

Navigating Grief: Tools for the Heart - Handout

The Skill of Actively Grieving

We are meeting today to inquire into and practice with the experience of grieving. The emphasis will be on resources to support you in your grieving process.

What is Grief?

The English "grief" comes from Latin gravitas (heaviness). Grief is an emotional response to loss, while grieving is the ability to process loss and integrate it into our reality - a process ending in authentic acceptance and internal reorientation.

Why We Grieve

There are a great many reasons in our lives to grieve. If we inquire into the Buddha's first Noble truth—"There is suffering"—we see the sickness, the ageing, the fragility of our bodies, the losses, not getting what we want and being stuck with what we don't want.

We grieve:

- The loss of health and abilities
- Unfulfilled dreams, hopes, and plans
- Relationships, roles, and identities
- Unmet needs and ideals
- Daily disappointments

What we grieve reaches deep into our understanding of who we are. We grieve what we love or what mattered to us, that which hasn't been accepted, heard, seen or hidden in shame, our unmet expectations and needs, the suffering in the world, and sometimes even grieve for pain which wasn't ours but passed on to us.

Grief is Healthy and Necessary

Grief integrates loss and processes change and disappointments (the way things are). Without it, we couldn't integrate life changes. Grief is an internal "update" needed when reality shifts, helping us make peace with loss and emptiness. Grief fosters acceptance and letting go, which isn't willpower but a process.

At the same time, most of us avoid or shy away from grief. Grief can be overwhelming and our hearts and mind avoid overwhelm. Without tools or safe spaces and times to grieve, we might avoid entering the process. Cultural view on grief isn't particularly supportive—it might be seen as a disruptive emotion which prevents us from functioning and thus must be quickly resolved, and grief is often pathologized with questions about whether its intensity or duration are "normal".

Reclaiming Grief

Our goal today is to reclaim grief. To make it part of what practice is about—to tap into the first noble truth and come in touch with the ouches and the disappointments, the losses and changes in our lives, and offer time and space for the integration of these.

To see grief not as something which happens to me and which I endure passively, but as something which I consciously allow and then maneuver (no control but more like steering a boat on a ruffled or rough sea). And to be able to do this, we need to see what tools we can use to be able to be the captain of that small nutshell. This is why I speak about the skill of actively grieving.

If we learn how to do so, this skill will enable us to:

- Accept losses and disappointments
- Compassionately acknowledge past and present pain without defining ourselves by it
- Experience authentic gratitude for what we had and have
- Develop emotional flexibility - holding beauty and challenge simultaneously
- Identify where we're rigid, clinging, or where grief entangles with other dynamics

Resource 1: Rooting in Goodness

Grief is often experienced as a wave. We come in touch with something (a sense impression or a memory) which triggers a grief response. The emotional current is gathering intensity and eventually peaks—we are often fully filled with this intensity and the narratives, beliefs and perspectives it brings with it. Then the wave comes down, and we get a bit of clarity and perspective back, and usually we also feel exhaustion following the intensity.

Accompanying the Wave

What we want to do is to accompany the wave—ride it like a boat on the wave rather than be submerged in it. How can we do that? We need a boat.

Mindfulness practice allows us to explore and then remember experiences (anchors), which can function like such a boat. We play with the fact that we can have something in the foreground (or background) of our

awareness, while the wave works through us. Enough connection to a sense of presence, safety, kindness, warmth, orientation, etc. to allow us to accompany, but not be overwhelmed by the wave.

Finding Your Anchor

In meditation, explore what authentically gives you a sense of support:

Locate yourself here and now:

- Is there anything you can see: a color, a shape, a play of light, an object which brings a bit of joy or comfort to you?
- Is there a sound or something within the receptive stance of just listening to sounds, which feels spacious, relaxing?
- Is there something to touch, a feeling of warmth and care in the clothes on your body?
- Anything you taste or smell?

Being here, being present:

- Do you notice your body in this posture—just me, being here?
- Are there any okay feelings or even slightly pleasant experiences within the body?

How we pay attention:

- Imagine mindfulness to be this caring warm gaze or a soothing, gently touching hand
- Receive the warmth and gentleness of this mindfulness
- Notice that you do not have anything to do, just be present with all the stuff

Supportive images or memories:

- Anything which feels mildly supportive?
- Anything where you are reminded of a bit of ease?
- Choose rather neutral and simple: a flower, sitting on a park bench, the morning coffee
- Leave any images aside where you think you "should feel" something
- Memories or images that feel nourishing

Reflect for a moment, what felt most nourishing. What would you like to go back to and linger with? Can you feel a physical change?

This way, we built a repertoire or a treasure chest of supportive experiences which we can bring our attention to anytime and anywhere.

Resource 2: Stepping In and Stepping Out (Titrating)

As we said before, grief can be intense, overwhelming and holds some challenging information for us. If our heart-minds (citta) have the feeling we can't cope with these experiences, we usually do not enter the grieving process. Grief can be stored away over astonishingly long periods of time, leading to numbness.

The Practice of Titrating

We use a practice called "titrating" in psychology. It means that we oscillate between safe experiences and intense, potentially overwhelming ones. This skill helps us approach intense experiences mindfully, staying non-reactive while knowing when to turn toward stabilizing resources.

How to Practice

We already practiced the first step and discovered the helpful anchors. When we need to draw our attention away from a challenging experience, we need to bring it somewhere. If we leave it in the open space, it is most likely for it to return to the challenge or engage in some narrative.

Once we are familiar with the supportive experience, we expose ourselves gradually to more challenging experiences:

- Start with something mildly unpleasant or disturbing—avoid over-ambition
- Observe how body, heart, and mind react
- You will notice a lot of stories, narratives, thinking, comments, etc.—that is all insightful material for later

The Tipping Point

You might notice a "tipping point":

- Where you are no longer "with" an emotion but merged with it
- There is hardly any connection anymore with the body, no spaciousness any more
- You might notice you react strongly to the experience

Over time you might notice more accurately when this point is approaching. We back off before that—no going through or working through or enduring.

We can simply lean in and lean out for a breath or two. This way we ensure our heart-minds that we can keep them safe, and we learn to expose ourselves to unpleasant experiences without overwhelm.

Resource 3: The Many Parts of Grieving

Grief isn't a single emotion but a diverse process that unfolds differently for everyone and varies even within individuals over time.

Common Emotions in Grief

While grief involves various emotions—shock, numbness, sadness, longing, anger, guilt, fear, depression-like states, relief, and ambivalence—these reveal more than just feelings. They are pointers to our typical behavioral patterns to handle challenges and loss. They tell us about our beliefs, how we see ourselves and the world, and point to identity questions.

Parts and Sankhārā

Grief isn't one thing—it activates multiple parts or dynamics within us. In Buddhism we call these sankhārā—patterns, programs or deeply ingrained impulses. For example, there might be a grieving part alongside a relieved one, an angry part and a hopeless one, a doubting part and one that feels joy.

Mindfulness Helps Us

Mindfulness helps us to see these different parts ("What's happening right now?") and separate them (instead of "I don't want to be sad anymore. I'm annoyed I'm not past this" - recognize "there's grief and there's a dynamic rejecting the grief").

Meeting Parts with Care and Curiosity

And then meet them with care and curiosity. What do they want? What do they need? What needs and values do they represent? What are they protecting?

Protective parts:

- Something which distracts, numbs, theorizes, assigns blame, or seeks "quick" solution
- This dynamic protects the heart-mind from overwhelm
- What do these parts need to step back a little and let me engage with the suffering?

Overwhelmed parts:

- Those that feel fear or despair, disoriented, helpless, or powerless ("I am never going to be happy again")
- What can we reflect back to this need, this fear, this overwhelm which comes from one of our anchors? What do we need to show or balance out?

Other parts:

- Feelings of anger, bitterness, cynicism, or hardness
- Parts that push forward by finding actionable tasks
- Pragmatic, future-oriented parts trying to prevent future pain

All parts are best attempts at coping. First, acknowledge their effort ("You mean well"). Then ask if this approach is currently helpful.

Practice: Noticing the Story

We come in touch with these parts as soon as we approach our grief:

- Keep the leaning in and out going
- Notice what arises for you in terms of feelings, thoughts, comments, images, etc.
- Treat it like meeting many different guests and put them at the table in your home
- You might note those who storm in and those who sneak in
- What can you learn about them?
- Who feels like a second skin hardly distinguishable from "me"?