

Bereavement in Buddhist teaching and practice



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AMONGST ALL BUDDHIST PARABLES, the story of Kisagotami (Ballou 1972) is perhaps the best loved and best understood, especially by the bereaved. It is often retold at Buddhist funerals as a homily for those who attend to mourn, and who may be strengthened and inspired by hearing it. It needs little or no interpretation, although I have added a few explanatory notes on Buddhist terms.

Kisagotami became pregnant, and when the ten months were completed, gave birth to a son. When the boy was able to walk by himself, he died. The young girl, in her love for it, carried the dead child clasped to her bosom, and went about from house to house asking if anyone would give her some medicine for it. When the neighbours saw this, they said, 'Is the young girl mad that she carries about on her breast the dead body of her son!' But a wise man, thinking to himself, 'Alas! This Kisagotami does not understand the law of death, I must comfort her', said to her, 'My good girl, I cannot myself give medicine for it, but I know of a doctor who can attend to it'. The young girl said, "If so, tell me who it is." The wise man continued, 'Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha) can give medicine; you must go to him.'

Kisagotami went to Gautama, and doing homage to him, said, 'Lord and master, do you know any medicine that will be good for my boy?' Gautama replied, 'I know of some'.

ABSTRACT

The author, a Buddhist Hospice charity-worker and nurse, offers a personal perspective on bereavement, illustrated by a well-known and well-loved Buddhist parable. The article draws out the contemporary relevance of an ancient teaching on the causes of suffering, especially that associated with loss, and suggests practical ways to transcend it, as described in Buddhist philosophy.

She asked, 'What medicine do you require?' He said, 'I want a handful of mustard seed'. The girl promised to procure it for him, but Gautama continued, 'I require some mustard seed taken from a house where no son, no daughter, husband, wife, parent, or slave has died'. The girl said, 'Very good', and went to ask for some at the different houses, carrying the dead body of her son astride on her hip.

The people said, 'Here is some mustard seed, take it'. Then she asked, 'In my friend's home has there died a son, a daughter, a husband, a wife, a parent, or a slave?' They replied, 'Lady, what is this that you say? The living are few, but the dead are many'. Then she went to other houses, but one said, 'I have lost a son'; another, 'I have lost my parents'; another, 'I have lost my slave'.

At last, not being able to find a single house where no one had died, from which to procure the mustard seed, she began to think, 'This is a heavy task that I am engaged in. I am not the only one whose son is dead. In the whole of the Savatthi country, everywhere children are dying, parents are dying'. Thinking thus, she acquired the law of death and, putting away her affection for her child, she summoned up resolution and left the dead body in a forest; then she went to Gautama and paid him homage.

He said to her, 'Have you procured the handful of mustard seed?' 'I have not', she replied; 'the people of the village told me, "The living are few, but the dead are many." Gautama said to her, 'You thought that you alone had lost a son; the law of death is that

EDITOR'S NOTE

Goble here spells out the basic premise of Buddhist faith that life is transient and only part of some greater purpose of which we are a small part. To those who see grief as a search for meaning in the face of death, the five point injunction to stop trying to figure things out may seem inappropriate. Yet there is wisdom in the notion that we must first accept what has been if we are to discover what is. CMP

among all living creatures there is no permanence'. When Gautama had finished preaching the law, Kisagotami was established in the reward of Sotapatti (an initial stage in enlightenment); and all the assembly who heard the law were also established in the reward of Sotapatti.

Some time afterwards, when Kisagotami was one day engaged in the performance of her religious duties, she observed the lights in the houses now shining, now extinguished, and began to reflect, 'My state is like these lamps'. Gautama, who was then in the Gandhakuti building, sent his sacred appearance to her, which said to her, just as if he himself were preaching, 'All living beings resemble the flame of these lamps, one moment lighted, the next extinguished; those only who have arrived at Nirvana (freedom, liberation or enlightenment) are at rest'.

Kisagotami, on hearing this, reached the stage of a Rahanda (a further stage of enlightenment) possessed of intuitive knowledge.

This parable, written in archaic yet lovely language, speaks to us from another age, another culture, of the human condition. Yet we readily recognise in it the unchanging truth about the inevitability of death, its seeming capriciousness, and the universality of suffering, grief and loss.

Gautama taught Kisagotami the cause of suffering, the antidote for suffering, and the means to acquire that antidote, which is ultimate freedom, enlightenment: Nirvana. This is illustrated in the parable by the girl's dawning insight into impermanence, triggered first by her visits to the bereaved, then by her mindful awareness of the lamps, now lighted, now extinguished, as symbols of mortality.

It is characteristic of the Buddha's teaching method, and of Buddhism generally, that he supplied the girl with the ingredients for a self-revelatory experience, tailored to her immediate circumstances, rather than with a hand-me-down 'explanation' or a sentimental comfort-blanket of religious reassurances.

Buddhists hold that all human experience of suffering carries within it the ingredients for its own healing, its own antidote; it is our noble task to find it, by opening to experience, including the experience of suffering, trustfully, courageously, and diligently, as did Kisagotami. In doing so, bit by bit as we are able, we grow more aware of the mind's circular tendencies, the temptation to cling to what is past, to grasp at what may be, and to dwell compulsively on what we are in the midst of. Gradually, or perhaps suddenly, we may awake to freedom.

A 10th century northern Indian mystic, Mahasiddhi Tilopa, offers the following all-purpose six-line advice. People who are suffering bereavement, and those supporting the bereaved, may

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find some consolation and uplift in what may seem, at first, to be a bleak and improbable series of injunctions:

Don't recall. Let go of whatever is past.

Don't imagine. Let go of whatever may come.

Don't think. Let go of what is happening now.

Don't examine. Don't try to figure things out.

Don't control. Don't try to make things happen.

Rest. Just relax. For now do nothing, just rest.

As more or less voluntary and complicit participants in the atomised modern society we are born into, or have adopted, we often feel very alone. In bereavement we do well to avail

ourselves of whatever resources speak to us as helpful in meeting our need for support and succour. Each of us will make a judgement about this, as we should. There is much of value on offer, and much to be thankful for in our time of need.

For those of us who follow the Buddhist path, the sorrow of bereavement, while sharp, may not throb and gnaw for as long as it otherwise might, as practice, leading to unfolding enlightenment, draws the poison of loss away; and what remains of it can be used, wisely and compassionately, for the merit of all suffering beings everywhere, of whom there is no lack. ●

Reference

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BEREAVEMENT IN THE ARTS

Portrait diptych of John the Steadfast and his six-year-old son, John Frederick

Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472-1553)

Photo © The National Gallery, London



A recent exhibition of Lucas Cranach the Elder's paintings brought to my notice this diptych, purchased in 1991 by the National Gallery. Painted in 1509 when Cranach was court painter to the Elector of Wittenberg, it commemorates the death of John Frederick's mother who died giving birth to him and is the first known German portrait of a prince painted while still a child. Normally, these diptychs were of husband and wife, but here the child replaces his mother. The Elector was unmarried, and he and his brother, John Frederick's father, pinned all their hopes for the succession on this six-year old. Here the father still wears mourning and his sad countenance tells us of his continuing grief. Little John Frederick too looks sad – motherless

and living with a grieving father can't have been much fun, even with a retinue of servants to care for him.

I reflected, as I gazed on these wonderful pictures, on the changes in maternal mortality rates even during my lifetime. When I was born in 1932, some 40 mothers died in every 10,000 live births in England and Wales; when my first child was born in 1960 it was about 4 in 10,000 and when my grandson was born in 1997 it was less than 1, although much higher in the developing world, and nearly 1 in 100 in sub-Saharan Africa. John Frederick did survive his childhood and became in turn the Elector of Wittenberg, John Frederick the Magnanimous, in 1532. ●

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