



‘What you counted and carefully saved’

By Singhashri

Reflections on loss and gain from the Lokavipatti Sutta, the Buddha's teachings on the conditions of our lives that can knock us off our feet.

Part 1: On loss

Before you know what kindness really is
you must lose things,
feel the future dissolve in a moment
like salt in a weakened broth.
What you held in your hand,
what you counted and carefully saved,
all this must go so you know
how desolate the landscape can be
between the regions of kindness.

- From *Kindness*, by Naomie Shihab-Nye

In Season 2, Episode 6 of the Netflix series *Underground*, Harriet Tubman gives a moving monologue about escaping from slavery in a divided 19th century America. At one point she speaks of those key events in our lives that have a *before* and an *after*. These events are so life changing that we can only relate to all other events in our lives as those that came either before or after these defining ones.

For her, that event was her journey that ended in freedom from bondage. It changed her worldview so completely that she had no choice but to go back and help others to make the same arduous journey. That choice would seal her place in the history books as a heroine for thousands.

For me, my defining moment was losing my mother when I was 16, which also marked the beginning of my spiritual journey. Although far less traumatic than living a life of bondage and then escaping that life, the experience changed me deeply. By losing the one person I thought would always be there for me, I touched into the truth of impermanence so raw it threatened to annihilate me.

This experience sent me into a deep depression and a five-year period of self-harm.

It was only when I found the Dharma that I began to see clearly that it wasn't the grief that was the problem, it was how I was relating to it. The initial loss was deeply painful, and understandably so. Grief is a normal response to such a massive loss. But I had spent five years drowning in my grief, making a self out of it, identifying so strongly with it that I couldn't imagine a life without it. I couldn't imagine ever being happy again.

I remember in one of the earliest Dharma books I ever read coming across a section that listed some of the things we might build up a sense of self around that we could lose at any moment. I also remember realising that I had already, in my short life, held dear and suddenly lost all of them. The list included death of a loved one, destruction of one's home, being fired from a job, the end of a relationship.

Although these experiences were painful, other experiences of loss were less dramatic, and yet just as devastating. Growing up in the States as the child of immigrants, I could sense from an early age, even before I could articulate it, the impact of being cut off from ancestry, culture, language, and extended family.

This led to feelings of what could never be, the life I would have lived if I'd been born and raised in our "home" country, the intimacy of living near an extended family that it turns out I would never know, and who would never know me. All this resulted in a feeling of never being "at home" anywhere, a deeply held view that the world wasn't "for" people like me, that I didn't belong anywhere, and finally, that there was something intrinsically wrong with me.

And then there was realising at the age of 11 that I was gay. This meant that I might never enjoy the full benefits of conventional marriage and family life. I knew that I would never feel completely safe walking down the street with my partner. I would always have to worry about my sexuality being the reason I didn't get a job, or wasn't approved for a loan. Even more frightening was the fear of withdrawal of love from my family and having to give up my religion, Catholicism, and religious community if they learned who I truly was.

I remember seeing clearly that I had two choices. I either hide my truth and live the life that others imagined for me, or I honour who and what I am, and risk losing everything. I chose the latter.

All of us are on a unique journey. No one else will ever live our lives, be conditioned in exactly the same way that we are conditioned. Our losses are ours alone, to be felt solely by us.

And what we choose to do at times of loss is deeply significant. Without awareness and kindness, we might spend years running away from our pain, or getting completely overwhelmed by it. Without wisdom, our response to loss is ultimately narrow and leads to deeper suffering. So, what can we do differently? What else is possible?

This is when kindness to self and others becomes an essential practice. During moments of loss, how might we soften into the inevitable pain of losing “what we counted and carefully saved” and do the same for others? How might we see that, although our story is unique, our suffering is universal. We are not alone in the fact that we suffer.

We have to meet ourselves in that “desolate landscape” and get curious about what that experience is actually like. Not just what it’s like to resist it, although that can also be a rich exploration. And not only what it is like to get completely overwhelmed by it. But what is it actually like, the raw sensation of devastation?

If we are able to stay with the raw, physical sensations (for me, its like a deep clenching in the gut) then we can begin to explore what it is like when we aren’t clinging to it or pushing it away, which are both ways of relating to experience for a self-centred perspective. What might it be like when we’re just with that experience, allowing it to be fully felt and move through us, and without an agenda of “getting rid of”?

This practice can also work in regards to our fears about the future. The way we relate to *potential* loss also is deeply important.

If we live a life in fear of what we might lose, then we will never be able to find the happiness of a life free of that fear. That is why it can be deeply beneficial to reflect on what we are attached to, imagine losing it, and allow ourselves to fully feel the fear bred by that, let ourselves truly face that fear so that it doesn’t ultimately control the choices we make.

It is possible to love and appreciate people, things, places without being attached to them and without the fear of losing them. In fact, when we are able to do that, our capacity to love and appreciate will deepen significantly. We will be able to *feel* love and appreciation much more fully.

Part 2: On gain

I don't know exactly what a prayer is.

I do know how to pay attention, how to fall down
into the grass, how to kneel down in the grass,
how to be idle and blessed, how to stroll through the fields,
which is what I have been doing all day.

Tell me, what else should I have done?

Doesn't everything die at last, and too soon?

Tell me, what is it you plan to do
with your one wild and precious life?

—from *The Summer Day*, by Mary Oliver

We get our sense of self from what we gather around us; our stuff, home, relationship, family, job. The dominant culture teaches us that these are the things that we must put all our effort into acquiring, keeping safe, and holding onto because they are what will make us happy.

There is nothing inherently wrong with any of these things. Our possessions and home can bring great joy, albeit transitory, and help us meet our very human need for comfort, beauty and safety. Relationships, family and work can be rich working grounds for getting to know ourselves better, learning to be in relationship with others in meaningful, transformative ways, gaining insight into our own habits of attachment and aversion.

The problem is that without wisdom, we will make an identity out of these things, which is pretty silly considering that none of them are at all reliable, could be taken from us at any time, are impermanent and insubstantial.

The root problem is that when we acquire and attach to all these things, people, places, and experiences we also project meaning onto them and then accept them as real based on that meaning. It's not that it's not important to find meaning in our life. But we need to see clearly that the meaning is self-created, and not intrinsic to what we project it onto.

Here's an example:

I had a friend who was very attached to a particular blanket. She always brought this blanket on retreat with her, meditated with it, and had had it for a very long time. One day she couldn't find her blanket. She called her roommate and discovered that he had re-purposed her blanket. It was in his car for the

possible situation in which he might need a blanket. She became angry and demanded that he return her blanket to her immediately. She was going on retreat and needed to pack it with all her other things.

Later, on the retreat, she decided to imagine giving up everything she was attached to. During one meditation, she was able to imagine everything in her life, and one by one, imagine what it would be like to have to give each thing up. She was doing really well, letting go of all her attachments with little resistance, until she got to her blanket. She felt the softness of her blanket on her skin, remembered all the wonderful times she'd had with her blanket. She couldn't let go of the blanket.

Later, when she told me her story, I asked her, "Where is the blanket now?" She said it was in the trunk of her car. I asked again, "But where is the blanket that you are attached to?"

At that moment she saw clearly that the blanket she was attached to only existed in her mind.

This is true of all the things, places and people that we gather around us in our life and then cling to. They only exist in our minds. This isn't to say that they don't also exist out there in the material world. But the sense of self we get from them, what we project onto them, what we hope they will provide us, our sense of identity that is tied up with them, all this only exists in our minds. They have nothing to do with the actual object of our attachment.

It's critical that we see this, and see it clearly. The significance we apply to things is only in our mind. And this is why we suffer when we lose things, because in our mind, the "realness" we attributed to them was over-inflated and tied up with our own sense of self. We must learn this hard truth, over and over again.

It's also important to understand that we can't simply apply an intellectual understanding of impermanence to the things we are attached to and hope that does the trick. There is no wisdom there. We also can't simply run away from our experience, try to create a more "spiritual" life without things, relationships, a home. We must learn to deal directly with the underlying delusion that causes attachment, looking it squarely in the face.

It's also important to remember not to judge ourselves for wanting things in life. In fact, it was something we wanted that started us out on the spiritual path, wasn't it? I remember I wanted to be a better, more loving person, to be

able to work more creatively with my mind, with my anger and resentment and with my cynicism. That intention may no longer be why I continue to practice, but it's what got me started.

It's also important to remember that acquisition is something we are hardwired to seek after. It is related to one of the three emotion regulation systems – the achievement system – which we can thank for giving us the capacity to get motivated.

And human motivation is an incredible force in the world. We can thank it for figuring out how to grow food, build buildings, and fly planes. But it also can be very dangerous. Just look at the 2008 financial crisis. When we get what we want in the short-term (that new shirt, promotion, sex) we get a dopamine hit that is deeply pleasurable and highly addictive. We want more!

So, there is nothing ultimately wrong with desire. In fact, it is our desire for freedom from suffering and to awaken that has brought us onto the path. Where we get into trouble is when we believe that all the things we want are owed us, it is our right to have them, and when we get them we will be happier and a better person. Where do we get the idea that the world owes us anything? Why should the world owe us anything? Does the world owe us anything?

So, in practice we are learning to cultivate a more appropriate relationship with our desire. As we apply wisdom to experience, we can begin to discern which desires are worth following, will help us to grow and develop, and which are based in delusion, and will only end in more suffering. Which have the taste of freedom, and which are based on a tension somewhere, a running away from experience, or a contraction?

It's also important that we recognise that we actually have little to do with a lot we have gained or lost in this life, in the same way that others have little to do with what they have gained or lost.

Think of people born into economically disadvantaged families, in an economically disadvantaged country, with little prospects of their lives ever improving. That has absolutely nothing to do with them. Sometimes people misunderstand the teachings on karma and misapply them, thinking, oh she must have done something bad in her past to get cancer.

We can't ever understand the complex web of conditions that has led to us being born in the body we inhabit, to the parents we were born to, or in the

country we were born in. And we don't need to attach any significance to that in order to effectively practice the Dharma. But we can practice gratitude and making the most of what we've been given.

So, with this precious life we have been given, that can be taken from us at any moment, it's critical that we cultivate a clear sense of purpose. It's critical that we reflect on what it is we want most in life and then gather up all our energy and apply it to that endeavor, rather than squandering that energy chasing after things that do not ultimately lead to liberation.

So tell me, what is it you plan to do with your one wild and precious life?