Grief

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Dharma Talks · 18:28

Evening and greetings. I trust you had a fruitful day. I do not say happy, though I wish it has been happy.

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma Sambuddhasa. Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma Sambuddhasa. Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Samma Sambuddhasa. Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-awakened one.

So I've had two rather sad emails. We've discussed all this business about death, and then, of course, there's the complementary side, which is grief. One writer says these last years has brought to my door a series of griefs: the deaths of close ones and beloveds, some unexpected due to suicide, some through the combination of illness. One, the most beloved, from a cardiac arrest. And she also lost her pet. And they themselves were diagnosed with cancer, but is in remission now. She's found that during this lockdown, a lot of this grief and sorrow arising, particularly in dreams during meditation. So when we're alone, these turbulences, whatever they are, they tend to come back to haunt us.

And very recently, a very sad case: a young man, well youngish — thirty-four from my point of view, youngish — Pete, who had a seizure at night and died, leaving his wife and three small children. So that, of course, is a huge shock to somebody who has to suffer that, to all those close to him.

This problem of grief is obviously coming up for all those people who've lost somebody to this coronavirus. So it's good just to say something a little bit about all that.

First of all, is to try to make a distinction, just using these words, between sorrow and grief. I mean, they're interchangeable. Sorrow is that trembling, as the Buddha would say, in the heart — what we would call empathy — where you feel the sorrow of somebody else. And you can say that when somebody dies in an unfortunate way or they're too young to die, died before their time as we say, that there's a certain sorrow on their behalf as a thing that they could have offered more to society. They could have lived a longer life. But generally, there's a sense of sorrow about it. And that's really looking at it, as it were, from their point of view, not from our point of view.

The big case, of course, was that little boy on the beach, which caused Angela Merkel to allow refugees in. So there was a movement there, a sort of a resonance in the heart with the suffering of others. And that sorrow normally demands some sort of action into compassion, or else it lies as unrequited. It lies as a pain in the heart. And of course, if you can't do anything, then you can at least send your good wishes. You can do the meditation on loving-kindness. And you have to accept that. You can't do anything. There's no point in beating ourselves up about that. So in a sense, that sorrow is part and parcel of our

communication, our being with people.

I'd like to read this really lovely poem by John Donne. John Donne was a poet in the Restoration period, James I, all that. And he says: "No man is an island, entire of itself. Each is a piece of the continent, a part of the main. If a clod is washed away by the sea, Europe is the less. Each man's death diminishes me, for I am involved in mankind. Therefore, send not to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee."

So in other words, every man's death is also a little death within me. I had a friend down in Cornwall I would visit on occasion, and he died. And of course, I've lost that relationship. So something in me has been lost. And there's a wholesomeness about that because we need people. We need friendships. We need to be able to relate, to communicate. It's just part of that — hopefully next tomorrow I'll be talking about the nutriments and you'll see that this was recognized by the Buddha — that we do need other people.

That's obvious when it comes to meditation. It's so much easier to sit when you know everybody else in the room is going through something similar than just sitting on your own. And I'm especially aware of people who are actually in isolation because of medical problems. So it's difficult just to be on your own. These days, of course, it is attenuated by modern technology.

Interestingly enough, when the Buddha's two main disciples died — that's Moggallāna and Sāriputta — I'm going to read this little bit. This again is taken from the book *Mindfully Facing Disease and Death* by Venerable Analayo. Highly recommend it. There is another book, by the way, which I might have mentioned: *Living in the Light of Death: The Art of Being Truly Alive* by Larry Rosenberg.

When Sāriputta died, Ānanda said, "I declare having myself known them on attaining full awakening before establishments of mindfulness and so on and so forth. These have all been taken away." In other words, Ānanda is grieving the loss of his teacher. And there's a series of questions that the Buddha asks him.

"Has he taken away your ability to observe your mind?" He goes through the discourse on how to establish right awareness. "Has he taken away your ability to investigate? Has he taken away your ability to become fully liberated yourself?" And of course, Ānanda says no.

And then the Buddha gives him his advice, which you also get right at the end of the discourse which tells about the last few days of the Buddha. He reminds him that he himself, the Buddha, the Tathāgata, would go. "Therefore, do not be so very sad, Ānanda. You should know that soon the Tathāgata will also be of the past. Therefore, Ānanda, you should have yourself as an island by relying on yourself. You should have the Dhamma as an island by relying on the Dhamma. You should not have another island, no other reliance."

Now this seems contrary to what we've just read from John Donne, that every man isn't an island. But of course, we're talking about two different things. We talk about our relationship, our necessary

relationship with other people, and the fact that the relationship goes wrong. Now, that's the problem. Where does the relationship go wrong? It goes wrong through attachment. We all know this. And attachment is just another way of saying a psychological dependency on somebody for my happiness, for my security, for my comfort, and so on and so forth.

And what the Buddha is saying is when you put that aside, you've got to find your own inner safety, your own inner place. And of course, we're doing that every time we sit in meditation. We're discovering this, the observer, the feeler, the one who knows. And when that's very clear to you, when you are really the one who knows within yourself and everything else is happening — the body with its feeling and the heart with its emotions, the mind with its thought — when you're quite separate from that and you are the observer, the feeler, ask yourself, what's it like? Is it okay? Is it worth being there most of the time?

The Buddha actually says that when Sāriputta dies, and Moggallāna too — Moggallāna was murdered, it seems, by another sect who got jealous of him or something — when these two main disciples died, and they would have been a similar age, because he was thirty-five when he began teaching, and they became very quickly his disciples, his first disciples. So they would have been late twenties, thirties, so very close to him in age. He said that the *saṅgha*, that's the order of monks and nuns, felt empty without them. So that's the other side. That's the business of no man is an island.

But we've got this more negative side, which is really about the grief that we feel. This grief has to be felt. It has to be suffered. It's what's left. It's the consequence, the *kamma*, the *kamma* of unwholesome relationship. Now, you have to be careful here. This isn't immoral. It's not as though you go to hell forever because you had an attachment to somebody. Not at all. It's unwholesome in the sense that eventually it causes pain and it causes us to suffer.

And grief, especially with sudden death, as we had with Pete who died a couple of nights back, and with this woman who's come with all these series of griefs, really it's extremely difficult to stay with that shock, with the constant death of people in our lives. And of course, as you grow older, as I am, people begin to disappear. And eventually, if you live long enough, it's just you. I mean, you've made other friends, younger friends, whatever. But all those old friends that you've known for years, that maybe even go back to childhood, they've all gone. And you're just left there with all these memories.

So grief is that sore, the wound, which is caused when something from the heart is taken out, is ripped out when it's a shock like that. And there's no other way but to sit with it and to give the heart time to heal and to know that this is the cause of a psychological dependency, but that isn't to take away the fact that there was also love. There was also a sense of care for the person.

Sometimes you get confused about that. And of course the big confusion is to think that as your grief diminishes, it's telling you that you don't love the person as you used to, you're losing their love. Well, if you get into that, you're into a never ending cycle of grief, which lessens and then you have to grieve a bit more. You have to keep pumping it up because you're trying to prove that the grief you have is the

measure of your love.

But if the grief process is gone through in its normal passage, which they say is about nine months, and I'm sure you all know if you happen to have grief in your life — there is a charity, Cruse, which helps people — that if you allow the heart to express its pain, then over a period of up to nine months, it begins to dissipate. Not that it doesn't come back in little blips, but at least the terrible pain, especially the first three, six months, begins to dissipate. And slowly one begins to contact that loved one has — that love, that care that one had. And of course, that brings up beautiful memories and joy arises. I mean, that would be the normal passage of things.

This happened: a woman, a lay woman who was a great supporter of the Buddha — it goes right back to his early days — and she turns up one day at the monastery with her hair drenched, weeping, crying out in sorrow. And it says she went to see the Buddha in the middle of the day in spite of the sun. Her favorite grandchild, Datta, who had always helped to distribute alms, had suddenly passed away.

And when she told the Blessed One of her sorrow, he asked whether she wanted to have as many children and grandchildren as there were people in the city of Sāvatthī. That's the capital of Kosala. And she joyfully agreed. "But how many people die in Sāvatthī every day?" said the Blessed One. And she considered and said, "Oh, Lord, in Sāvatthī, nine or ten people, five or three or two people, or at least one, die every day. Sāvatthī is never free of dying."

And being asked whether in this case she would ever be without sorrow, she had to admit that she would feel sorrow every single day. So the Blessed One said, "Those who have a hundred loved ones have a hundred sorrows. Those who have ninety, all the way down to one, have only one sorrow. And those who have no loved ones have no sorrow. Those alone, I say, are without sorrow, without suffering, without desperation."

And of course, he's not talking about love and care. He's talking about what happens when you're attached, when you are dependent on somebody for some well-being, for some happiness, for some comfort. And that, of course, is something that we simply have to work through. And as I say, not to make the mistake between grief and love. Grief is the measure — the way I'm using the word grief is the measure — of attachment.

And we just have to suffer it. And that's something to remind ourselves, too, that punishment is out of the question in Buddhism. You don't have to punish anybody or punish yourself or get angry with yourself. All we're doing that is adding more suffering to the suffering. All we have to do is suffer consequences. That's all we're asked to do. And allow the heart, give it time to heal.

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