

Grief (5 of 5) Liberating Grief

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We come to the last talk on grief. Grief is a very human experience to be had, especially if we see grief as the pain that comes from loss. With loss, there's an absence, something is missing. What do we fill that empty space with? How complicated does that get for us?

One of the ways of practicing with grief is to develop a capacity to hold grief simply. To stay in the empty space without filling it with our judgments, desires, wishes, and fears. Keep it very simple. This is a way of respecting our grief. We are not treating grief as wrong or bad or something that should be gotten rid of. Grief is something to allow and make space for and to breathe with.

To do that well, it helps a lot if we include, as part of our mindfulness of grief, the relationship we have to grief. On the one hand, there is grief, and then there are the attitudes we have toward grief. Those attitudes sometimes can be more intense or more difficult than the grief itself. There can be an attitude that grieving is wrong. There can be an attitude that we need to grieve or have to grieve so that everyone can see us – that we have an obligation to grieve. There can be ideas that “I certainly should have grieved enough” or “I shouldn't be still grieving.” There can be ideas that successful human life doesn't experience the intensity and the difficulties of grief. So those are all secondary ideas having to do with grief.

Another secondary relationship to grief is that some people cling to grief. They may hold on to grief out of a sense of loyalty to what they've lost or to the person who has died. They think that if they let go of the grief, it's somehow a betrayal or means they're really going to lose that person. Somehow the grief fills the vacuum that's too difficult to sit with by itself so they hold on to it.

With the practice of mindfulness, we learn to notice the attitude we have toward grief. If it's an intense loss, that might not happen in the first day or two or a week. But, at some point, we can ask ourselves: “What is my attitude? What's my belief about this grief? What relationship do I have towards it?”

We can move towards having a simpler and simpler relationship to grief, where we're not adding layers of relatedness, judgments, and ideas about the grief. We are liberating the grief, in a sense, from the imposition of these attitudes, relationships, needs, and fears that we might have about the grief itself.

As we begin to do this work, we can be with grief, even if it's very intense, in a simpler way. Maybe not in meditation, but in a walk with a friend, journaling, or doing a ritual, which we talked about yesterday. By being with grief more simply, we can sometimes start slowly discovering that grief is not a singular, unitary thing. It's made up of different emotions, ideas, beliefs, memories, and aspirations.

As we begin to separate out the different parts of grief, we see that there may be an attitude, a second arrow toward what's happening. Part of grief, for some people, is anger. The anger itself is hostility toward something that's happening that we don't like. To see it that way – “Oh, it's an attitude towards something” – allows us then to begin simplifying and being present for the very thing that we're angry with, as opposed to staying angry with it from a distance.

With grief, there might be fear, and we're afraid of the fear. Slowly we begin to learn not to add fear to the fear. Just be afraid. As we begin being present and seeing the different elements of grief, we might see that it isn't only the person who died that we're grieving, but we're grieving other aspects of that relationship.

Some people grieve the loss of financial security when a breadwinner dies. Part of the grief is the uncertainty and the fear of what's happening, the loss of a whole way of living. It's not just the loss of a person but also a way of living. When the person who died is the hub for a set of relationships, it might be the loss of those relationships. So the loss may be more than the person who died.

We can begin teasing apart the different elements of grief and seeing our attitudes toward them. We bring desires, wishes, fears, and attachments to all these different parts of grief. Slowly, kindly, and compassionately,

we can begin exploring what is extra and not needed. I think of this process as a process of liberation. Not that we're becoming free, but that we are liberating the grief.

In the middle of intense grief, it might even be disrespectful, the idea that we're somehow not letting the grief be free. But slowly over time, we discover where in the grief, we haven't given freedom, where we haven't gotten out of the way. Let grief just be there in a simple way. We are letting the grief be there without the complexities of our attitudes, judgments, fears, and attachments. Slowly begin letting go of anything that is extra with the grief.

Sometimes grief can even be pleasant, satisfying, or have a feeling of rightness to it when you've freed the grief enough from yourself in a certain way. This is a difficult task to do because you are the one who is grieving, but also the one who is giving freedom to the grief. So not identifying so fully with the grief that it's "my grief" or "I am the grief."

This takes this; this takes practice. This takes something that might not be understood by people who do not have a mindfulness practice or a well-established capacity to rest in awareness or to hold difficult states.

Rather than fixing things, criticizing things, or running away, the movement of practice is to keep opening so we have a greater and greater capacity to be with the challenges and the joys of life. This increased capacity is directly connected to giving freedom to our experience, giving freedom to the world, and giving freedom to our feelings. Maybe dropping the idea that you will be free, and instead, there will be freedom given to all things.

May all things exist with a certain freedom from our clinging, anger, aversion, confusion, delusion, bias, and projections. May we learn to give generous, kind attention to everything, including our grief.

I hope that this discussion on grief and the teachings on emotions and anger of the last few weeks gives you a sense of how to practice with emotions and challenges. I think we'll continue next week with the theme of emotions. It's a rich area of life. Hopefully, you find it beneficial and interesting to see the application of mindfulness and practice to this very personal area of your inner life. Thank you very much.