Kisa Gotami and her Baby

A young lady named Kisa Gotami was born to a poor family, but she got married to a young man from a wealthy family and thereafter, became pregnant and gave birth to a son. However, the child died when he was a little toddler, at the time he was first able to walk.

Kisa Gotami was not familiar with death; she had never known anyone who had died. When people came to take the baby's body for cremation, she was in such shock over the death—the loss of her only son—that she didn't allow them to take the body. She made them leave her house. She refused to believe that her son had died.

She said to herself, "I will seek medicine for my son."

Holding the dead child on her hip, she went from house to house, inquiring, "Do you know anything that will cure my son?"

In response, people said to her, "Woman, you are stark raving mad that you go from house to house seeking medicine for your dead child!"

But she went on her way, thinking, "Surely I shall find someone who knows a medicine for my child."

A wise man saw her and thought to himself, "This young woman has no doubt borne and lost her first and only child, and has not seen death before. I must help her."

So, he said to her, "I myself do not know how to cure your child, but I know of one who has this knowledge."

She responded, "Sir, who is it that knows?"

He told her, "The Buddha knows; go and ask him."

She said, "Good, sir, I will go and ask him."

She went to the Buddha, and after greeting him, asked, "Venerable sir, is it true, as men say, that you know how to cure my child?"

The Buddha replied, "Yes, I know."

Anxious to go out and find whatever medicine he might recommend, she asked, "What shall I get?"

He said, "A pinch of white mustard seed."

She responded, “I will get that, venerable sir. But in whose house shall I get it?”

The Buddha said, “In the house where neither son nor daughter nor any other has yet died.”

With renewed hope to cure her child, Kisa Gotami said, “Very well, venerable sir,” and respectfully departed.

Placing her dead child on her hip, she entered the village. She stopped at the door of the very first house and when the owners appeared, she asked, “Have you here any white mustard seed? They say it will cure my child.”

Responding affirmatively, the owners of the house brought some white mustard seed and gave it to her. She asked,

“Friends, in the house where you dwell, has any son or daughter yet died?”

The owners said, “What are you saying? As for the living, there are few; only the dead are many.”

That meant that many people had died in that family. So, Kisa Gotami was disappointed and said,

“Well then, take back your mustard seed; that is no medicine for my child.”

In the same manner, she went inquiring from house to house. There was not a single house where she found the mustard seed she sought; in every family there was someone who had died. When evening came, she thought, “Ah, it is a difficult task I took upon myself. I thought that I alone had lost a child, but in every village, the dead are more in number than the living.”

While she contemplated that fact, her heart—which until then was soft with a mother’s love—became firm. She took the dead child and buried his body in the forest. Then she went to the Buddha and greeted him.

The Buddha asked her, “Did you get the pinch of mustard seed?”

She replied, “No, I did not, venerable sir. In every village the dead are more in number than the living.”

The Buddha responded, “You imagined vainly that you alone had lost a child. But all living beings are subject to an unchanging law, and it is this: The Prince of Death, like a raging torrent, sweeps away into the sea of ruin all living beings, but still their longings are unfulfilled.”

Instructing her in the Dharma, he said this stanza:

In flocks and children finding delight
With a mind clinging – just such a man
Death seizes and carries away
As a great flood a sleeping village.

As the Buddha uttered that last part of the stanza, Kisa Gotami became established in the first level of enlightenment, the stage of stream entry. Others who were present, hearing the teaching, also attained the first, second or third level of enlightenment. Kisa Gotami then requested the Buddha to let her be ordained as a nun. He sent her to the Order of Nuns, directing that they ordain her. Afterward she was accepted as a nun and came to be known as Bhikkhuni Kisa Gotami.

One day, it was her turn to light the lamps in the meditation hall. Having lit the lamp, she sat down and watched the flames of the lamp. Some flames flared up and some flickered out. She took this as the subject of her meditation and contemplated, "Even as it is with these flames, so also is it with living beings here in the world: some flare up, while others flicker out; only those who have reached Nirvana are no more seen."

The Buddha, seated in his meditation cottage known as the Perfumed Chamber, sent forth a radiant image of himself, which stood face to face with Kisa Gotami and said, "Even as it is with these flames, so also is it with living beings here in the world: some flare up, while others flicker out; only those who have reached Nirvana are no more seen. Therefore, better is the life for one who sees Nirvana, though living but for an instant, than the lives of those who endure for a hundred years and yet do not see Nirvana."

And he instructed her further with the following stanza:

Though one should live a hundred years,
Not seeing the Deathless State,
Yet better is life for a single day
For one who sees the Deathless state.

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At the end of the discourse, Kisa Gotami, even as she sat there, attained arahantship—liberation from the cycle of birth and death (samsara)—together with the analytical knowledges.

Dharma Discussion – Loss and Grief:

Kisa Gotami was in denial that her child had died. She clung to hope, thinking that everything would be okay if she could just get the right medicine. Why was she in denial? She had never experienced a loss as devastating as death of a loved one. All her hopes, dreams and expectations were shattered.

This story illustrates the universality and intensity of the grief and devastation we experience from loss of a loved one, and provides the Buddha's guidance to help us heal from it. This guidance can be practiced now to strengthen us and reduce the intensity of our grief whenever it arises in the future, so it doesn't become so overwhelming.

The Buddha describes how pain proliferates to become overwhelming in the Two Arrows Sutta (Sallatha Sutta, Samyutta Nikaya 36.6 of the Pali Canon). In that Sutta, the Buddha presents an allegory about two arrows. He explains that when an ordinary person experiences a great pain, he not only feels the physical pain, but he also feels a second type of pain—the mental pain of grieving, lamenting, and becoming distraught. This is analogous to being struck not only by a single arrow, but also being struck by a second arrow. The Buddha explains that the second type of pain is resistance and obsession, trying to fight the pain and obsessing over it. The ordinary person sees no escape from that pain except for some kind of sensual pleasure, which he then becomes obsessed with. So, he is then entangled not only in pain but also in seeking pleasures, and the suffering and stress they cause. The Buddha contrasts that with someone who is well instructed in the Dharma, who does not grieve, lament or become distraught, because he does not resist or obsess over the initial painful feeling. He doesn't fight it. He also doesn't try to distract himself with some kind of sensual pleasure because he knows he can escape from the pain by a better method: he merely senses the pain but doesn't get attached to it or obsessed with it. He discerns the feeling as it is actually present—the origination, passing away, allure, drawback and escape from the feeling.

So, in the context of loss of a loved one, what do the first and second arrow represent?
The first arrow is the inevitable shock, pain and sadness of loss, which is experienced even by advanced Dharma practitioners.
The second arrow is the proliferation of reactions and emotions in response to the loss, which might include emotions such as regret, fear, anxiety, guilt, self-pity, worthlessness, helplessness, despair or anger. These emotions arise from resisting the pain and obsessing over it, including thoughts such as, "this is tragic, unbearable," "this should never have happened," "he didn't deserve to die so young," "why didn't they do something to save him?" "I could have done something to prevent his death," "my life is useless now," "how could this have happened?"
The second arrow causes the most intense and prolonged suffering, and as the Buddha explains, it can be avoided or reduced by understanding, mindfulness and insight.

As the Buddha taught Kisa Gotami, we must accept that everyone faces the death of a loved one, and it can happen at any time.

In the Two Arrows Sutta, the Buddha advises us not to distract ourselves with some temporary pleasure, because it isn't a lasting solution; it eventually leads to more pain. And, it might get us caught up in more problems, especially because we are more vulnerable while grieving, so we may be more impulsive, uninhibited or reckless, and we may have compromised decision-making skills.
The Buddha explains the skillful way to cope with loss is to be mindful of the feelings as they arise and pass away, knowing that they are impermanent.

In order to do that, we first practice mindful awareness of our physical body. We can practice mindful breathing, or slow and mindful walking, or mindful eating. We can practice being fully present in the here and now, being fully aware of our body in positions of sitting, standing or laying down. We can practice noticing each sensory perception that arises, moment by moment, one after the other—including hearing, smelling, tasting, and tactile perceptions such as warmth, pressure, sense of touch, and the body's movements. It's best to do this with eyes closed. All these sensory perceptions arise and then pass away, one after another.

When we have developed a practice of mindfulness of the body, then it's easier to practice being mindful of our emotions. We identify them and accept them as normal experiences rather than resisting them. Without any judgment, notice emotions such as nostalgia, sorrow, self-blame, guilt, anger, fear, anxiety, or jealousy. Notice that they arise and then disappear.

If self-blame or guilt arises, such as a feeling of failure as a parent for somehow not preventing the death of your child, remember that everything happens as a result of an unknown mix of causes (including karma) and conditions. Even if your action or failure to act was a condition that led to the person dying unexpectedly, that person had their own past karma that was the actual cause of dying unexpectedly; you didn't create their karma. Each person is the owner of their own intentional actions (karmas) and receives the effects of them. Torturing yourself with self-blame for an unintentional error or misjudgment on your part distracts your mind with negativity, polluting your mind and hindering your journey to Nirvana. It doesn't undo your failure, but only harms you, like biting your own limbs or whipping yourself. Think of the death as a learning experience for you—perhaps to learn to be more mindful, careful and aware, or to get rid of unnecessary activities in your life. Learn the lesson well from the mistake, resolve not to make such mistakes ever again, and then let it go. To ease your mind, if you feel the need to atone for any neglect or mistake, increase your efforts in Dharma practice and in doing good deeds—making merit—improving your karma. Therapy also might be useful.

While we are suffering the pain of loss, we need to make efforts to take care of our body with compassion, as it may be stressed and weakened by grief. Make sure—and request help as needed—to regularly eat healthy food and take care of cleaning. Exercise daily, even if it's just a little walk or a few yoga stretches. Spend time around people with whom you feel very comfortable, and communicate your needs such as a need for silent companionship.

We should keep reminding ourselves to remain in the present, and not to project our minds to the past with regret and sorrow or to the future with fear and anxiety.
If we find ourselves clinging to hope that in the future when we die, we will be again with our loved one in a heaven-world, we can consider that we have been the wife, husband, parent, child, relative and friend of countless beings whom we dearly loved from our countless past lives.
Of course, it's so difficult not to think of the past, as we miss all the sweetness of our loved one—their good qualities, particular habits and skills, their endearing appearance and words. But it might make us fear for the future, that we will never experience that delight again, lamenting "Oh! I will never again [feel, have, see, do, enjoy, love, or be] . . . .!"

Such thinking increases our suffering.
We must understand that it's not only the presence of the loved one that we miss, but also the pleasant feelings that the loved one evoked in ourselves. We felt happy, appreciated, loved, supported, motivated, and worthy around our loved one. A large part of our grief is experiencing the void of not having those feelings, and the fear that we'll never have them again.
We have to convince ourselves that with time, we will experience those pleasant feelings again; they arise from within us, so we must learn to evoke those feelings without depending on another particular person.

Consider how not only your feelings but also your identity has been tied to your loved one. Over the years, you have thought, "I am the wife of this wonderful man," "I am the partner of this perfect woman," "I am a mother of an adorable child," "My joy is my lovely dog."
Try to substitute those thoughts with an identity based on something that cannot be lost in this life, such as "I have many good qualities," "I am a Dharma practitioner," or "I am a bodhisattva," or future arahant, or devotee of the Buddha. Eventually with Dharma practice, we come to understand that we have no permanent, unchanging, separate identity or self. But on our path to that understanding, we can work on detaching from our ordinary identity based on who we love, what we like, what we dislike, our career and successes, and so forth, and forming instead an identity that is not limited by time and place and this particular lifetime. Then we won't feel so lost and worthless without our loved one. The loss of our loved one can be the catalyst for us to form this more wholesome identity.

After becoming a nun, Kisa Gotami realized how fruitless it was to tie her identity with her child, expecting her child to live a long life.
As she meditated on the flames, she observed that only some flare up and others flicker out. Similarly, there are long lives and short lives, and they keep arising and ceasing—birth and death—over and over. So, we can't assume that our loved ones will live a long and healthy life. The Buddha had taught her that death takes away all living beings but they still have desires and longings. We are stuck in the cycle of samsara—suffering, dying, and being reborn—because we have desires for things and experiences in this world. When we are free of worldly desires and our delusion, we attain Nirvana.

The Buddha then appeared to her and pointed out that it's better to live a short life—even only for a single day—and reach Nirvana than to endure for a long life on Earth and not experience Nirvana. He made her realize that having a long life is not the goal; having a Dharmic life generating merit as we journey on the path to Nirvana is what makes life valuable.

We can do the best for our deceased loved one and for ourselves by making efforts to be focused on the present, here and now, moment to moment—practicing mindfulness—and offering our merits to our loved one and to all sentient beings.