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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Death: Never Done Grieving

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Abstract
This paper deals with the psychological trauma caused by death and how Hindu culture responds to that trauma. Every culture has a grieving mechanism to ease the pain and suffering brought on by death. In this paper, the author presents his personal experience with death of his parents and his best friend's families who died of COVID-19. To cope with the loss that death involves, all cultures have some kind of death ceremonies—some are more elaborate than others. Hindu death ceremonies are rooted in texts that guide the grieving one through various steps to keep the bereaved family members preoccupied with ritualistic activities that give them no time to think about the loss. The *preta karma* is one of the Hindu *samskāras* related to death that this paper goes into detail to argue that it is designed to ease the bereavement process, a coping mechanism invented before Western psychotherapy came into practice in the nineteenth century.

Keywords Dukkha · Grief from loss of life · Hindu death rites · Samskāra · Shrāddha · Anteyṣṭi rite · Collective mourning · Shared emotions

Introduction

It is necessary to clarify at the outset that this paper is not about Hinduism, even though there is a smattering of references to it. It is a personal account of my experience with death, as it relates to my parents and my friends' families with whom I have firsthand knowledge of the rituals and bereavement associated with it. Hence, only the aspects of Hinduism that are related to death and grieving are discussed here.

Death is inevitable; it visits every family, everyone, and everywhere. I am reminded of the story of the grieving mother Kisa Gotami who went to see Buddha with her dead child in her arms. She was so emotionally distraught from the death of

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her son that she sought no less than a miracle from the Buddha—the return of life to her child.

Death is inevitable, but how can one make that understood by a grieving mother who has just lost her only child who was so dear to her? How did Buddha handle it? Let me briefly summarize the incident as mentioned in a Pali text of Theravada Buddhism (Buddharakkhita, 2019). According to the narrative, Kisa Gotami, wife of a wealthy merchant, lost her only son to death.[1] Unable to bear the pain of loss she went to every home in her village asking for help. She wanted them to bring her son back to life. Of course, no one could help her because her request was beyond human power. An old man in the village suggested that she see the Buddha because he alone would have some solutions to her problem. On hearing her sad story, Buddha understood her *dukkha* (pain) and asked her to return to the village to collect a fistful of mustard seeds from the homes that have been untouched by death.[2]

A rational understanding of loss is important in one's life. If the loss is not processed well, it may manifest in various types of psychosomatic illnesses later in life (O'Sullivan, 2015). Blinded by love and attachment, Kisa Gotamai had experienced intense *dukkha* and had lost her sense of reality. She needed someone to show light in the darkness of her life. Hence, she instantly and faithfully followed Buddha's instructions. She knocked on the door of every home in the village and asked for mustard seeds only, if the family had not lost a member in their lifetime. Clearly, it was the responsibility of the Buddha, as an enlightened being, to open her veil of attachment to reveal the truth of life. The task of collecting mustard seeds from homes where death has not visited once was precisely the key that opened the lock.

Death was inevitable; every family had lost a loved one. Kisa Gotami was not alone! But her grief was difficult to accept intellectually. When she discovered that she could not collect a single mustard seed, she found her answer. It is said that she later became an *arahant* (an enlightened nun—*bhikshuni or bhikkhuni* in Pali) and joined the Buddha's *sangha* (spiritual community).

To cope with the loss that death involves, all cultures have death ceremonies—some are more elaborate than others (Breen et al., 2019; Kubler-Ross & Kessler, 2014; Robben, 2005; Scheff, 2001). Hindu death ceremonies are rooted in texts that guide the grieving one through various steps to keep the bereaved family members preoccupied with ritualistic activities that give them no time to think about the loss (Chaitanya, 2011; Mishra, 2010). The ontological purposes for death rituals are to safely and comfortably ferry the soul to the other world for the next incarnation. I believe theirs was the most excellent coping mechanism ever invented before Western psychotherapy came into practice in the nineteenth century.

[1] There are two versions of the story. The one I have referenced here is the most common version.

[2] According to the Buddha's teachings, dukkha encompasses the concept of life's transmigration, the ceaseless cycle of death and rebirth, and is often associated with sorrow experienced when a loved one passes away.

Personal Reflections

Because I have gone through two death rituals (*kriyā, also called preta-karma*) for my parents, I speak with experience. I was born a Hindu, and for a Hindu, there are rituals for all life events from the day a person is born to the day she/he dies. This paper is about various *Perspectives and Rituals on Grief and Grieving*, and this topic will be presented from a Hindu perspective.

Constructing an elaborate death ritual is part of the process of dealing with grief that follows after a loved one passes away. Whoever that loved one happens to be—a parent, a child, a sibling, or a spouse—the passing away leaves an enormous physical and psychological void in the surviving person's life. The relationship built over many years is severed when the person dies suddenly, leaving the surviving members of the family in limbo. The *kriyā* ceremony that I went through many years ago included "meaning-making practices"[3] that attended to the personal, social, religious, and emotional dimensions of the grieving process (Kegan, 1998).

Death is a form of separation that touches everyone. I have heard people say that it is difficult to bear the pain, especially if the loved one dies young or in an accident. Both my parents and siblings died of natural causes when their time came. Even knowing that no one lives forever, and I had always known they would one day pass away, it was hard to accept their loss. Although I had known for years that the day was coming, when they died, I was not really prepared to accept, let alone process, the separation.

But this current story is not just about something that took place in the distant past; I am also referring to COVID-19 in 2021. How does a parent endure the loss of a 31-old-daughter, mother of two young children, who is suddenly taken away in the chaotic time of a pandemic?

Loss of Shared Emotion

My best friend Chatur's (not real name) wife was stricken by COVID-19. Upon hearing of her mother's serious illness, her young daughter flew into the city to take care of her. Her mother died 3 days later, and the young daughter caught the same virus and died a week later. That was very tragic for everyone involved, especially Chatur, who now has to grieve for two. He was devastated by the unexpected death of his partner of many years as well the death of his young daughter, who left behind two small, now motherless, children. That was not all that happened. Because his wife and daughter died of COVID-19, their bodies became medically contaminated. Government authorities took over their bodies. My friend was separated from the bodies of his loved ones, which meant he was unable to perform the necessary Hindu *samskāra*. Not being able to say goodbye and perform his husbandly and fatherly duties was most disturbing for him. Normally after a death, relatives and friends

[3] Robert Kegan developed a theoretical framework that posited five levels of meaning-making. See In Over Our Heads:Mental Demands of Modern Life (1995).

visit to offer their condolences and words of advice. Such sharing of condolences at a most vulnerable time provides those in mourning with great emotional support. When COVID-19 prevented that from happening, this took a toll on Chatur—both mentally and physically. He was unable to sleep or eat, making him vulnerable to diseases. When I called him to express my condolences he was unable to verbalize. All I could hear from the other end of the phone was the sound of sobbing. He was denied the coping mechanism of having rituals to send off the departed souls to a place of peace. The rituals are intended to comfort and give strength to those who are grieving, but this comfort was denied him because of the nationwide lockdown at the height of COVID-19.

During normal circumstances in the Hindu tradition, when a person dies, the body is kept in the house and is covered with white linen and flower garlands for viewing. Streams of relatives and friends come to offer condolences. The family priest arrives to prepare the body for the *anteyṣṭi* rite (last rite) which is cremation (Chaitanya, 2011; Firth, 1997). After anointing the body with holy water from the Ganges, the body is then covered with a yellow (*pitāmbar*) shroud (Justice, 1997). When the body is finally taken to the burning *ghāṭ* (crematorium), the family members burst into a loud cry. The wailing becomes a cathartic process that allows them to release their pent-up emotions (Scheff, 2001). However, COVID-19 took away all of those possibilities (Adams, 2020). Instead, many people felt anger toward the healthcare workers and the government officials because the restriction prevented them from normal and essential activities. Furthermore, some viewed COVID-19 as a stigma, which made outcasts of the surviving members of the family.

It is an established fact that grief can cause psychosomatic illness in people who experience *dukkha* after the death of a loved one (Karki, 2011). *Dukkha* can manifest itself in various ways, such as catching a cold or coming down with the flu. People are susceptible to illness during a period of intense grieving because grief lowers one's immunity. Grief is a natural response to loss (Kegan, 1998). Crying is a normal and natural part of grieving. It has also been found, however, that crying and talking about the loss is not the only healthy response and, if forced or excessive, can be harmful (Bonanno, 2004). My friend developed flu-like symptoms. Insomnia and the loss of appetite lasted for almost a month. Although Chatur had not contracted COVID, he was in serious danger of dying. His son stepped up the care and I kept vigil by calling him every day to cheer him up with the promise of fantastic future projects. As he was an artist, I asked him to paint a portrait of his wife when she was young to honor and treasure her memory like the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan of India in the seventeeth century did by building the Taj Mahal to immortalize his beloved queen, Mumtaz Mahal. Chatur agreed and when he began making his wife's portraiture; he spent a lot of time gathering old photographs of her because he wanted to capture her youth in the painting. This I think gave him a mission and reason to live by diverting his grief into a meaningful *kriyā* (action)—although in that case it was not a religious ritual.

According to George Bonanno's scientific research, resilience is the main component of our reactions to grief and trauma (Bonanno, 2004). The Hindu response to grief through *kriyā* rituals comes closer to Bonanno's findings that the expression of grief or trauma symptoms is a healthy outcome, rather than something to be feared

as has been the thought and practice until his research. Because grief responses can take many forms, including elaborate rituals in which guests are invited for feasting. Bonanno coined the phrase "coping ugly" to describe some forms of coping (Dolnick, 2011).

Although the *ātman* (loosely translated as soul) is not killed when the physical body dies as exhorted in the *Bhagavad Gītā*,[4] most Hindus have difficulty coping with grief when their loved ones depart the physical realm. Everyone knows death is inevitable and yet many cannot console themselves when the moment arrives. Even when a parent has lived a full life and death is considered "timely," it is difficult to accept and impossible not to grieve. Grieving is part of human existence; everyone feels the pain of loss. And everyone handles grief differently. Some process it by turning to others for consolation, and others by shutting out friends and family (Marshall, 2004).

In recent years, studies of ritual and religion have increasingly taken account of the rich material dimension of ritual practice. Nicole Boivin remarks, "By doing away with language partly or perhaps even entirely, at certain points in time, both material culture and certain more experientially oriented types of ritual activity are able to alter human thought and understanding by relating it directly to experience of the material world, the environment, the body, and the emotions (Boivin, 2009)." Gleaning from the Hindu practices that have been observed for millennia, it seems obvious that the Hindus had addressed this vital issue and developed elaborate practices specifically to deal with grieving. Boivin observes that while language may frequently be adequate for dealing with everyday activities and experiences, rituals that are materially, emotionally, and sensually oriented help observers to grasp the elusive and unknowable at the margins of these experiences (Boivin, 2009).

Personal Loss

I was 19 years old when my mother passed away. She was only 62. As I was her youngest son and considering the circumstances in which I had been born, she loved and cared about me dearly. I stayed with her until the last moment of her life. At one point near the end, she suddenly felt better and looked brighter. She encouraged me to go out to be with my friends since I had been living with her by her bedside for almost a week. I took her advice and went out. I spent about 2 hours with my friends.

However, upon my return, I encountered an unthinkable scene. Several people had gathered at the front door of our house. Women folks, including my sister, were crying. I froze and my sister pulled me in, saying, "She left us. We have no mother.

[4] *na jāyate mriyate vā kadāchin/*
nāyaṁ bhūtvā bhavitā vā na bhūyaḥ/
ajo nityaḥ śhāśhvato'yaṁ purāṇo/
na hanyate hanyamāne śharīre//
Chapter 2, Verse 20.

Before she left, she asked me to take care of you." I still do not know why the news did not bring tears to my eyes. Maybe I was processing all this and the realization had not yet hit me that she was really gone. I had not seen death in my family prior to this. As a teenager, I used to think that we lived forever. Many years later as a young man, I tried to rationalize why my mother sent me away at her last hour. Perhaps she wanted to spare me the pain of seeing her die because of my attachment to her. But I guess I felt guilty for not being with her at that last moment. That may be the reason why I could not cry because the scene left me confused as much as stunned.

When the priest and my brothers began the process of taking her to the Arya Ghat at Pashupatinath on the banks of the Bagmati River for cremation, I still was not convinced that my mother had really died. Maybe she would come back to life by the time we reached the burning *ghāṭ* of Bagmati at Pashupatinath. It was really a wishful thinking for a young boy with no prior knowledge of death! After about an hour, we finally reached the *ghāṭ*, the open cremation ground. Her four sons shaved their heads, eyebrows, and the hair of their armpits. We were given a *dhoti* (white linen) to wear, a symbol of mourning, purity, and peace.

When they finally placed her body on the funeral pyre, I felt her neck for the last time, and her body felt warm. I told one of my brothers that she was warm, maybe she was still alive. I heartily wished that were true. Finally, they gave each of us a flaming torch to light the funeral pyre. After cremating her body and giving the ashes to the river, we returned home in a deeply sad mood and we sat for *kriyā* in the basement of our house. For 12 days, we slept on the floor covered only with straw and, according to custom, we ate food without salt, spices, or milk. It was a tough way to spend 12 days. Later in my life, I reflected on this and interpreted that custom to be a compassionate way to divert one's attention toward oneself and away from the departed one because of the trauma involved with the loss of a parent.

I had not experienced death before in my family. It was an ordeal to say the least for a young boy of 19. The *kriya* observation which seemed like a test of endurance finally came to an end on the 13th day. It was a cause for celebration for all the family members, especially the sons who had endured the most. The ritual to break the fast with regular foods among the members of the family and other extended relatives was celebratory. Besides, it was the time to send off the departed soul with the ancestors who reside in heaven by offering *pinḍa* (a ball of cooked rice). It is generally believed that the departed soul, after death, becomes *preta* (an evil spirit) until it receives *pinḍa* through a ritual called *śrāddha*. Only then the departed soul becomes *pitri* (a good spirit) who will be included among the ancestors.

The Sanskrit word for death is *dehānta*. It literally means "the end of the physical body" but not the end of life. One of the central tenets of Hindu philosophy is the distinction between a body and soul. Hindus believe that the body is a temporary vessel in the mortal realm for an immortal soul. When we die, our physical body perishes but our soul lives on. The soul continues its journey of birth, death, and rebirth, in perpetuity until final liberation. This is at the heart of the Hindu philosophy of detachment. Both Buddhists and Hindus recognize desire as the root cause of attachment and hence cutting all forms of desire is the path to liberation (Renard, 1999).

Strict diet and rules of ritual pollution are followed during the 12-day *kriyā* period. Milk products, as milk relates to the mother, are avoided. So are salt and foods considered luxurious and tasty. It is a period of mourning and foods and products that engender sensual pleasures are shunned. Hence, sleeping on the hard floor without a mattress and a pillow is required. Caffeinated products such as tea, coffee, and soda are also out because of their properties to excite or stimulate the individual's senses. Similarly, meat products are shunned not only for the 13-day period but for a whole year for some conservative families. However, some families make it part of the normal diet after 45 days of observance.

It is believed that an individual is a spiritual being who inhabits a physical body. As the body grows old and dies, the soul remains eternal, or simply moves on to the next life where it takes on a new body. It is similar to discarding an old garb and replacing it with a new one. According to Hindu understanding, all living beings are eternal. Hence, passing away is completely a normal and natural process and one should not feel sad and mourn when a loved one passes away. Some intellectuals who like to rationalize activities during this time offer such explanation.

Unlike Shyma Allard—who realized at the age of 8 that one day she would have to die—this realization came to her when her mother passed away (Allard, 2021). With her passing, she writes, "I came to the truth that all living beings once born must perish." However, many humans prefer to ignore the truth and live a life making big plans as Indra (king of gods) did ordering Vishwakarma (the architect of the gods) to build many fabulous palaces for his use (Zimmer, 2017). When Vishnu revealed to Indra that there had been millions of Indras before him, he came to understand that he was not eternal. So he stopped having palaces built. For Allard, the passages from the Gita helped her to view pain and suffering as not wholly negative. Everyone processes grief differently. For me, it was a positive step toward understanding my mortality, just as it was for Allard. While that understanding gave her comfort, it was not enough to drive away the debilitating effect the prospect of death often had on me after the death of my mother.

Pain of Separation and Shared Emotions

When a Hindu passes away, a constant flow of visitors, mostly relatives and community members, come to offer their condolences and sympathy to the family of the deceased. That in itself becomes a cathartic process. While some offer words of comfort, some cry. It is understood that crying and wailing while shedding tears will hasten the process of grieving (Laungani & Laungani, 2015). In some communities, a professional mourner or a group of mourners is hired to cry to hasten the grieving process. When people cry openly in a group, the load of grief becomes lighter.

Grieving publicly with family members and friends is a way to share one's grief. Grief and sorrow are helped by being shared because then it is known that the community also knew and loved the person. The involvement of friends, extended family and community members help mourners deal with the pain because it is shared by a group of caring people. In *Death Ritual: Anthological Perspectives*, Cohen posits that death rituals across cultures offer valuable insights into behaviors of both

kin and community (Cohen, 2013). Among the rites of passage practiced throughout history, it is marriage and death that have been considered the most important ones. The ritual called *shrāddha* is the one the family celebrates annually in memory of the departed. It is one of the 16 *samskāras* a Hindu is prescribed to observe in which at least three generations of one's family ancestors are invoked to receive offerings of *pinḍas*..

During the recent COVID-19 pandemic lockdown, when people could not meet physically, they still managed to express their joy or sorrow through various means of group activities. Suddenly the use of Zoom became possible and the use of video apps soared. People who lived in high-rise apartment buildings came out onto their balconies to share their feelings. Some played musical instruments and some sang songs and some simply joined with their presence like spectators. Even in such difficult times, human beings find inventive ways to express their grief as well as gratitude for the unwavering commitment of frontline workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, who tirelessly worked day and night. This serves a poignant reminder of the universal nature of collective emotions, encompassing both grief and joy. These shared emotions transcend boundaries and are a common thread connecting people in times of sorrow as well as moments of happiness. We are human beings and we express our emotions—negative or positive—through words and actions. Rituals are tools through which we forge our paths in a positive direction.

Collective Mourning

While I was wrapping up this essay, England's Queen Elizabeth II passed away. There was a question whether or not her passing would bring grief to many, except for a few who were closely associated with her. But as the news of her death spread, there was an overwhelming outpouring of sympathy and shared memories of the Queen who ruled for nearly 70 years. It was clear that her death resulted in a shared grief. *Time* magazine published a special issue dedicated to the Queen with the title *A Time to Mourn*, in which it stated, "Braving wind and rain, a silent line of mourners snaked to the wrought-iron gate of Edinburgh's Holyrood Palace on September 9, patiently waiting their turn to read the official notice announcing Queen Elizabeth II's death."

The official mourning of her death was observed for 10 days. Many people—who did not know the Queen personally or never had anything to do with her—came to pay their respects and to bid farewell. What is it that drew them to the scene? Clearly, the loss of a leader, a Queen in this case, is a national tragedy and coming together in a group is a way to mourn the death of a leader.

The audience of all colors and ethnicities, putting aside any feelings against Britain's colonial past that stretched from east to west—from which was coined the term "The sun never sets in the British Empire"—came to mourn together. While standing in line for many hours, people bonded with their neighbors and described the shared sense of community as a highlight of their experience. If this is not a reflection of their deep feelings of grief over their loss, what is? Oneness is a collective experience that we encounter in many events when a shared joy or grief occurs as

we witnessed recently when a beloved Queen died. The same is true in our individual lives at the passing of a loved one or even a distant relative for which relatives, friends, neighbors, and strangers come together to express their shared emotion of loss.

Conclusion

For a Hindu, life is understood as a journey and the present life on earth is merely a stopover. Saint Tiruvalluvar wrote that "Death is like falling asleep, and birth is like awakening from that sleep." (Editors of Hinduism Today, 2007). After death, the *ātman* (soul) continues its journey to another world, other than the physical since the *ātman* after enjoying the fruits of karma may return to it in another form. This is so because a Hindu believes in *samsāra*; the cycle of life and death until *moksha* (liberation) is attained after burning all the karmic residues. Hence, *anteyṣṭi*, the last rite, is observed strictly to ensure that the journey is cleared of any obstacles. Performing the process correctly by observing each step makes the ritual more meaningful thus satisfying the family members that they have fulfilled their filial duty. It is also suggested that when key truths are understood and accepted about the nature of the soul and the cycles of birth, life, dying, death, afterlife, and rebirth, all sense of foreboding and fear of death perish. The most favored book to read after death strikes in a family is *Bhagavad Gītā* because it speaks about the perishable nature of a physical body and the permanence of *ātman*. But who is going to be consoled by this when the family is in mourning? Emotional pain suffered by human beings is universal whether it happened in the past at the time of the Buddha or and in our own time. The act of grieving and shedding tears in response to personal losses offers a cathartic experience (Gračanin et al., 2014). This catharsis, in turn, has a positive impact on both emotional and physical well-being, suggesting a therapeutic value of mourning and expressing sorrow in the face of loss. This process can be instrumental in promoting overall health and emotional equilibrium. The Greek physician, Galen of Pergamon in the second century is recorded to have said, "I was convinced the woman was afflicted not by a bodily disease, but rather that some emotional trouble grieved her, and it happened at the very moment I was examining her that this was confirmed."[5] Galen's perspectives on pain and grief provide insights into this universally experienced phenomenon that impacts everyone (Petit, 2018). While the specific case he references remains somewhat ambiguous within the limited narrative available in his writings, it can be inferred that he alluded to profound psychological trauma stemming from a loss, now manifesting as a physical ailment. He explicitly notes that the woman's emotional distress does not stem from a bodily ailment but rather from an emotional issue causing her grief. This suggests that the woman was deeply affected, and grieving was a natural response. When we lose someone we love, we are pained by the loss. Stephen Grosz in *Examined Life* (2013) says, "At

[5] Quoted by Suzanne O'Sullivan (2015) in It's All in Your Head: True Stories of Imaginary Illness. New York: The Random House. Chapter one.

one time or another, we will try to silence painful emotions. But when we succeed in feeling nothing we lose the only meaning of what hurts us and why."[6] Silencing is not the answer, expressing it is. Hence, many cultures have simple or elaborate rituals to express loss through grieving.

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[6] O'Sullivan (2015). Op. cit., Chapter two.

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