in the kingdom. He invited a representative of each village to the meeting. He had heard about Sona and his unusual feet, and he was curious. So, he also invited Sona by messenger sent from the palace, with a message, "Let Sona come. I want Sona to come."

When Sona's parents heard this from the king's messenger, they were delighted that the king was so interested in their son. To be sure that Sona would make a good impression, they told him,

"The king wants to see your feet, Sona dear. Now don't stretch your feet out towards the king. That would be disrespectful. Instead, sit down in front of him cross-legged in lotus position, with the bottom of your feet turned up so that he will be able to see your feet as you sit there."

His parents arranged for him to travel on a palanquin, which is a covered seat like a small tent on two long poles carried on the shoulders of four servants. Sona was carried in comfort on the palanquin all the way to the king's palace.

When they arrived, Sona went to the king and politely and dutifully bowed. Then he sat in front of the king in full lotus position as his parents told him to do, with each foot resting on the opposite thigh. The king saw the soft hair growing on the soles of Sona's feet, and was amazed.

Then the king spoke to the big crowd of people who were assembled there, including Sona. He instructed them about what goals they should accomplish in their lives. At the end of his speech, he told them,

“You have been instructed by me in the goals of this life. No go and do honor to the Buddha. He will instruct you in the goals to be accomplished for your future lives.”

The huge crowd of people did as they were advised by the king, and traveled to see the Buddha. When they arrived, the Buddha instructed them in the Dharma. They were very pleased by his teachings, and accepted him as their teacher, saying aloud that they take refuge in the Three Refuges – the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. Then they departed for the long journey back home to their villages.

But Sona didn't want to leave. He was fascinated with the Dharma and wanted to learn more. He didn't want to return to all the comforts and luxuries of his life at home in the mansion, because it seemed so meaningless. What was he going to accomplish in his life? What was the point of waking up every day just to eat, talk, learn to run his father's business, play his lute, eat again, and sleep? He wanted to be like the monks, learning and practicing Dharma and meditation every day. He decided this was the way he wanted to spend his life.

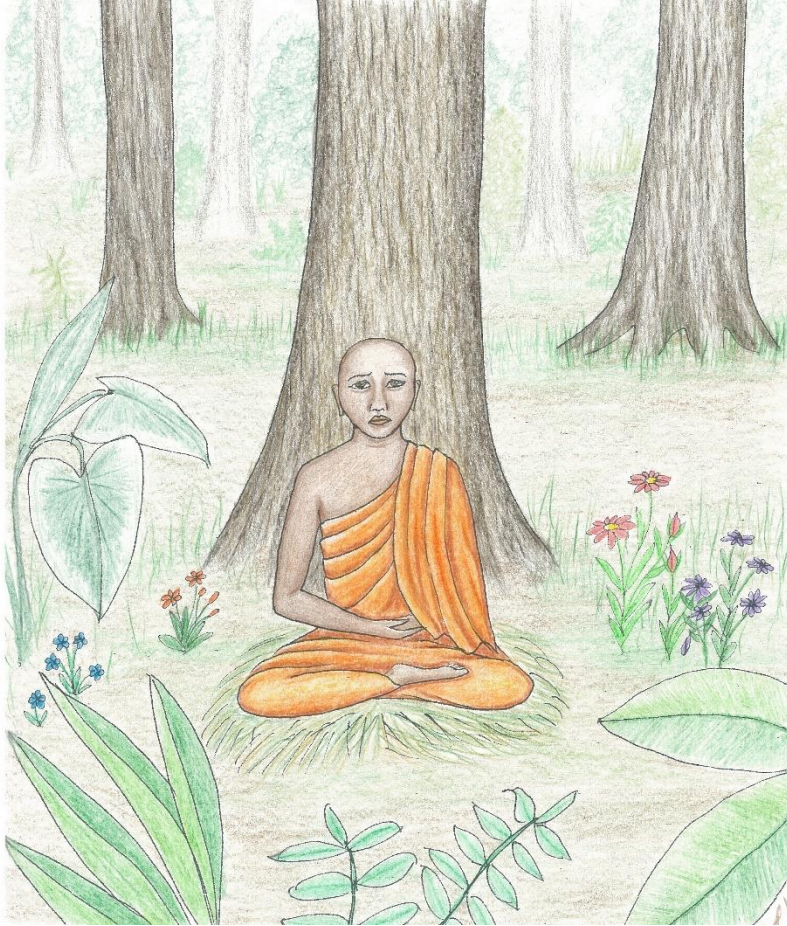
So, he went to the Buddha and asked to be ordained as a monk. The Buddha said he could if his parents agree. A message was sent through a messenger to his parents for their permission, and they agreed. He was then ordained as a monk, and he shaved his head and wore robes like the other monks. He took a seat among the monks to hear the Buddha speak about the Dharma, and to listen to the other monks discussing the Dharma.

Sona was eager to experience the peace, contentment and wisdom that the Buddha and other monks had. He had experienced every kind of pleasure and wealth that he could ask for, but he had not experienced real peace and contentment. Now that he was a monk, he wanted to learn and practice meditation. He received meditation instructions, and understood that the best way to practice is to do a meditation retreat, which means meditating many hours per day over a few days, weeks or months while remaining silent, alone and undisturbed.

So, very soon after becoming a monk, he went to a quiet place in the forest called the Cool Grove to do his meditation retreat. He made a small hut with some branches and palm leaves to sleep in at night and to stay in during rainy weather. This was totally different than the secure and comfortable, but noisy and busy atmosphere at the mansion! Now he was alone in the beautiful forest and he was ready to start, determined to make great efforts to really learn to meditate.

Every day, for hours at a time, he sat cross-legged with his eyes closed and tried to calm and concentrate his mind. After some time sitting, he needed to stretch his legs, so he followed the Buddha's instructions for “walking meditation” - very slowly and mindfully walking back and forth on a small area of smooth ground - his walking path.

While he was walking, he tried constantly to be mindful of each and every movement and feeling in his body. He didn't care at all about the hair on his feet. That didn't matter anymore. While he was sitting, he tried to focus his mind only on breathing, or on other subjects that he had been instructed to concentrate on.



But it wasn't so easy! His mind just kept wandering off to some other thoughts, and soon began thinking about all sorts of things. At first, he patiently brought his mind back to his meditation. But, again and again his mind just wandered off, and soon was just as distracted and uncontrolled as it had been back at home with his family. It was getting frustrating!

His tender, soft feet were not used to walking on the ground. During walking meditation, he noticed that his

feet were hurting and swelling, and developing terrible blisters. But he was determined to ignore the pain and persevere in his efforts to master walking meditation. Soon the blisters burst and then began to bleed. He kept doing his walking meditation anyway, trying to be tough and disciplined like the other monks. The walking path became spotted with blood from his feet.

Day after day he tried to meditate, but he could not calm his mind enough to experience real peace. He just kept thinking and thinking, not meditating. He became really frustrated and thought,

“This is no use. I have enough energy and determination to be able to concentrate well like the other monks. But after all this effort, I didn't get the peace I was hoping for. I am still wishing for this and that. I should just return home to live my family. With that wealth, I can make offerings of food, housing and other things to the monks to make merit. That will give me at least some happiness.”

On that same day, the Buddha came to visit Sona. When the Buddha arrived at Sona's meditation hut, Sona prepared a seat for him, and bowed to greet him. The Buddha said,

“When you were alone in retreat, Sona, weren't you just now thinking, ‘Whatever students the Blessed One has that are energetic, I am one of them. Yet my heart is not free of clinging to things. Now there are still riches in my family; I could use those riches and make merit. Maybe I should return to family life and use those riches to make merit?’”

Sona replied, “Yes, Lord.”

The Buddha asked, “You were once a good lute player, weren't you?”

Sona said, “Yes, Lord.”

The Buddha then asked, “When the strings of your lute were too tight, did your lute sound good and respond well to your fingers?”

Sona replied, “No, Lord.”

The Buddha asked further, “When the strings of your lute were too loose, did your lute sound good and respond well to your fingers?”

Sona replied, “No, Lord.”

“When the strings of your lute were neither too tight nor too loose and were evenly tuned, did your lute sound good and respond well then?”

“Yes, Lord,” Sona agreed.

The Buddha said, “So too, Sona, trying too hard leads to agitation. Not trying hard enough leads to laziness. Therefore, try to meditate with the right amount of energy, not too intense and not too lazy. Be calm and relaxed, but fully alert. Try again.”

Sona agreed to try, and the next day, he sat to meditate. This time, he didn't force his mind to focus. He didn't become agitated when his mind wandered. Instead, he just watched his thoughts, letting them come and go. When his thoughts started going too fast, he paid attention to his breathing. He was fully aware moment by moment, noticing every little thing that he felt, as he breathed in and as he breathed out. When his mind wandered, he gently and patiently brought it back to breathing. His mind became more and more calm. He felt no worry, anxiety, disappointment, discomfort, expectation, or desire.

Now, finally, he could meditate!

*Questions:*

1. Whom did the king tell the crowd of people to visit? (the Buddha)
2. What did Sona think of his life in his mansion after visiting the Buddha? (it was meaningless, he felt he wasn't going to accomplish anything)
3. What happened to his feet when he practiced walking meditation? (they hurt, became blistered, and bled)
4. What was Sona doing wrong in his efforts to meditate? (he was trying too hard)
5. What leads to agitation when you are trying to meditate? (trying too hard)
6. What leads to laziness when you are trying to meditate? (not trying hard enough)

*What the Buddha said:*

**“Suppabuddhaṃ pabujjhanti sadā Gotamasāvakaṃ,  
yesaṃ divā ca ratto ca, bhāvanāya rato mano.”**

**“Those students of Gotama always awaken happily,  
whose minds delight in the practice of meditation by day and night.”**

Dhammapada 301 (21:12)

*Dharma Discussion - Meditation:*

What is meditation?

Generally, it means focusing your mind on one simple thing, such as breathing, or on lovingkindness.

It can also mean mindfulness, such as being aware in each moment, of every little thing that you hear and feel. You can be mindful as you sit, as you stand, or as you walk very slowly, like Sona practiced walking meditation.

The Buddha taught and encouraged the practice of meditation.

Is it important only for monks? No, it can help anyone. It can help you! How? It helps us to be calm and peaceful.

It trains us to concentrate, which helps us be more successful in whatever we do. It helps us avoid stress, anger and anxiety, so we can think more calmly and clearly, and have more patience.

Have you meditated before? What is your favorite way to meditate?

Do you know how to sit in a position that is good for meditation?

It is best to sit on the floor on a cushion or folded blanket.

Sit up tall, with your back straight.

We can sit cross legged, in a half lotus (with one foot resting on the opposite thigh) or in full lotus position (each foot resting on the top of the opposite thigh).

We can rest our hands on our knees, or rest one hand in the palm of the other.

We can close our eyes, or keep them partially closed.

Our head should be facing straight ahead with our chin held in slightly.

We should keep our body as still as possible, so our mind can be still as possible.

Here are a few examples of meditation you can try. Find which one you like best.

To meditate on breathing, take long, deep, slow breaths, paying close attention to exactly how it feels, each moment, to breathe in, and breathe out. You can focus on how it feels in the nose, or in the chest, or how the abdomen moves with each breath.

To practice lovingkindness meditation, wish that you be peaceful, happy, and free from all harm and suffering, and imagine being surrounded by a bright warm light of love and protection. Then wish your friends and family be peaceful, happy, and free from all harm and suffering; imagine them surrounded by a bright warm light of love and protection..... Then wish the same for other people you know,...all people in your neighborhood,...your city,... your country,... all people in the world,...all animals and other beings on earth,...and all beings in the universe,...that they be peaceful, happy, and free from all harm and suffering; imagine them surrounded by a bright warm light of love and protection.

Or you can meditate on an object: place the object – for example, a statue or picture of Buddha, a flower, a pebble - in front of you. Look at it very carefully. Notice its shape, colors, each side (top, bottom, left, right, middle), then the whole object. Next, close your eyes and try to see it in your mind.

To meditate on an imaginary place: choose a place that you would like to be, for example on top of mountain, by a lake, in a forest, at the beach, at the bottom of the ocean, or on the moon. Close your eyes. Imagine you are sitting alone there. Imagine feeling the ground under you. What sounds might you hear? What might you feel against your skin? What might you see? Try to imagine the many things you see, feel, and hear at your imaginary place.

Do any of these meditation techniques help you feel relaxed but fully alert, like the Buddha advised Sona? Or is your mind busy, full of thoughts, like Sona? Or do you feel tired or sleepy?

Meditation is like a sport or skill that takes a lot of practice to learn to do well. Like we train our body regularly to build up our strength to play a sport, we can train our mind regularly, to build up strength in our mind to meditate. First, we have to remember to practice.

The best way to remember is to fit it into your daily routine – meditate before or after you brush your teeth in the morning, or just before you go to bed.

You only need a few moments - maybe just a minute or two – to meditate.

If you feel, like Sona, that it's difficult to calm your mind, don't be discouraged. After some time, you get used to the fresh, relaxed feeling after you meditate, and then you will like to do it every day, like you brush your teeth every day knowing you get a fresh clean feeling in your mouth afterward.

When you're older, you will be very glad that you started a good habit of meditation when you were young, that helped you be successful and happy.

*Activity* - Walking meditation:

For the first experiences of walking meditation, walk very slowly outside on different surfaces, noticing how it feels under the feet to walk on grass, gravel, pavement, soil, mulch, etc.

Or, first try standing meditation: Stand with eyes closed.

Pay close attention to breathing, noticing every sensation of breathing.

Notice the feeling of the feet on the floor - the toes, the ball of the foot, and the heels, and how the floor surface feels beneath feet.

Notice how the body is balanced on the feet, and how it feels to lean forward just a tiny bit, and then to stand straight up again.

Next, try walking meditation:

Open your eyes, and walk very slowly, naturally, without exaggerating any movements or dragging the feet.

Pay close attention, each moment, to each movement of the legs, feet and arms. Slowly raise one foot slightly, and notice how it feels in the leg to raise the foot, then smoothly move the foot forward in a normal small step and place the foot down on the floor. Be aware of how it feels for the foot to touch the floor again. Do the same for the next step.

Continue walking at your own pace, not looking around; just keep focused on how it feels to walk very slowly.

Feel sensations in the foot, as each part of the foot touches the floor, moves forward and touches the floor again.

Feel sensations in the leg - the upper leg, lower leg, ankle, how the body balances with each new step

Notice the movement of arms and hands.

Notice when you are breathing in, and when you are breathing out.