

## Patacara's Presence of Mind

INDIA, SIXTH CENTURY BCE .....

**I**N A SINGLE DAY Patacara experienced the deaths of her whole family: her husband was bitten by a poisonous snake, her newborn child was carried off by a hawk, her older child drowned in a river, and her brother, mother, and father were killed when their house collapsed. Mad with grief, she tore off her clothes and wandered naked in circles for a long time, until she stumbled into the place where the Buddha was teaching. The monks wanted to send her away, but the Buddha stopped them and said to her, "Sister, recover your presence of mind."

At his words she regained her sanity and knew she was naked. A man threw her his cloak and she covered herself. She told the Buddha of her tragedies and begged him to help her.

He said, "I can't help you. For countless lives you have wept for loved ones. Your tears could fill the four oceans. But no one can be a secure hiding place from suffering. Knowing this, a wise person walks the path of awakening."

His words eased her mind. She ordained and practiced diligently. One day she saw into the nature of impermanence, and a vision of the Buddha appeared before her. He said, "Patacara, all human beings die. It is better to see the truth of impermanence even for just a moment than to live for a hundred years and not know it."

Patacara awakened and became the greatest of the women teachers in the Buddha's sangha.

## ANNA PRAJNA DOUGLAS'S REFLECTION

Patacara's story seems very dramatic, almost mythological—losing her entire family in a swift series of deadly events. Thinking about Patacara the other night, I was startled to see on the nightly news a contemporary version of her story—a woman had lost her three children and her parents in a deadly house fire. The pundits wondered whether the smoke alarm systems were functioning properly and whether a lawsuit would be brought. This is how it is in America; when something deadly occurs we look for who is to blame. But sometimes there is no one to blame. Instead, the event is a teaching on the unpredictability of conditions, and this is the nature of human existence.

It is so easy to feel victimized: "I am suffering and someone or something must be to blame!" The Buddha's view was larger than that. He could see that to adopt the role of victim is to suffer and to perpetuate that suffering. A good therapist or spiritual guide will help traumatized people remember that they are more than their grief or loss or trauma. This is what the Buddha showed Patacara: that although her loss was great, she had not lost everything. She still had something of great value, which could restore her sanity; she had a precious resource—her presence of mind.

One's presence of mind is more fundamental, of course, than simply remembering one's name, address, and social security number. In fact, in the Buddhist tradition it is considered our most precious resource. One translation of the word "mindfulness" is *sati*, which means "remembering." When we practice meditation we are practicing remembering our presence here and now, our wakefulness right here and now. Presence is always with us, no matter whether our experience is good or bad. Our presence of mind was with us when we were born and will stay with us as we grow old, get sick, and die.

Luckily for Patacara, in the midst of devastation she found her way to the Buddha, and he provided the "reminder" she needed in order to come back to herself, to recover her "presence of mind." Coming back to oneself after being lost in the afflictive emotions is a great

relief. *I'm alive!* Flowers are blooming, my heart is beating, I taste the air that nourishes me. Life has not forgotten me; it is here to hold me whenever I return.

In the next part of the story Patacara begs the Buddha to help her. He answers, "I can't help you . . . No other person can save you from suffering."

Imagine! We may not commonly think of the Buddha as saying to someone who is suffering, "I can't help you." But he did, and even more surprising is the effect these words had on Patacara: "His words eased her mind." How can that be?

Years ago, I was struggling with a personal problem and I felt that my family and friends didn't hear me or understand what I was saying. So I asked the spiritual teacher Byron Katie to help me. I told her what I was struggling with. She listened intently and then suggested, "I will pretend I am your friends. Now you tell me what you want me to hear."

"Okay," I said, launching into my well-worn tale. Katie listened patiently.

When I was through, she said, with compassion, "Anna, we don't really want to hear it. We don't want to hear about it." That was it. Nothing more.

I was momentarily stunned, and then—my mind cleared! The burden of wanting to be heard lifted and evaporated. Someone was finally telling me the truth! No one actually wanted to hear my sad story! I could accept what Katie told me because I saw with sparkling clarity that it was true. Like Patacara, my mind was eased and liberated. From that day to this I have never had to be heard on the matter again.

This is the effect of truth. When we are told the truth, no matter how painful, it helps us to settle down. We feel heard, seen, responded to accurately. We feel sane, connected.

For Patacara, the truth that no one could help her but herself opened a door for her. She ordained and practiced diligently, coming to a deeper understanding of the truth of impermanence. She was no longer the sorry victim of her fate but a clear-eyed knower of truth.



Can you weep with an awakened mind for those you love?  
Is there a place where suffering can't enter?  
And if the Buddha can't help you, who can?