**How Violence Is Ended
A Buddhist Legend**

**Retold by Aaron Shepard**

**Reader’s Theater Edition #16**

Adapted for reader’s theater (or readers theatre) by the author, from his story printed in *Parabola,* Spring 1996

All special features are at www.aaronshep.com/extras.

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PREVIEW: A prince must choose whether to heed his father’s last words or take revenge on the king who has killed both parents.

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| GENRE: Legends, fables, sacred stories CULTURE: Buddhist, Asian Indian THEME: Forgiveness |   | READERS: 6 or more READER AGES: 11 and up LENGTH: 10 minutes |

ROLES: Narrators 1 & 2, Brahmadatta, Dighiti, Deva, Dighavu, (Generals), (Barber), (Soldiers), (Elephant Trainer), (Hunters)

NOTES: This story is found in the *Mahavagga,* an ancient Buddhist text concerned with monastic discipline. Since the story was told by Buddha about a time in India before Buddhism, the characters and settings are Hindu. For best effect, place NARRATOR 1 at far left, and NARRATOR 2 at far right, as seen from the audience. *Benares* is pronounced “ben-AR-ess.” *Brahmadatta* is pronounced “BRAH-ma-DAH-ta.” *Deva* is pronounced “DAY-va,” sounding like “Dave a.” *Dighavu* is pronounced “dee-GAH-voo.” *Dighiti* is pronounced “dee-GEE-tee” (hard *g*).

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NARRATOR 1:  Nearly all the world’s greatest religious teachers have been peacemakers, and one of these certainly was the Buddha. Among the teachings of his Eightfold Path was Right Action, and part of this was to avoid all killing.

NARRATOR 2:  Tradition says that the following tale was told by the Buddha himself to monks whose quarrel had reached the point of violence.

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NARRATOR 1:  Once long ago, there arose a quarrel between two kings.

NARRATOR 2:  One king was the great Brahmadatta. His kingdom was large and rich, and his troops were many.

NARRATOR 1:  The other king was Dighiti. His kingdom was small and poor, and his troops were few.

NARRATOR 2:  Brahmadatta told his generals,

BRAHMADATTA:  We will march against Dighiti and conquer his kingdom. He will not be able to resist me.

NARRATOR 1:  When Dighiti heard of the army’s advance, he told Deva, his queen,

DIGHITI:  *(calmly)* Nothing we do can prevent Brahmadatta from seizing our country. For the sake of our people, it is best to avoid a battle. Let us flee from the kingdom tonight.

NARRATOR 2:  Deva asked,

DEVA:  *(anxiously)* Where can we go?

DIGHITI:  We will go to Brahmadatta’s own capital city, Benares. It is large enough to hide in, and he will never search for us there.

NARRATOR 1:  So they took their young son, Dighavu, and fled by night to Benares.

NARRATOR 2:  There they lodged in a poor quarter of the city. King Dighiti disguised himself as a wandering holy man and each day begged enough coins and food for them all.

NARRATOR 1:  Time passed and the prince grew toward manhood. Then King Dighiti told his wife,

DIGHITI:  Truly is it said, we may forgive those who hurt us, but we never forgive those we hurt. If Brahmadatta finds us here, he will surely kill us all. It is best to send our son from the city.

DEVA:  Let him go to my parents in the west. There he can learn the arts and sciences proper to his estate.

NARRATOR 2:  So they sent the prince away.

NARRATOR 1:  Now, it happened that the barber from the court of King Dighiti was at this time at work in the court of Brahmadatta.

NARRATOR 2:  One day, the barber caught sight of Dighiti in the marketplace, begging in the guise of a holy man. Hoping for reward, he secretly followed Dighiti to his home, then reported to Brahmadatta.

NARRATOR 1:  Brahmadatta sent his men to arrest the family.

NARRATOR 2:  Dighiti and Deva were brought before him.

BRAHMADATTA:  Where is your son?

NARRATOR 1:  . . . demanded Brahmadatta.

DIGHITI:  *(firmly)* Beyond your reach.

NARRATOR 2:  . . . replied Dighiti. Brahmadatta turned to one of his generals.

BRAHMADATTA:  *(seething with anger)* Tie them up and cart them around the city for all to see and scorn. Then take them out the south gate and execute them by the sword. Allow no one to perform the funeral rites. Their bodies shall be prey to birds and beasts. *(waves them off)*

NARRATOR 1:  Now, on that very day, Prince Dighavu had come back to Benares to visit his parents. As he passed through the marketplace, he saw soldiers on horse and on foot, and among them a cart, and tied up in the cart, his mother and his father. And he was powerless to help them.

NARRATOR 2:  King Dighiti saw the prince as well. Wishing to advise his son, yet mindful not to give him away, Dighiti called out as if to no one. And these were his words:

DIGHITI:  *(loudly)*

Be not shortsighted.
Be not longsighted.
Not by violence is violence ended.
Violence is ended by *non*violence.

NARRATOR 1:  As darkness fell, King Dighiti and Queen Deva were taken outside the city walls and executed by the sword.

NARRATOR 2:  Their bodies were left on the ground, with a dozen soldiers standing guard.

NARRATOR 1:  Within the city, Prince Dighavu told himself,

DIGHAVU:  *(bitterly)* First I will perform the funeral rites for my parents. Then I will find a way to avenge them.

NARRATOR 2:  He brought strong wine from the marketplace out to the guards. They took it gladly, and soon lay drunk and asleep.

NARRATOR 1:  Dighavu piled up wood, placed his parents’ bodies on top, then lit the funeral pyre. He pressed his palms together and walked three times around the flames.

NARRATOR 2:  At that moment, at the royal palace, Brahmadatta was strolling upon his roof terrace, puzzling over the words of King Dighiti that had been reported to him. Gazing far south, over the city wall, he spied the fire and the figure circling it. A cold fear gripped his heart.

BRAHMADATTA:  It must be Prince Dighavu! *(turns away from the sight)*

NARRATOR 1:  The prince, his duty complete, slipped quickly into the forest.

NARRATOR 2:  For days he stayed there, hiding from Brahmadatta’s men while grieving for his parents.

NARRATOR 1:  At last, the danger and the tears had passed, and Dighavu entered the city once more.

NARRATOR 2:  At the royal elephant stables, he took work as an apprentice.

NARRATOR 1:  And so it was one morning that Dighavu rose early, sat before the stables, and sang to greet the dawn.

NARRATOR 2:  His voice drifted to the palace and to the balcony of King Brahmadatta, who had also risen early, wakened by a fearful dream.

BRAHMADATTA:  *(to himself)* How lovely. I have need of such music to ease my mind. *(leaves the balcony)*

NARRATOR 1:  He sent for the singer, and Dighavu was brought before him.

BRAHMADATTA:  *(pleasantly)* Sing for me.

NARRATOR 2:  . . . said Brahmadatta, not knowing who the young man was.

NARRATOR 1:  Dighavu sang, and the king’s heart was gladdened. Then Brahmadatta told him,

BRAHMADATTA:  Stay with me.

NARRATOR 2:  And Dighavu answered,

DIGHAVU:  *(formally, with a bow)* As you wish, my lord.

NARRATOR 1:  So Dighavu became the king’s attendant.

NARRATOR 2:  And since the young man’s conduct was agreeable and his words pleasing, the king grew ever more fond of him, bestowing on him more and more responsibility and trust.

NARRATOR 1:  Then came a day when Brahmadatta desired to go hunting. And he told Dighavu,

BRAHMADATTA:  *(pleasantly)* Today you will drive my chariot.

NARRATOR 2:  And Dighavu replied,

DIGHAVU:  *(formally, with a bow)* It is an honor, my lord.

NARRATOR 1:  So Dighavu that day drove the chariot of the king.

NARRATOR 2:  But as the hunters pursued their quarry, Dighavu cleverly took a path that led away. He brought the king far from the sight and hearing of the others.

NARRATOR 1:  At last Brahmadatta said,

BRAHMADATTA:  I wish to stop and rest.

NARRATOR 2:  Dighavu dismounted and sat cross-legged on the ground. And he told the king,

DIGHAVU:  Come rest yourself, my lord.

NARRATOR 1:  So the king lay down beside Dighavu and slept.

NARRATOR 2:  Dighavu gripped his sword and drew it slowly from its sheath.

NARRATOR 1:  He pointed the blade at the throat of Brahmadatta.

NARRATOR 2:  And then there came to him the words of his father.

DIGHITI:  *(speaking as Dighavu’s memory)*

Be not shortsighted.
Be not longsighted.
Not by violence is violence ended.
Violence is ended by *non*violence.

NARRATOR 1:  The sword of Dighavu trembled.

NARRATOR 2:  He drew it slowly away and replaced it in its sheath.

NARRATOR 1:  Brahmadatta breathed heavily and opened wide his eyes and sat up in alarm.

BRAHMADATTA:  *(breathes loudly and heavily, eyes wide in fear)*

DIGHAVU:  What is wrong, my lord?

BRAHMADATTA:  *(slowly calms himself)* It is a dream that often plagues me. I see Dighavu, the son of my enemies, coming at me with his sword to avenge his parents.

NARRATOR 2:  Then Dighavu rose and again drew his sword.

DIGHAVU:  *(fiercely)* I am Dighavu, son of your enemies, and here am I to avenge my parents!

BRAHMADATTA:  *(in terror)* Have mercy, dear Dighavu! Grant me my life!

DIGHAVU:  *(reproachfully)* How can I grant your life? Truly is it said, we may forgive those who hurt us, but we never forgive those we hurt. You have killed my mother and my father, and would surely kill me too. So the life to be granted is mine!

BRAHMADATTA:  Then grant me my life, and I will grant you yours!

NARRATOR 1:  So Dighavu put away his sword.

NARRATOR 2:  And the king rose, and the two clasped their hands and swore never again to seek the other’s harm.

NARRATOR 1:  Then Brahmadatta said,

BRAHMADATTA:  I have often pondered your father’s final words. Tell me, Dighavu, what did he mean when he told you, “Be not shortsighted.”?

DIGHAVU:  My father meant, “Do not be quick to spurn a gift of friendship.”

BRAHMADATTA:  And what did he mean when he told you, “Be not longsighted.”?

DIGHAVU:  My father meant, “Do not allow your hate to last too long.”

BRAHMADATTA:  And what did he mean when he told you, “Not by violence is violence ended. Violence is ended by *non*violence.”?

DIGHAVU:  My father meant this: You, my lord, have killed my parents and stolen their kingdom. If I were to kill you in revenge, your allies would kill me, and then my allies would kill them, and so on, with no end to violence. But now instead, you have granted my life and I have granted yours. So violence is at an end.

NARRATOR 2:  Then the king marveled at the wisdom of Dighavu, who understood in full what his father said in brief.

NARRATOR 1:  Indeed, so great was Brahmadatta’s admiration and his gratitude, he soon restored to Dighavu the kingdom of his father.

NARRATOR 2:  And as long as both kings lived, all quarrels between them were resolved in friendship and good will.

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**Gift of Story #24**

Adapted for storytelling by the author, from his story printed in *Parabola,* Spring 1996

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PREVIEW: A prince must choose whether to heed his father’s last words or take revenge on the king who has killed both parents.

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NOTES: This story is found in the *Mahavagga,* an ancient Buddhist text concerned with monastic discipline. Since the story was told by Buddha about a time in India before Buddhism, the characters and settings are Hindu. *Benares* is pronounced “ben-AR-ess.” *Brahmadatta* is pronounced “BRAH-ma-DAH-ta.” *Deva* is pronounced “DAY-va,” sounding like “Dave a.” *Dighavu* is pronounced “dee-GAH-voo.” *Dighiti* is pronounced “dee-GEE-tee” (hard *g*).

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Nearly all the world’s greatest religious teachers have been peacemakers, and the Buddha was certainly one of these. Among the ethical precepts of his “Eightfold Path” was “Right Action,” which included avoiding all killing.

A legend is told of two kingdoms on the brink of battle. Each claimed the right to irrigate lands from a river flowing between. The Buddha asked the two kings, “What is the water worth?” “Very little,” was the reply. “And what is a life worth?” “It is priceless.” “Then why would you trade something priceless for something of little worth?”

According to tradition, the following tale was told by the Buddha himself to monks whose quarrel had reached the point of violence.

Once long ago, there arose a quarrel between two kings.

One king was the great Brahmadatta. His kingdom was large and rich, and his troops were many. The other king was Dighiti. His kingdom was small and poor, and his troops were few.

Brahmadatta told his generals, “We will march against Dighiti and conquer his kingdom. He will not be able to resist me.”

When Dighiti heard of the army’s advance, he told Deva, his queen, “Nothing we do can prevent Brahmadatta from seizing our country. For the sake of our people, it is best to avoid a battle. Let us flee from the kingdom tonight.”

Deva asked, “Where can we go?”

“We will go to Brahmadatta’s own capital city, Benares. It is large enough to hide in, and he will never search for us there.”

So they took their young son, Dighavu, and fled by night to Benares. There they lodged in a poor quarter of the city. King Dighiti disguised himself as a wandering holy man and each day begged enough coins and food for them all.

Time passed and the prince grew toward manhood. Then King Dighiti told his wife, “Truly is it said, we may forgive those who hurt us, but we never forgive those we hurt. If Brahmadatta finds us here, he will surely kill us all. It is best to send our son from the city.”

The queen said, “Let him go to my parents in the west. There he can learn the arts and sciences proper to his estate.” So they sent the prince away.

Now, it happened that the barber from the court of King Dighiti was at this time at work in the court of Brahmadatta. One day, the barber caught sight of Dighiti in the marketplace, begging in the guise of a holy man. Hoping for reward, he secretly followed Dighiti to his home, then reported to Brahmadatta.

Brahmadatta sent his men to arrest the family. Dighiti and Deva were brought before him.

“Where is your son?” demanded Brahmadatta.

“Beyond your reach,” replied Dighiti.

Brahmadatta turned to one of his generals. “Tie them up and cart them around the city for all to see and scorn. Then take them out the south gate and execute them by the sword. Allow no one to perform the funeral rites. Their bodies shall be prey to birds and beasts.”

Now, on that very day, Prince Dighavu had come back to Benares to visit his parents. As he passed through the marketplace, he saw soldiers on horse and on foot, and among them a cart, and tied up in the cart, his mother and his father. And he was powerless to help them.

King Dighiti saw the prince as well. Wishing to advise his son, yet mindful not to give him away, Dighiti called out as if to no one. And these were his words:

*Be not shortsighted.
Be not longsighted.
Not by violence is violence ended.
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As darkness fell, King Dighiti and Queen Deva were taken outside the city walls and executed by the sword. Their bodies were left on the ground, with a dozen soldiers standing guard.

Within the city, Prince Dighavu told himself, “First I will perform the funeral rites for my parents. Then I will find a way to avenge them.”

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And Dighavu answered, “As you wish, my lord.”

So Dighavu became the king’s attendant. And since the young man’s conduct was agreeable and his words pleasing, the king grew ever more fond of him, bestowing on him more and more responsibility and trust.

Then came a day when Brahmadatta desired to go hunting. And he told Dighavu, “Today you will drive my chariot.”

And Dighavu replied, “It is an honor, my lord.”

So Dighavu that day drove the chariot of the king. But as the hunters pursued their quarry, Dighavu cleverly took a path that led away. He brought the king far from the sight and hearing of the others.

At last Brahmadatta said, “I wish to stop and rest.”

Dighavu dismounted and sat cross-legged on the ground. And he told the king, “Come rest yourself, my lord.”

So the king laid his head in the cradle of Dighavu’s legs, and slept.

Dighavu gripped his sword and drew it slowly from its sheath. He pointed the blade at the throat of Brahmadatta. And then there came to him the words of his father.

*Be not shortsighted.
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The sword of Dighavu trembled. He drew it slowly away and replaced it in its sheath.

Brahmadatta breathed heavily and opened wide his eyes and sat up in alarm.

“What is wrong, my lord?” asked Dighavu.

“It is a dream that often plagues me,” said the king. “I see Dighavu, the son of my enemies, coming at me with his sword to avenge his parents.”

Then Dighavu clutched the king’s hair, dragged his head back down, and drew his sword. “I am Dighavu, son of your enemies, and here am I to avenge my parents!”

“Have mercy, dear Dighavu! Grant me my life!”

“How can I grant your life?” replied Dighavu. “Truly is it said, we may forgive those who hurt us, but we never forgive those we hurt. You have killed my mother and my father, and would surely kill me too. So the life to be granted is mine!”

“Then grant me my life,” said Brahmadatta, “and I will grant you yours!”

So Dighavu released the king and put away his sword. And the two rose and clasped their hands and swore never again to seek the other’s harm.

Then Brahmadatta said, “I have often pondered your father’s final words. Tell me, Dighavu, what did he mean when he told you, ‘Be not shortsighted.’?”

“My father meant, ‘Do not be quick to spurn a gift of friendship.’”

“And what did he mean when he told you, ‘Be not longsighted.’?”

“My father meant, ‘Do not allow your hate to last too long.’”

“And what did he mean when he told you, ‘Not by violence is violence ended. Violence is ended by nonviolence.’?”

“My father meant this: You, my lord, have killed my parents and stolen their kingdom. If I were to kill you in revenge, your allies would kill me, and then my allies would kill them, and so on, with no end to violence. But now instead, you have granted my life and I have granted yours. So violence is at an end.”

Then the king marveled at the wisdom of Dighavu, who understood in full what his father said in brief.

Indeed, so great was Brahmadatta’s admiration and his gratitude, he soon restored to Dighavu the kingdom of his father. And as long as both kings lived, all quarrels between them were resolved in friendship and good will.

**Tips for Telling**

Here’s one of the most important tricks a storyteller must learn: If you’re losing your listeners’ attention, don’t speed up. Instead, slow down! Going faster only makes it easier for listeners to ignore you, while slowing down will often attract their interest.

That’s a good rule to remember when telling this story. It’s a difficult one to tell in that there’s not a lot of action. Yet the events have singular power and suspense. If not rushed, this tale can mesmerize—and that’s your goal.

Though the dialogue can be as dramatic as you like, the narration should be stately, lyric, composed. This is, after all, from Buddhist scripture, so it’s akin to a Bible story. The drama is in the unfolding events, not in the narrative style. Of course, this means your listeners must be mature enough to follow the tale without the aid of lively movement or voice acrobatics.

Another reason to keep things slow and calm is to give your listeners time to absorb unfamiliar elements. They will at first expect a tale of daring rescue, and later, one of vengeance. They’ll need time to adjust to unexpected actions, and to understand the principles that underlie them.

Probably the moment of greatest dramatic tension is when Dighavu first holds his sword at Brahmadatta’s throat. Will he do it? Your listeners don’t know and are breathless to find out. I like to mime this moment while stretching it out—pulling out the sword, holding it pointing downward, making it tremble.

When Dighavu hears his father’s words in memory, I deliver those words exactly as I did at first, like a timeless echo.

By the way, try not to start your performance with this one! Because of the concentration it requires, you need to win over your listeners before you get to it.

**About Aaron Shepard’s**

**How Violence Is Ended
A Buddhist Legend**

Here is background info for my [story](http://www.aaronshep.com/stories/040.html).—Aaron

The full story is found in the tenth chapter of the *Mahavagga,* an ancient Buddhist text concerned with monastic discipline. Pieces and summaries of the story are found in the *Jataka,* a collection of fables, and in the *Dhammapadatthakatha,* a commentary by Buddhaghosa on the *Dhammapada.*

Brahmadatta is a legendary king mentioned in many Buddhist tales. Dighiti and Dighavu seem to be characters created just for this story, since their names describe their conditions—*Dighiti* meaning “long-suffering” and *Dighavu* meaning “long-lived.” Dighiti’s queen, here called Deva, is unnamed in the sources.

I was first introduced to this tale in the late 1970s by Paul Carus’s *The Gospel of the Buddha.*

Key references for my retelling included:

*Vinaya Texts, Part 2,* translated by T. W. Rhys Davids and Hermann Oldenberg, Oxford University, 1882 (Volume 17 of The Sacred Books of the East, edited by F. Max Muller), pp. 291–306 (from the Tenth Khandhaka of the *Mahavagga*).

*The Jataka, or Stories of the Buddha’s Former Births,* Volume 3, translated by H. T. Francis and R. A. Neil, edited by E. B. Cowell, Cambridge University, 1897, pp. 139–140 (#371) and 289–291 (#428).

*Buddhist Legends* (translation of Buddhaghosa’s *Dhammapadatthakatha*), translated by Eugene Watson Burlingame, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1921 (Volume 28 of the Harvard Oriental Series, edited by Charles Rockwell Lanman), pp. 176–177.

*The Gospel of the Buddha,* compiled and retold by Paul Carus, Open Court, Lasalle, Illinois, 1915, pp. 104–108 and the glossary.

The legend described in the introductory note comes from:

*The Jataka, or Stories of the Buddha’s Former Births,* Volume 5, translated by H. T. Francis, edited by E. B. Cowell, Cambridge University, 1897, pp. 219–220 (#536).

For help with this retelling, I would like to thank the many students, teachers, and librarians who took part in my Internet program Works in Progress during the first half of 1995. The comments I received were invaluable in guiding my revisions.

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