

Weaver's Daughter

At DhammĒnanda VihĒra, Oct. 10, 1998

Today I will tell you a story of the daughter of a weaver. From this story, which happened during the time of the Buddha, we can learn several lessons. We will learn that it is good to keep the practice going, to practice meditation regularly, and that we can get benefits by meditating on death.

Once Buddha went to a city called ĒĒavĒ. The people in that city invited Buddha and offered Him food. After the offering, Buddha gave a dhamma talk on the practice of *meditation on death* (also known as *recollection of death*). Note that meditation on death is not *vipassana* meditation. It is one of the forty subjects of *samatha* meditation, but since it is beneficial to practice this meditation, Buddha urged the people to practice it.. Buddha said, "You should reflect thus: – 'Uncertain is my life. Certain is my death. I shall surely die. Death will be determination of my life. Life is unstable and death is sure.'" This is how we are taught to practice recollection on death.

The commentary says that when people practice meditation on death, they can get benefits. People, who have not practiced meditation on death, will tremble and fear when their last hour comes; they will die screaming screams of terror. Just like a man having no stick is stricken with fear on seeing a snake. On the other hand, people, who have practiced meditation on death, will not tremble and fear when their last hour comes. Just like a steadfast man with a stick is not stricken with fear on seeing a snake; even from a distance, he takes the snake up with his stick and tosses it away. So Buddha said, "Practice meditation on death".

It is strange that when we practice meditation on death we lose fear of death – not all together but we lose some fear of death. That happens because when we reflect on death many times, we become familiar with the death experience. When death really comes, we are able to face it without much fear. Buddha's method is to meet death face to face rather than run away from it. Buddha's advice may be quite the opposite of what people are doing nowadays. People do not want to hear about death; they do not want to think about death. Although they do not want to think about death, it is certain that death will come one day and they cannot escape. It is better to be prepared than to be frightened when the last moment of life comes.

Buddha taught to the people of ĒĒavĒ how to practice meditation on death, but according to the commentary, with the exception of a 16-year old girl who was a weaver's daughter, nobody took the dhamma talk seriously. They followed their ways and forgot about the dhamma talk. The weaver's daughter practiced meditation on death every day for three years.

Three years passed. One day when Buddha surveyed the world looking for beings who were mature enough to get enlightenment, the weaver's daughter entered His knowledge. Buddha knew that this girl had a potential to become enlightened. He would ask the four questions and He knew that she would be able to answer all the questions correctly. So Buddha went again to that City of Āvāṭī. When He reached there, the town people invited Him to meal. After taking the meal, Buddha sat and looked for the weaver's daughter. Although there was a multitude of people waiting for the Buddha to give a gladdening dhamma talk, seeing that the girl was not there, Buddha thought to Himself "For the sake of that very person I came here is not here yet, I would wait in silence." Since Buddha was silent, it is said that nobody dared to utter a word. Everybody was silent.

When the weaver's daughter heard that Buddha had come to her city, she was extremely glad. She had great devotion for the Buddha, and was determined to go see the Buddha and listen to His talks. But on that day her father said, "There is a garment or a cloth on the loom. A span of it is yet to be completed. I must finish it today. So you quickly replenish the shuttle and bring it to me." On hearing what her father said, she thought, "I want to go to the Buddha and listen to His talks. My father is asking me to replenish the shuttle and bring it to him. What shall I do? Go to the Buddha and listen to His talks or to carry out what father asked me to do? If I fail to bring father the shuttle, he would strike me and beat me. I will first replenish the shuttle and give it to father. Afterwards, I would go to the Buddha and listen to the dhamma." So she replenished the shuttle and she put it in a basket and she picked it up and went to her father's workshop.

On the way she approached the multitude waiting for the Buddha to give dhamma talk. She stood at the edge of multitude, and cast looking at the Buddha. Buddha saw her coming from a distance. Buddha also looked at the weaver's daughter in such a way that she knew that Buddha wanted her to come closer — may be the gesture of the eyes Buddha was beckoning her to approach. She put down the basket and went closer to the Buddha. When she came close to the Buddha, the Buddha asked her four questions.

The first question Buddha asked was "Where did you come from?"

The girl replied, "I don't know."

Then Buddha asked the second question, "Where are you going?"

She said, "I don't know."

And Buddha asked the third question, "Do you not know?"

Then she said, "I know."

The last question was "Do you know?"

"I don't know", she said.

So when the multitude heard her gave these answers, they were offended. They said, "This girl is saying whatever she likes with the person Supreme Enlightened Buddha. She made jokes with the Buddha." They criticized her, but the Buddha silenced them and asked the weaver's daughter again.

"Why did you say 'I don't know' when I asked you where did you come from?" Buddha asked. She said, "Bhante, You know everything. So You know where I came from. I came from my house, the house of my father, the weaver. You already know this. So when You ask this question, I thought that You are not asking me from which place I came from. You are asking me from which existence I came from before I was reborn here. Since I do not know where I came from before I was reborn here, I said "No". When she gave this answer, Buddha was very pleased. Buddha said, "Well said! Well said! You have answered my question correctly." Buddha praised the girl for being able to answer the first question.

Then Buddha said, "When I asked 'Where are you going?', why did you say 'you don't know'?" She said, "Bhante, You know that I am going to my father's workshop but I do not think You are asking that. What I think You were asking was 'Where you will be reborn after you leave this life?' Since I don't know, I replied, "I don't know". Buddha said "Well said! Well said! You have again answered my question correctly." So she got the second praise.

Buddha said, "When I asked you 'Do you not know?', why did you say 'I know'?" She said, "Bhante, I think when You asked 'Do you not know?' You were asking whether I do not know that death is certain for me. I know that death is certain for me. So I said 'Yes'. Buddha said "Well said! Well said! You have again answered my question correctly." So she got the third praise.

Buddha said, "Why did you say 'You don't know' when I asked you 'Do you know'?" She said, "Although I know that death is certain for me, I do not know when death will come. I do not know whether death will come in the morning, or in the afternoon, or in this month, or in that month and so on. Since I do not know when death will come, I said 'I don't know'." Buddha said "Well said! Well said! You have again answered my question correctly." So she got the fourth praise.

The weaver's daughter answered all four questions correctly, and after each answer Buddha said words of praise for her. At the end Buddha said to the multitude, "You do not know the meaning of my questions and yet you wanted to criticize this girl. But this girl knew what I meant and she gave answers correctly. Those who do not possess the eye of wisdom are the blind ones and those who possess the eye of wisdom are those who see." Then Buddha uttered a verse:

Blind is this world. There are only few that can see clearly. As birds who escape from a net only a few go to a blissful state.

Here Buddha said that this world is blind. That means most people are not intelligent. Most people do not possess wisdom, so this world is blind. There are only a few that see things clearly. That means that there are very few people who practice vipassana meditation and see the true nature of things. And those who are reborn in the celestial realms and those who reach Nibbāna are very few. Just like a few birds escape after being caught in a hunter's net. Buddha uttered this verse and at the end of this verse it is said that this girl became a Sotāpanna.

What lessons do we learn from this story? First the girl was able to answer the Buddha's questions correctly as He intended because she had practiced meditation mindfulness on death every day for three years. That is why when Buddha asked "Do you not know or do you know?", she could guess what Buddha meant. If she had not practiced meditations constantly, she would not have answered the Buddha's questions correctly.

Second, the girl would not have been able to see the Buddha for the second time. She had been practicing meditation every day for three years, and she had a kind of devotion for the Buddha. So when she heard the Buddha had come to her city, she decided to go and see Him right away.

Third, this story shows why it is important to practice meditation regularly. We practice for one day and then give up for a while. Then may be after one month, two months, or three months we practice again. That kind of practice is not so beneficial, since we do not gain momentum. We must keep the practice with us constantly; that means every day. We should practice whatever meditation we choose to practice, practice it every day so that we are ready when the opportunity comes.

It is important that we keep our practice going — not just practicing once a while but practice regularly every day. If we have the desire and determination to keep it going, I think we can keep it going however much we are busy. In this country people say that they are busy and they have hardly any time to practice meditation. But if they choose to do it and if they have the will to do it, I think they can find time. It is important that we keep the practice going constantly or every day. That is one thing.

Fourth, the story describes the importance of the mindfulness of death. Although it is *samatha* meditation, it is good to practice it and as explained by the commentary we can get benefits from the practice of mindfulness of death.

Fifth, whenever you read stories like these, you will find that at the end of the verse, so and so became enlightened. It seems so easy for them to gain enlightenment just listen to a verse. One verse has thirty-two syllables. To say these thirty two syllables takes how many seconds? Maybe ten or twenty seconds. After ten or twenty seconds, a person is enlightened. That is the impression we get from reading these stories. Actually these people became enlightened or became SotĀpannas and so on, not without practicing *satipaĀhĀna* meditation. These details were not mentioned in the stories in the books and they were not recorded. The commentary says that there is no mental development without comprehending the body, the feelings, the consciousness, and the dhamma objects. That means without practicing *satipaĀhĀna* meditation, without practicing vipassana meditation, there can be no mental development; there can be no attainment of enlightenment; there can be no realization of NibbĀna. So when we read that somebody became enlightened after the verse, we must understand that he or she went through the stages of vipassana meditation. It is not like (what a call) you snap the finger, a person is enlightened. He or she has to practice at least for some minutes while listening to the teaching of the Buddha. Although one verse is recorded, I think, Buddha must have taught more than this verse.

It is said that Buddha talked very fast. When we say one word, it is said Buddha could say one hundred and twenty eight words. That means Buddha spoke one hundred twenty eight times faster than we do. So if Buddha talked for five minutes, how much would that teaching be? That is why it is said that just the teaching given in one sitting becomes a whole *nikĀya*, becomes the whole collection or maybe thousand pages and so on. Buddha must have taught more than this verse; He must have explained it and He must have taught them to practice meditation and so on. While listening to the teaching of the Buddha, they must have been meditating, they must have been going through the stages of vipassana. Such people are those who had accumulated experience in the past or in other words who had *pĀramĀ*. They had practiced in their past lives, so they are ripe for enlightenment. They are like a lotus flower waiting to open at the first appearance of the sun's ray. Let me say they are just ready for enlightenment and when Buddha gave this talk and then explained some more they were able to achieve enlightenment. Whenever we read such stories, we must understand that they must have gone through the stages of vipassana meditation in order to reach enlightenment. Without going through the stages of vipassana meditation they could not gain enlightenment.

The girl became a SotĀpanna. After she became a SotĀpanna, she picked up her basket with shuttle and went to her father's workshop. When she reached the workshop, her father had fallen asleep at the loom. But she was not aware that her father was asleep so she put down the basket. And by accident the basket fell and made a noise. The noise woke up the father. By instinct, he just pulled the loom.