8 The Sermon at Benares

1059CH10

Before You Read

Activity

Use a dictionary or ask for your teacher's help as you discuss the following questions in groups.

1. *What is a sermon? Is it different from a lecture or a talk? Can this word also be used in a negative way or as a joke (as in "my mother's sermon about getting my work done on time…")?*
2. *Find out the meanings of the words and phrases given in the box.*

afflicted with	*be composed*	*desolation*
lamentation	*procure*	*be subject to*

3. *Have you heard of the Sermon on the Mount? Who delivered it? Who do you think delivered a sermon at Benares?*

Gautama Buddha (563 B.C. – 483 B.C.) began life as a prince named Siddhartha Gautama, in northern India. 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. 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. These sights so moved him that he at once went out into the world to seek enlightenment concerning the sorrows he had witnessed. He wandered for seven years and finally sat down under a peepal tree, where he vowed to stay

chanced upon came across by chance

enlightenment a state of high spiritual knowledge

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until enlightenment came. Enlightened after seven days, he renamed the tree the Bodhi Tree (Tree of Wisdom) and began to teach and to share his new understandings. At that point he became known as the Buddha (the Awakened or the Enlightened). The Buddha preached his first sermon at the city of Benares, most holy of the dipping places on the River Ganges; that sermon has been preserved and is given here. It reflects the Buddha's wisdom about one inscrutable kind of suffering.

sermon religious or moral talk

dipping places bathing

inscrutable something which cannot be understood

Kisa Gotami had an only son, and he died. In her grief she carried the dead child to all her neighbours, asking them for medicine, and the people said, "She has lost her senses. The boy is dead."

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."

repaired (a stylistic use) went to

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."

Poor Kisa Gotami now went from house to house, and the people pitied her and said, "Here is mustard-seed; take it!" But when she asked, "Did a son or daughter, a father or mother, die in your family?" they answered her, "Alas! the living are few, but the dead are many. Do not remind us of our deepest grief." And there was no house but some beloved one had died in it.

Kisa Gotami became weary and hopeless, and sat down at the wayside watching the lights of the city, as they flickered up and were extinguished again. At last the darkness of the night reigned everywhere. And she considered the fate of men, that their lives flicker up and are extinguished again. And she thought to herself, "How selfish am I in my grief! Death is common to all; yet in this valley of desolation there is a path that leads him to immortality who has surrendered all selfishness."

valley of desolation an area which is filled with deep sorrow

The Buddha said, "The life of mortals in this world is troubled and brief and combined with pain. For there

mortals those bound to die

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is not any means by which those that have been born can avoid dying; after reaching old age there is death; of such a nature are living beings. As ripe fruits are early in danger of falling, so mortals when born are always in danger of death. As all earthen vessels made by the potter end in being broken, so is the life of mortals. Both young and adult, both those who are fools and those who are wise, all fall into the power of death; all are subject to death.

"Of those who, overcome by death, depart from life, a father cannot save his son, nor kinsmen their relations. 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.

afflicted with
affected by suffering, disease or pain

"Not from weeping nor from grieving will anyone obtain peace of mind; on the contrary, his pain will be the greater and his body will suffer. He will make himself sick and pale, yet the dead are not saved by his lamentation. 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."

lamentation
expression of sorrow

[*Source*: *Betty Renshaw*
Values and Voices: A College Reader (1975)]

Thinking about the Text

1. When her son dies, Kisa Gotami goes from house to house. What does she ask for? Does she get it? Why not?
2. Kisa Gotami again goes from house to house after she speaks with the Buddha. What does she ask for, the second time around? Does she get it? Why not?
3. What does Kisa Gotami understand the second time that she failed to understand the first time? Was this what the Buddha wanted her to understand?
4. Why do you think Kisa Gotami understood this only the second time? In what way did the Buddha change her understanding?
5. How do you usually understand the idea of 'selfishness'? Do you agree with Kisa Gotami that she was being 'selfish in her grief '?

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Thinking about Language

I. **This text is written in an old-fashioned style, for it reports an incident more than two millennia old. Look for the following words and phrases in the text, and try to rephrase them in more current language, based on how you understand them.**

- give *thee* medicine for *thy* child
- *Pray* tell me
- Kisa *repaired* to the Buddha
- there was *no* house *but* someone had died in it
- kinsmen
- *Mark*!

II. You know that we can combine sentences using words like *and*, *or*, *but, yet* and *then*. But sometimes no such word seems appropriate. In such a case we can use a semicolon (;) or a dash (—) to combine two clauses.

She has no interest in music; I doubt she will become a singer like her mother.

The second clause here gives the speaker's opinion on the first clause.

Here is a sentence from the text that uses semicolons to combine clauses. Break up the sentence into three simple sentences. Can you then say which has a better rhythm when you read it, the single sentence using semicolons, or the three simple sentences?

For there is not any means by which those who have been born can avoid dying; after reaching old age there is death; of such a nature are living beings.

Speaking

The Buddha's sermon is over 2500 years old. Given below are two recent texts on the topic of grief. Read the texts, comparing them with each other and with the Buddha's sermon. Do you think the Buddha's ideas and way of teaching continue to hold meaning for us? Or have we found better ways to deal with grief? Discuss this in groups or in class.

I. A Guide to Coping with the Death of a Loved One

Martha is having difficulty sleeping lately and no longer enjoys doing things with her friends. Martha lost her husband of 26 years to cancer a month ago.

Anya, age 17, doesn't feel like eating and spends the days in her room crying. Her grandmother recently died.

Both of these individuals are experiencing grief. **Grief is an emotion natural to all types of loss or significant change.**

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Feelings of Grief

Although grief is unique and personal, a broad range of feelings and behaviours are commonly experienced after the death of a loved one.

- *Sadness*. This is the most common, and it is not necessarily manifested by crying.
- *Anger*. This is one of the most confusing feelings for a survivor. There may be frustration at not being able to prevent the death, and a sense of not being able to exist without the loved one.
- *Guilt and Self-reproach*. People may believe that they were not kind enough or caring enough to the person who died, or that the person should have seen the doctor sooner.
- *Anxiety*. An individual may fear that she/he won't be able to care for herself/himself.
- *Loneliness*. There are reminders throughout the day that a partner, family member or friend is gone. For example, meals are no longer prepared the same way, phone calls to share a special moment don't happen.
- *Fatigue*. There is an overall sense of feeling tired.
- *Disbelief*: This occurs particularly if it was a sudden death.

Helping Others Who Are Experiencing Grief

When a friend, loved one, or co-worker is experiencing grief—how can we help? It helps to understand that grief is expressed through a variety of behaviours.

Reach out to others in their grief, but understand that some may not want to accept help and will not share their grief. Others will want to talk about their thoughts and feelings or reminisce.

Be patient and let the grieving person know that you care and are there to support him or her.

II. Good Grief

AMITAI ETZIONI

Soon after my wife died — her car slid off an icy road in 1985 — a school psychologist warned me that my children and I were not mourning in the right way. We felt angry; the proper first stage, he said, is denial.

In late August this year, my 38-year-old son, Michael, died suddenly in his sleep, leaving behind a 2-year-old son and a wife expecting their next child.

There is no set form for grief, and no 'right' way to express it. There seems to be an expectation that, after a great loss, we will progress systematically through the well-known stages of grief. It is wrong, we are told, to jump to anger — or to wallow too long in this stage before moving towards acceptance.

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But I was, and am, angry. To make parents bury their children is wrong; to have both my wife and son taken from me, for forever and a day, is cruel beyond words.

A relative from Jerusalem, who is a psychiatrist, brought some solace by citing the maxim: 'We are not to ask why, but what.' The 'what' is that which survivors in grief are bound to do for one another. Following that advice, my family, close friends and I keep busy, calling each other and giving long answers to simple questions like, "How did your day go today?" We try to avoid thinking about either the immediate past or the bereft future. We take turns playing with Max, Michael's two-year-old son. Friends spend nights with the young widow, and will be among those holding her hand when the baby is born.

Focusing on what we do for one another is the only consolation we can find.

Writing

Write a page (about three paragraphs) on one of the following topics. You can think about the ideas in the text that are relevant to these topics, and add your own ideas and experiences to them.

1. Teaching someone to understand a new or difficult idea
2. Helping each other to get over difficult times
3. Thinking about oneself as unique, or as one among billions of others

In This Lesson

What We Have Done

Narrated the story of the Buddha, and the advice he gave to the grief-stricken woman.

What You Can Do

1. Read and discuss the following extract from Kahlil Gibran's *The Prophet* with the students.

Joy and Sorrow

Then a woman said, "Speak to us of Joy and Sorrow."

And he answered:

Your joy is your sorrow unmasked.

And the selfsame well from which your laughter rises was oftentimes filled with your tears.

And how else can it be?

The deeper that sorrow carves into your being, the more joy you can contain.

Is not the cup that holds your wine the very cup that was burned in the potter's oven?

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And is not the lute that soothes your spirit, the very wood that was hollowed out with knives?

When you are joyous, look deep into your heart and you shall find it is only that which has given you sorrow that is giving you joy.

When you are sorrowful look again in your heart, and you shall see that in truth you are weeping for that which has been your delight.

Some of you say, "Joy is greater than sorrow," and others say, "Nay, sorrow is the greater."

But I say unto you, they are inseparable.

Together they come, and when one sits alone with you at your board, remember that the other is asleep upon your bed.

2. Help students to read and memorise the following extract from Tagore.

Say not in grief that she is no more
but say in thankfulness that she was.
A death is not the extinguishing of a light,
but the putting out of the
lamp because the dawn has come.

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For Anne Gregory

This poem is a conversation between a young man and a young woman. What are they arguing about?

"Never shall a young man,
Thrown into despair
By those great honey-coloured
Ramparts at your ear,
Love you for yourself alone
And not your yellow hair."

"But I can get a hair-dye
And set such colour there,
Brown, or black, or carrot,
That young men in despair
May love me for myself alone
And not my yellow hair."

"I heard an old religious man
But yesternight declare
That he had found a text to prove
That only God, my dear,
Could love you for yourself alone
And not your yellow hair."

WILLIAM BUTLER YEATS

William Butler Yeats (1865–1939) was an Irish nationalist. He was educated in London and Dublin, and was interested in folklore and mythology. He won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1923.

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Glossary

ramparts: the high, wide walls around a castle or fort, for example, *the ramparts of the Red Fort*

Thinking about the Poem

1. What does the young man mean by "great honey-coloured /Ramparts at your ear?" Why does he say that young men are "thrown into despair" by them?
2. What colour is the young woman's hair? What does she say she can change it to? Why would she want to do so?
3. Objects have qualities which make them desirable to others. Can you think of some objects (a car, a phone, a dress...) and say what qualities make one object more desirable than another? Imagine you were trying to sell an object: what qualities would you emphasise?
4. What about people? Do we love others because we like their qualities, whether physical or mental? Or is it possible to love someone "for themselves alone"? Are some people 'more lovable' than others? Discuss this question in pairs or in groups, considering points like the following.
   (i) a parent or caregiver's love for a newborn baby, for a mentally or physically challenged child, for a clever child or a prodigy
   (ii) the public's love for a film star, a sportsperson, a politician, or a social worker
   (iii) your love for a friend, or brother or sister
   (iv) your love for a pet, and the pet's love for you.
5. You have perhaps concluded that people are not objects to be valued for their qualities or riches rather than for themselves. But elsewhere Yeats asks the question: How can we separate the dancer from the dance? Is it possible to separate 'the person himself or herself' from how the person looks, sounds, walks, and so on? Think of how you or a friend or member of your family has changed over the years. Has your relationship also changed? In what way?

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