

padhai | Class X

English

Notes



**Full
Explanations**



**Character
Sketch**



**Word
Meanings**



**Tone, Central
idea, devices....**

First Flight

The Sermon at Benares

Detailed Explanation:

The chapter The Sermon at Benares begins by presenting the background of Gautama Buddha, who was originally born as **Prince Siddhartha Gautama** in northern India. Although he lived a life of luxury and comfort as a prince, his outlook changed profoundly when he encountered a **sick man, an old man, a funeral procession**, and a **monk** asking for alms. These experiences awakened him to the harsh realities of human suffering and inspired him to **abandon worldly life** in search of spiritual truth. After wandering for seven years, he finally meditated beneath a peepal tree, where he attained enlightenment. He later named this tree the **Bodhi Tree**, meaning the Tree of Wisdom, and came to be known as the **Buddha**, that is, “the Awakened” or “the Enlightened.” Following this transformation, he delivered his first sermon at Benares, a sacred city on the banks of the River Ganges, where he explained the universal truths of suffering and death.

The narrative then focuses on **Kisa Gotami**, a young woman devastated by the death of her only son. Overcome by grief, she loses all sense of reality and carries her dead child from one house to another, asking for medicine to bring him back to life. The people around her pity her and believe she has “**lost her senses**,” which reflects both the depth of her **maternal love** and the **overwhelming madness** caused by grief. Eventually, a kind-hearted man directs her to the Buddha, recognising that spiritual guidance may succeed where ordinary remedies cannot. When she approaches the Buddha and pleads for a cure for her son, he calmly instructs her to bring him a **handful of mustard seeds from a household where no one has ever lost** a child, husband, parent, or friend. Initially, she is filled with hope, believing that her son might still be revived.

However, as Kisa Gotami goes from house to house in search of such mustard seeds, she gradually realises that every family has experienced loss. The repeated replies she hears – that “**the living are few, but the dead are many**” – slowly shatter her illusion and confront her with the universal nature of death. Exhausted and disheartened, she sits by the roadside and observes the city lights that “flicker up and extinguished again.” This imagery serves as a powerful metaphor: the lights represent human lives that shine briefly before fading away, suggesting the temporary nature of existence. The eventual darkness that “reigned everywhere” reinforces the sense of **sorrow**, **realization**, and the **inevitability of death**. In this moment of deep reflection, she understands that she has been “**selfish** in her grief,” as death is not unique to her but common to all humanity. She also realises that only by letting go of selfish attachment can one overcome suffering.

When she returns to the Buddha, he further clarifies this understanding through his sermon.

The Sermon at Benares

He explains that human life is “**troubled and brief** and combined with pain,” and that no one born into the world can escape death. He uses a simile by comparing human beings to ripe fruits that are always in danger of falling, thereby presenting death as a natural and unavoidable process. Another powerful comparison likens human beings being taken away by death to “an ox that is led to the slaughter,” highlighting human **helplessness** in the face of fate. The Buddha also teaches that grieving and weeping cannot bring back the dead; instead, one must “draw out the arrow of lamentation, and complaint, and grief.” This metaphor portrays grief as a painful arrow lodged within the heart, which must be removed to achieve peace. Through this compassionate and insightful teaching, the Buddha transforms Kisa Gotami’s personal sorrow into a deeper spiritual awareness. The chapter ultimately presents him as a calm and enlightened teacher, while Kisa Gotami emerges as a figure who evolves from blind grief to acceptance and wisdom.

Reference Information:

1. Background of Buddha: Gautama Buddha was born as Prince Siddhartha Gautama in northern India and lived a royal life before seeking enlightenment after witnessing human suffering.
2. Age and turning point: At around the age of twenty-five, Siddhartha encountered a sick man, an old man, a funeral procession, and a monk begging for alms, which altered the course of his life.
3. Search for enlightenment: He wandered for seven years and then meditated under a peepal tree, attaining enlightenment after seven days of meditation.
4. Bodhi Tree: After achieving enlightenment, he named the peepal tree the Bodhi Tree, meaning the Tree of Wisdom.
5. Meaning of Buddha: The word “Buddha” signifies “the Awakened” or “the Enlightened.”
6. Setting of the sermon: The first sermon was delivered at Benares, considered the most sacred bathing place on the River Ganges, which adds spiritual importance to the teaching.
7. Kisa Gotami’s loss: Kisa Gotami had only one son, and his death caused her extreme sorrow and mental disturbance.
8. Reaction of neighbours: When she asked for medicine to revive her dead child, people felt pity for her and believed she had lost her sanity, indicating the intensity of her grief.
9. The Buddha’s method: Instead of directly preaching, the Buddha guided her to realise the truth herself through the task of collecting mustard seeds, making his method psychologically effective.
10. Mustard-seed condition: The seeds had to be taken from a house where no one had ever experienced the death of a loved one, which made the condition impossible to fulfill.
11. Universal experience of death: Every house Kisa visited had suffered some form of loss, helping her understand that death is a universal reality.

12. Symbolic city lights: The lights of the city that “flickered up and were extinguished again” symbolize the short and uncertain nature of human life.
13. Important realization: Kisa Gotami’s realization, “How selfish am I in my grief!” marks the turning point in her understanding.
14. Key teaching about life: The Buddha states that the life of mortals is “troubled and brief and combined with pain,” which is the central philosophical idea of the chapter.
15. Key teaching about grief: He teaches that peace is not achieved through sorrow or weeping but through overcoming grief and maintaining composure.
16. Major literary devices: The chapter uses metaphor (“arrow of lamentation”), simile (comparison of mortals to ripe fruits and to “an ox that is led to the slaughter”), imagery (flickering city lights), and symbolism (darkness and extinguished lights representing mortality and sorrow).
17. Style of language: The language is old-fashioned because it describes an event from over two thousand years ago, using expressions such as “give thee medicine” and “Pray tell me.”
18. Title significance: The title The Sermon at Benares emphasizes both the location of the Buddha’s first sermon and the importance of spiritual wisdom in understanding grief and death.

Detailed Character Sketches

Kisa Gotami

Kisa Gotami is the central human character in the chapter and symbolizes the anguish caused by personal loss. She is a devoted mother whose only son’s death pushes her into deep sorrow. In the beginning, she behaves irrationally, moving from one house to another with her dead child and seeking medicine, which reflects the denial and emotional disturbance caused by grief. However, her behaviour is not due to foolishness but to overwhelming sorrow. Her readiness to visit every house in search of mustard seeds shows her determination and desperate hope. Gradually, through her experiences, she develops awareness and understanding. Her realization – “How selfish am I in my grief!” – indicates her transformation from personal sorrow to a broader understanding of life. By the end of the chapter, she emerges as a figure shaped by suffering, humility, and wisdom.

Gautama Buddha

Gautama Buddha is portrayed as a calm, wise, and compassionate spiritual guide. Originally Prince Siddhartha Gautama, he renounced his royal life after understanding the depth of human suffering. His wisdom lies in his deep insight into human nature. When Kisa Gotami approaches him in despair, he does not reject her or lecture her directly; instead, he leads her towards self-realisation through the mustard-seed task.

This demonstrates his psychological understanding as well as his spiritual enlightenment. His teachings are simple yet profound, expressed through memorable statements such as “The life of mortals in this world is troubled and brief and combined with pain” and “draw out the arrow of lamentation.” He stands as a symbol of compassion, detachment, and universal truth.

Central Message

The central idea of The Sermon at Benares is that death is universal and inevitable, and true peace lies in accepting this reality rather than resisting it. The chapter teaches that while grief is natural, excessive attachment and prolonged sorrow only increase suffering. Through the experience of Kisa Gotami, it becomes clear that no individual is alone in loss, as death is a common part of human life. The Buddha’s teaching emphasises that peace is achieved through self-control, acceptance, and freedom from selfish grief. It also suggests that spiritual understanding provides deeper healing than emotional desperation.

Narrator’s Tone

The tone of the narrator is serious, reflective, and compassionate. In the beginning, it is informative and respectful while describing the life of the Buddha. During Kisa Gotami’s story, it becomes sympathetic and sorrowful, especially in the depiction of her grief and her search for a cure. In the sermon, the tone shifts to a philosophical and meditative one, guiding the reader towards deeper reflection on life and death. Overall, the tone remains calm and dignified, in harmony with the spiritual nature of the chapter.

Word Meanings

Sermon – a religious or moral discourse.

Chanced upon – came across unexpectedly.

Enlightenment – a state of deep spiritual understanding.

Inscrutable – difficult or impossible to understand.

Dipping places – places used for bathing.

Repaired – went to a place.

Procure – to obtain or acquire.

Desolation – a condition of deep sadness or emptiness.

Valley of desolation – a state or place filled with sorrow.

Mortals – human beings subject to death.

Afflicted with – suffering from or affected by.

Lamentation – expression of grief or sorrow.

Kinsmen – relatives or family members.

Be composed – remain calm and self-controlled.

Be subject to – likely to experience or undergo.

Pray tell me – a polite way of asking someone to explain.

Thankyou for Learning with **padhai**

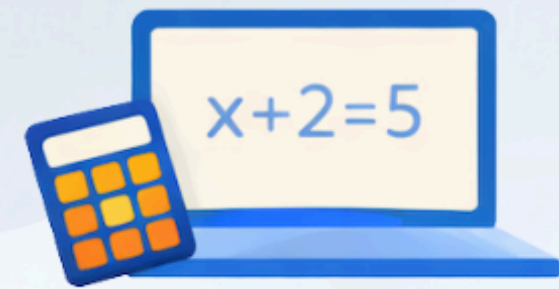
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