

First Flight

(Class X – NCERT English)

Chapter 10: The Sermon at Benares – Betty Renshaw

Detailed Summary (Expanded, Exam-Oriented)

This chapter describes the early life of Gautama Buddha and his first sermon after attaining enlightenment. It also narrates the story of Kisa Gotami, a woman who learned Buddha's teaching about the universality of death through personal experience.

Siddhartha Gautama was born around 2500 years ago as a prince. His father was the king of the Sakya clan. At his birth, a holy man prophesied that Siddhartha would become either a great king or a great spiritual teacher. His father wanted him to be a king, so he shielded Siddhartha from all suffering.

Siddhartha grew up in royal luxury, surrounded by every comfort. He married a beautiful princess and had a son. His father ensured he never saw any form of suffering, sickness, old age, or death. The young prince lived in ignorance of the harsh realities of life.

However, at the age of twenty-five, while riding through the city, Siddhartha saw what are called the Four Sights. First, he saw a sick man, then an aged man, then a funeral procession with a corpse, and finally a monk who had renounced worldly life. These sights deeply disturbed him.

Siddhartha realized that all beings are subject to suffering, old age, and death. No wealth or power could protect anyone from these realities. This realization troubled him deeply. Despite having everything - wealth, family, comfort - he felt restless and dissatisfied.

At the age of twenty-five, Siddhartha made a momentous decision. He left his palace at night, abandoning his royal life, his wife, and his newborn son. This act is called the Great Renunciation. He became a wandering ascetic, seeking the truth about suffering and liberation.

For many years, Siddhartha practiced severe austerities and meditation. He tried various spiritual paths and learned from different teachers. He starved himself, practiced extreme self-discipline, and pushed his body to its limits. But none of these practices brought him the enlightenment he sought.

Finally, he decided to follow a middle path - neither indulgence nor extreme self-denial. He sat under a peepal tree (later called the Bodhi tree) in Bodh Gaya and meditated. After meditating for several days and nights, he finally attained enlightenment at the age of thirty-five. He became Buddha, which means the Enlightened One or the Awakened One.

After attaining enlightenment, Buddha delivered his first sermon at Benares (Varanasi), in a deer park. This sermon is known as the Dharma Chakra Pravartana, which means turning the wheel of dharma or law. In this sermon, Buddha explained the Four Noble Truths.

The Four Noble Truths are: First, suffering exists - life is filled with suffering, pain, and dissatisfaction. Second, suffering has a cause - it arises from desire, attachment, and ignorance. Third, suffering can end - there is a way to overcome suffering. Fourth, there is a path to end suffering - the Eightfold Path of right understanding, right thought, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

The story then shifts to Kisa Gotami, a young woman from a poor family who lived in Benares. She married into a higher-status family. Being from a lower social class, she faced discrimination from her in-laws. Her status improved only after she gave birth to a son.

Kisa Gotami loved her son deeply. The boy brought her joy, respect in the family, and a sense of security. However, when her son was about a year old, he fell ill and died suddenly. Kisa Gotami was devastated. She refused to believe her son was dead.

Kisa Gotami carried her dead son around the village, knocking on every door, begging for medicine to cure him. The neighbors thought she had gone mad with grief. They told her the child was dead and no medicine could help. But Kisa Gotami could not accept this reality.

Finally, a wise man took pity on her. He told her to go to Gautama Buddha, who might know of a medicine that could bring her son back to life. Desperate and hopeful, Kisa Gotami went to Buddha with her dead child.

Buddha listened to her with great compassion. He told her that he knew of a medicine that might help. But to prepare this medicine, she would need to bring him a handful of mustard seeds. However, there was one condition - the mustard seeds must come from a house where no one had ever died.

Kisa Gotami felt relieved and hopeful. Mustard seeds were common in every household. Surely, she could find one house where death had never visited. She immediately began going from house to house, asking for mustard seeds.

Every house had mustard seeds and people were willing to give them to her. But when she asked if anyone had died in that house, the answer was always yes. Some had lost parents, others had lost children, spouses, or other relatives. Some had lost multiple family members. Death had visited every single house.

Kisa Gotami went from house to house, from morning until evening, but she could not find a single household that had not experienced death. As the day progressed, her understanding grew. She began to realize that she was not alone in her grief. Death comes to everyone. It is a universal truth that no one can escape.

By evening, exhausted and enlightened, Kisa Gotami finally understood Buddha's lesson. She realized that death is an inevitable part of life. Everyone who is born must die. Mourning and grief cannot bring back the dead. She had been selfish in her sorrow, thinking only of her own loss.

Kisa Gotami returned to Buddha. She no longer asked for medicine to revive her son. Instead, she requested Buddha to teach her about the nature of death and the path to end suffering. She

cremated her son and became Buddha's follower.

Buddha explained to Kisa Gotami that mourning and lamentation cannot change reality. The wise do not grieve because they understand that grief only increases suffering. Those who are born must die; it is the law of nature. Accepting this truth brings peace.

Buddha taught that life is like an earthen vessel - fragile and temporary. Young or old, foolish or wise, all are subject to death. Death is certain for everyone. Just as ripe fruits are in constant danger of falling, all mortals face death.

The wise understand this truth and do not grieve excessively. Grieving does not bring back the dead; it only weakens the living. The path to peace lies in accepting the impermanence of life and letting go of attachments.

Through this experiential learning, Kisa Gotami achieved peace. Her personal tragedy became the gateway to spiritual wisdom. She understood that personal loss must be viewed in the context of universal suffering and the impermanence of all things.

Central Themes

1. Universality of Death

Death is inevitable and universal - it comes to everyone regardless of age, status, or wealth. Understanding this truth helps in accepting loss.

2. Suffering and Enlightenment

Personal suffering can lead to spiritual awakening when understood correctly. Kisa Gotami's grief became the path to enlightenment.

3. Acceptance vs Denial

Accepting the impermanence of life brings peace, while denial leads to increased suffering.

4. Wisdom Through Experience

Sometimes, direct experience teaches more effectively than words. Buddha's method made Kisa Gotami discover the truth herself.

5. Letting Go of Attachments

Excessive attachment causes suffering. Understanding the temporary nature of everything helps in letting go.

Character Analysis

1. Gautama Buddha

The enlightened teacher who left royal luxury to seek truth. Compassionate, wise, and skillful in teaching. He helped Kisa Gotami realize the truth through experience rather than mere words.

2. Kisa Gotami

A grief-stricken mother who transforms through Buddha's teaching. She represents all humans who struggle with loss and must learn acceptance.

3. Siddhartha (before enlightenment)

The young prince who lived in luxury but was troubled by the reality of suffering. His spiritual quest led him to become Buddha.

Important Vocabulary (With Meanings)

- **Enlightenment** – spiritual awakening or profound understanding
- **Sermon** – a religious or moral talk
- **Renunciation** – giving up possessions and worldly life
- **Ascetic** – one who practices severe self-discipline
- **Lamentation** – expression of grief and sorrow
- **Mortal** – a human being, subject to death
- **Afflicted** – suffering from pain or distress
- **Tranquility** – state of peace and calm
- **Impermanence** – temporary nature of all things
- **Mustard seeds** – tiny seeds used in cooking

Exam-Ready Key Points

- Buddha was born as Prince Siddhartha in the Sakya clan
- Shielded from suffering until he saw Four Sights at age 25
- Renounced royal life to seek truth about suffering
- Attained enlightenment at age 35 under the Bodhi tree
- Delivered first sermon at Benares explaining Four Noble Truths
- Kisa Gotami's son dies - she refuses to accept his death
- Buddha asks her to bring mustard seeds from house where no one died
- She searches all day but finds every house has experienced death
- Realizes death is universal - no one can escape it
- Accepts truth, cremates son, becomes Buddha's follower
- Buddha teaches: mourning cannot bring back the dead
- Wisdom lies in accepting impermanence and letting go of attachments
- Story teaches about accepting death as natural part of life