

Neither loss nor grief

Buddhist attitude to death and beyond
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My ex-colleague in the University of California at Berkeley, TSAI Yao-ming, now a professor of philosophy in National Taiwan University, wrote a thoughtful paper, on “Neither bereavement nor grief: Coping with the death of a cherished person in the Cunda-Sutta.”¹ It has moved me to write this reflection on the key points of the teachings for our own wisdom when we are challenged by loss or grief.

At once, too, I thought of my dear friend, LEE Chiew Lim, who lost his dear wife recently. To him I dedicate this reflection. May this occasion, too, bring wisdom and relief to others facing loss and grief.

The Cunda Sutta (S 47.13)

The Cunda Sutta is a short but instructive discourse, which has a Chinese version found in the Saṃyukta Āgama (T125 @ T2.549b-830b). The Sutta was occasioned by the death of the Buddha’s right-hand monk, the elder Sāriputta.

The sutta’s 4 teachings

Sāriputta’s nephew and attendant, the “Novice” Cunda (novice is a nickname since he is himself an elder) customarily bearing the late elder’s robes and relics, breaks the news to the elder Ānanda (a streamwinner), who is deeply saddened and distressed to learn about the death of his cherished friend.

Both Cunda and Ānanda then go to the Buddha with the news. The Buddha, of course, remains calm and serene. Ānanda expresses his deep sorrow, declaring that he feels “as if drugged” and disoriented, and that the teachings are no longer clear to him.

(1) On what is not lost

Comforting Ānanda, the Buddha replies:

“Why, Ānanda, when Sāriputta attained final nirvana, did he take away
your aggregate of moral virtue, or
your aggregate of concentration, or
your aggregate of wisdom, or
your aggregate of the knowledge and vision of freedom”?

This is a beautiful teaching on the 3 aspects of **non-self**: “This is not mine, I am not that, that is not my self.”

I do not **own** my departed dearly beloved: she is a free individual; he is a free individual.

¹ *Contemporary Buddhism* 17,2 2016:357-368.

I am **not** her: she has her own lives (the past, the present, the future).
I am **not** him: he has his own lives (the past, the present, the future).

This is not my self: everything changes, becomes other and moves on.

Meeting is but parting in time, but we will meet again and again: let us keep learning.

(2) Honouring the departed

Getting a hold of himself again, Ānanda replies,
“No, bhante, he did not.
For me, bhante, the venerable Sāriputta was an advisor and counsellor, one who instructed,
inspired, roused and gladdened me.

He was tireless in teaching the Dhamma. He was helpful to his colleagues in the holy life.
We recollect the help that is the Dhamma,
the food that is the Dhamma,
the nectar (essence) of the Dhamma given by the venerable Sāriputta.”

(3) The inevitability of death

“But, Ānanda, have I not declared, that
we must be parted from,
we will be separated from,
there will be no more of all those who are dear and pleasant to us?

How is it possible, Ānanda to say:
‘May what is born, has come to be, conditioned, subject to breaking up, not break up’?
That is impossible.

Ānanda, it is just as if the biggest branch would break off a great tree of heartwood that is
standing.
Even so, Ānanda, in the great community of monks that is heartwood, Sāriputta has attained
final nirvana.

(4) Training for true happiness

Therefore, Ānanda, dwell
with yourselves as your own island,
with yourselves as your own refuge,
with no other refuge;
with the Dhamma as your refuge,
with no other refuge.”

How do we dwell in this way? By practising the 4 satipatthanas:
seeing only the **body** in the body;

seeing only **feeling** in the feeling;
seeing only **thinking** in the thoughts;
seeing only **reality** in the realities [dharmas].

“Therefore, Ānanda, now or after I’m gone,
who dwell with themselves as their own island,
with themselves as their own refuge,
with no other refuge;
with the Dhamma as their refuge,
with no other refuge—

It is these monks [practitioners], Ānanda,
amongst those who are keen in the training, who will reach the highest.”

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