

The Sermon at Benares

Introduction

This chapter is a part of Betty Renshaw's book 'Values and Voices'. It is about the first sermon given by the Buddha at the city of Benares, which is deemed to be the most holy of the cities situated on the banks of River Ganga. It reflects the Buddha's wisdom about the suffering inflicted by death.

Summary

Gautama Buddha was born in 563 BC in Northern India. He was a prince known as Siddhartha Gautama. At the age of twelve, he was sent away for schooling to study the Hindu sacred scriptures. He returned after four years and married a princess named Yashodhara. They had a son. The family was leading a royal life. At the age of twenty-five, he went out for excursion. Till this period he did not know sufferings. On the way he happened to see a sick man, an aged man, a funeral procession and a monk begging for alms. These sights moved him very much. He immediately decided to become a ascetic and went out to seek enlightenment.

For seven long years, he went on wandering here and there in search of enlightenment but in vain. At last he sat down under a big peepal tree and vowed to stay there until he achieved enlightenment. He was enlightened after seven days. He renamed the tree as the *Bodhi* Tree (Tree of Wisdom) and he became known as the *Buddha*. He preached his first sermon at the city of Benares near the holy banks of the river Ganges. That sermon is given ahead.

Kisa Gotami had an only son, and he died. She went to-and-fro with her dead child and requested for medicine. She had lost her senses after losing her boy. A man told her to go to *Sakyamuni*, the Buddha. She went there and cried, 'Lord and Master, give me the medicine that will cure my boy.' After a deep thought, the Buddha asked her to bring a handful of mustard-seeds. He also said that it must be from that house where no one had died.

Kisa Gotami went from house to house asking for mustard-seeds. She found no such house where some beloved had not died. Gotami became sad and troubled. She sat down at the wayside and saw the flickering lights of the city. She realised that the faces of men were like the lights that flickered and extinguished. She thought, 'How selfish am I in my grief? Death is common to all. But there is a path for immortality if one has surrendered all selfishness.'

The Buddha said, 'Our life is brief. It is mixed with pain. After birth, one has to approach the danger of death. All are subject to death. 'Neither a father nor a kinsman can save life. The world is affected by suffering, death and decay. Therefore, it is not wise to grieve.' Through weeping or grieving we cannot obtain the peace of mind but our body suffers. We can seek peace by drawing out the arrow of lamentation, complaint and grief. One who has drawn out this arrow, has become composed and will obtain peace of mind. Such a man will be free from sorrow and be blessed.

Message

This chapter conveys the message that death is common to all. The life of mortals is troubled and combined with pain. Yet in this valley of desolation there is a path that leads him to immortality who has surrendered all selfishness.



Extract Based Questions

1. Read the extract given below and answer the questions that follow:

At about the age of twenty-five, the Prince, heretofore shielded from the sufferings of the world, while out hunting chanced upon a sick man, then an aged man, then a funeral procession, and finally a monk begging for alms.

(a) Who is the Prince?

(b) The Prince was out when he saw the sufferings of the world.

- (i) wandering
- (ii) hunting
- (iii) riding
- (iv) swimming

(c) State whether the given statement is True or False.

The Prince saw a monk begging for alms.

(d) The Prince saw:

- (i) a sick man
- (ii) an aged man
- (iii) a funeral procession
- (iv) All of the above

Answers

- (a) Siddhartha Gautama is the Prince.
- (b) (ii) hunting
- (c) True
- (d) (iv) All of the above

2. Read the extract given below and answer the questions that follow:

At twelve, he was sent away for schooling in the Hindu sacred scriptures and four years later he returned home to marry a princess. They had a son and lived for ten years as befitted royalty.

(a) For whom does 'He' stand?

(b) For ten years:

- (i) they lived a royal life
- (ii) he was away for schooling
- (iii) he learnt scriptures
- (iv) All of the above

(c) After returning home, the Prince

(d) The word 'sacred' means



Answers

- (a) 'He' stands for Prince Siddhartha.
- (b) (i) they lived a royal life
- (c) married a Princess
- (d) holy

3. Read the extract given below and answer the questions that follow:

At length, Kisa Gotami met a man who replied to her request, "I cannot give thee medicine for thy child, but I know a physician who can."

And the girl said, "Pray tell me, sir; who is it?" And the man replied, "Go to Sakyamuni, the Buddha."

Kisa Gotami repaired to the Buddha and cried, "Lord and Master, give me the medicine that will cure my boy."

The Buddha answered, "I want a handful of mustard-seed." And when the girl in her joy promised to procure it, the Buddha added, "The mustard-seed must be taken from a house where no one has lost a child, husband, parent or friend."

- (a) What did the Buddha want Kisa Gotami to understand?
- (b) State whether the given statement is True or False. Kisa Gotami had two sons.
- (c) The mustard seeds must be taken from where no one has lost a:
 - (i) child
 - (ii) parent
 - (iii) friend
 - (iv) All of these
- (d) Complete the analogy with a word from the text:
request : order :: questioned :

Answers

- (a) The Buddha wanted Kisa Gotami to understand the great truth of life, i.e. death.
- (b) False
- (c) (iv) All of these
- (d) answered

4. Read the extract given below and answer the questions that follow:

Mark! while relatives are looking on and lamenting deeply, one by one mortals are carried off, like an ox that is led to the slaughter. So the world is afflicted with death and decay, therefore the wise do not grieve knowing the terms of the world.

- (a) Who said the above lines?
 - (i) Kisa Gotami
 - (ii) The Buddha
 - (iii) The Priest
 - (iv) A Farmer
- (b) State whether the given statement is True or False. All the mortals shall die one day.
- (c) do not grieve knowing the reality of the world.
 - (i) The fool
 - (ii) The Buddha
 - (iii) The wise
 - (iv) The people
- (d) Complete the analogy with a word from the text:
death : birth :: rejoice :

Answers

- (a) (ii) The Buddha
- (b) True
- (c) (iii) The wise
- (d) grieve.

5. Read the extract given below and answer the questions that follow:

He who seeks peace should draw out the arrow of lamentation, and complaint and grief. He who has drawn out the arrow and has become composed will obtain peace of mind; he who has overcome all sorrow will become free from sorrow and be blessed.

- (a) How can one get peace?
- (b) To be blessed one should
- (c) Complete the analogy with a word from the text:
complaint : approval :: celebration :
- (d) Who is the speaker of the given lines?

Answers

- (a) One can get peace by not complaining and grieving.
- (b) overcome all sorrow
- (c) lamentation
- (d) Gautama Buddha is the speaker of the given lines.



Short Answer Type Questions

- Q 1. What did Siddhartha Gautama come across by chance when he was about twenty-five years old?
(CBSE 2023)

OR

What was the effect of the sufferings of the world on the Buddha?

- Ans. The Buddha, at the age of twenty-five, came across by chance a sick man, an aged man, a funeral procession and a monk begging. These scenes moved him so much that he renounced his kingdom and went out into the world to seek enlightenment. He wandered for seven years and finally sat down under a peepal tree. He vowed to stay there until enlightenment came.

- Q 2. Why was Gautama known as the Buddha?

- Ans. 'Buddha' means 'the Awakened or the Enlightened'. Gautama sat under a peepal tree and got enlightenment after seven days. He started teaching his new understanding and became known as Gautama Buddha.

- Q 3. Why did the Buddha choose Benares to preach his first sermon?
(CBSE 2016)

- Ans. The Buddha preached his first sermon at the city of Benares. This city is regarded as the most holy place to take dip in River Ganges. Therefore, the Buddha chose Benares to preach his first sermon.

- Q 4. What was the basic idea of Buddha's preaching?

- Ans. The basic idea of the Buddha's preaching is that death is the ultimate truth of life. It is that all living beings are to die one day. No one can escape from death. We must accept this universal truth and should not grieve over the dead.

- Q 5. Why was Kisa Gotami sad? What did she do in her hour of grief?
(CBSE 2015)

OR

Why did Kisa Gotami go from house to house?

OR

What did Kisa Gotami do after the death of her only son?
(CBSE 2023)

- Ans. After the death of her only son, Kisa Gotami was overcome with grief. She carried the dead body of her son in her arms and went from house to house

asking for medicine to cure her child, but nobody could provide any medicine. For there is no such medicine available which can bring a dead person back to life.

Q 6. What did the Buddha want Kisa Gotami to understand? (CBSE 2015)

Ans. The Buddha wanted Kisa Gotami to understand the great truth of life, i.e. death. He wanted her to understand that all those who are born are to die one day. A ripe fruit has to fall one day. So, all the mortals shall also die one day. Death was inevitable and sure.

Q 7. How did the Buddha teach Kisa Gotami the truth of life?

OR

Why did the Buddha ask Kisa Gotami to bring handful of mustard seeds? (CBSE 2018)

OR

What is the significance of the Buddha's request for a handful of mustard seeds and the addition of a condition to it? (CBSE SQP 2022 Term-2)

Ans. Gautama Buddha taught Kisa Gotami the truth of life by asking her to bring mustard seeds but added the condition that these should be from the house where no death had occurred. He said that such mustard seeds can bring her son alive. Kisa Gotami went from house to house but couldn't find such a house where no one had died. Finally, she understood the truth of life. She understood that death is common to all.

Long Answer Type Questions

Q 1. Explain how did Gautama Buddha attain enlightenment as given in the story.

Ans. Gautama Buddha was born in Northern India. He was the son of a king named Suddhodhana. He was the king of Kapilvastu. His birth name was Siddhartha. He led his early life with luxuries. His father loved him very much. When he was about twenty-five years old, he decided to go out for hunting. On the way, he saw a sick man, an old man and a dead man. These sights jolted his mind. He became restless and could not sleep. He decided to become a monk. For seven years, he wandered here and there in search of enlightenment. After seven days of continuous meditation, he got it. He started to deliver his preaching, which is known as his first sermon, at the city of Benares. It is the holy city situated on the bank of holy river Ganges.

Q 2. What lesson on death and suffering did the Buddha teach Gotami in the chapter, 'The Sermon at Benares'? (CBSE 2018)

OR

Why did Gotami go to the Buddha? What lesson did he teach her? (CBSE 2019)

OR

How does Buddha being about a different perspective in Kisa Gotami's understanding of life? (CBSE 2022 Term-2)

OR

Why did Kisa Gotami meet the Buddha? How did Buddha change her life? (CBSE 2023)

OR

'As ripe fruits are in danger of falling early, so mortals when born are always in danger of death'. With this statement of the Buddha find out the moral values that Kisa Gotami learnt after the death of her child. (CBSE 2023)

Ans. Kisa Gotami was bereft with grief when her son died. She searched for someone who could bring her son back to life and was directed to the Buddha. She requested the Buddha to cure her boy. The Buddha thought to teach her a lesson on death and suffering. So, he asked Kisa Gotami to bring a handful of mustard seeds from a house whose members had not witnessed any death. Only then he will be able to cure her son. Kisa Gotami went from one house to another, but was not able to find such a house that had not lost their beloved. Kisa Gotami then realised that death is common to all. The Buddha wanted to teach her that the life of mortals in this world is troubled and brief and combined with pain. As ripe fruits are early in danger of falling, so mortals when born are always in danger of death. Both young and adult, both those who are fools and those who are wise, all are subject to death. He wanted to teach her that a father cannot save his son, nor kinsmen their relations. So, the world is afflicted with death and decay, therefore the wise do not grieve as grieving will not help to obtain peace of mind; on the contrary, his pain will be the greater and his body will suffer. He who seeks peace should not lament and complaint, and grieve.

Thus, Kisa Gotami's life changed altogether. She learnt the moral values of impermanence, acceptance and letting go.

Q 3. 'The life of mortals in this world is troubled and brief and combined with pain ...' With this statement of the Buddha, find out the moral value that Kisa Gotami learnt after the death of her child. (CBSE 2016)

OR

Life is full of trials and tribulations. Kisa Gotami also passes through a period of grief in her life. How does she behave in those circumstances? What lesson does a reader learn from the story of her life? Given any two points how you would like to act in the midst of adverse circumstances.

Ans. It is a fact that the life of mortals in this world is full of troubles. It is brief and has pain. So, human life is a sad and unhappy experience. Death is a reality. Anyone who is born has to die one day. This reality is learnt by Kisa Gotami when she goes to get mustard seeds from a house where death has not occurred to be able to bring alive her dead son. She is not able to find such a house. Then she realises the basic truth of life. This is what Gautama, the Buddha, wanted to teach her. Wise men do not grieve at the death as they know this truth.

I would act in the following manner in adverse circumstances:

(i) I would try to overcome my grief.

(ii) I would try to be happy and console others around me.