

## **The Story of Bahiya with Clothes of Tree-Bark**

*Theme: The search for wisdom – beyond words and concepts*

This is what we have been told. Once, a long time ago, there was a man called Bahiya, who lived by the seashore in Supparaka, where the people all wore clothes made of cloth woven from strips of bark from the trees. Bahiya was highly respected for his wisdom by all his friends and by all the local people. He was grateful for this, but, still, he was worried. 'Am I *really* wise?' he thought to himself. 'Do I *really* understand who I am, what I am, and what makes people happy? All the people I know *say* I am wise, but perhaps that is just because they really don't know very much at all. Perhaps there are still many things that I don't know, but I just don't know that I don't know. Perhaps there is a wisdom somewhere that is much greater than mine.'

He asked one of his friends about his worry. And his friend said, 'Bahiya, you are quite right; there is indeed a great teacher, far away, who has a wisdom that is even greater than yours. He is called The Buddha, which, as you know, means 'The Awakened One', and people say he is called this because he really does understand everything. He lives in the Jeta Wood, just outside the town of Savatthi. But unfortunately, that is on the other side of India over *eight hundred* miles away. That's a long way to go for wisdom.'

But Bahiya was delighted at the news that there was someone who could teach him a greater wisdom, and so he set off straight away, walking right across India and stopping only overnight to rest. When he arrived at the Jeta Wood, just outside the town of Savatti, he found the Buddha's followers and asked them where he could find the Buddha so that he could receive a teaching from him. The Buddha's followers were surprised and even slightly amused at his strange clothing, woven from strips of bark. However, they explained that unfortunately the Buddha had just left the Jeta Wood to go into the town for food. So Bahiya went into the town and immediately recognized the Buddha by the amazing tranquillity that radiated from him like a beam of light.

He went up to the Buddha, bowed low before him and said, 'Please, oh wise one, I am Bahiya and I have walked all the way from Supparaka, on the other side of India, to meet you. Please teach me your wisdom, so that I may gain happiness for ever.'

The Buddha replied, 'I'm afraid this is not a good time: as you see I am on my way to find food in the town. Can't you wait for a bit, until I return to the Jeta Wood? Then I can teach you.'

But Bahiya said, 'But, oh wise one, who knows how long we have to live? Later may be too late. I *need* wisdom. Please give me your teaching now.'

Again the Buddha protested that this was not a convenient time, and again Bahiya repeated that his need for wisdom was so urgent that he couldn't wait.

So the Buddha, seeing how serious Bahiya was in his desire to increase his understanding, noticing his strange bark-woven clothes and remembering how far he had travelled, decided to give him a teaching that would sum up all the wisdom that Bahiya needed. It was brief and quite surprising, as follows.

'Bahiya, when you see something, just see it, when you hear something, just hear it, when you think of something, just think of it. Don't worry about whether you like it or dislike it. Don't praise or blame: just *notice*. That is the important thing. That is the way to happiness.' Then the Buddha looked into Bahiya's eyes. And Bahiya looked back, and just gave a single nod of his head – because Bahiya was already wise enough to understand exactly what the Buddha meant, and realized that in those few words the Buddha had taught him something that went far beyond any other wisdom.

So the Buddha left Bahiya and continued into the town. And Bahiya turned back to the Jeta Wood. But at that very minute a cow came down the road with her little calf, and thinking, quite wrongly, that Bahiya was going to attack her calf, she knocked Bahiya over, trampled on him and killed him.

One of the Buddha's followers saw what had happened and ran back to tell the others. When the Buddha returned his followers said to him, 'Isn't it a dreadful thing that happened to that poor man with the strange clothes woven of tree-bark?'

But the Buddha said, 'Perhaps it's not so dreadful. Bahiya may have been a stranger to us, but he was wise enough to understand straight away one of the most difficult Dharma teachings I have ever given. So he died wise and happy. No-one can ask for more.'

So Bahiya was given a magnificent funeral in honour of his wisdom.

## Questions

1. We are told two things about Bahiya – that he had walked hundreds of miles to see the Buddha and that he wore strange clothing. Why is this important in the story?
2. What was the important teaching that the Buddha gave to Bahiya?
3. Do you think this is an important thing to understand? Why?
4. 'He died wise and happy; no-one can ask for more'. Do you agree? What do you think you would need in order to 'die happy'?

## *Dharma Issue:*

- *The Nature of Ultimate Reality, i.e. as beyond all concepts and feelings.*

*Based on the 'Bahiya Sutta' in The Udana, (Sutta No. 1.10), Routledge / Curzon, 1994*