

Grief (1 of 5) The Pain of Emptiness

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The last two weeks I've been here, I talked about practicing with emotions, and then I focused on anger. This week, I'd like the theme to be grief. Perhaps, sometimes anger and grief follow each other and are closely related.

I know some teachers who, when people talk to them about grief, will gently ask, "What about sadness?" And when people talk about sadness or grief, the teacher might ask: "What about anger? Is there anger here?" Sometimes sadness and anger operate in tandem or in relation to each other. One is sometimes a partner to the other in our lives.

It might seem strange to talk about grief on this 4th of July holiday here in the United States. But, with grief, nothing is left out. We're celebrating an independence that was violent. There are things to grieve.

The first time a friend, a Buddhist teacher, was asked to perform a wedding, he gave a dharma talk on death and dying as part of the ceremony. It was probably a bit of a surprise for some of the people there. I don't know if the couple knew that was coming. For the dharma teacher, the wedding was an occasion for him to share something central and at the heart of a wise and caring life.

So on a day that celebrates a kind of liberation and independence, the 4th of July, for that to be realistic, perhaps there has to be space to also recognize and sit with grief.

Grief is a hugely important issue for many people. Sooner or later, most people will go through a period of grieving. People might think they know what grief is, but maybe there's no real, solid definition for it. There are some languages in which it's difficult to find an equivalent for the English word grief. It might not have the same connotations, meanings, or emotional associations.

Even within the United States, there are many different ways in which people grieve. There are many ways in which people understand grief and have meaning for it. So it's a very rich and important area to explore. It's also one that's very difficult. And I'm certainly aware that bringing up the topic of grief this week may be very difficult for those of you who are in the middle of intense grief. Perhaps, you came to the 7:00 am sitting for something else, rather than be reminded of it, sit with it, and address it. So, be careful this week around the topic of grief and care for yourself. Hopefully, I'll speak with a lot of respect for each of you and for the challenges and difficulties that this world of grief might have.

Grief is not just challenging. It's also a profoundly important part of our human heart. There's something very meaningful, powerful, and wonderful that can happen when we learn to respect grief deeply. When we learn to allow for grief, understand it, allow it to move through us, and find freedom with it.

I want to tell a brief story from the Buddha's teachings. The Buddha had a lot of disciples, but he had two disciples that historically are considered his main disciples. Some people have called them the left-hand and right-hand disciples. They were the wisest, deepest practitioners, the ones closest to the Buddha. They were responsible for a lot of teachings within the Buddhist community at that time. The two disciples were Sāriputta and Mahāmaudgalyāyana, who is less known in the modern world. The Buddha had known them for many years. I think they both died in the last year the Buddha was alive. The Buddha died when he was around 80, 81 years old.

Sāriputta was one of the leaders of the monastic community. After Sāriputta died, the Buddha addressed his order of monastics. He says that this gathering of our community feels empty now that Sāriputta has died. He doesn't say anything more about what he's feeling, but he sees it as being empty.

I find it very evocative that people have asked, Does the Buddha grieve? Is the Buddha ever sad? The closest evidence of something like grief in the Buddha is his recognizing the absence of his disciple. So one way of understanding grief is it involves the loss of something, the absence of something. Something is not here anymore that was important. And that absence is an absence we feel. That absence has different meanings and associations for different people in different cultures, societies, and religions. How people experience the death of someone and the impact it has on them is so varied. The meaning and function of that loss, that absence, and its impact are what we want to study. We want to understand and respect it.

I offer this story so that we don't have some idea that we know what grief is or that grief is just grief by itself. Rather, grief is a very broad word for a range of emotions and meaning-making. We can sit and be with them and get to know them better. If we just call it grief by itself, we might not see the fullness of it, the conditionality of it, the contingent nature of it. And given the conditioned, contingent nature of grief, how can we best allow for it, respect it, and respond to it? So, to begin unpacking, What is grief, this empty thing that happened?

One definition I have for grief is it is the pain that comes with a loss. Grief is the pain that comes with something important that is no longer here. I don't use the Buddhist word suffering here because suffering implies a lot more than just pain. Pain is more a basic feeling of discomfort.

What is going on for us in relation to the pain of grief and the sense of emptiness and space? What are we experiencing? What are we contributing? What are the stories we're telling ourselves? What stories are we now living by? What identities do we have? What hopes for the future did we have? What comforted us or what were we cherishing that is no longer here? What's the nature of that pain? What arises with that pain?

When people, sometimes therapists or dharma teachers, describe grief, they'll sometimes describe it as being a combination of many different emotions: anger, numbness, hostility, despair, discouragement, hopelessness. All kinds of things come into play.

For people in some cultures, the pain and emptiness of loss sometimes comes along with love and compassion. Sometimes it comes with even joy and celebration. In some cultures I've read about, their word for grief is a combination of sadness and love.

So what is this complex, rich domain of grief? It represents part of the depth, complexity, and fullness of life. It's not a singular thing.

In today's guided meditation, I suggested as you breathe in, to touch all of who you are. And on the exhale, allow something about it to settle. Not to disappear, not to push it away, but allow it to rest. So with grief, to breathe and touch the grief, that subjective experience, in meditation. As you exhale, allow something about the grief or relationship to the grief to settle. By practicing that way, we're not caught in the grief, lost in the grief, or reactive to the grief. We're exercising our freedom to touch it and to allow something to settle. In a sense, that is where we find our freedom, so we can give freedom to our grief. And that's a wonderful thing – to have our freedom together with grief, not one or the other.

So that's the journey we'll take this week. It's a journey through grief. By the end of the week, I hope you'll understand something about how to give freedom to your grief, not how to be free from grief. By giving freedom to your grief, you'll find your freedom too. Thank you.