

Buddhists believe that there is great happiness to be found in helping others. This story tells how the Buddha helped a woman to find her own happiness.

THE MUSTARD SEED

One day the Buddha was walking along the road when he came to a river. It was a very hot day and he was dusty from the road, so he stopped and bent down to splash some of the cool water on his face.

When he had finished washing, he looked up to see an old woman. She knelt down beside him to drink from the river. Her clothes were old and torn, her face was tired and her arms were thin and dirty.

"Oh," she wailed, "I am suffering so much. Can you help me?" The Buddha looked at the old woman kindly. "What is the matter?" he asked. "What do you want me to do for you?" "Just look at me," she moaned, as she pointed at herself with her long, bony fingers. "Just look at my clothes. Look at the sores on my arms. I am tired, hungry and ill."

She went on to tell the Buddha how she had once been wealthy and had owned her own house and some land, but that now she had nothing but a bowl of rice to eat. She pleaded and pleaded with the Buddha to help her, to heal her and to get her riches back. The Buddha answered that everyone has some suffering in life, that she had described life as it is.

The old woman became very angry and then started to cry. "I will not listen to you," she said. "I was not born to suffer like this and yet you refuse to help me." The Buddha, seeing that she did not understand what he was trying to say, reluctantly told her that he would help, but that she must do exactly as he said.

"Yes," she agreed, "anything, anything, I will do anything to get my riches back." The Buddha asked the old woman to bring him a mustard seed. She stared at him in astonishment. "What," she asked, "a mustard seed? Is that all that I should bring, only a mustard seed?"

The Buddha replied, "Yes, but the seed must come from a house where the people have never had any troubles, suffered anything or been sad. Find this seed and I will use it to banish all your suffering and sadness."

"Oh, thank you, master, thank you!" she said. The old woman hurried away to find a house which had known no suffering, so that she could get the mustard seed which was to bring her happiness. The Buddha continued his journey.

Many weeks later, the Buddha came back along the same road, to the same bit of river. There, he saw the old woman again. She was kneeling by the river, washing clothes and spreading them on the rocks to dry in the sunshine. He heard her singing happily as she washed. She turned, saw him and smiled.

"Hello," said the Buddha, "have you found a mustard seed yet?"

"No," said the woman "I did look, but every house I visited had sorrow and troubles, far worse than mine and there have been so many people who have needed my help."

"Are you still looking for the mustard seed then?" asked the Buddha. "I suppose so, when I have time," said the old woman. "There is still much to do. These clothes belong to a poor family with a very sick child, and they need them to be washed quickly, so I must get on." She smiled at him and went on scrubbing the clothes and singing to herself.

The Buddha, too, smiled. "You no longer need the mustard seed," he said, "You have discovered for yourself the joy and riches of helping others."

The Buddha went on his way.

