Chapter 8: The Sermon at Benares

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Exercise 8.1 — Thinking about the Text

Q1 When her son dies, Kisa Gotami goes from house to house. What does she ask for? Does she get it? Why not?

SOLUTION

When her only son dies, Kisa Gotami is so overcome with grief that she cannot accept his death. She carries the dead child from house to house among her neighbours and asks them for medicine to cure (bring back to life) her boy.

She does not get any medicine. The people cannot help her because there is no medicine that can cure death — the child is already dead. Some even think she has lost her senses, saying, “She has lost her senses. The boy is dead.”

Answer: She asks for medicine to cure her dead son; she gets none, because no medicine can bring the dead back to life.

Q2 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?

SOLUTION

After speaking to the Buddha, Kisa Gotami is told to bring him a handful of mustard-seed — but it must be taken “from a house where no one has lost a child, husband, parent or friend.” So the second time she goes from house to house asking for mustard-seed from a household untouched by death.

She does not get it. Everywhere she goes, people are willing to give her the mustard-seed, but when she asks whether a son or daughter, father or mother had died in that family, they all reply, “Alas! the living are few, but the dead are many.” There was no house in which some beloved one had not died.

Answer: She asks for mustard-seed from a house where no one has died; she does not get it, because there is no such house — death has touched every family.

Q3 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?

SOLUTION

The second time, Kisa Gotami understands that death is common to all — no family has been spared it, and no one is immortal. As she sat watching the lights of the city flicker up and go out, she reflected that human lives too flicker up and are extinguished. She realised, “How selfish am I in my grief! Death is common to all.”

Yes, this was exactly what the Buddha wanted her to understand. By sending her to search for mustard-seed from a house untouched by death, he gently led her to see for herself the universal nature of death, so that she could overcome her grief and find peace.

Answer: She understands that death is common to all and no one is spared; yes, this was precisely what the Buddha wanted her to realise.

Q4 Why do you think Kisa Gotami understood this only the second time? In what way did the Buddha change her understanding?

SOLUTION

The first time, Kisa Gotami was blinded by her personal grief. She could think only of her own loss and desperately sought a cure for her dead son, unable to accept that death is final and universal.

The Buddha did not lecture her directly. Instead, he set her a task — to bring mustard-seed from a house where no one had died. Going from house to house, she discovered for herself that every home had known death. This personal experience made her see that her grief was not unique. The Buddha thus changed her understanding by leading her to a truth she realised on her own, rather than simply telling it to her.

Answer: The first time she was blinded by personal grief; the Buddha led her to discover, through her own search, that death is universal — so the truth came from experience, not a lecture.

Q5 How do you usually understand the idea of ‘selfishness’? Do you agree with Kisa Gotami that she was being ‘selfish in her grief’?

SOLUTION

We usually understand ‘selfishness’ as caring only about oneself — one's own needs, feelings and gains — without regard for others.

In the ordinary sense, Kisa Gotami was not being selfish; her grief over losing her only son was natural and deeply human. But she calls herself selfish because, in the depth of her sorrow, she thought only of her own loss and forgot that death and grief are common to everyone. In that sense — grieving as though her suffering were unique — there is some truth in her feeling that she was ‘selfish in her grief’, since her loss was no different from what countless others have borne.

Answer: Selfishness means thinking only of oneself; her grief was natural, but in seeing her loss as unique and dwelling only on it, there is some truth in her calling it ‘selfish’.

Exercise 8.2 — Thinking about Language

Q1 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!

SOLUTION

The old-fashioned expressions can be rephrased in current English as follows:

- "give thee medicine for thy child" — give you medicine for your child.
- "Pray tell me" — Please tell me.
- "Kisa repaired to the Buddha" — Kisa went to the Buddha.
- "there was no house but someone had died in it" — there was no house in which someone had not died.
- "kinsmen" — relatives / relations.
- "Mark!" — Note this! / Listen carefully!

Answer: give you medicine for your child; Please tell me; Kisa went to the Buddha; there was no house in which someone had not died; relatives; Note this!

Q2 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."

SOLUTION

Broken into three simple sentences:

- 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.

The single sentence joined by semicolons has the better rhythm. The semicolons link the three ideas into one flowing, sermon-like statement, giving it a solemn and continuous rhythm that suits the Buddha's teaching. The three separate sentences read as abrupt and disconnected by comparison.

Answer: The single sentence with semicolons reads with a better, flowing rhythm; the three separate sentences sound abrupt and disconnected.

Exercise 8.3 — Thinking about the Poem — For Anne Gregory

Q1 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?

SOLUTION

By “great honey-coloured Ramparts at your ear” the young man means the young woman's beautiful golden-yellow hair, which falls thick around her ears like the high, protective walls (ramparts) of a castle. ‘Honey-coloured’ describes its warm golden shade.

He says that young men are “thrown into despair” by this hair because they are so captivated by its beauty that they fall in love with her outward appearance — her yellow hair — rather than with her true self. Their despair comes from being unable to love her “for herself alone.”

Answer: It means her beautiful golden-yellow hair, likened to castle walls; young men despair because they are captivated by her looks and love her hair, not herself.

Q2 What colour is the young woman's hair? What does she say she can change it to? Why would she want to do so?

SOLUTION

The young woman's hair is yellow (golden, honey-coloured).

She says she can get a hair-dye and change its colour to “Brown, or black, or carrot.”

She wants to change it so that young men will love her for herself alone and not merely for her yellow hair. By altering the colour that so attracts them, she hopes to test whether anyone can love her true self rather than her outward beauty.

Answer: Her hair is yellow; she says she can dye it brown, black or carrot, so that young men may love her for herself alone and not for her yellow hair.

Q3 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?

SOLUTION

Many everyday objects are valued for particular qualities. For a car, desirable qualities might be its speed, mileage, comfort, safety and sleek design. For a phone, it could be a fast processor, a good camera, long battery life and an attractive screen. For a dress, it might be the fabric, colour, fit and current fashion.

If I were trying to sell an object, I would emphasise the qualities that matter most to the buyer — for example, for a phone I would highlight its camera quality, battery life, speed and value for money, since these features make one phone more desirable than another.

Answer: Objects are desired for qualities like performance, appearance, durability and value; a seller would emphasise the features (e.g. a phone's camera, battery and speed) that most attract the buyer.

Q4 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?

SOLUTION

With people, love is not the same as valuing an object for its qualities. We are often first attracted to others by their physical looks or mental qualities — beauty, intelligence, kindness or humour. But true love goes deeper than these outward qualities.

It is possible, and indeed higher, to love someone “for themselves alone.” A parent's love for a newborn or for a challenged child, or the love between close friends, is not based on qualities or usefulness — it is love for the person as they are. The poem suggests that such selfless love, free of outward attractions, is the truest kind, and (as Yeats says) perhaps only God can love perfectly in this way.

Answer: We are often drawn to people by their qualities, but it is possible — and truer — to love someone “for themselves alone,” beyond looks or usefulness, as a parent loves a child.