



Grief Management in Buddhism for Human Development

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Abstract

As it is discussed in the Roga Sutta of the Aṅguttaranikāya, it is immensely impossible to be a perfect mentally healthy person except an Arahant, one who has reached the highest mental and spiritual development. Enlightened beings who have not yet reached liberation are confronted with very subtle mental distortions. Nevertheless, average people are having various mental problems minute by minute. In this comprehensive analysis on mental problems, grief (*soka*) is understood in Buddhist discourses as natural phenomenon faced by every average person. In this paper, it is understood with the help of elucidation of Suttas like Piyaḷika, Sokasallaharaṇa, and Saccavibhaṅga in which the death of beloved ones is explained as the main cause of grief. In this context, the Buddha, played his role as a great Psychotherapist, has shown how to overcome such grief. The elements of Buddhist Grief Management Techniques scattered throughout Suttas are presented here in a systematic manner with the aim of drawing the attention of professionals who work in the related areas of grief into valuable discussion of several Buddhist discourses that could be adopted to develop the field.

Keywords: Grief Management, Psychology, Human Development.

Prelude

As it is discussed in the Roga Sutta of the Aṅguttaranikāya, it is immensely impossible to be a perfect mentally healthy person except an Arahant, one who has reached the highest mental and spiritual development. Enlightened beings who have not yet reached liberation are confronted with very subtle mental distortions. Nevertheless, average people are having various mental problems minute by minute. In this comprehensive analysis on mental problems, grief (*soka*) is understood in Buddhist discourses as natural phenomenon faced by every average person. In this paper, it is understood with the help of elucidation of Suttas like Piyajālīka, Sokasallaharaṇa, and Saccavibhaṅga in which the death of beloved ones is explained as the main cause of grief. In this context, the Buddha, played his role as a great Psychotherapist, has shown how to overcome such grief. The elements of Buddhist Grief Management Techniques scattered throughout Suttas are presented here in a systematic manner with the aim of drawing the attention of professionals who work in the related areas of grief into valuable discussion of several Buddhist discourses that could be adopted to develop the field.

Grief Among Other Psychological Problems

According to the “First” of the Four Noble Truths. “grief” means universal experience faced by every average individual. The equivalent Pāli term that conveys the meaning of grief is ‘*soka*’ But various aspects and stages of grief (*soka*) are discussed with othersimultaneous terms such as *parideva* (lamentation), *domanassa* (sorrow), and *upāyāsa* (despair)... etc. (M. III, 249).

Grief Born of Affection

The Piyajātīka Sutta of the Majjhimanikāya explains with clarity how grief is born from affection. As it is elaborated therein, “affection” is the origin of grief (*soka*), sorrow (*parideva*) suffering (*dukkha*) lamentation (*domanssa*) and despair (*upāyāsa*). The Psychology of affection is discussed with the help of two generic terms as *Kāmatanḥā* (craving for sense gratification) and *Bhavatanḥā* (Craving for self-preservation). According to Warden, attachment is developed in animals (including humans) because it has a survival value (Warden, 1983). The Saccavibhaṅga Sutta explains that their attachment to desire as the main cause of grief (*saṃkhittena pañcupādānakkhandhā*). This attachment (*upādāna*)

which binds the beings into continued existence (*samsāra*) is recognized in Buddhist teachings as desire (*lobha*) impregnated with its various aspects such as *chanda* (impulse), *rāga* (excitement), *nandi* (enjoyment), *sineha* (love).. etc. The tendency of desire (*lobha*) lays the foundation for self-preservation (*bhavataṇhā*). The strong attachment to this self-preservation blinds the being from recognizing the world reality. When the wishes related to this craving for self-gratification and to self-preservation are changed in face of the world reality, the individual begins to shiver just like a fish out of water. Then the average person begins to suffer from grief, sorrow, suffering. The three fold division of *dukkha* is mentioned in the Saṃyuttanikāya as (i) *Dukkha-dukkha* (intrinsic *dukkha*) (ii) *Viparināma dukkha* (*dukkha* in change) and (iii) *Saṅkhāra - dukkha* (*dukkha* due to disposition). The nature of grief has the relationship with this threefold division of *dukkha*. Nonetheless, the individual who has been blinded by the strong attachment to his survival cannot perceive things as they are. This situation is recognized in Buddhist Psychology as *moha* or *andha* (delusion or blindness). When the wishes of average person are disturbed by change (*anicca*), the reaction taken by him/her is hate. This situation is recognized in Buddhist Psychology as self-annihilation (*vibhavataṇhā*). According to the suttas “He who is under the sway of anger becomes ugly, he cannot sleep in comfort, his mind is constantly disturbed, when a person is overwhelmed by anger, he does not know what is right and wrong and is unable to understand even what is beneficial to himself. When anger becomes most intense one loses all sense of discrimination and does not hesitate to kill even his own kith and kin or in the end even himself (A. IV. P.98). All aspects related to grief cannot be limited only to the word *soka* (grief). The above mentioned Pāli term simultaneously used with *soka* discuss various emotional, physical, aspects of grief that have been discussed in modern grief counseling as sadness, anger, guilt, anxiety, loneliness shock, yearning, numbness, helplessness and physical sensations like fatigue, a dry mouth, a hollow feeling in the stomach, tightness in the throat and more various thoughts that can lead to depression, obsessions, confusion or even in hallucination and behavioural disorders such as disturbed sleep, social withdrawal, and absent-mindedness as well. The Pali terms *soka* (grief) *parideva* (lamentation, wailing) *domanassa* (distress, dejectedness, melancholy and grief) and *upāyāsa* (trouble, turbulence tribulation, unrest, unsettled condition) cover various emotional, physical and cognitive influences of grief. (Rhys Davids, 1974)

Grief Management (Sokasallahāraṇa)

The terms such as *Bhisakko* and *Sallakatto* that have been used in Pali Buddhism are really conducive to recognize the role played by the Buddha as the great psychotherapist, but not as the physician or surgeon. In this Sutta, the distinctions between Psychotherapist and physician or surgeon are clearly made. However, the term of great psychotherapist is not used for the Buddha in this Sutta. The Buddha as a great psychotherapist makes the therapeutic arrangement to pull out the arrow which makes painful feeling related to grief. This therapeutic process related to grief management process is mentioned as *sokasallahāraṇa*. (A, III) The first therapeutic approach is really based on the behavioural transformation of the client. As all is discussed in the Sokasallahāraṇa Sutta, the client should be given sufficient time for mourning and being grief. As a result of mourning and being grief, the client can release his/her intensity of grief to certain levels where the client can be provided the help to get rid of the issue. This occasion is recognized as the suitable time for commencement of discussion. The grievances of Ubbiri, Patācāra, Kisāgotami were concerned by the Buddha after giving them sufficient time for them to mourn. According to the story of Ubbiri who lost her beloved daughter, she was questioned by the Buddha as “why dost thou weep?” Her reply was “I weep because of my daughter, Exalted One.” Warden (1983) also recognizes this situation as ‘Experience the pain of the grief.’ This experience makes arrangement for the client’s mind to accept the reality of the loss. The behavioural transformation of the client is aimed at the first level of the grief management which is in a suitable and acceptable way. This behavioural transformation could be seen from the story of bereaved lady kisāgotami who was given a performance based technique (De Silva 1989). The aims of their behavioural formation are to encourage the client to accept the reality of the lost and adjust to an environment where the client could be given psychological education to understand what has really happened. When it goes back again to the story of Ubbiri, it is evident that how the Buddha initiates this psychological education:

“Burnt in this cemetery are some 84,000 of the daughters. For which of them dost thou weep. (Rhys Davids Mrs. 1980, 89)”

It is very clear that the psychological education is brought here with religious and spiritual beliefs. In order to create a meaning to life back, spiritual transformation could be used successfully (Golsworthy and Coyle, 1999, Calhoun and Tedeschi 2000). This spiritual transformation in religious belief led her own insight

Lo, from my heart the hidden shaft is gone
 The shaft that nestled there hath he removed.
 And that consuming grief for my dead child
 Which poisoned all the life of me is dead
 To-day my heart is healed, my yearning stayed.
 And all within is purity any peace
 Lo, I for refuge to the Buddha go
 The only wise the order and the Norm

(Rhys Davids Mr. 1980 p. 40)

The withdrawal from the emotional energy from the deceased could not be reached only through the psychological education. It could be seen from both *Alabbhaniyaṭ hāna* and *Sokasallaharaṇa* how the cognitive transformation is aimed at to get the client back to normal life. It is repeatedly mentioned therein that old age, sickness, death, destruction are the natural phenomena that never change. This cognitive transformation is to be achieved through the establishment of mindfulness or *satipaṭṭhāna*. *Sati* means awareness and *paṭṭāna* means keeping present. This is the only way recommended by the Buddha to overcome grief.

“There is, Monks, this one way to the purification of beings, for the overcoming of sorrows and distress, for the disappearance of pain and senses, for the gaining of the right path, for the realization of Nibbāna, that is to say the four foundations of Mindfulness’ (Walshe, Maurice, 1995, p. 335)”.

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