

This parable, written in archaic yet lovely language, speaks to us from another age, another culture, of the human condition. Yet we readily recognise in it the unchanging truth about the inevitability of death, its seeming capriciousness, and the universality of suffering, grief and loss.

Gautama taught Kisagotami the cause of suffering, the antidote for suffering, and the means to acquire that antidote, which is ultimate freedom, enlightenment: Nirvana. This is illustrated in the parable by the girl's dawning insight into impermanence, triggered first by her visits to the bereaved, then by her mindful awareness of the lamps, now lighted, now extinguished, as symbols of mortality.

It is characteristic of the Buddha's teaching method, and of Buddhism generally, that he supplied the girl with the ingredients for a self-revelatory experience, tailored to her immediate circumstances, rather than with a hand-me-down 'explanation' or a sentimental comfort-blanket of religious reassurances.

Buddhists hold that all human experience of suffering carries within it the ingredients for its own healing, its own antidote; it is our noble task to find it, by opening to experience, including the experience of suffering, trustfully, courageously, and diligently, as did Kisagotami. In doing so, bit by bit as we are able, we grow more aware of the mind's circular tendencies, the temptation to cling to what is past, to grasp at what may be, and to dwell compulsively on what we are in the midst of. Gradually, or perhaps suddenly, we may awake to freedom.

A 10th century northern Indian mystic, Mahasiddhi Tilopa, offers the following all-purpose six-line advice. People who are suffering bereavement, and those supporting the bereaved, may

find some consolation and uplift in what may seem, at first, to be a bleak and improbable series of injunctions:

Don't recall. Let go of whatever is past.

Don't imagine. Let go of whatever may come.

Don't think. Let go of what is happening now.

Don't examine. Don't try to figure things out.

Don't control. Don't try to make things happen.

Rest. Just relax. For now do nothing, just rest.

As more or less voluntary and complicit participants in the atomised modern society we are born into, or have adopted, we often feel very alone. In bereavement we do well to avail

ourselves of whatever resources speak to us as helpful in meeting our need for support and succour. Each of us will make a judgement about this, as we should. There is much of value on offer, and much to be thankful for in our time of need.

For those of us who follow the Buddhist path, the sorrow of bereavement, while sharp, may not throb and gnaw for as long as it otherwise might, as practice, leading to unfolding enlightenment, draws the poison of loss away; and what remains of it can be used, wisely and compassionately, for the merit of all suffering beings everywhere, of whom there is no lack. ●

Reference

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BEREAVEMENT IN THE ARTS

Portrait diptych of John the Steadfast and his six-year-old son, John Frederick

Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472-1553)

Photo © The National Gallery, London



A recent exhibition of Lucas Cranach the Elder's paintings brought to my notice this diptych, purchased in 1991 by the National Gallery. Painted in 1509 when Cranach was court painter to the Elector of Wittenberg, it commemorates the death of John Frederick's mother who died giving birth to him and is the first known German portrait of a prince painted while still a child. Normally, these diptychs were of husband and wife, but here the child replaces his mother. The Elector was unmarried, and he and his brother, John Frederick's father, pinned all their hopes for the succession on this six-year old. Here the father still wears mourning and his sad countenance tells us of his continuing grief. Little John Frederick too looks sad – motherless

and living with a grieving father can't have been much fun, even with a retinue of servants to care for him.

I reflected, as I gazed on these wonderful pictures, on the changes in maternal mortality rates even during my lifetime. When I was born in 1932, some 40 mothers died in every 10,000 live births in England and Wales; when my first child was born in 1960 it was about 4 in 10,000 and when my grandson was born in 1997 it was less than 1, although much higher in the developing world, and nearly 1 in 100 in sub-Saharan Africa. John Frederick did survive his childhood and became in turn the Elector of Wittenberg, John Frederick the Magnanimous, in 1532. ●

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The Buddhist Hospice Trust is a small UK registered charity providing compassionate care and spiritual support to seriously ill, dying and bereaved people, their families and friends, Buddhist or non-Buddhist, at their request.

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