



Buddhism and Bereavement

“By effort and heedfulness, discipline and self-mastery, let the wise ones make for themselves an island which no flood can overwhelm.”

— Dhammapada, Chapter 2 Verse 25

This guide contains bereavement advice for Buddhists of any denomination who are going through a difficult time, perhaps because they have suffered a major loss or experienced another life-changing event. It has been created by the Buddhist Spiritual Care team, with the support of Good Thinking, London's digital mental wellbeing service, and with endorsement from the Network of Buddhist Organisations and The Buddhist Society.

The Buddha said: "The company of good friends is the whole of the spiritual life". Indeed, it is always best to practice in a group – for support, motivation, advice and collective reflection and feedback.

If you're unable to join in communal activities (either online or in person) or if you're not ready to commit to any group or tradition, you might find the suggestions in this guide useful in establishing a steady spiritual practice in your daily life. In turn, this may enable you to open up and investigate and process the emotional waves that are life's natural response to challenging events.

If you need advice, clarifications and support, please email the Buddhist Spiritual Care team at buddhacare@gmx.com (please note: this email address is for the purpose of initial contact only and is also used for emergency support).

We hope you find this guide helpful and wish you a fruitful and joyful journey of recovery.

Contents

- 4 **What is grief?**
- 5 **How might grief affect me?**
- 8 **What practices are helpful for the bereaved?**
- 9 **What coping strategies should I try to avoid when grieving?**
- 10 **What else can I do to help me cope with my grief?**
- 12 **Which Buddhist Life/Death/Rebirth analogies, metaphors, similes and parables might be helpful for the bereaved?**
- 16 **References and resources**

What is grief?

Grief is a natural response to losing someone or something you feel close to – not necessarily a person, it could be a pet or even a particular cause. You can also experience grief when a relationship breaks down, when you lose capacities, when your pension pot disappears into thin air and in other challenging situations.

- The grieving or mourning process involves different stages and you may experience a whole gamut of unsettling emotions, moods and thoughts, cognitive challenges, as well as physical symptoms.
- Although it is deeply personal in nature, the depth, expression and impact of grief may depend on your cultural background, beliefs, customs, effectiveness of rituals, support network, social and personal expectations and other factors.
- There is no standard way of grieving or a standard duration for it. It's a personal journey that may take many twists and turns before coming to a resolution (although there is no guarantee that it will come to an end).
- You may end up grieving for a very long time and become attached to your coping mechanisms, narratives and rituals. If you experience some form of complicated grief, you might even refuse to let go of these.
- Some people even die of grief, either ending up with a 'broken heart' or by actively or passively taking their own life.

How might grief affect me?

At different points during the grieving process, you might experience some of the following emotions, cognitive challenges and physical symptoms.

Emotions	
Shock	→ You may experience shock, numbness and a feeling of unreality, especially after a sudden or major loss.
Sadness	→ A feeling of sadness may stay for many months but may change in intensity. In some cases, it can lead to depression.
Anger	→ This tends to come and go and may be directed at others, Buddhas and protectors, the circumstances, yourself and the deceased.
Guilt	→ You may feel guilt and/or regret for surviving the loss, not seeing it coming or being unable to make amendments – as Buddhists, this raw emotion may make you feel you're not a "good student".
Confusion	→ You may feel confused or that you are being treated unfairly if you're leading a life of service. You may also feel you're being unfairly punished.
Rejection	→ Rejection and abandonment are common emotions, especially if you lose someone to suicide.
Relief	→ You may feel relief that the illness and dying process is over for your loved one (although this might be accompanied by feelings of guilt).

Cognitive challenges

Confusion	→ You may feel confused as your cherished narrative may be challenged (e.g. you may have been living in a dreamlike state where Nature/Life/The Earth is perceived as a benevolent, caring and just mother).
Loss of agency & sense of integrity	→ Suddenly, the Buddhist paratrooper or Dharma warrior who can sit unflinchingly through 10 days of a gruelling meditation schedule and spartan discipline feels as defenceless as a toddler.
Loss of meaning & significance	→ The stunned and confounded heart finds it difficult to shine through daily activities.
Alienation	→ You may experience creeping alienation, a feeling of not belonging and difficulty connecting to people due to possible stigma surrounding the loss or because others may fear 'emotional contagion'.

Physical symptoms

Fainting	→ You may faint or collapse when you hear that your loved one has died.
Lethargy	→ You may experience lethargy, low energy and having trouble sleeping.
Tension	→ It is common to have tension and stiffness throughout the body, including in the stomach area, which might lead to heartburn and ulcers.
Palpitations	→ You may experience palpitations and/or high blood pressure.
Shivers	→ Shivers and chills may occur, especially if you are in shock.
Overactive mental activity	→ You may experience overactive mental activity, including muddled thoughts.

What practices are helpful for the bereaved?

- Try to stick to a simple daily routine that gives you structure. You might even find it useful to write out a timetable and hang it on the wall as a reminder.
- Stay physically active and spend as much time as possible in nature.
- Meditate regularly to declutch and defuse from the identification with your thoughts. This will also help you to regain a sense of balance and centredness and see more clearly through the fog of your cognitive biases.
- Get support from good friends (Kalyana Mitras) – they may be able to point out how things could improve.
- Practice with others (e.g. in temple or centre/group activities), especially when you feel down or lonely.
- Pay special attention to your emotions and where they manifest in the body (known as ‘embodied awareness’). Straighten up and relax your body, keeping a collected and dignified form and some muscle tone, in order to contain the arising energy and allow it to be expended in a more constructive way.
- Protect your senses by avoiding situations that are likely to overstimulate them and that may even trigger secondary emotional upsets.
- Make it a habit to keep coming back to the body, the present, the environment.

“Watch your thoughts, they become your words; watch your words, they become your actions; watch your actions, they become your habits; watch your habits, they become your character; watch your character, it becomes your destiny.”

— Lao Tsu

What coping strategies should I try to avoid when grieving?

When you’ve lost someone or something you care about, it’s easy to fall into certain habits, such as:

- Constantly aiming for something, leaning to the future and harbouring expectations.
- Dreading the imagined future and catastrophising.
- Linger on the past, hanging on to guilt or glory, blaming yourself or others.
- Dissociation (e.g. “This is not happening to me, there must be a mistake”).
- Over-attachment/clinging or, alternatively, repulsion/pushing away.
- Fear of intimacy in case you are let down again.
- Compulsively comparing yourself with others and/or finding faults in yourself.
- Daydreaming, being distracted, not wanting to engage with the situation at hand.
- Busyness, excessive multi-tasking and overexcitement.
- A compulsive tendency to look for meaning/significance in your experiences.

Try to replace these coping strategies with the habit of coming back to where your feet stand, time after time.

This new habit will come to your rescue when you’re in trouble or feeling down.

What else can I do to help me cope with my grief?

Try to adopt some trigger events (something that you do often) to bring you back to the present moment. This could be as simple as opening a door, getting up from a chair or answering your phone.

Memorial services may help you to connect safely to your emotional states, via rituals. If performed correctly, these actions that follow a certain form may deliver spiritual merits – for the benefit of the deceased and all beings in need.

Devotional practices are designed to lift the heart. You might like to:

- Keep an altar or special corner and/or ashes of your dear departed. This is a reminder of our deep connection to a long line of ancestors, both spiritual and by blood.
- Chant, both in traditional languages and in English, perhaps as a family group and using recordings from the internet. Repentance, Going for Refuge to the Three Jewels and renewing your undertaking of the Precepts will help re-energise your practice.
- Give thanks at meals. This develops joyful gratitude and appreciation for the cook's efforts too!

- Journaling can help you to pay particular attention to your moods, emotions and feelings. When you revisit your journal after some time, it might help you develop a sense of perspective and show you that even emotional rawness changes in intensity from one moment to the next, from one day to another.
- Writing to or about the deceased can give you a degree of closure. It enables you to air issues you didn't have the chance, or were afraid, of raising before their death. Over time, it may help you to develop a helpful narrative about the traumatic event and what preceded it, allowing you to move on.
- Volunteering some of your time and being of service to others, without expectations, can take the attention away from your emotional turmoil. It gives you back some agency, value and purpose and reconnects you to your fellow human beings.

"Do small things with great love"
— Mother Teresa of Calcutta

Which Buddhist Life/Death/Rebirth analogies, metaphors, similes and parables might be helpful for the bereaved?

The Ocean and the Waves

- **Everything in this phenomenal world, including our "self", is anicca (impermanent) and anatta (without individual essence; egoless). If this fact causes dukkha (suffering or dissatisfaction), it is because we are unable to realise the ultimate reality of it.**

To put this another way, "you" are a phenomenon in much the same way a wave is a phenomenon of ocean. A wave is ocean. Although a wave is a distinct phenomenon, it cannot be separated from ocean. When conditions such as winds or tides cause a wave, nothing is added to ocean. When the activity of wave ceases, nothing is taken away from ocean. It appears in the moment because of causes and disappears because of other causes. The principle of Dependent Origination teaches that we, and all things, are wave/ocean.

When does a wave arise/start? When does it stop? Where are the boundaries between waves? Where does the energy powering the wave and the sense of direction and the momentum go when the wave falls back into the ocean? The water does not belong to the wave, rather the latter is a pattern in the ocean. Sensations, images, feelings, memories, thoughts, even the idea of me, belong to the ocean. The wave has got an undercurrent consisting of habits, inclinations, cultural and karmic baggage or constructs. The undercurrent is mostly unconscious/sub-conscious and it keeps feeding back and forth with the surface wave. The current is part of ever larger and inclusive currents (human, primate, mammals, etc), resulting from evolutionary drives. All the commotion takes place close to the surface whilst, at the bottom, the ocean is very quiet: it is the heart of all that is.

Two Candles

- **The literal meaning of the word samsara is "continuing on" or "wandering on".**

It signifies the repetitive cycle of birth, ageing, death and rebirth. Buddhism sees rebirth as the repeated occurrence of the process of existence. While there is no soul, no permanent entity which transmigrates from one life to another, there is a continuity, a transmission of influence, a causal connection between one life and another.

The onward flow of consciousness

- **Individual identity in a single lifetime, the Buddha teaches, is a functionally unified combination of five aggregates made up of a material process (a current of material energy) and a mental process (a current of mental happenings.) These currents consist of factors that are subject to momentary arising and passing away.**

The mind is a series of mental acts (cittas) made up of feelings, perceptions, mental formations and consciousness. Each citta arises, breaks up and passes away. When a citta falls away, its perceptions, emotions and volitional force are passed on to the next citta. In this way, all our experiences leave their imprint on the onward flow of consciousness. This causal continuity gives us our continued identity. We remain the same person through the whole lifetime because of this continuity.

Simile of a candle

- **Now suppose that as the flame reaches the bottom of the candle, we put the wick of a new candle to the flame of the old candle and catch the flame from the old candle to the new one. The flame on the old candle goes out and the flame has now been transmitted to the new candle. Is it the same flame or a different flame?**

From one angle, we can say it is the same flame because it follows in continuity, it belongs to the same series. But now the flame is burning with a new physical base, with a new candle as its support. It is burning up new particles of air, new pieces of wax, a new section of wick. We say it is the same flame as the flame of the old candle because it caught fire from that and it continues the succession. But there is no absolute identity of one flame with the other, because of the conditions contributing to that flame. But we can't say that it is a different flame. To call it a different flames would not be in conformity with conventional usage.

Craving the Seamstress

- **Just as a seamstress sews together different pieces of cloth, so does craving sew together one life to another. It ties together the succession of lives. Craving is so powerful that it can bridge the gap created by death and rebuild the whole house of sentient existence again and again.**

"Thro' many a birth in Sansara wandered I, Seeking but not finding,
the builder of this house. Sorrowful is repeated birth. O House-
builder! You are seen. You shall build no house again. All your rafters
are broken, your ridge-pole is shattered. To dissolution (Nibbana)
goes my mind. The End of Craving have I attained."

— Dhammapada (154)

Ajahn Chah (from the book A Still Forest Pool)

- **A devout, elderly village lady from a nearby province came on a pilgrimage to Wat Ba Pong. She told Ajahn Chah she could stay only a short time as she had to return to take care of her great grandchildren and, since she was an old lady, she asked if he could please give her a brief Dharma talk.**

He replied with great force, "Hey, listen. There's no one here, just this. No owner, no one to be old, to be young, to be good or bad, weak or strong. Just this, that's all; various elements of nature playing themselves out, all empty. No one born and no one to die. Those who speak of death are speaking the language of ignorant children. In the language of the heart, of Dharma, there's no such thing."

Two Snooker Balls

- **The white ball strikes the stationary red ball. The movement of the red ball is entirely conditioned by the angle and speed at which the white ball strikes it. Without the white ball, the red ball would have neither motion nor direction.**

Of course, two of these simple metaphors (Craving the Seamstress and Two Snooker Balls) can never explain the immense complexity of karma but they give rise to the possibility that it does exist and a life that has gone before has somehow created conditions that will affect the life of a newly born person.

When you begin to meditate on this, you realise the enormous responsibility resting upon us all. As well as skilful, positive karma, we can also create unskilful negative karma, which can burden the life of someone yet unborn. By living an ethical, empathetic life, we hope to create good conditions upon which positive phenomena may arise, long after we have returned to a state of 'not being'.

References and resources

Peto, Alan, 7 Jul 2013, Reincarnation, Rebirth and Buddhism: here we go again:

[Here We Go Again - Alan Peto](#)

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<https://dharmanet.org/coursesM/23/Theravada10.htm>

<https://dharmanet.org/coursesM/23/Theravada10a.htm>

HH Dalai Lama, Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, Thich Nhat Hanh, Zoketsu Norman Fischer – Lion's Roar: The Buddhist Teachings on Rebirth

https://www.lionsroar.com/just-more-of-the-same/?fbclid=IwAR3_IS1u9ERQt-58ExTcW_QBHe9KVqOIjHOD3EASIDOAsetRmUdIZVhB5Ik

Bereavement support organisations for all faiths

[At a loss](#) (directory of services)

[Cruse](#)

[Sudden](#)

[The Good Grief Trust](#)

Useful bereavement resources for health and care professionals

[Good Thinking](#) (How to provide culturally sensitive bereavement support: A guide for practitioners)

[NHS](#) (Understanding different bereavement practices and how our colleagues may experience grief)

[Sudden](#) (Cultural and religious issues professionals may encounter following a bereavement)

Useful Good Thinking bereavement resources for all faiths

[How to cope with bereavement and grief](#) (advice for adults)

[How to cope with the death of a loved one](#) (advice for young people)

[How to support someone who has lost a loved one](#) (advice for relatives and friends)

About Us

Good Thinking is supported by the NHS and London borough councils. We provide free, 24/7, digital support to Londoners seeking mental health advice and help regardless of where they are on their journey. We offer round the clock support and self-care options that are easy to access, and simple to navigate.

Our Mission

We support individuals to look after their mental wellbeing in a way that works best for them. We encourage everyone to be proactive about their mental health and we provide tools and guidance to support this. If these suggestions or the resources on Good Thinking are not helpful for you, try talking to your GP about what else may be more helpful for you.

London Bereavement Support Programme

This resource has been funded and supported by the Mayor of London under the remit of the Mental Health and Wellbeing Recovery Mission, which is being led by Thrive LDN. The mission aims to build a coalition of wellbeing champions and empower Londoners to act to improve their own and their communities' wellbeing. For more information, visit the Thrive LDN website.

Thrive LDN
towards happier, healthier lives



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For more advice, visit the [Good Thinking](#) website.



www.buddhisthealthcare.org.uk

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