

An Arrow in the Heart

THE BUDDHA'S TEACHINGS ON GRIEF

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Gentle sages...
go to the unwavering state
where, having gone,
there's no grief. — *Dhp* 225

The Buddha went to a cemetery one day and found a woman, Ubbiri, crying out to her dead daughter, Jivā. He called to her, “84,000, all named Jivā, have been burned in that charnel ground. For which one of them do you grieve?”

When Ubbiri later recounted the story in verse (*Thig* 3:5), she said that the Buddha's words totally removed the arrow of grief from her heart—although in saying so, she was probably taking poetic license. Actual experience shows that reflecting on the universality of loss—the loss of a loved one, the loss of love, the loss of any kind of happiness—can lead you to accept your own personal loss, in that it helps you realize that the universe isn't focusing unusual punishment on you; but still, acceptance isn't enough to totally overcome the pain of sorrow. And when we look elsewhere in the Pali Canon for passages on how to heal the wounds of grief, we find that they set out many steps in the mental training that leads from acceptance of loss all the way to total release from grief and its attendant pain.

In no single passage does the Buddha lay out all the steps, but a composite picture can be assembled from the main passages on the topic. And although there are several steps in the training, they're all founded on a principle taken from the four noble truths—that we suffer more from the way we talk to ourselves than we do from outside events. This may be a principle we don't want to hear when loss leaves us feeling helpless and bereft, but still it's the only principle that will allow us to pull ourselves out of the downward path leading to grief and set our heart on the path leading away.

King Pasenadi, who liked to question the Buddha about basic points of Dhamma, happened to be in the Buddha's presence when one of his courtiers came and whispered into his ear that his favorite queen, Mallikā, had just died (*AN* 5:49). Overcome with shock and sorrow, the king could do nothing but sit there, brooding, his shoulders drooping, at a loss for words.

The Buddha's immediate response was to teach him three things to do to manage his grief. The first was to reflect on the universality of loss. No one anywhere, no matter how powerful, can arrange for what is subject to change not to change, or for what is subject to death not to die. To the extent that there are beings—past, present, and future—change and death happen to all of them. This thought helps take some of the personal sting out of the loss, allowing you to acquiesce to what has happened and not to waste energy in trying to undo what can't be undone.

The second step the Buddha taught to the king was that as long as he saw that traditional funeral observances performed a useful function in giving skillful expression to his sense of loss and to his appreciation for the person who was now gone, he should arrange them. The Buddha never advocated that his listeners try to smother their grief with feigned indifference. As long as they felt a need to express their loss, they should try to do it in a skillful and healing way. Among the observances he mentioned as potentially useful were eulogies, donations, and the recital of wise sayings. If you actually want to help the person who has passed on, you do good and dedicate the merit to your loved one. To heal the wound in your heart, and to encourage goodness in the people still alive, you show your appreciation for your loved one's goodness. Weeping and wailing accomplish none of this. They destroy your health, cause distress to those who love you, and please those who hate you.

The Buddha mentions this last point as motivation for gathering energy for the third step, which is to remind yourself that there are still good things to accomplish in life, and that for the sake of your true well-being and that of others, you need to get back to the good work that the loss has interrupted.

The Buddha offers these steps to King Pasenadi simply as basic instructions in grief management. They're designed to assuage the pangs of grief only to the extent of ensuring that grief doesn't become self-indulgent and ruin your life. They can't entirely remove the arrow of grief from the heart. But the Buddha's more advanced instructions for going entirely beyond grief take the same three steps—accepting of the universality of loss, skillfully expressing appreciation for what has been lost, and directing your focus to the good things that still need to be done—and pursue them on a deeper level.

First, the universality of loss: The Buddha recommends that this reflection lead not only to acceptance of the fact of loss, but also to compassion for all those who have experienced it. How he meant for this reflection to function can best be grasped in light of the theories that artists and dramatists during his time had developed for understanding emotions. Although the Buddha never mentioned these theories explicitly in his teachings, the poems attributed to him show clear signs of having been composed in line with their standards. So there's every reason to assume that he was familiar with them—and that he borrowed them for his own purposes.

Indian dramatists had grappled with the issue of why it is that an audience can enjoy watching plays in which sympathetic characters undergo suffering, when it was obvious that there was nothing sadistic in the pleasure at all. The

answer they arrived at was that the audience enjoyed “tasting” the emotions of the characters, without at the same time being swallowed up in them. According to their theory, the taste of the emotion was often different from the emotion itself, and even a painful emotion could have a poignantly pleasant taste.

They worked out a system of basic emotions and their corresponding tastes, and the taste of grief, they decided, was compassion. In other words, when actors portrayed grieving characters, the audience watching the portrayal tasted compassion. The act of compassion gave them a pleasant sense of intimacy with the character, fully acknowledging the character’s pain, while at the same time providing a sense of distance that prevented the pain from being overwhelming. Dramas portraying sorrow were, for this reason, regarded as valuable tools in teaching the human values to society. They taught people to have compassion for one another, even for people with whom they had no personal ties.

The Buddha—in advocating a universal perspective on death, separation, and loss—took this principle and taught his listeners to apply it to their own suffering. When you think of how unavoidable and pervasive loss can be throughout the cosmos, it helps to broaden your heart and to enlarge your compassion for the suffering of others. At the same time, broadening your perspective on loss helps you get some aesthetic distance from your own. You pull out of your grief, not by denying it—for that would be inhumane—but by turning it into a more healing, expansive, and uplifting emotion, one that acknowledges suffering but, instead of being swallowed up by it, allows the mind to grow larger than its sufferings and to manage a more ennobling and nourishing response to them.

That response, though, doesn’t simply stop with an aesthetic sense of expansion and distancing. As the Buddha teaches it, compassion also contains within it the desire to do something about the causes of grief. Think of the Buddha on the night of his awakening: In the second watch of the night, he viewed the sufferings of all beings from a cosmic perspective, but he didn’t stop there. The sense of distance from his own sufferings that he gained from this knowledge enabled him to see objectively the causes of suffering within himself. He then went on to apply that knowledge for the purpose of putting an end to suffering, first by ferreting out and removing the causes of suffering in his own heart, and then by teaching others how to remove the causes of suffering in theirs (MN 36).

In the same way, the sense of objective distancing that can come with compassion isn’t an end in itself. It’s meant to help you to view your grief with a measure of objectivity that allows you to see into the internal causes of grief. It then motivates you to do something about them.

We need to get some distance from our grief to understand it because it has very deep roots that reach beyond the particularities of loss down into the mind’s underlying attitude toward itself—an attitude you might rather not question. But it’s true: We suffer not so much from the loss of things outside, but because of an unskillful tendency inside.

Ven. Sāriputta, one of the Buddha's chief disciples, once remarked to a group of fellow monks that, on reflection, he realized that there was nothing in the world the loss of which would cause him any grief (SN 21:2). Ven. Ananda, who was sitting in the group, immediately countered with the example of the Buddha: If the Buddha were to pass away, would Sāriputta still feel no sorrow? Sāriputta replied that he would reflect: "What a great being, of great might, of great prowess, has disappeared! For if the Blessed One were to remain for a long time, that would be for the benefit of many people, for the happiness of many people, out of sympathy for the world; for the welfare, benefit, and happiness of devas and human beings." Ānanda then commented that this was a sign that Sāriputta had no *māna*, or conceit—meaning, in this case, not excessive pride, but the simple insertion of the thought, "I am," into his thoughts.

This was a very astute analysis on Ananda's part. We feel the sting of loss because we make it "our" loss. And, as the Buddha points out elsewhere (SN 42:11), we make it ours through the passion and desire we have felt for the people and things we've lost. We've been feeding on them emotionally, and now we've lost our food. This is why grief is so intimately felt. We've been internalizing the other person or the situation that is now gone, so what we had made a part of ourselves has been ripped away. Grief is grief because it deprives us of an intimate portion of who we have assumed we are.

This means that to go totally beyond grief, we have to learn how to stop making things ours. And the first step in that direction is to reflect on the universality of loss in a way that gives rise to another emotion, beyond acceptance and compassion: *samvega*.

Samvega is the terror or dismay that arises when you reflect at the meaninglessness of all the many sufferings that life everywhere entails. This is an emotion that motivates the heart to want to go beyond simply recovering from grief over a particular loss, and to aspire instead to freeing itself from the possibility of experiencing grief ever again. When you develop *samvega*, it lifts you from what the Buddha calls house-based distress (MN 137)—sorrow over the loss of the people and sensory objects you love—to what he calls renunciation-based distress: the sense that there is a way out of experiencing this kind of loss, but that you haven't reached it yet. This realization is distressing because it alerts you to the amount of work that needs to be done, but it contains an element of hope that house-based distress doesn't: the conviction that it is possible to get beyond grief. Renunciation-based distress, for this reason, doesn't just indulge in sorrow. It uses sorrow as motivation to do what needs to be done to get out.

It was to induce this useful sense of distress that the Buddha, in one of his more famous teachings, asked a group of monks which was greater: the water in the four great oceans or the tears they had shed in the course all their many lifetimes over the loss of a mother (SN 15:3). The answer: the tears. The same answer applies to the tears shed over the loss of a father, a sister, a brother, a daughter, a son. The emotion that comes with this reflection is a mixture of

acceptance and unwillingness: acceptance that this is the way things will continue to be if you don't find a way out, and an unwillingness to stay trapped in this immense and unending suffering.

The proper response to this reflection is to look for the way out and to develop conviction that the path of practice will take you there. It's from this perspective that the Buddha has you develop further the second step in going beyond grief: expressing appreciation. In this case, the appreciation goes in two directions.

The first is to realize that the best thing you can do for those who have helped you is to follow the path all the way to its end, and then to dedicate the merit of your attainment to them. In this way, the good they have done for you will bear them great fruit (MN 39).

The second direction is to develop appreciation for all the efforts the Buddha went through in finding and teaching the path to the end of suffering. This appreciation is followed by a desire to practice the Dhamma in accordance with the Dhamma—i.e., to follow the path as the Buddha taught it. Instead of trying to change it to suit your preferences, you try to change yourself to be worthy of the path. This reflection, in itself, helps to take you beyond yourself and to help heal the “you” defined around the object of your loss.

This leads to the third step in fully overcoming grief, which is to focus your attention on the good work that still needs to be done. The nature of that work is indicated by the Buddha's reaction to the news of Ven. Sāriputta's passing (SN 47:13). It's somewhat ironic, in light of Ven. Ānanda's conversation with Ven. Sāriputta, that Sāriputta actually passed away before the Buddha did. When Ānanda brought the Buddha the news, he added that when he himself had heard the news it was as if he had lost his bearings, and all the directions became dark—his attachment to Sāriputta was that strong. In short, his was the typical reaction of intense grief: There was no brightness left in the world because what he had relied on with so much trust was now lost.

So the Buddha asked him: When Sāriputta passed away, did he take virtue along with him? No. Concentration? No. Discernment? No. Release? No. Knowledge and vision of release? No. In other words, the good work of the world—the best work of the world, the path to total release from suffering—is still there to be done.

It's when this work is accomplished that renunciation-based distress leads to renunciation-based joy: the realization that you're freed from any need to be affected by any sort of change at all. The mind no longer creates the sense of “me” and “mine” that has to feed on things that change, because it has found a happiness that doesn't change and hasn't the slightest need to feed. In that sense, it no longer turns itself into a being, for beings are defined by their attachment to how they feed (SN 23:2; Khp 4). When the mind no longer takes on the identity of a “being,” it's released. In this way, you find that the Buddha's words to King Pasenadi—“to the extent that there are beings”—turn out to have a limit. Going beyond that limit, the mind no longer stabs itself with the arrows of grief. From that point on, as long as it continues to live in the world, it will know loss but not

suffer from it. When it has gone beyond the world, it will “dwell” in a dimension totally free of loss.

That’s where the Buddha’s three steps for grief management go beyond mere management to the point where they free you from having to experience grief or sorrow ever again.

With arrow pulled out,
 independent,
attaining peace of awareness,
all grief transcended,
free of grief,
 you’re unbound. — *Sn 3:8*