

**Shinran's Approaches towards
Bereavement and Grief:**

Transcendence and Care for the
Pain of Separating from Loved Ones in
Shinran's Thought

Naoki Nabeshima

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Editor's Preface

Professor Naoki Nabeshima is a professor of Shin Buddhist Studies at Ryukoku University in Kyoto, Japan. Professor Nabeshima has written extensively on a range of topics related to Buddhist perspectives on bio-ethics, including Shin Buddhist views on cloning, brain death, organ transplantation, abortion, and euthanasia. He has also recently taken up the issues of terminal care and grief counseling within the context of the Pure Land Buddhist tradition and teachings.

Last year, the Institute of Buddhist Studies invited Professor Nabeshima to take part in an IBS course, "Counseling and Shin Buddhist Ministry." The result was his lecture, given on November 15, 2000, which was entitled, "Shinran's Approaches towards Bereavement and Grief," based a talk that Professor Nabeshima gave on the NHK Radio program, "Shukyo no jikan," broadcast on March 2000.

In addition, Professor Nabeshima also presented a special public lecture at the Mountain View Buddhist Temple in memory of the late Dr. Masatoshi Nagatomi, a noted Buddhist scholar at Harvard University and a long-time supporter of IBS, who passed away on June 3, 2000. Both lectures were sponsored by the BCA Research and Propagation Program, the BCA Endowment Foundation, the Yehan Numata Foundation, and the IBS Center for Contemporary Shin Buddhist Studies.

David Matsumoto
Director, Center for Contemporary
Shin Buddhist Studies

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Introduction

Parting with a beloved person creates such painful sorrow that it seems to sever our own body. Although it is said that time heals all wounds, in reality healing the separation is not a very easy process. Our feeling of sorrow often grows deeper and deeper. Sometime we shout in our mind that we want to go back before the time of separation. Parting with our loved ones is always sad and painful.

But how can we understand the grief of separation and how can we go beyond the sorrow? I would like to share my thoughts on the healing of bereavement and grief with you through the words of Shinran (1173-1262), a Buddhist teacher

who lived in medieval Japan.

In Buddhism, a human being is understood as an existence embracing suffering. The suffering of separating from those one loves—*aibetsuriku* in Japanese— is one of the eight essential human sufferings. In the twelfth volume of the *Nirvana Sutra*, the Buddha says, “The suffering of separating from loved ones is the foundation of all suffering. The deeper your love is, the deeper your grief and pain.”

Separation from loved ones is followed by feelings of sadness and loneliness. The pain of separation from a loved one by death, however, brings the deepest sorrow among the sufferings of separation. This pain is understood as the suffering of separating from the benevolent and loved, or *onaibekku* in Japanese. A close expression in English is “bereavement,” which includes meanings such as “depriving” and “taking away.” No matter how deeply we love each other, when the wind of impermanence blows, we must part as if a standing tree is cut into half. Love always stands on the danger of separation. The suffering we feel when separated from someone we love reminds us of the impermanence of such love and the loneliness of our own existence in a very painful manner.

The modern Japanese writer Kamei Katsuichiro in one of his essays discusses the most profound love as follows:

In our everyday lives, even between friends or husband and wife, we often hate each other, fight, and do not always live peacefully. Love always comes hand in hand with jealousy or hateful feelings. However, when loved ones or friends die, how do we feel about them? We forget their shortcomings and any hateful feeling toward them, and each one of their traits turns into a dear memory. We

recall our past experiences with them, even fights. By encountering death, for the first time we clearly realize the significance of the person's many aspirations, actions, and works. The death of a human being tells his or her life completely. Through a person's death, it becomes clearer what kind of a human being that person was. Then we shed tears of love. But if there is one kind of love that we might call the most profound love in the world, it is this: while we feel deep love for a person who has died, if we can feel that kind of love for the person while he or she is still alive, that must be the most profound love.

As Kamei's words teach us, through separation our feeling of love becomes deeper. After the separation, we often regret sorry and a sense of guilt arises within us. If we keep in mind that each one of our friends, lovers, or family members is to die eventually, I believe we can forge deeper understandings with each other.

Shinran's Approaches Towards Grief

Shinran's Approach A. "We should not criticize people who are lamenting in sadness": When you are sad, you do not have to hold back your tears.

Now we turn to the issue of how Shinran understood the suffering of separation by death. In chapters seventeen and eighteen of the *Kudensho* (Notes on oral transmissions) compiled by Shinran's great grandson Kakunyo (1270-1351), there are records of Shinran's views concerning how to support the people in grief of bereavement. In the *Kudensho*, Shinran's lively conversations and communications with people are vividly recorded by Kakunyo. In order to understand Shinran's attitudes towards

bereavement and grief, I would like to analyze his sayings by classifying them into three types.

First, Shinran's attitude toward grief is that people should let their tears fall when they are in sorrow. When people want to cry, he thinks, they should cry. In the seventeenth chapter of the *Kudensho*, it is recorded as follows:

Shinran Shonin says, "Even though we know in our mind that we will surely be born in Amida Buddha's Pure Land in the future, and believe without doubt that we can meet others again in the Pure Land, sadness at the moment of separation by death always affects us ordinary beings full of confusion. It is precisely those who are aware of themselves without any artifice, just as they are, who are the right cause of the Primal Vow in Jodo Shinshu." Shinran Shonin says, "The sadness of separating from a loved one at this time of death is the most painful experience. Sobbing, lamenting together, or even crying out loud at the deathbed of the deceased is no hinderance to birth in the Pure Land. We should not criticize people who are lamenting in sadness." (*Jodo Shinshu Seiten, Chushakuban*, p. 904-6.)

Shinran accepts the feeling of uncontrollable grief just as it is. Because we human beings who are the subjects of the Buddha's salvation are suffering and grieving beings, there is no need for us to pretend to be calm or suppress our grief.

Shinran's words are not limited only to those who lived in the medieval period. Generally speaking, Japanese people tend to act as if it is a shame to expose feelings of grief. Japanese society makes it difficult to express the natural feeling of sadness. But when surviving family members consciously try to suppress their emotions through strong self-will, it also becomes difficult

to express other natural feelings, and because of these suppressed feelings, they often suffer mental and bodily disorders which make it more difficult for them to resolve their grief. We can face our own sadness only by becoming sad.

I would like to introduce some passages clarifying the meaning of grief. Itsuki Hiroyuku, a modern Japanese writer, says in his book titled *Tariki* (Other Power):

When we meet a lamenting person, some say, "There is no use lamenting for ever. You must get over such emotions and start over. You can do it!" Trying to help someone recover from the sadness with words of encouragement is called the method of healing by confrontation (*taiji* in Japanese). On the other hand, there are those who try to share the heavy burden of sadness by quietly shedding tears together with the lamenting person. This is called the method of healing with empathy (*doji* in Japanese).

The method of healing by confrontation originates in the idea of negation, e.g., negation of evil, negation of sickness. Inconvenience is also considered an evil. By destroying or removing the inconvenience, it tries to recover the state of goodness. The idea of confrontation and attack is an aspect of modern European civilization. However, can we negate aging? Can we negate death? The answer is no. Isn't it better to help despairing people with positive thoughts and empathy?

I strongly feel that "commiseration" and an attitude of "lamenting together" are now more important than "encouragement."

Dr. Takeshi Saito, a chaplain at Tokyo Medical University, says:

What is most important is providing support for the grieving so that they are able to face directly the reality of

the loss. We should avoid trying not to think sad thoughts or distract them from the reality of the separation by death. Next step is to help lamenting people recognizing and express their feelings. That means helping to create situations for them to be able to live in the reality of the loss of the loved one. In order to do this, we must create concrete relationships with them, such as figuring out what problems they are directly facing and what solutions are possible.

It is also necessary to have plenty of time to lament. In order to provide support, we should set aside enough time for them to lament and thereby help lighten the deep feelings for the deceased and create new human relations and social contacts.

As we see in the valuable proposals of these two persons, we can face our sadness only by becoming sad. By going through difficult experiences in our lives, such as lamenting and suffering, we can then awaken to the profound feeling of love.

There are generally four important points for understanding the emotion of sadness. First, sadness is a natural feeling. Second, the feeling of sadness is different individually depending on the relationship with the deceased. Third, the sadness experienced at the separation by death is accompanied by various other feelings, such as confusion, loss of words, negation of death, anger, vengeance, injustice, loneliness, guilt, remorse, fantasy, peace of mind, indifference, gratitude, and the hope to see the deceased again. Many different feelings can arise together in our mind. In order to understand the process of grief easily, some people demonstrate it with a linear step by step model. However, actual cases of grieving are more complex with many different feelings mixing together. It is more important for

us to receive our grief spontaneously rather than trying to interpret the feeling of sadness. Fourth, the total process of grief will, little by little, become the process of healing of the damaged heart.

Therefore, I would like to learn from the embracing heart and empathy of Shinran who says, "You do not have to hide your feelings of sadness. When you want to cry, it is alright to cry."

Shinran's Approach B: "One should never comfort mourning people by adding more sadness to their grief.": You should not let yourself fall deeper and deeper into sadness.

This second point stands very much in contrast to the first one discussed above. Shinran's also pointed out that we should not make grieving people more sad than necessary. In chapter eighteen of the *Kudensho*, Shinran is recorded as saying:

One should never comfort mourning people by adding more sadness to their grief. If so, you are not comforting them. Rather, you make them more lonely. Shinran says, "Sake is also 'boyu' (anxiety remover). You should pour some as a comfort until the person smiles, and then you should leave. That is the real mourning." We should remember this. (*Jodo Shinshu Seiten, Chushakuban*, p. 907)

Perhaps Shinran said this for the mourning child who lost a parent, or for parents who have lost a child. At the time of the funeral, we should not act in ways that will add more sadness to the existing sadness. Such emotions are no comfort to the family at all. Rather it makes them increasingly lonely. Therefore Shinran Shonin says, "Sake is also called 'boyu' (anxiety remover). You

should pour some as a comfort until the person smiles, and then you should leave.”

In this way, Shinran told his followers that they should not excessively comfort the mourners and so cause them to lament more than necessary. Excessive comforting adding tears to more tears, may only serve to push the mourners into an abyss of sadness.

By the way, “boyu” (anxiety remover) as a name for sake sounds very attractive to me. If I had a bottle of sake labeled “boyu” whenever I am facing a difficult time, I am afraid I would just grab the bottle and drink it up. This sake could become a top seller in our difficult modern society! Of course, we have to be careful not drinking too much. Shinran recommended us to drink only until we can have a smile on our face.

In Shinran’s recommendation of offering sake as “boyu” (anxiety remover) to the mourners, we can see his effort to try to soften the grief of the people who could not get through it by themselves. But we should not indulge ourselves in grief too long. Shinran teaches us that it is important to spare some time for resting the grieving heart.

We rarely talk about what is really difficult. That is because such difficulty can only be understood by the person who experienced it, and no matter how many words we use we cannot express it. Also by telling one’s hardship to another, the repetition of the words becomes the repetition of the experience, and one hurts oneself again. Yet in such times, sharing one’s experiences with others in a similar situation, or simply being together with them, can allow one to feel a connection beyond words and find some peacefulness.

Once I had an opportunity to give a talk at a Himawari-kai (Sun flower Association) meeting organized by a group of women who wanted to share their grief of separation by death. The participants revealed their grieving experiences one by one. "Why did my child die? Where has she gone?" "I should have been nicer to my child before he passed away." The entire meeting hall was overwhelmed by the sadness of their stories. One thing that struck me at that time was that when a certain woman started talking about her experience, withholding her tears, another woman sitting next to her was rubbing her back quietly.

After everyone finished relating their experiences, it was time for a meal. Dr. Liang (another participant) and I were worried that because of the depth of their grief, none of them would be able to eat at all. However, all the women attending the meeting finished the meals prepared for them. Seeing this, Dr. Liang said to me, "Prof. Nabeshima, I think they are starting to get out of the long tunnel of grieving little by little. The strength of these women sharing their feelings is a relief for us, too." I too learned something from the kindness of this woman who quietly rubbed the back of another crying woman next to her, even though she herself was also having a difficult time.

On another occasion, when I was doing my research in the United State in 1999, I learned of The Doughy Center, a national facility in Portland, Oregon established for caring for grieving children. According to Rev. Julie Hanada-Lee, a Jodo Shinshu minister who trained at the center, children who have lost a parent cannot properly express their grief in words. One of the most important things to help these children is to play with

them. When they talk about the death of their parents, if adults around them are overly surprised or express sympathy, the children would feel sorry for them and stop talking. It is best us to talk with the children by repeating what they say, using the same words and tone. Playing together with them, shouting, running, and drawing pictures also gives them a great support.

As Shinran said, when you comforting grieving people, it is important not to overreact to their grief. First we should receive their grief which cannot be expressed in words. Then we should be together with them—drinking sake, or quietly rubbing their back, or playing with them.

Shinran's Approach C: "Without the Buddha's teaching of the Other Power that upholds us, how can we possibly transcend life and death?": Grief can be overcome gradually when a solid foundation is established within your mind.

The third characteristic of Shinran's approach is his teaching that we can transcend sorrow when the foundation of our mind and heart has been established beyond our death. This foundation beyond death is, for Shinran, the truth, or connection of hearts which does not disappear at death. Our loved ones do not die in our hearts. Even after their physical deaths, they continue living in our hearts. A certain connection with those we love is nurtured in our minds. Shinran, for example, once sent a letter to his disciples saying, "I am waiting for you in the Pure Land." For Shinran, the true foundation of his life was in the Pure Land, where we can all could meet again even after death, and in the Other Power of Amida Buddha, who vowed to embrace all

the lonely people and never forsake us.

In the *Kudensho*, chapter 17, Shinran says, "Without the Buddha's teaching of the Other Power that upholds us, how can we possibly transcend life and death?" (*Jodo Shinshu Seiten, Chushakuban*, p.906) Shinran means that through the Other Power of the Buddha's Primal Vow, we can overcome sorrows and delusions in our life and death.

In the *Kudensho*, chapter 18, he says,

As you make your journey toward the Pure Land of Amida, gradually the darkness of your sorrow brightens, and certainly you will return to the virtue of the embracing light. (*Jodo Shinshu Senten, Chushakuban*, p. 907)

Shinran means that by focusing your mind calmly toward meeting with loved ones in the peaceful Pure Land beyond this world of sorrow, your darkest sorrows will little by little grow lighter, and you will be wrapped in Amida Buddha's embracing light.

In this way, Shinran strongly iterates that the path of Other Power cannot be destroyed by sorrow no matter how deep. When we discover that there is a warm and peaceful land beyond this world filled with anxiety, if we live an assured life, our memories become the stuff from which new growth emerges.

Shinran teaches us that it is not by controlling our thoughts but by the Other Power of the Primal Vow that can overcome our sorrows and suffering. In other words, because our lives are securely protected by the great compassion of the Buddha, or the Other Power, we can let our tears flow down spontaneously and peacefully.

This attitude of positively accepting one's own sadness positively—or sharing sorrow together with others without criticism—is none other than the tolerance created in our hearts with the support of the Other Power. This is significantly different from the so-called “positive way” of thinking that forces us to cut off our sorrow and to think only bright and happy thoughts. Within the sorrowful heart itself resides true compassion.

Further, in one of his letters Shinran writes about how to deal with separation by death:

When [Kakushin] left us behind by dying earlier, we felt extremely sad and lonely. However, because he has reached nirvana before us, he has certainly taken a vow to guide his followers, his relatives, and friends. (*Jodo Shinshu Seiten, Chushakuban*, p. 767)

If you are left behind or have to go earlier than others, you become sad. However, Shinran says, since Kakushin, one of Shinran's disciples, has attained birth in the Pure Land ahead of us, he will certainly guide us. Even though separation by death is filled with sorrow, certainly the deceased is going to guide those left behind to the path toward the Pure Land. This reminds me that my mentor, Prof. Shigaraki Takamaro, told me once, “After separating at death, we will truly encounter the heart of the person.”

Shinran explains the meaning of salvation by Other Power in the *Kyogyoshinsho* “Shoshinge” (Hymn of True Shinjin and the Nembutsu).

The light of compassion that grasps us illumines and protects us always;

The darkness of our ignorance is already broken through;
Still the clouds and mists of greed and desire, anger and
hatred,
Cover as always the sky of true and real shinjin.
But though the light of the sun is veiled by clouds and
mists,
Beneath the clouds and mists there is brightness, not
dark.
(*The Collected Works of Shinran*, p. 70)

Through this passage, we realize that we are gently embraced by the great compassion of Amida Buddha which penetrates the sadness-colored clouds.

Conclusion

As we have examined, Shinran's approach toward people lamenting the separation from a loved one can be seen from the following three perspectives.

- A. When you are sad, you do not have to hold back your tears.
- B. However, you should not let yourself fall deeper and deeper into sadness. (The experience of grief differs individually. The entire process of grief provides the path to reflect upon the wounds in your heart and to heal them.)
- C. Grief can be overcome gradually when a solid foundation is established within your mind.

Shinran demonstrates that there is a fundamental resolution of grief by engaging continually in the process of grief.

To conclude this essay, I would like to introduce a haiku poem by Kobayashi Issa. Issa lost his wife when he was young.

Although he remarried in his latter life, his children died one after another at about the age of one year. Remembering such sad experiences, he composed this poem:

A bitter persimmon's
bitterness itself
turns naturally into its sweetness.

The depth of Issa's sadness is beyond my imagination. But I understand that Issa, in this poem, wants to express that the bitterness of the persimmon represents the sad separations in his life. However, just as the bitterness of the persimmon itself turns naturally into sweetness, the sadness itself is gradually transformed into the kindness in his heart.

Perhaps Issa's state of mind in his poem could be re-phrased like this.

Tears of sadness
themselves naturally turn
into compassion.

We cannot change the reality of impermanence expressed in the separation from the loved one. But facing the sadness without turning away from the past, just as the bitterness of a persimmon turns into sweetness by itself, grief eventually turns into kindness in the heart, and from there new tolerance is born. Perhaps too the sad memories of hurting each other and the happy memories of trusting each other will naturally turn into love.

True kindness can be learned from grief. If we do not forget about the one who passed away, we can transform our

sadness into compassionate love toward all living beings.

The deceased do not only living in our memories of the past. The loved ones continue to live in our memories of the present and future. Whether you are suffering or happy, the departed are, as Buddhas, always comforting you, reminding you who you are, and directing you where you are going.

(Translated by Eisho Nasu)