

**UNDER A DEMENTED SKY**



**SANEH SANGSUK**



## Voice-over

*Savatthi, capital of Kosala, northern India*

*Reign of King Pasenadi in Buddha's lifetime*

The small *kuti*<sup>1</sup> in the deep shade of ancient trees with thick tall trunks, splendid curly branches and abundant verdant leaves stood in the area for nuns only. A white wall separated the monks' area and the nuns', to the west of the temple. From the front of the kuti's platform, looking east beyond the white wall, could be seen the hallowed residence of the Buddha.

Late into a cold-season night, the waning moon sky was spangled with stars and chillingly cold. The blobs of dew falling on the roof of the kuti and on the leaves of the surrounding trees sounded like rain. The Big Dipper raised its handle in mid-sky. The burnished gold crescent moon shone its downward slide to the west and seemed to take the stars away in its wake. A forktail uttered drowsy moans. The atmosphere around the little dwelling was reclusive and sorrowful, under a veil of silent acceptance, utter restraint and profound yearning.

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<sup>1</sup> A monk's or a nun's living quarters, traditionally a discrete wooden cell on stilts.

Inside the kuti two terracotta lamps sent out pulsating light. Some eight or nine shaven-headed nuns sat in a group on the veranda under the ambit of that light. Old, middle-aged and young, all wore robes dyed yellowish brown from the heart of the jackfruit tree. Many of them had faces and eyes of sheer imperturbability. They had reached the final stage of Enlightenment. But a few were crying or holding back sobs which told of their mental sense still bearing traces of worldly attachment. The kuti had only one room. Its door was wide open, revealing the wasted body of Reverend Mother Kisa Gotami, who was very ill. She lay on her right side, her head turned to the south, her right hand supporting her head, her left arm stretched along the contour of her hip and thigh, her left foot overlapping her right foot in a posture that was complete and dignified. The Reverend Mother lay on an old piece of yellowish brown cloth, all patched up but as immaculate as could be. That piece of cloth covered a reed mat.

Her whole body was clad in yellowish brown cloth, a yellowish brown so dark it was almost black, glistening from the dainty stitches of many a darning betraying the meticulousness of its owner. The Reverend Mother's eyes had the brightness of the morning star. Her skin, for what her robe allowed to be seen, that

is, her face and hands, looked smooth and radiant, unlike any ordinary person's, as results for monks and nuns from the strict observance of the precepts and noble discipline. Her lips parted slightly in a mysterious smile as if she was glad to mock death. A few Buddhist novices were fanning the stove on which squatted a terracotta kettle. Near that stove a smooth wooden tray held three or four terracotta cups. When the fire in the stove caught, the novices quietly slid back and slipped out to sit on the porch.

It was the sparest of rooms. The floor and walls made of wood had been swept and cleaned until they shone. In the southern corner, on a small low table, were four or five string-bound palm-leaf books (as even during the Buddha's lifetime his sayings had begun to be recorded in writing). On the floor in front of the table was spread a piece of yellowish brown cloth for nuns to sit on. The Reverend Mother's terracotta alms bowl was placed upside down on its stand, its upturned lid on top of it. One wall had a clothesline made of vine on which hung a yellowish brown length of cloth used for bathing. To the right of the table were one of the thick terracotta lamps, a coil of yellowish brown yarn, a yellowish brown needle box, a yellowish brown paper umbrella and a bamboo-joint water filter. Those were all the worldly possessions

of the Reverend Mother. She cast her eyes around the group of nuns and novices who were her disciples and peered at every item she had used and taken great care of. She looked at the sky, the ground and the various species of trees in front of the kuti. Her eyes were devoid of regret of any kind. Finally she sat up, chest erect, legs crossed, right foot against left foot, right hand against left hand upturned in her lap, a posture obviously long familiar to her.

From outside the cell came the dulcet call of a wild cock, the loud crackling of cicadas, the rattling of a kukri snake, the whooshing of the wind. The earth seemed about to wail. As for the more sensitive sky, it rumbled in lamentation. Those sounds scratched the Jetavana temple's serenity, totally even and coruscating like the surface of a lake, and generated ripples. Amidst such sounds and serenity, the Reverend Mother began to speak. Her eyes at times half-closed, at times shut tight in meditative absorption, and at times opened wide, but her body remained steady, stock-still, as if the cross-legged posture was a bastion no one could topple. Her voice was clear and had the ring of a brass bell. Many times did the Reverend Mother speak as if she was mouthing a spell; many times did the Reverend Mother speak as if she was talking to herself and

she the only one who could understand; all this in the leonine voice peculiar to her. The story that the Reverend Mother was about to tell was of her life before her ordination. Even in those days, that story had both the bleakness and the brightness of mythological tales – a noble tradition perpetuated from the distant days of the Buddha until the present time.

He still kept coming round to see me and beg me to tell him I would disrobe. He knew nothing to talk to me like that, with the voice of an immature, self-conscious young man who spoke a little haltingly, hesitated a long time before letting words pass through his lips, and besides adorned himself with the care of a hedonist, dabbed himself with perfume, fragrant oil in his hair, freshly bathed and wearing beautiful, conspicuously immaculate raiment. He had a clear complexion and was a well-set young man. Everyone knew he was the scion of an old wealthy family, a pure Brahman on both his father's and his mother's side, a pure Brahman for seven generations. He had a dignified demeanour. His horse carriage was beautiful and strong. Its two horses too were beautiful and strong. The jewels he wore were very valuable and very expen-

sive. Even his sandals and socks had been made with care, and of course he had a driver who haughtily waited to be of service and he also had a taciturn sword-bearer and a taciturn archer ready to ensure protection – both as his retinue and to boost his prestige. Sometimes he whistled blackbird imitations and sometimes he sang a song or recited a poem to draw my attention. He was the one who had built the biggest Ganesha image in Savatthi. He was a major donor at Ganesha cult fairs. He owned the Hema Paiti troupe, reputed for its performance of more mythological plays than any other theatre troupe in the Kosala kingdom. I would see him at the gate of the wall separating the monks' from the nuns' area at Jetavana. Every late morning he told some female novice or other to come and tell me to go and meet him, every late morning, every day, three months running – every late morning because he never woke up early. He always went to bed late. If no friends came to see him at home, he went out to seek them. He went to every disreputable place in Savatthi, to gambling dens, to brothels and all those places where there was entertainment and music was played. He associated with magicians and witchdoctors. He liked to watch horse racing especially and betted on the horses he liked without ever regretting his losses. But even so he came round to

see me who was a nun, no longer concerned with the world, clad in the robe of sorrow, living a life of simple peace of mind and merely persevering in the search for the absolute truth, whereas in reality he was most pleased with the practices of the nude heretics, those so called Sky-clothed that clad themselves in wind. He or his parents would invite such practitioners to eat – Sky-clothed with coarse, chapped feet caked in dust, Sky-clothed with dirty hands, Sky-clothed with mottled complexions, their flesh full of rashes from the bites of ants, horseflies, mosquitoes, midges and mites, Sky-clothed that squatted on the ground to wolf down their food, their penises hanging down to the ground, their testicles hanging down to the ground. He and his parents were devoted to the Sky-clothed. He was mystified by the daring of the Sky-clothed, didn't see that the daring of the Sky-clothed was absence of shame. He had once said that if Ganesha returned to Earth, the god would favour the Sky-clothed, the god would flap its elephant ears in excitement, whip their backs with its trunk, slurp water and flush it all over their heads and faces, and laugh uproariously in the manner of a cub elephant pleased with a new toy. He admired Buddhist recluses whose practice was extreme. ...