

Reconciling Western Conceptions of Loss with Theravada Buddhism

Michael A. Westbrook
University of North Carolina at Wilmington

Introduction

Bereavement, grieving, and mourning are expected when one loses a family member or a close friend. However, depending on the parties religious identification, the rituals and expectations surrounding how the bereaved, grieving, and mourning are to occur will differ among us. Generally, Buddha's teachings are said to have conveyed non-attachment as an ideal. Under superficial examination, Buddha's non-attachment principle would leave those with a lost loved one unable to properly bereave, grieve, and mourn. However, upon analyzing Buddhist texts while also understanding the difference between bereavement, grieving, and mourning, one will understand that a Buddhist may still conform to Western conceptions of loss.

Difference between Grief, Bereavement, and Mourning

When loved ones die, individuals experience a complex set of emotions that society interchangeably labels as grief or mourning. However, contrary to the dictates of societal norms surrounding the interchangeability of said words, each label has a distinct meaning and therefore distinct consequences in the context of the Theravada Buddhist principle of non-attachment. Grief is defined as a deep felt or violent sorrow whereas mourning "refers to the signs and practices associated with the sorrow" regarding the deceased (Maddrell 2016, 170). Moreover, the additional term of bereavement is used when understanding the emotions associated with the deceased. Bereavement is defined as the "robb[ing] or dispossession of an immaterial thing" (Maddrell 2016, 170). Grief and bereavement can be categorized as emotions or feelings surviving individuals grapple with after the loss of the deceased. This categorization is distinct from mourning because mourning is considered as acts associated with the aforementioned

emotions in order to serve a further end. Having clarified some of the core terms associated with loss, I will now turn to the Buddhist conception of attachment.

Theravada Conception of Attachment

Siddhartha Gautama (“Buddha”) in *Maha-nidana Sutta: The Great Causes of Discourse* engages in a dialogue which ultimately demonstrates how an individual clings, or in other words, becomes attached. Buddha first inquires as to whether contact gives rise to feelings (Bhikkhu 1997). He asks, “if there were no contact at all, in any way, of anything anywhere . . . would feeling be discerned” (Bhikkhu 1997)? The subsequent answer is no. Therefore, the Buddha concludes, contact results in feelings (Bhikkhu 1997). Advancing the dialogue in the same format, Buddha concludes that feelings result in dependent craving (Bhikkhu 1997). Most importantly, for the purposes of this paper, Buddha states “attachment is dependent on desire and passion,” which are feelings associated with craving (Bhikkhu 1997). Therefore, according to Buddha one’s feelings can lead to attachment. More specifically, one’s feelings for another person may lead to the attachment of said individual.

Tension Between the Western Conception of Grief and Theravada Buddhist Non-Attachment

After clarifying various aspects associated with loss and the Theravada Buddhist conception of attachment, I am going to explore the tension between the modern conception of loss and the Buddhist rituals concerning the deceased. The modern study of relationships between the deceased and surviving has recognized that “human beings are born with an innate psychobiological system . . . that motivates them to seek proximity to significant others”

(Wijngaards-de Meij 2007, 358). Consequently, the aim of attachment theory is to “focus on the nature of a person’s relationships and adjustment in situations of separation” (Wijngaards-de Meij 2007, 538). This recognition of attachment inherent in all humans is blatantly *prima facie* tension with the Theravada Buddhist conception of non-attachment. Therefore, it raises the question, should devote Theravada Buddhists bereave, grieve, and mourn even if at the funeral, Buddhists emphasize “the impermanent nature of things and the liberating power of letting go of attachments” (Rathnayake 2021).

My paper aims to “close the gap” between the Western and Eastern religious conceptions of loss. When Buddhism is studied within the context of other Eastern religions or broad Eastern ideals the product often acquires a comparative nature rather than a reconciliatory one. As globalization and immigration increase, it is important that those seeking to integrate themselves into the Western world have a firm conception of how their religion reconciles with a differing prevailing ideology. Thus, I attempt to provide a reconciliation between Theravada Buddhist principles and the Western conceptions of loss.

Reconciling Theravada Buddhism Non-Attachment with Grief

The Theravada Buddhist can maintain the practice of non-attachment while experiencing grief. Emotions are biologically innate in humans and therefore individuals cannot rid themselves of the capacity to experience emotions. However, one can “influence which emotions they have, when they have them, and how they experience and express these emotions” (Altinyelken 2018, 188). This can be done by practicing mindfulness, or scientifically stated, emotional regulation (Altinyelken 2018, 188). Buddha acknowledged that feelings or emotions result from contact, which given the societal construct of family is inevitable (Bhikkhu 1997).

Additionally, Buddha recognized that such emotions and feelings then may result in craving and subsequent attachment (Bhikkhu 1997). Buddha does not emphasize the destruction of emotion in order to prevent attachment. Rather, Theravada Buddhism asserts that one should not cling to their emotions. Instead, one should passively observe the emotions they are experiencing as not to give rise to attachment. Therefore, theoretically a Buddhist who has mastered the observation of emotion can observe their deep or violent sorrow independent of the directed target.

Reconciling Theravada Buddhism Non-Attachment with Bereavement

Contrarily the devote Theravada Buddhist cannot, without contradiction, bereave unless the Buddhist conception of a fluxing collective conscious is posited as opposed to a soul. The Theravada Buddhist rejects the western notion of “the soul” (“atman”) (Harris 2018, 397). Additionally, bereavement’s definition does not specify the exact nature of the “immaterial thing” the survivor is robbed or dispossessed of. However, one could reasonably posit the conception of “the soul” as we do not traditionally mourn the loss of the body but rather the “essence” of what defined the deceased. Understanding the “immaterial thing” referencing the western conception of “the soul”, Theravada Buddhist could not devotedly be said to engage in bereavement. This is because Theravada Buddhist, and Buddhist generally, reject the conception of atman. Rather, Theravada Buddhist believe there is a constant flux of consciousness that inhabits the body. Therefore, for a Theravada Buddhist to both bereave and be devoted to the tenants of Buddhism would be a contradiction. However, the conception of a bereaving Theravada Buddhist can be salvaged if one understands the referenced “immaterial thing” as a fluxing collective conscious. A Buddhist can feel robbed or dispossessed of a fluxing collective conscious that inhabited the body of a loved one. Moreover, with such understanding established,

the Buddhist could then, as mentioned prior, mindfully observe the emotion. Thus, if the “immaterial thing” incorporated in the definition of bereavement is understood as a fluxing collective conscious then a Theravada Buddhist could be said to partake in the bereavement of a loved one.

Reconciling Theravada Buddhism Non-Attachment with Bereavement

Lastly, a Buddhist may properly engage in the mourning process. Mourning generally refers to the rituals and practices surrounding the departure of the deceased (Maddrell 2016, 170). Here, the Theravada Buddhist may engage in such rituals without having an attachment to the deceased. One might posit that if there was no attachment then why engage in a ritual or practice that is often reserved for those most intimately associated with the deceased and thereby have an attachment. One such reason is to ensure the deceased has a way of passage into the next life, as evidenced by the tradition of money in the mouth of the deceased (Goss and Klass 2006, 76). Another such reason may be to rid oneself of the negative aspects of their bond as to ensure this does not affect one's kamma thereby affecting their rebirth (Goss and Klass 2006, 76). However, such reasons for engaging in the practice still do not directly address the criticism that such rituals are done out of attachment. Nonetheless two foundational doctrines of Theravada Buddhism, in conjunction, adequately address such attack. All Buddhist strands emphasize the conception of compassion. This is evidenced by Buddhist not wanting to inflict unnecessary suffering on animals and people. Additionally, a Theravada Buddhist could act with kamma in mind. By burying the deceased the survivor acquires good kamma by acting. Such can be

illustrated in the case of performing rituals and practices for a stranger. The Theravada Buddhist emphasized on universal compassion and adherence to kamma could demonstrate that an attachment is not necessary to mourn. Therefore, Theravada Buddhist can mourn without engaging in attachment.

Conclusion

Although superficially one might not accord Theravada Buddhist the privilege of partaking in the traditional and complex system of loss, such is compatible with Buddhist doctrine. Truly understanding and implementing the various Buddhist conceptions and reconciling such with the western ideals of loss proves challenging but ultimately demonstrates that Buddhist can grieve, mourn, and behave.

Altinyelken, Hulya. 2019. "Promoting the Psycho-Social Well-Being of International Students Through Mindfulness: A Focus on Regulating Difficult Emotions." *Contemporary Buddhism: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 19 no. 2: 185 – 202. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14639947.2019.1572306>

Bhikkhv, Thanissaro. 1995. "Maha-nidana Sutta: The Great Causes Discourse," *Access to Insight*. <https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/dn/dn.15.0.than.html>

Goss, Robert and Dennis Klass. 2006. "Buddhisms and Death." *In Death and Religion in a Changing World*, edited by Kathleen Garces-Foley, 69 – 92. Routledge.

Harris, Stephen E. 2018. "PROMISING ACROSS LIVES TO SAVE NON-EXISTENT BEINGS: IDENTITY, REBIRTH, AND THE BODHISATTVA'S VOW." *Philosophy East and West* 68 (2) (04): 386. <https://www-proquest-com.liblink.uncw.edu/scholarly-journals/promising-across-lives-save-non-existent-beings/docview/2021668907/se-2?accountid=14606>.

Rathnayake, Chandana. 2021. "Grief experience of Buddhist monks and nuns." *The Humanistic Psychologist*

Wijngaards-de Meij, Leoniek, Margaret Stroebe, Henk Schut, Wolfgang Stroebe, Jan van den Bout, et al. 2007. "Patterns of Attachment and Parents' Adjustment to the Death of Their Child." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 33 no. 4: 537 – 548. <http://dx.doi.org.liblink.uncw.edu/10.1177/0146167206297400>