



The Work of the Heart to Grief and Loss

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Reflection about grief and loss invites inquiry into how we relate to the inward process. I don't write as an authority, simply from my own direct experience, and from perspectives explored working as a hospital chaplain and end of life researcher. As practitioners in the study of the dharma, we hope and intend our meditation practice to lend insight that supports release from distress resulting from loss.

The three themes I want to touch upon are:

- Loss and resulting grief are universal.
- As students of the dharma we might mistakenly think grieving is wrong, since we so often struggle with the process. Grief seems not in alignment with the Buddha's teaching of truth of impermanence and the end of suffering.
- Counter to common cultural tendencies, if we honor and respect the process of grief and loss, we are not abandoning practice but instead engaging practice in what I call "the work of the heart."

As in study of the dharma, the message is simple, not complicated.

We might briefly describe grief to be the internal process of adjusting to subtle and significant changes in life. We all experience major losses throughout life; in the grief process, we are internally adjusting, realigning, to how we will live with loss. Externally, we have many tasks to attend to related to loss. Certainly after the death of a close loved one, the countless matters we must take care of are integral to the grief experience, giving rise to a wide range of thoughts and emotions.

Grief from loss is universal. It can be witnessed in the natural world too. At my home once, a crow flew into the dining room window. The sound itself was startling. The bird hit hard, fell to the ground, and died. I was saddened. Before heading out from home, I laid a small cloth over the bird lying very still, dead, upon the ground. When I later returned, the fabric still covered the body of the crow, except, surprisingly, a portion of the cloth had been turned down, exposing the head of the deceased. In the trees above were crows sounding numerous cries. I went indoors, leaving space and time for the family of birds to grieve. Much later, I buried the crow in the nearby forest floor. We know this is universal, this movement to grieve after loss.

Examining the truth of anicca, change, ever more deeply through our dharma practice

may well deepen our understanding and strengthen our intention to give caring attention to grief. However, culturally, people often want to quickly get over, or move around, the grief experience. There are as many reasons as individuals why avoidance might present. We may seek to avoid the degree of vulnerability grief calls forth, or to avoid the tender, difficult feelings, emotions, and thoughts bound to a multitude of memories. How do we move through grief experiences? How does our practice support the process?

Some twenty or more years ago, I was in a small group interview on a weekend meditation retreat. The teacher provided time for each of us to share what was 'coming up' on retreat. Surprisingly, I found myself quite emotional, flooded with grief. My parents had recently visited for a week and I found my father was exceptionally frail. On walks together, what seemed to be a short way for my mother and me was a great hardship for my father. I'd not expected his health to be so diminished. Living on opposite coasts, time had passed between visits. I hadn't seen the gradual decline in his health. And, I saw the impact of his frailty upon my Mother.

I found myself grieving, flooded with a mix of strong emotions. Being in a group, strong feelings felt compounded. I noticed inwardly a subtle resistance, discomfort for being tender in the presence of others. I felt awash, knowing the teachings of the Buddha are about freedom, liberation, and the end of suffering. In this seeming contraction, there was sense of failure and, in the body, a subtle contraction. "I" was suffering. In this discomfort, my feelings were confirmed; a fellow retreatant expressed frustration with the tears and tenderness. He frankly shared that the Buddha teaches of the inevitability of change, birth, aging, sickness, and death. He stressed again this will happen to us all. It felt to be a not so subtle nudge toward this truth. It was all, okay, the sorrow and the nudge, perhaps not so timely, but no doubt sincere. Through the tenderness, comprising of resistance to the decline in health of my folks the sense of grief continued for weeks to follow while bringing heart to this new truth.

Fortunately, soon after, thanks to modern medicine, my father received medical interventions that significantly improved his health and quality of life for years to come. But, naturally, the truth of change did not end. My father and my mother grew in frailty and both died. They died four days apart with family at their sides. I was grateful to be present with each of them when they died.

What I didn't know was how altered life would be after this significant loss. Returning home, soon after returning to work, the weeks unfolded as if moving through a haze. I had much support at home, though at work it was different. For example shortly after returning a dear co-worker, asked if "I was feeling better." I sensed her caring and her discomfort with the truth of such significant loss. My dedication though was unshaken, to be present to what was arising, to be with this tenderness, to be with this kind of "altered state." I witnessed a heightened awareness to life as delicate and fragile and the grief process, which was complicated by my multiple losses. Work seemed to be

moving very slowly. However, more accurately, I sensed that “I” was moving very slowly in work. Often it was difficult to focus, nothing felt important or urgent in the face of death and loss. Everything was known through a new lens.

During this time at work in the hospital, after lunch, passing in the cafeteria hallway, with many people coming and going every which way, I met a dharma friend. In the middle of this blur of activity, we stopped to say hello. He asked how I was and tears fell forth. I shared my personal loss. We were undeterred by the busy spot, rather focused and caring, and my dharma friend was so there. He said, “This is such a rich time after such significant loss.” In so many words he encouraged me to “honor this tender time.” I knew all this *and* it was poignant to hear it reflected in that moment at that time. He encouraged giving this process its full respect. He was affirming that the grieving process deserves caring attention. This generous meeting meant a lot during this journey through uncharted territory. For the next year and half moving through the grieving process was a central part of life. When timely, I found a therapist to focus on intensive “grief work.” It was what felt most fitting and appropriate to my individual experience.

This dharma friend encounter framed questions that arose in my work as a medical spiritual care provider. Can we move *gently* through a grieving time? Can we name or know inwardly in the body that often it is not pleasant, but rather difficult? Even still, can we embrace the process, honoring it as a natural versus unwanted? Are we able to move into it, without expectation, with faith and heart, respecting and allowing the periodic floods of memory and emotion that come forth with merciful caring? What happens when we really attend? What happens when we not try to rush or pressure because of the dharma ideal to live without struggle?

Sometime after my parents died, a dharma friend called. Knowing I work as a chaplain, she wondered if I might be available to see her friend, Alice. Alice was suffering from complex grief after the death of her mother. Martha shared that her friend was not a dharma practitioner but wondered if I would consider a care visit. I agreed and Alice and I met at a park and walked together along Puget Sound. I listened with caring attention. Alice, spoke of her deep love, diligent devotion, and care for her mother, who had lived disabled with blindness and was feeble for years. She’d been her mother’s care provider. Life without her mother felt unimaginable, unbearable, yet here she was. Caring for her mother had been tender and intimate, embodied with mutual love and friendship. Alice shared in detail: her devotion was unwavering. Such a deep sense of loss left her devoid of meaning and purpose. She felt empty, lost, and bad for having so much emotional difficulty. Loved ones, she explained, were exhausted by her intense grief process. They wanted Alice to move on with life. But this wasn’t Alice’s experience: she felt stuck.

As my dharma friend had provided to me, in turn, to Alice, I affirmed the grief process as a normal human experience that deserved deep care and respect. And, yes, it

contained the sadness, frustration, anger, confusion, doubts, and all the of the “if only(s)” and wishes of “could of, would of” I posed, “Could this all be held in gentle kindness?” And I encouraged Alice to seek professional grief counseling, when and if, it felt timely.

Some of us appreciate stories as a means to learning. Others may prefer the facts straight on. Reflection on *time* and our personal tendencies may lend understanding into our grief experience. We can ask “What’s my predominate movement in relationship to time?” Some of us lean forward and some of us lean back. The beauty in meditation practice is an up close ability to stop to see tendency of mind. Leaning forward thoughts are future oriented and employed with planning. Leaning back thoughts are remembering past and might, at times, be flooded in memories. Formal meditation practice trains us to again and again come back to present moment, to be aware and present, and to see and know what is arising.

In the same way, may we choose wakefulness in the midst of grief -- to be here for this too. Whether with heart moved by stories or moving into the truth of the dharma, may it be with care to grief, with gentleness, with patience, with vigilance, with mindful caring attention. As a chaplain in the hospital, I am a humble witness to the sudden shifts, when a window opens for an individual, allowing what is true -- a kind of glow, a waking up to life when patients and families hear respect and acknowledgment to their grief and loss. May we allow vigilance, interest, caring to this difficult part of our life process. I call it, humbly, part of “the work of the heart.”

