

Lesson 4 – SUFFERING – The Four Sights

Prince Siddhartha grew up with everything a boy could want in those times in his royal family's palaces in the city of Kapilavatthu. When he was 16 years old, his father, King Suddhōdana, met with his council and they discussed Prince Siddhartha's future as a king, to govern the Sakya people. The council members suggested that the young prince get married. The king wondered which young lady would be the best one - the right one - to be his son's bride, and to be the future queen. Each council member wanted his own daughter to be married to the kind prince who had such excellent character, and who in addition would be the future king. The king wondered whether any of those daughters would be a suitable queen and wife for his son.

The king went to his son and asked him what type of bride he would accept. Prince Siddhartha replied,

“She must not be an ordinary girl, but she must have no envy, and she must be truthful, careful, not proud of her beauty, generous, content, religious, pure in mind and speech and respectful to all.”

How would a girl with all of those qualities be found? It would be best for the prince himself to choose among many young women from the noble families all around the kingdom. The king sent messengers to announce the search for a bride for his son, and they invited all of the daughters of the neighboring kings and noblemen to his palace for a party to meet the prince.

On that day, the young ladies came to the palace dressed beautifully, with great hopes that they would be the one chosen by the handsome prince. During the party, Prince Siddhartha presented a gift to each young lady. The last one to approach the prince to receive a gift was his cousin, Princess Yashodhara. But after all of the other young ladies had received a gift from Prince Siddhartha, there were no gifts left to give to Princess Yashodhara. So, he gave her one of his own pieces of jewelry that he was wearing.

The prince saw that Princess Yashodhara had all the qualities that he had told his father he was looking for. He decided that she would be his bride.

Not long thereafter, they were married in a beautiful palace ceremony. Prince Siddhartha then lived happily with his wife, Yashodhara. They enjoyed all the pleasures of palace life, being served with the best food, riding around the palace grounds, with its gardens and parks, and being entertained by many musicians, dancers and singers.

They stayed within the palaces and the surrounding palace grounds. They had everything they wanted, so there was no reason to travel around. For the prince's entire life, the king had not allowed the prince outside the palace grounds, to protect him from seeing any pain or suffering that might urge him to become a

holy man rather than a king, as the astrologers had forecasted soon after he was born.

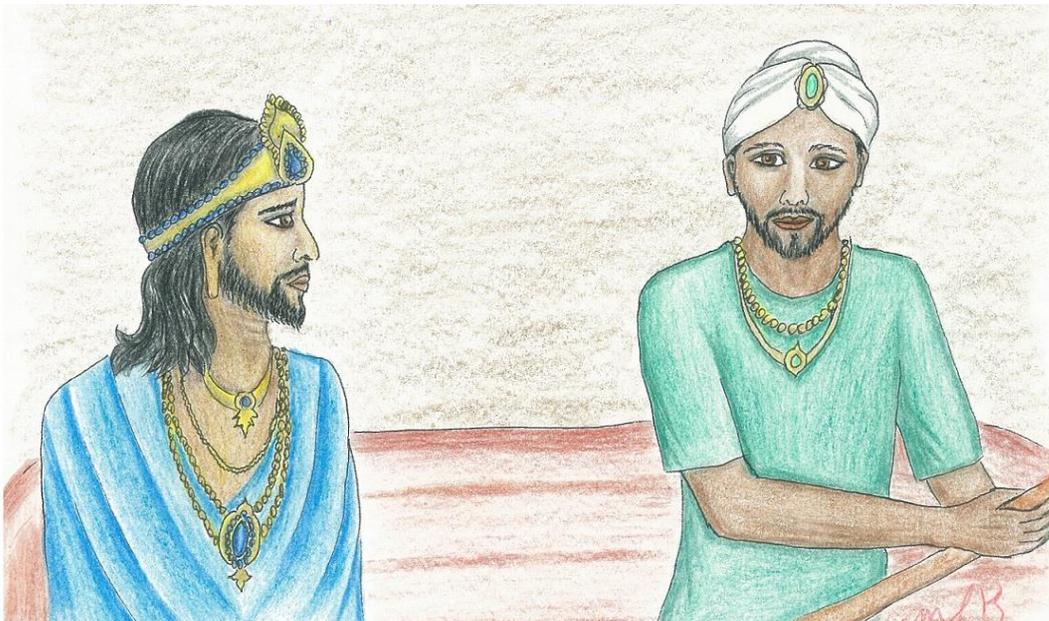
But Prince Siddhartha was to be the future king, so he had to meet the citizens of the kingdom. One day when he was 29 years old, after many years of living happily in his palaces with Princess Yashodhara, he asked Channa, his chief servant and driver of his horse-drawn chariot, to drive him outside the palace grounds and into the kingdom's capital city, Kapilavatthu.



During the journey, people all along the road joyfully welcomed the prince. But there was one person who caught the prince's full attention. An old man was walking along the road, bent over, shaking, holding on to a large stick for support. Prince Siddhartha had never seen any person bent over and shaking. He had never seen someone who was old. No one at his family's palaces looked like that. It seemed like something was terribly wrong with him.

He asked, "What is wrong with that man? Where are his teeth? What's wrong with his eyes? And why is his hair so white and his face full of wrinkles?"

Channa replied, "He is very old."



The prince asked, "what is the meaning of 'old'?"

Channa said, "He will not live long."

The prince asked, "Will I become old like that?"

Channa said, "You and I and all people get old if they live a long time."

The prince was shocked and troubled, full of sorrow and distress, thinking about the suffering of old age. He had never seen such suffering before. He said,

"Enough of this journey. Let's go back home."

He thought, "Ordinary people are shocked and disgusted seeing another person who is old, but he forgets that he will get old. I too will get old, I am not safe from aging, so I shouldn't be shocked and disgusted to see an old person."

He thought deeply about the old man he had seen, and about himself and everyone he knew becoming old, their body aging, and becoming weak and unpleasant to look at. He wished he could help people escape the suffering of old age.



On another day, Prince Siddhartha went again to the city of Kapilavatthu with Channa. Along the road they saw a man wailing in pain, trembling and thin, breathing loudly.

Channa said, "Let's get away from here."

Prince Siddhartha asked, "Who is he? Why should we get away?"

Channa replied, "He is a sick man. It is painful to be sick. Anyone can get sick at any time and suffer with sickness."

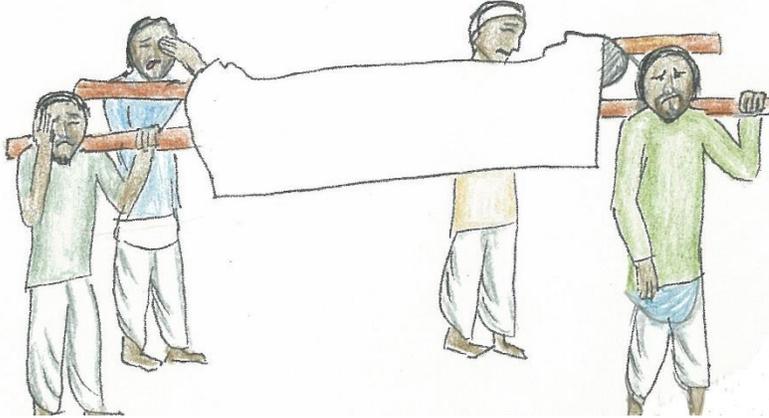
The prince asked, "Could I get sick? Can my family get sick?"

Channa said, "Yes, no one knows when they will get sick."

The prince was shocked and distressed, thinking about the sick man and the suffering of being sick. He had never seen such suffering before. He thought,

"Ordinary people are shocked and disgusted seeing another person who is sick, but he forgets that he will get sick. I too will get sick, I am not safe from sickness, so I shouldn't be shocked and disgusted to see another person who is sick."

He thought deeply about illness, how terrible it is, and that there must be a way to avoid it. He wished he could find a way to relieve people of the suffering of illness.



On another day, Prince Siddhartha went with Channa to the city, and they saw a body being carried on a stretcher, with people crying around the body.

The prince questioned Channa, “What is this? Why are those people crying? Is the

man sleeping on the stretcher?”

Channa answered, “The body is a dead man.”

The prince asked, “What is the meaning of ‘dead’?”

Channa said, “A dead person cannot walk or even move, and they cannot feel anything. The body will be cremated, burned to ashes.”

The prince asked, “Will I die? Will my father die? Will all the people I know die?”

Channa said, “All living beings die. We cannot avoid it. No one can live forever.”

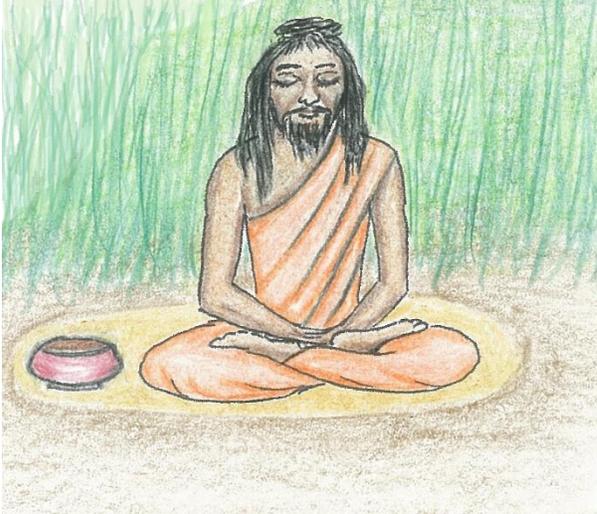
The prince was shocked and distressed, thinking about the dead man and the fact that everyone will die. He had never seen the sadness and suffering that people feel from the death of a loved one. On returning to the palace, the prince thought,

“Ordinary people are shocked and disgusted seeing another person who is dead, but he forgets that he will die. I too will die, I am not safe from dying, so I shouldn’t be shocked and disgusted to see another person who is dead.”

He also thought, “No one has found a way to avoid death, but there must be a way to escape it. I must find a way.”

On yet another day, Prince Siddhartha went with Channa to the city, and they saw a man with a bowl who was wearing just a plain orange cloth. His face looked very serene, deeply peaceful. The prince asked Channa,

“Who is this man? Why does he look so peaceful?”.



Channa explained, “He is an ascetic, a person who has given up family life to live without a home and other comforts, to seek liberation, freedom.”

Prince Siddhartha was fascinated by the ascetic. He wanted to know more about ascetics. When he returned to the palace, he sat for long periods of time deep in thought about the four sights he had seen - the old man, the sick man, the dead man and the ascetic. He thought,

“If I must experience birth, aging, illness, death, sadness and impurity, why should I want those who also must experience these things? Seeing the danger in these things, suppose I seek after that which is not born, doesn’t get old, doesn’t get sick, doesn’t die, and has no sadness or impurity – freedom from suffering, liberation from worldly life, Nirvana?”

King Suddhōdana observed his son deep in thought and worried that he might be dissatisfied with the royal palace life and want to leave it to become a holy man. The king therefore ordered more entertainment for the prince, and ordered his guards to watch him.

But the prince did not enjoy the pleasures at the palace anymore - the singers, dancers and musicians. He wanted to be an ascetic like the one he saw.

Questions:

1. What type of lady did Prince Siddhartha want as his bride, the most beautiful one in the country? (no, he wanted a lady who was not jealous, truthful, generous, respectful to all, not proud of her beauty, and pure in mind and speech)
2. What did Prince Siddhartha see during the first ride to the park with Channa? (an old man)
3. What did he see during the second ride and the third rides to the park? (a sick man and a dead man)
4. Why was he shocked and distressed when he saw these three sights? (he had never seen such suffering before)
5. Why did the king order more entertainment for his son, and guards to watch him? (so he would not want to leave the royal palace life to be a holy man)

6. What is an ascetic? (a person who has given up family life to live without a home and other comforts, to seek liberation, freedom)

What the Buddha said:

“Dukkānupatitaddhagū”

“A person who is in samsara (continuing cycle of birth, death and rebirth) experiences suffering.”

Dhammapada 302 (21:13)

Dharma Discussion - Suffering:

When Prince Siddhartha saw the old man, the sick man, the dead man and the sad, grieving people around the dead man, he was distressed because he had never seen suffering before.

He also was distressed because he had great compassion for them.

He felt sad and wanted to relieve their pain.

In Buddhism, we talk a lot about compassion. What is compassion?

Understanding others' suffering and wishing to help relieve their suffering.

The Buddha taught us to develop compassion.

But we can't develop compassion unless there are others for whom we can feel compassion, to whom we can show our compassion.

And we can only feel compassion if they are suffering in some way.

So, we must understand something about suffering.

What does suffering mean, exactly?

In Buddhism, suffering means any kind of discomfort or dissatisfaction, ranging from slight discomfort or worry to extreme pain, fear, grief, or distress.

Can you think of some examples of suffering that we all feel sometimes?

We suffer every day, whenever we are hot, cold, thirsty, hungry, or tired.

We suffer whenever we feel disappointed, frustrated, lonely, worried, embarrassed, stressed, bored, or ignored.

At some points in our lives, we suffer when we are very ill or injured, when we suffer some type of failure, when we lose a loved one or lose something precious, when we are blamed, or when others don't like us.

Does everyone suffer?

Do you think some people are always happy and don't experience real suffering?

Many students, movie stars, sports stars, and other people we see seem to have a life full of pleasures and fun. We don't see them unhappy, crying or in pain.

Many people don't like others to know that they are unhappy or distressed, so they don't show their unpleasant feelings.

And many people experience years of an easy life without many big difficulties.

But everyone experiences some suffering every day.

No matter how wealthy, famous, intelligent or popular a person is, he or she experiences the same kinds of suffering that we experience.
Animals suffer too. How? They get hungry, thirsty, ill, injured, afraid of being attacked, exhausted,
Suffering is part of life; we can't totally escape it while we are living on earth.
Whenever we feel some pleasure or happiness, we always feel some pain, unpleasantness or unhappiness later. And whenever we feel pain, unpleasantness or unhappiness, we always feel some pleasure or happiness later.
Suffering and pleasure always come and go.
So, our pleasure comes only between two pains. No pain, no gain!

But Prince Siddhartha had a feeling that there could be an end to suffering.
He saw that the ascetic had a very peaceful face although he had no wealth, family or home to keep him happy.
Yet the prince's family didn't look as peaceful although they had everything to keep them comfortable, entertained and happy.
The prince realized that they must be suffering in some ways that the ascetic was not suffering.
And the prince wanted to find out how!
He wanted to find out how all suffering could end: how a person could end their suffering, how they could stop the cycle of getting old, sick and dying, then being reborn into a new body and again getting old, sick and dying, over and over again.
He felt such great compassion for all beings that he wanted to help them find a way to end their suffering.
He couldn't feel happy and satisfied knowing that others are suffering.

Activity:

Bean bag toss: Students sit in a circle, and try to think of several situations which cause suffering in their lives (for example, getting a bad grade, broken toy, not being invited to a party, being bullied, making your team lose, disagreement with a friend, boredom, too much homework).
As the teacher or parent tosses the bean bag toward a student, he/she calls out a situation which causes suffering. The student catching the bean bag must immediately toss the bean bag to another student while calling out a different situation which causes suffering. Students continue the bean bag toss while calling out a situation which causes suffering. If a student pauses more than three seconds with the bean bag, calls out a type of suffering after throwing it, or repeats one which someone else already called, he is "out" and is no longer in the game. The last one in the game wins.