

From Grief to Compassion

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In India they developed an aesthetic theory that explained why you can see people suffering onstage and still get some enjoyment from it. And it's not that you're being sadistic or enjoy their suffering. You sympathize with their suffering, but you enjoy the sympathy. And the theory comes down to the idea that onstage emotions are being portrayed and the audience *tastes* the emotion, rather than feeling the emotion directly. Different emotions, when they're portrayed, provoke different tastes in the audience.

When grief is being portrayed, the taste is compassion. You feel sorry for the person who's suffering, and there's an enjoyment in that feeling of compassion. This connection carries over from plays into real life. When you've lost a member of the family and you feel grief, the best reaction is compassion. Compassion for yourself and then from there spreading out to others. It recognizes the pain, doesn't deny it, but at the same time it develops some distance from it. You feel sorry for yourself, you feel sorry for the person who's gone, and then you start realizing that everybody goes through all this. And although the compassion is tinged with sorrow, it's much better than out-and-out grief.

You know the story about the woman who'd lost her baby and denied that it was dead. This is a story in the Commentary. She goes to the Buddha to ask for medicine for her child, and the Buddha says, "You can make medicine for the baby, but it has to be made from a mustard seed," which in India is very easy to find, "but it has to be mustard seed from a family where nobody's ever died." So the woman goes from house to house asking for a mustard seed, and people are glad to give her the mustard seed, but then when she asks, "Oh, by the way. Has anyone in this family died?" "Of course, a mother's died... a father's died... a sister... brother... son... daughter... grandfather... grandmother... grandchild..." And by the end of the day she's finally ready to admit that, yes, her baby is dead.

This is one of the reasons why, when King Pasenadi lost his favorite queen, the Buddha had him think about all the people in the world who have lost their loved ones. You might think that the thought of so many deaths and so many people suffering would be depressing, but no, it gives rise to a sense of compassion. And compassion is the emotion that feels *right* at that time. It's the taste that's appropriate for grief, but at the same time helps pull you out.

This is why, when people pass away, we think of making merit and dedicating it to them: to engender a sense of compassion within ourselves for whatever they

may be suffering. The Buddha says that those who have passed away may be in a state where they can receive the merit and may be in a state where they can't, but you want to do it anyhow, just in case. The states where they can receive are those where they have a way of knowing. Hungry ghosts, beings that are seeking birth, as they say: Beings in these categories are suffering, but they can know of the merit being dedicated to them, and if they appreciate it then that becomes their merit, and that makes them happy—and might possibly get them to a better place.

Ajaan Fuang had a student who started seeing visions of hungry ghosts, and they were all over the place: in doorways, under stairways, looking pretty miserable. And she didn't like it, so she went to him and asked, "Can I turn off this channel?" He said, "No, there's something to be learned. You can dedicate merit, but at the same time you want to ask them what they did to become hungry ghosts." She learned of all kinds suffering that had come from the unskillful things they'd done. Then she'd dedicate the merit of her meditation. In some cases, they'd receive it and they'd go beyond the state of being hungry ghosts. Others just couldn't, for whatever karmic reason. Then *that* got the woman upset. "What do you do in cases like that?" she asked Ajaan Fuang. And he told her, "Your duty is to do your best, but you don't have to do a follow-up. If they can't keep up their end of the bargain, well, maybe somebody else can help them."

The lesson she learned from all this was that there are so many people out there suffering and doing the things that cause suffering, and the only appropriate response is compassion. This helps with the maturation of the heart, when you start being sensitive to all that suffering—but at the same time, not so sensitive that it gets you down. "Just right" is when it makes you treat people more kindly, with more thought for their genuine happiness. You realize that we don't have that much time together, so if there's anything good you want to say to somebody else, say it now. Any appreciation for their goodness, show your appreciation. Given that everybody in the world is suffering so much, whatever good we can do for one another helps to lessen that burden. And that lifts our hearts as well. We're not so wound up in our own problems that we can't think about others.

This larger perspective is always useful, because it allows you to look back at your own life and see it from a different angle, in a way where the narratives don't eat away so much at the heart.

The Buddha, in the first watch of the night of his awakening, saw all his many rebirths. In the second watch he pulled himself out of that story just about himself and looked at the story of the cosmos. And he saw how much suffering was still going on everywhere. On the one hand, the proper response is compassion, and on the other it's the desire for release: what the Buddha called renunciate grief, the

realization that you want to find a way out, but that you're not there yet. That was what led to his third knowledge and then to renunciate joy, the joy of his awakening.

He follows the same dynamic in the sutta on the five reflections that we often chant. First, he has you reflect on the fact that you're not beyond aging, illness, and death—or, as in the Thai translation, that aging, illness and death are normal for you. There's going to be separation: That's also normal. What you have to depend on, though, is your actions. Reflecting on that much gives rise to a sense of heedfulness.

But then you go further—which we don't have in our evening chant—which is to reflect on the fact that all beings everywhere are subject to aging, illness, death, and separation. And the proper response there is, one, *samvega*, and then two, a sense of renunciate grief, a desire for release. Because no matter where you go in this universe, you're going to find people you love and then you're going to be separated from them. You want to meet them again, and it goes back and forth like that. Sometimes, as you move from one configuration to another, it's like shuffling cards: sometimes the love grows stronger, sometimes something happens and it turns into something else.

This has gone on and on and on, for who knows how long. Thinking about that can be oppressive, but the Buddha doesn't leave you there with that feeling of oppression. He says that there *is* a way out, and it's available for everybody. Renunciate grief is meant to lead you to act in a way that leads to renunciate joy.

Sometimes it sounds selfish—you want to get out of *samsara* and leave everybody behind—but *samsara*'s not a place, it's an activity. *Samsara-ing* is what we do, and in the course of doing it we create a lot of suffering for ourselves and for others. Even when we're good with them, we can be with them only for so long, then there's the pain of separation. So love and pain have to go together.

But there is a way out, which is the path we're following right now. As we learn how to stop *samsara-ing*, we stop creating suffering for ourselves and we stop creating suffering for others. The idea that *samsara* and *nibbana* are the same thing is *totally* ridiculous. *Samsara* is the process by which pain is created; *nibbana* is the end of that process. And by taking the path you're showing other people that, yes, they can take the path, too, if they ever get around to realizing that the cause of the problem lies inside.

As the Buddha said, there's an arrow in your heart. What we're trying to do here is develop the skill so that each of us can remove the arrow in his or her heart. Then as long as we're in the world, we don't have to suffer. When we leave the

world, there's no suffering, either. This is how we abandon grief and show true compassion for ourselves *and* for the people around us.