

# The story of Kisagotami

## A Buddhist story

**Key ideas: loss, coming to terms with bereavement, compassion**

**K**isagotami was the oldest daughter of the poorest man in the village. She was a frail, delicate girl, often ill, not fit for the long, hard hours of work that kept her sisters busy. The neighbours were certain that she would never find a husband. But the beauty of her long, dark hair and deep, shining eyes won the heart of a stranger and Kisagotami left the village to join the family of her new husband. They treated her harshly because she was poor and tired easily under her burden of work, but all that changed when Kisagotami gave birth to the first son in her new family. Kisagotami delighted in her child. He was the joy of her life. Motherhood, too, brought respect and care from her relatives. Kisagotami had never known such happiness.

The boy grew strong and graceful. Then one day, at play in the forest, a snake bit him on the ankle. Within hours, Kisagotami and all her household were plunged into mourning. Her precious son was dead. Kisagotami was distraught with grief. She would not eat or sleep. She wandered, like a wild thing, round the houses of the villagers, cradling the body and pleading at every door for medicine to make her child well again. Her cries frightened the villagers. 'Whoever heard of medicine for the dead?' they muttered.

But Kisagotami's grief moved the heart of one person in the village. He was an old man, a follower of Gautama, the Buddha. Gently, he advised her that Gautama was teaching in the next village. He might be able to give her medicine for her dead child.

That evening, Kisagotami started on her journey. All night she walked, carrying the child. She arrived at midday to find a large crowd gathering round Gautama. She pushed her way through and laid her child on the ground before him. A deep silence fell on the crowd.

'Exalted One,' she pleaded. 'Give me medicine for my child.' Gautama gently gathered Kisagotami in his arms. 'Go to the city,' he told her. 'Visit every house. Bring me back a mustard seed from every house that death has not visited. I shall wait for your return.'

Delight filled Kisagotami. At last, someone was listening. Here was one who would help. Through the city, she wandered, knocking on every door, pleading for a mustard seed if death had not entered there. She found herself listening to countless stories of sadness, the death of wives and husbands, of parents and children, of old age and sickness. In every house the story was different but the grief was the same, like Kisagotami's own grief. So Kisagotami learned compassion.

At length, she returned to seek Gautama. She found him waiting. She opened her empty hands. Neither spoke. Together they lifted the body of the child and carried him to the cremation grounds.