

## CHAPTER 10 – THE BOY AND THE SPIRITS

There was once a woodcutter who traveled into a forest with his son in a cart pulled by oxen to cut some firewood. On their return home in the evening, they stopped near a cemetery to have their dinner. The woodcutter took the yoke off of the two oxen to let them walk around so they could eat, too.

As they were grazing on the fresh grass, the oxen wandered away. The woodcutter and his son were enjoying their dinner and didn't notice that the oxen had wandered away. When he finally noticed that the oxen were gone, the woodcutter quickly went out alone to look for them, and left his son with the cart to guard the firewood so it wouldn't be stolen. The woodcutter looked around for a while but he couldn't find the oxen. He suspected they might have gone back home, in the city. So, he went into the city and there he found the oxen. He led them back toward the city gate to go back to his son and the cart.

But as he approached the gate, he saw that it was closed for the night! There was no way to leave the city, which was surrounded by stone walls. He had to leave his son and the cart alone for the night near the cemetery. The woodcutter slowly led the oxen back home, hoping his son would be okay staying alone during the night.

Meanwhile, as the sun set and it became dark, the boy realized that his father would not be returning that night. He knew he would have to spend the night alone. He crawled under the cart for protection from any rain and tried to fall asleep on the grassy ground.

Just as he was dozing off to sleep, he felt a tug at his leg. He realized it wasn't a dream, and it wasn't his imagination. Something—or someone—or some creature—was pulling at his leg. Was it an animal? A robber? A ghost?

He immediately cried out, "Namo Buddhassa!" which means, "Honor to the Buddha!"

Indeed, the boy's family were devoted to the Buddha, and every day the boy regularly contemplated the unique, wonderful qualities of the Buddha, such as his great compassion, lovingkindness and power. The boy knew that if he thought about the Buddha, or called out to him, the Buddha would protect him.

The beings who pulled his leg were spirits—beings who were in another dimension. But they could interact with people if they wanted to. They had pulled the boy's leg to try to frighten him.

But, hearing the boy call out to the Buddha, the spirits themselves were frightened! They knew that the Buddha was extremely powerful, and that he wouldn't appreciate them frightening one of his devotees. So, the spirits felt that they should take care of the boy rather than try to frighten him. What could they do to take care of him? Feed him, of course! And, feed him with the very best food—the food prepared for the king!

One of the spirits rushed to King Bimbisara's palace and brought the royal tray heaped with food that had been prepared for the king. The other spirit remained near the boy, guarding him from all danger.

The boy didn't see the spirits, didn't know what had tugged at his leg and had no idea that spirits visited him or what they were doing. But suddenly, he saw his parents right there with him!



Actually, what he thought were his parents were the two spirits who appeared in the forms of the boy's parents. They fed him the food from the tray as if he was their own son.

The boy happily ate all the delicious food they offered him.

Then, when his belly was full, he felt very tired after the long day cutting wood with his father. He soon fell asleep, feeling content, without any fear.

The spirits knew the king would be upset that his royal food tray was gone, and would send his men out to search for it. If they found that the boy had it, they would accuse the boy of having stolen it, and the spirits didn't want to get him into trouble. So, at the palace, the spirit had written a message concerning the tray, and this message would be visible only to the king.

In the morning, the king's men discovered that the royal food tray was missing. They were very upset and searched all around the palace for it. The king found the message left by the spirit and directed his men where to look for the tray. The king's men went out to where the cart was and found the royal food tray among the firewood in the cart. They also found the boy, still sleeping underneath the cart. The men brought him to King Bimbisara, along with the tray.

The king asked the boy, "How did this tray appear in your cart?"

The boy answered, "Your majesty, I was alone guarding the cart of firewood for my father while he went to find our oxen that had wandered away while we ate dinner. During the night my parents came to give me food, and they brought it on this tray."

The king asked, "You were alone when my men found you. Why would your parents bring you food and then leave you alone?"

The boy replied, "After I ate, I felt content and went to sleep without any fear. I know only that much and nothing more, your majesty."

The king ordered his men to bring the parents of the boy to the palace. The king asked them, "What happened last night?"

The father explained that he had found his lost oxen in the city but couldn't leave the city to bring his son and the cart back home because the city gate had been closed for the night. So, he and his wife stayed home all night.

The king asked the boy. "Did anything unusual happen last night before you saw your parents?"

The boy said that before his parents came, he had felt something tugging his leg, and he had called out, "Namo Buddhassa."

The king asked the parents about the boy's knowledge of the Buddha. The parents told him that their son was always mindful of the unique qualities of the Buddha.

From these statements of the boy and his parents, and from the mysterious message left at the palace about the tray, the king knew something unusual had happened. The boy had been near a cemetery, and when he felt a tug on his leg and he called out to the Buddha, he was in no danger and was treated very well. Perhaps some spirits had been involved. Only the Buddha would know the truth.

So, he took the boy and his parents to see the Buddha.

The king asked the Buddha, "Is mindfulness of the unique qualities of the Buddha the only method that gives protection against evil and danger, or is mindfulness of the unique qualities of the Dharma equally potent and powerful?"

The Buddha replied, "O king, my student! Mindfulness of the Buddha is not the only protection against evil and danger. Mindfulness in any of the six senses is also a good protection against evil and danger."

So, the Buddha taught that being mindful of what one sees, hears, feels, smells, tastes or thinks helps protect us against anything evil or dangerous. Also, thinking of the Buddha gives us protection.

The Buddha gave a talk on the Dharma, after which the boy and his parents attained the first level of enlightenment.

*Questions:*

1. Why was the father unable to get back to his son in the evening? (the city gates were closed)
2. What happened that made the boy scared as he was falling asleep? (he felt something tugging his leg)
3. What did the boy immediately think of when he felt scared? (the Buddha)
4. What did the spirits want to do when the boy called out to the Buddha? (they wanted to take care of him and bring him food)
5. Did the boy know that spirits had visited him? (no)
6. What did the spirit do to make sure the boy didn't get accused of stealing the king's tray? (it left a message that only the king could see)

*What the Buddha said:*

“Suppabuddham pabujjhanti sadā Gautama sāvakā,  
yesam divā ca ratto ca, bhāvanāya rato mano.”

“Fully alert and ever vigilant are the students of Gautama, who by day and night delight in meditation.”

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*Dharma discussion – Fear and Mindfulness:*

Imagine how you would feel if you were all alone and had to sleep outside at night, and suddenly you felt something tugging your leg. You might feel terrified!

The boy in the story might have felt terrified, too.

But, he knew what to do. What did he do?

He called out to the Buddha.

Why did he think of the Buddha immediately when he was in danger?

Because he often thought of the Buddha. It was his habit to think about the Buddha.

So, when he was in shock and needed help, his first thought was of the Buddha.

Have you ever been terribly frightened? Did you call out for help?

If your mother or father was nearby, maybe you called out to them.

But what if you were alone, whom would you call out to for help?

Would you think of the Buddha for protection?

As we learn in the story, thinking of the Buddha protects us.

But, if the Buddha is no longer living on the Earth, can we still be protected by thinking of him? Yes! We don't need the Buddha's body to come and help us.

As he taught, we only need to be mindful of him, to think of him when we're in danger or frightened.

Then our mind connects with the power of the Buddha, and it protects us.

The Buddha also said that other types of mindfulness will protect us, too.

What exactly does mindfulness mean?

It means we are fully aware of this moment, right now.

We keep our mind in the present moment—right here, right now, not in the past or future.

In each moment, one moment right after the other, we are fully aware—of seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, or feeling.

We are aware, moment by moment, of each sensation that we receive through our five senses: our eyes, ears, nose, tongue or skin.

We aren't thinking about something else—remembering something that happened, or planning or expecting something in the future, or wondering about something, or analyzing something.

To practice mindfulness, it's easier to close our eyes, because our eyes take in so much information that we easily can get lost in thoughts about the things we see.

And it's easier to sit very still, alone in a quiet place so we aren't distracted by our body moving around, or the activities of others, or any loud sounds.

While we are sitting still with eyes closed, we notice any sounds that we hear.

We notice the sensations on our skin—such as our clothes against our body, the cool wind, the warm sun, our toes touching each other, our fingers touching each other, our eyelids on our eyes, our tongue against our teeth, the seat or floor under our legs.

We can practice this for a few seconds or a few minutes any time we are anxious, worried, unhappy, or bored, so we feel better and more relaxed.

How does this mindfulness protect us?

We become more alert and aware of our surroundings, so we sense any danger before it gets close, and then we can get away or avoid it.

And, our mind becomes calm so we can think more clearly and find solutions to problems, and so we don't react in a way we might regret later.

Also, mindfulness takes our mind away from our scary thoughts, so it helps reduce our fear; it helps us not become so fearful that we panic.

It takes our mind away from our fear that our pain or bad experience will keep on hurting us and won't go away.

When we are mindful, then our mind is full of calm thoughts, so there is no room for worries, fears, and unpleasant thoughts. Then we aren't worrying about what might happen later, and we aren't feeling bad about what already has happened.

Mindfulness takes our mind away from our worries at least for a little while.

Being mindful doesn't mean that everything always will be okay, that we'll never be hurt.

Sometimes we have to experience the effects of our past negative karmas  
We don't know the things we have done in past lives, but all of us have past negative karmas.  
So, we will have painful, unpleasant, or scary experiences in our lives.  
Whatever we have already done can't be undone, so we have to experience the results.  
But if we are mindful or if we focus on the Buddha, then our experience isn't so scary or awful;  
our mind becomes more calm and we can cope much better.

Whenever we think of the Buddha, and whenever we are mindful, we are creating merit—good karmas—the causes for good experiences. We're building a good future for ourselves.

And, like the boy in the story, the more we have a habit of thinking of the Buddha, or practicing mindfulness, the easier it is to remember to be mindful or think of the Buddha when something scares us or when things go wrong.

In addition, when we have a habit of practicing mindfulness, we become more and more aware of what is going on around us—our mind becomes more sharp and alert—we notice all the little things that we might miss when our mind is distracted, when we are lost in our thoughts.