

# How Grieving Parents Adapt To Grief And Build Resilience Through Buddhist Teachings

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**Abstract**—This article explores how bereaved parents can use Buddhist teachings to cope with grief, build resilience, and turn the pain of losing a child into enlightenment. Many parents originally believed that their “life is in control,” and that the death of a child made them struggle to adjust their original meaning structure. If they can make good use of Buddhist teachings to construct a new meaning structure for “cause and consequence,” re-attribute and interpret the death of a child, it may effectively help bereaved parents cope with grief, build resilience, and regain the meaning of life.

**Keywords**—bereaved parents; grief; coping; resilience; Buddhist teaching

## I. INTRODUCTION

The death of a child is a traumatic experience that cannot be eliminated and is possibly the worst bereavement experience of all (Aho et al., 2006; Arnold & Pmhcns-Bc, 2008). Parents often consider themselves the guardians of their children, and their meaning in life is closely related to their children. The loss of a child often brings parents a sense of neglect and failure, which is a heavy blow to their sense of control, self-efficacy (Malkinson & Bar-Tur, 2005), and faith (Gillies & Neimyer, 2006). Religious beliefs help people cope with and express grief. Studies have shown that religious beliefs and spiritual growth help the bereaved adjust to loss and sorrow and build resilience (e.g., Chang et al., 2018; Chang, 2009; Tsai, 2007; 2014). Buddhist teachings are profound; hence, this study introduces some Buddhist teachings that may be useful for bereaved parents to cope with grief and build resilience.

## II. BEREAVEMENT AND GRIEF

Bereaved individuals often experience various stages of grief including denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Kübler-Ross, 1969). The bereaved can act to accomplish the tasks of mourning, including accepting facts, experiencing

grief, and adapting and shifting gears in life (Worden, 2020). The bereaved tend to refuse to believe the facts and show numbness, frustration, and anger; they expect their loved ones to return and show rage, pain, and

anxiety; they then enter the stage of despair, deteriorate in life functioning, and gradually enter the stage of recovery, accept facts, and start a new life (Parkes, 1996). Individuals experience loss and recovery simultaneously, swinging back and forth between accepting losses and escaping the facts (Stroebe & Schut, 1999).

Chang et al. (2018) described an elderly mother facing the death of her daughter from cancer and the sudden death in a coma. Religious beliefs helped her accept the death of her children as heavenly and restored a sense of power. Chang (2009) believed that religious experiences enhance the cognitive ability of the bereaved and help them obtain inner peace, enlightenment, and gratitude. Tsai (2007) interviewed adults losing their parents and found that accepting that the deceased was transformed into a "virtual presence" could alleviate the impact of loss. Epstein (2006) surveyed 45 respondents who had lost their spouses and found that they could adapt to their loss and sorrow using cultural and memorial rituals to maintain a connection with the deceased. The process of grieving and adaptation is dynamic, starting from initial shock, denial, and sorrow, and then swinging back and forth between loss and temporary stability, gradually restoring and repositioning the relationship with the dead.

## III. RESILIENCE

Resilience is a dynamic process and outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences through mental, emotional, behavioral, and social flexibility and adjustment to survive and empower in adversities (Masten, 2001). Individuals face crises and demonstrate resilience, including their interpretation of adversities and actions of resilience (Masten, 2001). Individuals often show resilience when they accept changes brought about

by adversities, regard crises as manageable, continue to confront difficulties with positive adaptation, believe in religion, adhere to principles and values, and do their best to survive. The bereaved can grow from the loss, understand the impermanence of human affairs, cherish the importance of significant others, be more responsive, invest in the present, grow spiritually, and gain a deeper understanding of their lives. In addition to tenacity, the

ability to attribute the bereaved helps them think, reinterpret adversities, and enhance their resilience.

#### IV. CHANGES IN THE STRUCTURE OF MEANING AFTER BEREAVEMENT

The loss of a child's parents' original view of a world as predictable, controllable, meaningful, fair, and secure, after which they find that the world is no longer predictable or controllable (Neimeyer, 1998). Parents believe that a child's premature death violates the natural laws of life and triggers a meaning crisis (Neimeyer, 2000). Bereaved parents are often in doubt, trying to understand why tragedy has fallen on them (Hsu, 2019). In the early stages of the loss, parents who fail to understand why they have suffered the tragedy often attribute death to accountability, misfortune, or punishment, and thus often experience emotions of anger, resentment, or guilt, and tend to respond with diversion, escape, denial, or folklore therapy. Bereaved parents in Taiwan show doubts and confusion, including self-blame, regret, and guilt (Hsu, 2019); blaming medical personnel for negligence (Lin et al., 2008); suspecting bringing bad luck to the child (Lin, 1998); failing to prevent them beforehand; and regretting not spending enough time with the child (Tong, 2011). Chinese parents under the one-child policy who have lost their only child are more somber than those who have not lost a child; they feel inferior, self-blame, and disgusted (Wang et al., 2021). If the parents' meaning structure does not explain death, they are prone to cognitive confusion and disorder, which affect subsequent grieving adjustment and recovery (Braun & Berg, 1994; Tseng & Lin, 2021).

Bereaved parents often feel hopeless. After their children die, they often think about life and death and try to find meaning in life again (Neimeyer, 2006). It is often difficult for them to interpret a tragedy of loss in accordance with their original belief that life is controllable and follows natural law. According to Neimeyer (2006), when the bereaved adapt to grief, it is often necessary to review and revise their original beliefs and construct new meaning structures to answer questions such as, "Why does the tragedy happen?" and "Why me?"

Neimeyer (2001; 2006) believed that the death of others affected the structure of the meaning of an

individual, the bereaved looking for the cause and trying to understand and find meaning. They gradually created new structures to accommodate the losses and sorrows. The pursuit of meaning" is the core of grief adjustment (Neimeyer, 2001; 2019), rebuilding faith that has been shaken or lost, creating a new meaning structure, and re-attributing and interpreting death. Bereaved parents who are able to construct a new meaning structure will adapt better after six months (Davis et al., 1998). He (2006) explored the grief of three bereaved mothers and found that if the mothers could identify the positive implications of the tragedy, they would be better able to adjust psychologically. Ho and Hsu (2007) interviewed bereaved parents and found that if they could reinterpret the meaning of their child's death, they would be better able to rebuild it. Although losing a child has negative impacts, it is also conducive to personal growth.

Bereavement experiences include cognitive reconstruction, emotional expression, psychological

reformation, and psychospiritual transformation. The bereaved become aware of the vulnerability of life, accept anxiety in the face of death, and ease anxiety through extensive exploration, commitment, regaining self-identification, and living in the moment. Individuals rediscover their self-identity, review relationships with the deceased, adapt to loss and sorrow, and nourish their ability to adjust their attitude toward life.

College students who have lost their loved ones feel that their bereavement experience is still positive in certain ways, including being more proactive, valuing life, living in the moment, fear of death, and valuing relationships with family and friends (Su & Lin, 2010). Some bereaved mothers described positive adjustments in self-control, self-growth, goal setting, and resource utilization (Chang, 2001). Some bereaved parents invested in religion, gained insight, helped others overcome their sorrow, and reinterpreted the meaning of death (Davis et al., 2000; Tsai, 2014). The bereaved need to adapt to life and think that the deceased just disappears physically but exists spiritually. They need to redefine the relationship with the deceased and connect with the deceased using a new approach (Worden, 2001). If the bereaved can continue to connect with the dead through symbolic links (Jordan & Ware, 1997), such as the mind and spirit, it will help enhance their resilience.

#### V. BUDDHIST TEACHINGS IN LIFE AND DEATH

Buddhist teachings reveal the principle of "origin" that "all actions are impermanence," (Yin-Shin, 1989) the phenomenon of the universe is constantly changing, and that "all dharma are born of cause and harmony" (Yu, 1995). The nature of this

phenomenon is interdependent, and with the accumulation of causes, it becomes difficult to control. Bereaved parents suffer from the death of their children in this life; they are not aware of their past and future lives, and they are confused about their belief that what goes around comes around. The Buddhist teaching of "Three lifetimes of cause and effect" views the life and death of a man from the perspective of reincarnation, one is the creator and bearer of karma in one's three lifetimes (Jing-Song, 1991). Encounters in this life are manifestations of karma in the past, and the actions of this life affect future lives. Buddhist teachings hold that the core concept of "karmic debt" is that "good moral actions lead to positive results and bad moral actions lead to negative results"(Jing- Song, 1991).

The karma of all beings is the foundation for reincarnation and is created by the maturity of the cause. If good deeds are not rewarded in this life, they may be rewarded in the future. The individual is the master of his own karmic results (Zhang, 2004). The control power rests with oneself, and the karmic results are subject to one's own deeds. When the bereaved learn these Buddhist teachings, they would interpret the death of their loved ones as "it is the destiny" (Hsieh, 2019), "it is karmically indebted," or that "the time is up" (Chan et al., 2005). Sudden deaths are interpreted as "the karma is ripening" (Chen, 2013). The above describes how bereaved parents interpret the death of a child and their suffering from the perspective of karmic causes and effects. To change karma, one must start with one's own thoughts, which are the root

cause of karma and the key to changing one's destiny. One has to stop wrongdoings and cultivate good faith, ideas, words, and deeds in all aspects of life and always remember to exercise full control over life.

## VI. USE OF BUDDHIST TEACHINGS TO ADAPT BEREAVEMENT AND STRENGTHEN RESILIENCE

The theory of meaning reconstruction considers grieving as a transformational process (Neimeyer, 2001). Helping professionals attempt to help clients maintain a symbolic link with the deceased, focus on the journey of mourning, note the meaning of loss to personal identity, assess loss and gain after child death, pay attention to the personal experience of the bereaved, and the impact on their family culture. The death of a child collapses the parents' existing meaning structure. Parents begin to examine their original beliefs in life and struggle to think, attribute, and interpret tragedy repeatedly while grieving the loss (Neimeyer, 2001). Studies have shown that bereaved parents' meaning structure influences their attribution, interpretation, and grief adaptation to tragedy (Braun & Berg, 1994). Religious beliefs affect the meaning structure of individuals and further influence their adjustment and recovery from loss.

Buddhism is one of the most important religions in the world, and bereaved parents who have lost their children can make good use of Buddhist teachings to build new, meaningful structures, adjust to grief, and enhance resilience. One Buddhist teaching is that there is a doomed fate accumulated in previous lives and life will not be lost after death. If bereaved parents have a chance to learn Buddhist teachings, such as "karmic debts," "three lifetimes of reincarnation," and "good moral actions lead to positive results, and bad moral actions lead to negative results", they would understand that death does not mean leaving forever, life returns constantly, and the dead may leave us physically, but they continue to make connections with the living in different ways. The bereaved could maintain connections with the deceased through certain rituals (Boerner & Heckhausen, 2003), and the relationship with the deceased is transformed from a physical style to psychological and spiritual connections (Tsai, 2009).

If bereaved parents learn the Buddhist teachings of what goes around, karmic debts, and the three lifetimes of cause and effect, they would understand that one's deeds do not necessarily manifest themselves in this lifetime but in the future. In this process, bereaved parents may experience a shift between the original and new meaning structures back and forth. Sometimes they immersed themselves in mourning, feeling resentful, sad, remorse, and pain. At other times, they try to interpret the death of the child with Buddhist teachings, gradually build the meaning structure of "karmic debts," accept that individuals are influenced by their karma, and attribute life and death to their own karmic results.

If bereaved parents implement the abovementioned Buddhist teachings in their daily lives, let go and live in the moment, and practice good thoughts and deeds, they may be able to regain control in life when they face the impermanence of life. They can take control of their "present" mood and actions, and hold the attitude of "the

planning lies with man, the outcome with heaven." To make good use of Buddhist teachings, accepting that "disasters and blessings are caused by your own actions, and your karma is the product of your thoughts," karmic debts and reincarnation, bereaved parents may be able to attribute and interpret the death of the child differently and transform from a sense of powerlessness to living in the moment. If the bereaved parents realize "the impermanence of life" and understand the cause of the loss, they may be able to keep an open mind on life. Buddhist teachings help bereaved parents review the meaning of suffering, get to know their inner self, accept the impermanence of the world, realize that death is

just the end of their physical life, and that bereavement is not entirely tragic.

## VII. IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

The death of a child provides an opportunity for parents to grow, adapt, and recover. Bereaved parents willing to learn Buddhist teachings may build new meaning structures more easily. Counseling professionals may use Buddhist teachings to help bereaved parents, assist them in understanding the uncertainty of life and the causes of loss, and interpret the loss of children from different perspectives. These Buddhist teachings include "disasters and blessings are caused by your own actions, and your karma is the product of your thoughts," karmic results, three lifetimes of cause and effect, and what comes around goes around. Counseling professionals may help bereaved parents view life from a broader and longer-term perspective, perceive and master thoughts and deeds in the present, and gain a sense of control and meaning in life. Buddhist teachings help the bereaved parents switch from "life is controllable" to a new meaning structure of "karmic results," thus adapting their sorrow and helping them let go of self-blame and blaming others. They strive to live in the moment, practice good thoughts and deeds, take control of life, and regain meaning.

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