

Loss

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One of the things you notice as you practice is how many selves you have. Often you have more than you notice. For every desire you take on, there's going to be the sense of what you can do to bring that desire about, what powers you have under your control, and then the sense of you as the person who's going to experience the happiness that will come when the desire is fulfilled. As the Buddha said, this desire or craving is the water that nourishes our sense of self. It's what provides the location around which each sense of self develops. That holds true for every desire we have. Sometimes we have a desire for food, sometimes for shelter, for friends, for relationships, for all kinds of things. And we have a sense of self for each of those desires.

Especially when we suffer loss of someone or something we thought we had—something we did have for a while but wasn't really as much ours as we thought it was: It's not just the loss of that thing or that relationship. There's a strong sense that we've lost part of ourselves, one of our selves.

This is very central to the Buddha's teachings on suffering. It's one of the main causes for suffering. And it goes deep. Once King Pasenadi was talking to the Buddha and one of the aides from the palace came to him and whispered in his ear, saying that Queen Mallika had just died. The King broke down and cried, so the Buddha said to him, "Did you ever think that she would live forever? How can we have it in this world, that the things and people we love don't pass away?"

But then he goes on to say to the king, "As long as you feel that there's a value in giving expression to your grief, go ahead. But there will come a point when you realize it's self-indulgence. At that point," he added, "you have to realize that there are other desires, other duties you have in life and you can't abandon those just to keep on giving expression to your grief." In other words, there are other parts of yourself or other selves that have to keep functioning.

That's where his first comment comes in: to remind the king that loss is not happening just to him. It's universal. This is one of the bizarre things about grief. You would think that thinking of the grief experienced by everybody in the world would make your own grief even heavier, but it doesn't. It actually takes a lot of the sting out as you realize, "It's not just me. This is built into the way things are."

The reflection we often recite—"I will grow different, separate from all that is dear and appealing to me": That's actually only part of the reflection given in the Canon. That part of the reflection is for the purpose of inspiring a sense of heedfulness, reminding you that you have to be skillful in what you do and in the desires you foster, choosing which ones to foster and which ones to put aside so as not to put yourself in danger.

But then the Buddha encourages you to go on and remind yourself that it's not just you, it's everyone: man, woman, and child; layperson and ordained; now, in the past, and in the future. Everyone is going to grow different, separate from all that is dear and appealing to them. As the Buddha said, that inspires in you a different motivation, the motivation to get on the path.

In other words, you develop a new self, a self that really does want to find a way out of all this turmoil, all this repeated, repeated suffering. The emotion here is *samvega*, the sense of terror over unending rebirth and redeath, and a sense of urgency in finding a way out.

In another context, he calls this sense of urgency "renunciate grief" as opposed to householder grief. Householder grief is when you don't get what you want in terms of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, and ideas. That sounds pretty abstract but it actually includes all our relationships and dealings with the world as a whole. After all, that's what the world is: the range of experience through the six senses.

And the skillful cure for that grief, the Buddha says, is not trying to find householder happiness in the senses. It's to conceive a different kind of desire, the desire to find a true happiness inside that's not going to leave you, that's not going to change. The realization that you haven't got there yet: He calls that renunciate grief.

Now, renunciate grief is good because it's what gets you on the path. Trying to find an escape from householder grief by searching for householder joy ends up in nothing but repeated disappointment. If you gain a little householder joy, its causes will have to change, and then you're back with householder grief again. What you want is a dependable joy, which is what renunciate joy can provide. But the quest for renunciate joy starts with renunciate grief, realizing that there is a goal that can be attained and you haven't gotten there yet. That grief has to be encouraged and accompanied by *pasada*: confidence that there is a way out, that you can find that way out, and that you have what it takes to go all the way.

In other words, you take the conceit that lies at the center of grief and you point it in a new direction. There's a story where Ven. Sariputta's talking about how he'd reflected one day after meditating, "Is there anything in the world that, in changing, would cause grief to arise in my mind?" And the response was No, there's nothing. Ven. Ananda, who was listening in, immediately asked, "Well, what if the Buddha passed away? Wouldn't you feel grief then?" Sariputta said No, he'd reflect that it's a sad thing that someone who was so useful for the world had to pass away, but it wouldn't cause any disturbance in his mind. And Ananda's reaction was interesting. He said, "Ah, it's a sign that you have no more conceit." Because that, essentially, is what the grief is: It's a wound to your sense of self or one of your senses of self.

But the cure is not to abandon conceit entirely. You can't do that right away, for you'd have no sense of self to support your practice. So you turn your conceit into renunciate conceit: reflecting that other people have found a way out, and many of them started out in situations worse than yours in terms of their strengths, their weaknesses, their inner and outer qualities, but they were able to find their way out. They could do it, so can you.

You take that conceit and you put it to a good purpose. You create another sense of self, a sense of self that aims at true happiness. This is a sense of self you want to encourage and nourish. You develop a sense of responsibility, a sense of confidence and purpose. You can begin to marshal all your different senses of self in this direction because it's not the case that once you're on the path you'll have only one desire. We live in a world, we have to deal with people, we have to deal with situations, we've got bodies we have to care for, we're social animals, so there are going to be other desires as well. But you have to learn how to marshal them. And really look at them: Which desires are pulling you away from true happiness and which ones are actually helpful or at the very least not obstacles on the path?

That right there involves a kind of shedding: shedding the desires that pull you away and shedding the selves that go along with them. This is why it's sometimes very difficult because we have a strong identification with certain desires, certain aspirations, certain aims. You have to reflect: If we don't let go of these things now, no matter how much we like them, no matter how intimate they are, if we don't let go of them now while we're focused and mindful, the day will come when they'll be pulled away from us when we're in no shape to let go of them at all. It's going to be as if part of you has been ripped out of you.

So you reflect on the fact that everybody has to do this. It's not just you. And that allows you to look at the whole issue of where you're looking for happiness from a broader perspective. The broader perspective helps to take a lot of the sting away.

Wherever there's loss in life, you have to reflect that the important things have not been lost. The story of Ananda and Sariputta continued, and it turned out that Sariputta ended up dying before the Buddha. For some reason, there's a Mahayana version of the story in which the Buddha says he lost his sense of the directions, he was so upset that he'd lost Sariputta and Moggallana. But that's really an insult to the Buddha. It's pandering to people's ideas of the importance of their emotions to slander and betray the Buddha in that way.

The actual story is that Ananda was the one who was upset when he heard of Sariputta's death. He

went to see the Buddha and complained that he had lost his sense of the directions when he learned that Sariputta had died. And the Buddha said, “Well, did Sariputta take virtue away with him? Did he take concentration away? Did he take discernment away? Did he take release away?” No, all the important things in life were still there. The important possibilities, the important opportunities were still there. And the Buddha continued, “Did I ever tell you that anything born will never leave you? Things that are born, things that age, things that grow ill: Do you think they’ll never leave you?” And Ananda had to say No.

But there is one thing in life that will never leave you, and that’s release. I’ve told you many times that story of Ajaan Suwat, but it bears retelling. It was my last visit to him before he passed away. He had suffered brain damage in an accident and he said, “You know, my brain is telling me all kinds of weird things; all kinds of weird perceptions are coming up.” At the very least, he had the mindfulness to recognize that they were weird. And then he added, “But that thing I got from my meditation. That hasn’t left.”

That’s something you can depend upon. It’s the only thing you can really depend on, so you want to develop the desire to find it. Nourish that desire and nourish whatever sense of self is skillful in pursuing that desire. Ultimately you’ll have to let that self go, too, but in the meantime it’s going to get you where you want to go. Like the raft across the river: Once you’ve crossed the river, you’re not going to need the raft anymore. Everybody knows that part of the story but people tend to forget that while you’re crossing the river, you’re going to need the raft, and you want a raft that—even though it won’t last forever—will last long enough to get you safely to the other side. You’re going to need to hold on to everything from right view on through right concentration. All these things require a sense of self that’s strong, competent, willing to learn from mistakes, focused on doing what’s skillful, learning to recognize what’s not, admitting when you’ve made a mistake, and wanting to learn from it so your skills can grow more solid.

That may seem like a far away goal. That’s renunciate grief: realizing that this takes time and energy. But it’s time and energy well-spent. When you think of all the time and energy that has been wasted in your life and your many lifetimes, it shouldn’t seem too much to put energy into this goal that doesn’t lead to disappointment, doesn’t lead to loss. It’s the one thing that, when you attain it and you have to let go of the sense of self that got you there, you don’t let go of it with regret. You let go with appreciation and joy.