

# Kisa Gotami Theri

And

## The Dancing Flames



The Buddha preaching to Kisa Gotami asking for medicine for her dead son

**Introduction** – Many might not have observed this fact when dealing with offering – lighting candles and offering it to Buddha and Gods. Please observe the flickering flames coming from the candle. It is a sign of acceptance of your offering. This is one place that the flame of candle was described in Pali Canon. The flickering indicates acceptance of your offering to which you have intended.

**The nun Kisa Gotami practiced the teachings of the Buddha in earnest. One day, as she was about to put out the lamp in the Dhamma hall, she was attracted by the flame. Concentrating on the dancing flame she reflected, "Even as it is with this flame, so also it is with living beings. Some flare up while others flicker out. Only they that have reached Nibbána are seen no more."**

Gotami was the daughter of a poor +man. Because of the leanness of her body she was referred to as **Kisa Gotami** or "**Lean Gotami**". She was fortunate, however, in marrying the son of a rich merchant. But the treatment she received from her in-laws was not in keeping with a lady of noble birth. They never let her forget her beginnings.

Before long Kisa Gotami conceived and gave birth to a son. She adored her child and lavished her attention and love on him. The child was just beginning to walk when he succumbed to a fatal sickness and died. Kisa

**Gotami, who had never experienced death before, was devastated. The in-laws who had mistreated her had accepted her after the birth of her son. As such she had lavished her attention on her son and centered her life around the child who had brought about her acceptance. Determined to seek medicine that would bring him back to life, she placed her dead child on her hip and went from house to house in search of a skilled physician.**

**The villagers began to laugh at her and call her names. Could she not see that her child was dead? But the grief-stricken Gotami persisted. A certain wise man, feeling compassion for the distraught woman, directed her to the Buddha. Paying obeisance to the Buddha, Kisa Gotami asked Him to bring her child back to life.**

**The Buddha, with his divine eye, saw that Kisa Gotami was spiritually advanced due to past life efforts. Her mind, however, was not ready for the Dhamma due to her unbearable grief.**

**Seeing that Kisa Gotami had never before experienced death, the Buddha asked her to bring Him a few mustard seeds from a house where there had been no death. Kisa Gotami lived in a village where extended families lived together. She went from house to house with her dead child, only to find that she could not find a house where a death had not occurred. Before long Kisa Gotami realized that death was common to all beings. Disposing of her dead child in the cemetery, she went back to the Buddha for consolation.**



**The Buddha drives home the reality of death to a woman named Kisa Gotami who was desperately seeking his help to regain the life of her dead child**

The Buddha questioned her if she had obtained the mustard seeds. Gotami informed the Buddha that in every family in the village there had been a death. "The dead", she said, "seem to outnumber the living."

Seeing that Kisa Gotami was ready for the Dhamma, the Buddha taught her the impermanence of all things. At the end of the four-line discourse, Kisa Gotami, who was spiritually ripe, attained the first stage of sainthood, Sotápanna. She then asked permission to be ordained as a nun.

The nun Kisa Gotami practiced the teachings of the Buddha in earnest. One day, as she was about to put out the lamp in the Dhamma hall, she was attracted by the flame. Concentrating on the dancing flame she reflected, "Even as it is with this flame, so also it is with living beings. Some flare up while others flicker out. Only they that have reached Nibbána are seen no more."

The Buddha, realizing that Kisa Gotami was close to reaching her goal, projected a radiant image of Himself and using her reflections instructed her as follows: "Even as it is with this flame, so is it also with living beings. Some flare up while others flicker out. Only they that have reached Nibbána are seen no more. Therefore, better is the life of one who sees Nibbána though living but for an instant than to endure a hundred years and not see Nibbána." At the end of the discourse Kisa Gotami attained the supreme bliss of Nibbána.

In gratitude Kisa Gotami describes the great joy the Buddha gave her and encouraged others to associate with the Noble Ones.

*"To the world the Sage has praised  
The value of noble friendship  
By resorting to noble friends  
Even a fool becomes wise.  
One should resort to worthy people,  
For thus one's wisdom ever grows,  
By resorting to worthy people  
One is freed from suffering.  
One should know the Four Noble Truths:*

*Suffering and its origination,  
Then the cessation of suffering  
And the Noble Eightfold Path.  
-- (Therigatha 213-215)*

**Kisa Gotami, who had suffered greatly as a poor woman of low birth, related to other women who were in pain. The life of a woman was difficult and fraught with suffering. Women were often treated as chattel and abused. Many men had more than one wife. Kisa Gotami, who had suffered as a woman, was compassionate to the suffering of women. She describes some of the ordeals that women she knew had to experience and her relief in release from suffering. It is only when one understands the plight of women in India at the time of the Buddha that one can truly appreciate the radical change that He instituted and the gratitude that women such as Kisa Gotami felt towards Him for recognizing that women were as spiritually capable as men.**

*"The Teacher, He the tamer of men  
Claimed as sorrow, birth as woman  
To be one among many others  
Wife to man, it is sorrow, it is painful.  
Women who have given birth but once,  
Unable to go through that pain again  
Slit their own throats.  
Frail girls take poison,  
When conceived in folly  
Child and mother suffer greatly.  
I have seen women  
Who when their time to give birth comes near  
Bear a child on the way before coming home  
Then find dead their own husbands.  
A woman once lost both her children;  
Her destitute husband, he too died  
She saw them all, mother, father, brother  
Burn together on one funeral pyre.  
Lowly and destitute by birth,  
Reborn a thousand times  
She suffered untold sorrow;  
The tears she shed were as boundless as the sea.  
She lived amid the burial grounds*

*To see beasts prey on her son's dead body,  
Born to a lot so humble, a target for scorn  
By the Light of Truth she won release.  
I too have trod that Eightfold Path  
So Noble, the roadway leading to peace  
That quietude I have myself realized,  
At Truth's mirror I have deeply gazed."  
-- (Therigatha 216-224)*

Once she was approached by Mara, the evil one, who tried to seduce her but Gotami was strong and undefeatable. With equanimity she addresses the tempter as friend.

*"Why not when you've lost your son  
Do you sit alone with a tearful face?  
Having entered the woods all alone  
Are you on the lookout for a man?"  
"I have gotten past the death of sons;  
With this the search for men has ended,  
I do not sorrow, I do not weep,  
Nor do I fear you, friend.  
Delight everywhere has been destroyed,  
The mass of darkness has been sundered.  
Having conquered the mighty army of Death,  
I dwell without defiling taints."  
-- (Samyutta Nikáya)*

The Buddha dispensed the Dhamma because of the impermanence of all things, for it is this impermanence that results in suffering. The Buddha often used the suffering caused by the death of a loved one to illustrate the impermanence of all conditioned phenomena. He then helped the spiritually advanced such as Kisa Gotami to attain the supreme bliss of the unconditioned Nibbána. Kisa Gotami took on ascetic practices and wore coarse robes patched from the discarded rags she found at charnel grounds. The Buddha declared that **Gotami was foremost among the nuns who wore coarse garments, one of the thirteen ascetic practices.**