

Renunciate Grief

May 10, 2021

There's a passage where the Buddha divides emotions into two sorts. There are household emotions and renunciate emotions. Household emotions are ordinary joy, sorrow, and equanimity. When you get sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, or ideas that you like, that's householder joy. Household sorrow is when you get things through the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind that you don't like. As for equanimity, it's when the mind is equanimous in the face of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations, and ideas.

As for renunciate emotions, renunciate sorrow is when you realize there is a goal but you haven't reached it yet. It is possible to put an end to suffering. People have done it, but you're not there. Renunciate joy is the joy you feel on reaching the goal, and renunciate equanimity is the equanimity that you feel when you have tasted that joy.

The Buddha makes an interesting comment. He says that when you're suffering from householder sorrow or householder grief, you don't want to try to replace it with householder joy, because those two just keep going back and forth, back and forth. They don't go anywhere. If you want it to go someplace, you replace householder grief with renunciate grief because that's what give the impetus to practice.

It all sounds very abstract. But think about grief, the situations where you're losing someone or something you hold dear: How does the Buddha recommend that you react? He says you should think about how this is not the only time this has happened. How many times over the course of many lifetimes have you experienced that same grief, that same loss?

There's that story of the woman who was crying after her daughter in the cemetery. The daughter's name was Jiva, which, ironically, means "life". But Jiva was now dead, buried in the cemetery, and her mother was crying after her. The Buddha happened to hear her and he asked her, "Do you realize how many Jivas are buried in that cemetery—how many *you've* buried in that cemetery? 84,000. Which one are you crying for?" She later said that on hearing that, she came to her senses.

It seems strange that to think about so many deaths is actually lighter than thinking about one death, but it takes a lot of the personal sting out of the loss. You realize that you're not the only one being singled out for this. This happens all the time. It's happened many, many times to you and to everyone else. When

you think about that, you can have a sense of compassion for everybody else who's lost a loved one. You see how much it hurts, and you realize that everybody's been going through this. That opens the heart. It gets you out of yourself.

In ancient India, they had an aesthetic theory that answered the question of why it is that, say, you have a play about something horrible happening, and yet people want to come and watch it and enjoy watching it. They're not getting a sadistic pleasure out of it. They empathize with the hero or heroine going through that suffering. So, what's the pleasure? The dramatists came up with the theory that the audience doesn't really experience the same emotions that the person on the stage is portraying. They *taste* the emotion, and the taste is different from the experience. The taste of seeing someone portraying grief, for example, is compassion. You're at one remove from the grief, and that expands your heart.

So allow yourself to think in those larger terms. Take one step from your grief into compassion. Once the heart is expanded like that, you don't stay right there. The compassion then moves on to *samvega*. You realize how this is just going to keep going on if you don't do something about it. The idea of having to go through this again, and again and again gets oppressive. So the focus is back on you, but in a new way. What are you going to do now? The proper response to *samvega* is *pasada*: the conviction that there's got to be a way out.

That's why there are those five reflections that we chant so often. We're subject to aging, illness, death, and separation. That's all *samvega*. Then we get to, "I'm the owner of my actions, heir to my actions." That's the *pasada*. You focus on your actions. It is possible to do something to get out. That's renunciate grief. It's possible to do it, but you're not there yet. This may not be a pleasant emotion, but at least it has some hope. Like the string on a bow: You pull it back so that it's taut and the arrow can fly. In other words, there's a tension in renunciate grief that gives you the impetus to keep on practicing.

As you reflect back, how many times have you had to grieve in the past? The emotion of compassion does get you out of the grief a little bit. But it doesn't solve the problem, because you're back with your own feelings again. Still, you've come back with a different perspective.

This is a pattern you see often in the Buddha's teachings. Think about the knowledges he gained on the night of his awakening. The first knowledge was about himself in all the lifetimes he'd been through: all the different pleasures and pains; what he ate; what he looked like; and how he died. Then he came back again: more pleasures and more pains over and over again, more eating, more dying. But it was all about him.

In the second knowledge, though, he took a wider perspective and realized that this wasn't just him. Everybody was going through this: people going up, going down, going up and then going down again, going down and coming back up again. Seeing that gave him a strong sense of samvega. He talks about this in many of his similes where he asked the monks which is greater, the water in all the oceans or the tears you've shed, going through these many lifetimes. It's the tears you've shed. So that gave him the impetus to want to get out.

That's what the third knowledge was all about: How do you get out? Well, you go back into your mind to see what in the mind is the basis for all this birth and death. What's the foundation? As we keep coming back, coming back to birth, we suffer from these things. We come back for more largely because we get focused on the pleasures. Even as they're falling from our grasp, we keep thinking, "Maybe if I come back the next time, I can get something better and hold on to it a little bit longer." But then it gets torn away again. How about a little bit longer still? It gets torn away again.

The Buddha began to realize he couldn't have nostalgia for his past pleasures. This is something we have to watch out for. A lot of people have told me that during the pandemic, when they've had a lot more time by themselves in confinement one way or another, the mind starts going back to the past. On the one hand, they think about some of the horrible things they did or horrible things that were done to them. But on the other hand, there are the things that they used to be able to do and now they miss. You don't want either of those to be in your mind when the time comes for you to actually leave the body, because the things you miss are not going to be that way when you come back.

I remember going to the Buddha's holy spots. You see these people who have been born right near the holy spots, and they're able to eke out a living based on tourists coming through. You wonder how many of them, in previous lifetimes, had been Buddhists and may have lived in the Buddhist holy spots. For many Buddhists, that was the highlight of their lives, going on pilgrimage. They thought, "Wouldn't it be good to have a life where you're right there all the time?" Well, they came back and they're right there, but the situation is different now. Hardly any Buddhists live in those areas. The people who hang around tend to be poor. It seemed so good in the memory, but it was a world that doesn't exist anymore.

So you've really got to train the mind, because otherwise it's just going to keep trying to find the pleasure it thought it might have had, could have had, or just missed. It's going to come back and try for it again. You've got to look deep into the mind because that's where all of this points. After all, the Buddha found this path because he was looking for a path that would lead to something that had no

sorrow, no aging, no illness, no death, no lamentation, no pain, no distress, no despair. And he found it. He found it looking here. It's when you reach that point that you've found the answer. The question is, do we have to keep on suffering? The Buddha says you get there, and the answer is no.

There is a way out. So even though the realization you're not there yet is painful, it's pain with a purpose. So many other pains in life have no purpose at all. They go nowhere. They just weigh you down, weigh you down, weigh you down. You ask what was accomplished by all that pain. Nothing. Then why? Because... one of those because's that has dot, dot, dot after it. It's because the mind still has craving and clinging. This is where the sorrow comes from. When the Buddha called this the origination of suffering, that's what he meant. It's because of this that we keep coming back and inflicting ourselves with more and more suffering.

So here's the area where we need to work, and this is the area where something can be accomplished. Even though the path is painful, as I said, it does serve a purpose that lies outside of pain.

So when you're suffering from household grief, remember the Buddha's cure was renunciate grief, because renunciate grief doesn't stay there. It moves on to renunciate joy and renunciate equanimity. It's a path we all can follow by enlarging our minds—enlarging our perspective on our grief—and then getting back to work.