

Lesson 28 - COURAGE

Opening chants, meditation and review of last lesson.

Question to think about before the story: Have you ever been really scared - terrified?

Story: Sopaka

A little boy named Sopaka was born to parents who were very poor. He was a very kind-hearted and innocent boy. When Sopaka was seven years old, his father died. Later, his mother got married to a man who was then Sopaka's stepfather. The stepfather was an angry, cruel man who always scolded and shouted at Sopaka, and even beat him, because the stepfather thought Sopaka was just another responsibility that he didn't want to have. He knew Sopaka's mother loved the boy very much, so he couldn't just get rid of Sopaka. This frustrated the stepfather even more.

One evening, he had an idea. He asked Sopaka to go for a walk with him. Sopaka noticed that he had a kind voice, and thought maybe his mother had asked the stepfather to be nice to him. He innocently thought that his stepfather may have become a better person.

So, he went with his stepfather out of the house. As they walked near the cemetery, Sopaka walked closer to his stepfather, scared of seeing the awful-looking dead bodies there. But his stepfather stepped into the graveyard. Sopaka wondered why he was going there, but he dared not wait alone outside. So he walked in also. The stepfather walked near some smelly dead bodies and took out a rope. Sopaka wondered what was going on, but he was so afraid of the dead bodies that he went very close to his stepfather. He watched his stepfather tie the rope around one of the dead bodies and then reach the rope toward Sopaka. In horror, too shocked and confused to know what to do, Sopaka watched his stepfather tie the other end of the rope tightly around both of Sopaka's hands. When he realized what happened, he wailed, "Oh father, don't do this to me, please! I'm scared!" But the stepfather walked away. "Don't leave me here, I'm scared!!" Sopaka cried. He tried to break free, but the rope was very thick and tightly tied around his hands. He tried to walk away, but he couldn't pull the heavy dead body on the other end of the rope. He was stuck there, and absolutely terrified.

It was very dark, and there were noises of animals nearby in the jungle, maybe tigers or leopards. He cried louder and called out as loud as he could for help. But there was no one. He was totally alone.

But through his tears, he saw a bright light. Could it be someone's torch? No, it was much brighter than that. Then he heard a kind voice calling his name. Was he imagining it? The kind voice called his name again, saying "Don't be afraid, I am here to help you." Then suddenly the rope that bound his wrists so tightly became loose and fell off. He saw a holy man in robes, with long earlobes and the

kindest, most loving face he had ever seen, surrounded by a bright light. He thought that he was in the cemetery, but suddenly he was sitting in a building with the holy man. It was the Buddha, who by his supernatural power had broken the ropes and suddenly transported Sopaka to the Jetavana Monastery, far away from the cemetery. He was given a bath, some clean clothes and some food. He was silent, amazed, and couldn't believe what had happened.

Meanwhile, the stepfather returned to the house, and immediately Sopaka's mother asked, "Where is my son?" The stepfather acted surprised and said, "He ran home before me. I thought he would be here." The mother was so upset, she looked everywhere for him, calling out for him, but it was no use. So she cried all night, and thought, "People say that the Buddha knows everything. Maybe he can tell me where my son is." So she went early in the morning to Jetavana Monastery, and walked into the temple. The Buddha saw her looking so worried with tears on her face, and asked, "Sister, why are you crying?" She answered, sobbing, "My only son, he went with my husband for a walk last night but didn't come home. He's been missing all night."

The Buddha said softly, "Sister, your son is here, safe with me." Sopaka's mother didn't understand what he meant, and the Buddha said, "Here, let me show you." He led Sopaka's mother to another room and pointed to a young monk, his head cleanly shaven, wearing robes, with a happy radiant face. It was Sopaka! He had now become a monk! His mother was so relieved that he was safe, and that he could live a holy life free from the abuse of the stepfather.

The Buddha gave a Dharma talk, mentioning that it is no use looking for children or family members without looking for the path to Nirvana. Sopaka's mother then became a follower of the Buddha and went home.

Questions after the story:

1. What type of person was the stepfather?
2. What type of person was Sopaka?
3. Why did Sopaka go with his stepfather for a walk?
4. Why did he go with his stepfather into the cemetery?
5. What happened when Sopaka was alone in the cemetery?
6. Why did the stepfather leave Sopaka tied to a dead body in the cemetery?

Quotation of Buddha about the moral of the story:

"Pāṇimhi ce vano nāssa, hareyya pāṇinā viṣaṃ, nābbaṇam visamanveti; natthi pāpaṃ akubbato."

"If on the hand there is no wound, one may even carry poison in it. Poison does not affect the hand without any wounds. In the same way, no evil happens to one who does no evil act."

Dhammapada 124 (9:9)

Application of the moral(s) in the story to our daily lives:

Poor Sopaka was in a terrible situation - left alone in a cemetery. He could have suffered for days in anguish and horror and then slowly died. But suddenly, after

only a short time in the cemetery, his unfortunate situation changed dramatically. As cruel as the stepfather was, with an act that was sure to get rid of Sopaka in a most horrible way, he couldn't destroy little Sopaka or even make him suffer for long. Why? The Buddha saved him with miraculous powers. Do you think that the Buddha saved everyone who was unhappy or suffering? Would he use his supernatural powers to bring just anyone to the temple?

In the past lessons, we learned about the Law of Karma, that if we do bad deeds (pāpakarma), we will suffer the bad results of those deeds sooner or later, and if we do good deeds (punyakarma), what happens? We will enjoy the good results of those deeds, sooner or later. What if Sopaka was an evil person who did many bad deeds? He would have to suffer the bad results. Maybe he would have died in the cemetery. But Sopaka was a good person, kind-hearted and innocent. Maybe he had some bad karmas from past lives that resulted in being abused by his stepfather. But his past karmas were not so bad that he had to die alone in a cemetery. He only had to suffer a little while before the Buddha saved him. And then he had a most fortunate life as a monk, living in a monastery with the Buddha. He was fully protected by the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. No matter what the cruel stepfather would try to do, he could not even touch Sopaka anymore. Sopaka would never have to be afraid again.

Once he was with the Buddha, practicing the Dharma, Sopaka was a person who could not be affected by evil; he was totally protected. The Buddha teaches that no evil happens to those people who do no evil acts. He compares this to a person whose hand is protected by healthy skin, who can hold poison in his hand but not be poisoned. The poison cannot get inside the body because the skin protects it. What happens if a person has a wound on his hand and holds poison in it? He will be easily poisoned. The poison can seep into the weak part of the skin – the wound - and the person suffers and may die.

Similarly, if we have a weak part of our character, then evil done by others can badly affect us. What does that mean, a weak part of our character? It means having hatred, greed, envy, anger, selfishness, or other negative attitudes. If someone does something unfair to us, and we have hateful feelings, then you can see that evil comes into us – we have many negative thoughts and maybe hateful words or acts. If instead we do not become hateful, then no evil comes to us. When the person is unfair to us, like the healthy hand holding poison, we don't let it get to us, we don't get badly affected by it because we don't become hateful.

In addition, as it is often said, the Dharma protects us - the more we follow Dharma, the less evil can affect us. If we are really practicing Dharma, not doing any bad acts and not saying unkind things, then we don't have to be afraid of bad things happening to us. Why? Because we are protected by the Dharma, by our good acts, words and thoughts. But, like Sopaka and Ven. Angulimala, we will have to suffer the results of our bad deeds in *past* lives. We can endure them with courage, knowing that we are not doing any more bad deeds (pāpakarma) in this life, and that we have a great and happy future.

Activity to reinforce the lesson:

Quiz - circle the best answer:

1. When Sundari and some ascetics tried to ruin the Buddha's reputation, and the villagers insulted the bhikkhus, what did the Buddha tell them to do?
a) go away c) tell them that those who lie and do wrong but say they didn't will suffer
b) tell the Buddha d) insult them

2. What can you do to avoid trouble when someone insults you?
a) tell the teacher c) tell the person to be quiet
b) feel embarrassed d) be quiet and remember that you are a good person

3. Why didn't the other monks take care of the sick monk?
a) the sick monk didn't help them c) they didn't know he was sick
b) they didn't know how to take care of him d) the sickness was too disgusting

4. What kind of people should we help?
a) monks c) people who didn't help us e) a through d
b) parents d) kids we don't know

5. Visakha gave gifts to the Sangha - which of these did she NOT give?
a) monastery c) gems e) bathing robes
b) medicine d) food f) meals

6. If we do merit (punyakarma), then we get:
a) protection c) happiness e) less suffering g) a through e
b) courage d) good future f) confidence h) a through f

7. When should we do merit?
a) when we are old enough c) when our parents ask us to e) a and c
b) whenever we can d) when we have to

8. What do we need to meditate?
a) effort (viriya) c) quiet clean place e) a, b and d g) b and c
b) courage d) diligence (appamāda) f) a, c and d h) a, b and c

9. If we do something wrong, we should:
a) not talk about it c) tell all our friends e) apologize g) b, d and e
b) fix the problem we caused d) admit we did it f) a and b h) c and e

Closing chant: Sabbe sattā bhavantu sukhittā May all beings have happy minds!

We can think about all the people who are afraid of different things, and wish that their fears go away and they become happy and peaceful.