A Buddhist Perspective on Grieving

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The ultimate relationship we can have is with someone who is dying. Here we are often brought to grief, whether we know it or not. Grief can seem like an unbearable experience. But for those of us who have entered the broken world of loss and sorrow, we realize that in the fractured landscape of grief we can find the pieces of our life that we ourselves have forgotten.

Grief may push us into the hard question of Why? Why do I have to suffer like this? Why can’t I get over it? Why did this one have to die? Why....... In the tangled web of “Why”, we cannot find the reasons or words to make sense of our sadness.

Dying people also can grieve before they die. They can grieve in anticipation of their death for all they will seem to lose and what they have lost by being ill. Caregivers will grieve before those they care for have died. They are often saddened by the loss of freedom and options of those that are ill and the knowledge that death will rob them of one more relationship. Those that have been left behind by the dying are often broken apart by the knowledge that they cannot bring back that which has been lost. The irrevocability of it all often leaves them helpless and sad. And then there is the taste of grief in Western culture which is conditioned to possess and not let go.

We all face loss, and perhaps can accept it as a gift, albeit for most us, a terrible one. Maybe we can let loss work us. To deny grief is to rob ourselves of the heavy stones that will eventually be the ballast for the two great accumulations of wisdom and compassion.

Grief is often not addressed in contemporary Buddhism. Perhaps it is looked on as a weakness of character or as a failure of practice. But from the point of view of this practitioner, it is a vital part of our very human life, an experience that can open us to compassion, and an important phase of maturation, giving our lives and practice depth and humility.

To begin, it is important for us to remember that the experience of being with dying for many does not stop at the moment of death. As a caregiver of a dying person or family member who has been at the death of a relative, we may attend the body after death and offer our presence to the community as they and we grieve. When the details of dying and death are settled, then what arises from the depths of the human heart is the many expressions of sorrow when the presence of loss is finally give the room to be seen and felt.

Sometimes grieving lasts not for weeks or months but for years. Frequently the reason why grief is not resolved is that it has not been sufficiently attended to just after the loss of a loved one. Family and friends of the deceased can become consumed by the busyness of the business that happens right after someone dies.

This is one of the great problems that we face in the Western way of dying, that business is so much a part of the experience of dying and death. Survivors often face a complex situation on the material level in the after-death phase. They find themselves looking for a funeral home, letting friends and family know that a death has happened, and creating a funeral service. Unraveling health insurance, taxes, and the last will and testament also take time and energy at this stage. Later there is cleaning up, dividing and giving away the deceased’s property, and other seemingly endless chores of closure. Resorting to the business of death can be a way for survivors to avoid the depth of their own loss.

Like dying, grieving has its phases, and it is important to pass through them. Similar to the phases of dying, grief can be characterized by numbness and denial, anger, great sorrow, depression, despair and confusion. Finally, there can be acceptance and even transcendence as sorrow has opened the door of appreciation and compassion. These phases are similar to those experienced in a rite of passage: separation, transition, return.

Grief can also arise as a person is dying. Family and friends as well as the one who is dying can experience what is called “anticipatory grief,” the bones of loss already showing. Working with that grief is an important part of what one can do in the care of the dying. In fact, most caregivers have
to cross and recross this territory of grief in being with living and dying many times in the course of just one person dying.

When my mother died, I received one of the best teachings of my life on grief. I realized that I only had one chance to grieve her. As a Buddhist, I felt I had a kind of choice. On the one hand, I could be a so-called “good Buddhist” and accept death and let go of my mother with great dignity. The other alternative was to scour my heart out with sorrow.

I chose to scour. Shortly after her death, I went to the desert with photos of her and several letters she had written my father after I was born. Settling under a rocky ledge, I sunk back into shadows of sorrow. When your mother dies, so does the womb that gave birth to you. I felt that my back was uncovered as I pressed it into cold rock. Later, I was to walk the Himalayas with a friend who had recently lost his mother. The fall rains washed down the mountains and down are wet faces. In Kathmandu, lamas offered a Tibetan Xithro ceremony for her. They instructed me not to cry but to let her be undisturbed by grief. By this time, I was ready to hear their words. The experience was humbling for me. And when I finally got to the bottom of it, I found that my mother had become an ancestor. As I let her go, she became a healthy part of me.

C.S. Lewis in his A Grief Observed reveals that “No one ever told me that grief was so much like fear. I am not afraid, but the sensation is like being afraid. The same fluttering in the stomach, the same restlessness, the yawning. I keep on swallowing.” Grief can call us into an experience of raw immediacy that is often devastating. Grieving, we can learn that suffering is not transformed by someone telling us how to do it. We have to do the work ourselves. Yet a friend can bear witness and shine light into the darkness of our suffering and in this way help us to learn to swim in the waters of sorrow.

Ubbiri, one of the first women Buddhists, was drowning in grief as a result of the death of her daughter. Through the help of the Buddha, she discovered truth from within the experience of her own suffering.

Ubbiri came from a high family in Savatthi. She was beautiful as a child, and when she grew up, was given to the court of King Pasenadi of Kosala. One day she became pregnant by the King and gave birth to a daughter whom she named Jiva, which means “alive.”

Shortly after being born, her daughter Jiva died. Ubbiri, terribly wounded by grief, went every day to the cremation ground and mourned her daughter. One day, when she arrived at the cremation ground, she discovered that a great crowd had gathered. The Buddha was travelling through the region, and he had paused to give teachings to local people. Ubbiri stopped for a little while to listen to the Buddha but soon left to go to the riverside and weep with despair.

The Buddha, hearing her pain-filled keening, sought her out and asked why she was weeping. In agony she cried out that her daughter was dead. He then pointed to one place and another where the dead had been laid, and he said to her:

Mother, you cry out “O Jiva” in the woods. Come to yourself, Ubbiri. Eighty-four thousand daughters All with the name “Jiva”

Have burned in the funeral fire. For which one do you grieve?

The sorrow of great and small losses is a river that runs in the underground of all of our lives. When it breaks to the surface, we might feel as though only “I” know this pain. Yet grief is a universal experience, touching caregivers, dying people and, if we look deeply, all of us.

When grief overwheels us, whether we are anticipating the loss of our own life or living with the loss of another, we can pass through the dark realms of the five elements of earth, water, fire, air, and space. We may feel forsaken as Christ was. Fearful, our body is empty and haunted, walled off from all that we have ever cared about. We can be plunged into numbness, with the very life squeezed out of us. We can drown in the cold and churning waters of sorrow or be blown like hot dry dust in a desolate landscape of depression. We can inhabit the hot exhausting dullness of mind and heart of a world without meaning, a life without purpose. We can try the patience of friends and be an embarrassment to others with our maudlin repetitiveness and self-pity. We can feel
heavy with guilt or contracted in shame. We can resent the shallow and defensive reassurances that “this too will pass” or that “there is no death.”

Grieving is a landscape that is so varied and so vast that it can only be discovered through our own most intimate experience. It touches the one who is dying, those around a dying person, and those who survive. No one escapes her touch nor in the end should we. The river of grief might pulse deep inside us, hidden from our view, but its presence informs our lives at every turn. It can drive us into the numbing habits of escape from suffering or bring us face to face with our own humanity. This is the very heart of Buddhism.

When the 18th century Japanese Haiku master Issa lost his baby daughter, he wrote: “The dewdrop world is the dewdrop world and yet – and yet.”

Issa has not yet been released by the anguish of grief. But the hand is beginning to open. And like the transiency of his precious daughter’s life, we hope this his grief also passed. The Zen nun Rengetsu expresses the poignancy of loss and impermanence in this way:

“The impermanence of this floating world I feel over and over It is hardest to be the one left behind.”

Grief can ruin or mature us. Like the mother who bathed her dead baby in her breast milk, grief can remind us not to hold on too tightly as she teaches us tenderness and patience with our own suffering.

An old woman once told me that wisdom and compassion are not given to us; they can only be discovered. The experience of discovery means letting go of what we know. When we move through the terrible transformation of the elements of loss and grief, we may discover the truth of the impermanence of everything in our life, and of course, of this very life itself. This is one of the most profound discoveries to be made as we engage in Buddhist practice. In this way, grief and sorrow may teach us gratitude for what we have been given, even the gift of suffering. From her we learn to swim in the stream of universal sorrow. And in that stream, we may even find joy. For this Buddhist, this is the essence of a liberative practice.