

**OPENING THE HEART IN HELL:  
PRACTICING WITH THE FULLNESS OF GRIEF**

**By Beata Chapman**

**Our Direct Experience of Grief and Loss: Just What is This?**

Grief includes complex, ever-changing physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual landscapes full of sensations and energy surges in great variety and fullness. What is grief full of?

Grief is a physical experience. It consists of many sensations that course through the body. It is essential to practice that we know, allow, and acknowledge these sensations. We take refuge in our own bodies because being grounded there brings us into the present moment and allows us to use all available resources to cultivate and sustain an open heart. From this grounded energy, we are not thrown off center by our own crises or other peoples' suffering. We can absorb the suffering of the entire earth and all beings. We become reliable as refuge for others when we bring ourselves as witness to our own grief and pain and to the grief and pain of those around us, of all beings, and of this great earth. Without any need to fix anything, the witness stands upright, offering nothing more and nothing less than presence. When we practice witnessing our own physical and emotional experience in this way, we prepare ourselves to serve others. This is how we make our own suffering of use to the world.

**Taking Refuge and Taking Care: Opening and Opening**

Opening the heart in hell is a paradox, a virtual impossibility. We are called to open the heart IN the flames, not to put out the flames or wait until the fire goes out. Right here, in the flames of grief, we are asked to open our tender hearts. Ouch. So what do you do when nothing will do? I take refuge, wholeheartedly surrender to the present moment just as it is. Let go. And to do that in the midst of our pain we need support and comfort—resources to help us through. Grief is a time of “golden wind” and to mine it fully we need stability and comfort for the long haul. This means we are both stable and flexible, taking care of ourselves and opening to the fullness of grief, the wholeness of our experience, and meeting each thing with whatever we've got. I take refuge in rituals like bowing and offering incense and in routine activities that have a visible result like scrubbing my laundry room basin. Sometimes I just wholeheartedly watch TV.

Opening the heart in hell, using our resources and taking care of ourselves, and staying close to physical sensations, we “peel back the fingers of resistance” as Stephen Levine describes, and grief transforms into loving kindness, compassion, and humble acceptance. These are all elements of grief, and there are many others. The joy of having loved, the tenderness of intimacy, the laughter and poignancy of life in form and in connection, these are also parts of grief. My mind is captivated by one particular element of grief, the sadness. My body wells up with tears a lot and my mind says how sad this is. And then sometimes I notice this process and I can pull myself out of compulsively focusing on just the sadness of grief and then I can notice something else. In small bits, I can take in other parts of the grief—I can witness and experience the fullness of grief. This is one way that I mine the golden wind. It also enriches my experience exponentially.

## **Building the Muscles to Include More and More**

Being able to “mine the golden wind” of grief in this way involves tremendous risk. It is not for the faint of heart. It means saying yes to parts of ourselves we compulsively avoid or push away. It requires us to embrace whatever shows up. It depends on our capacity to include, include, include...“this too.” We have to become as vast and wide as the wind itself, ever the curious and yet impartial compassionate observer, opening more and more. Training the mind through zazen cultivates this capacity in a particular way that is very precise, and there are many other practices that also do this in different ways. The important thing is building our inclusion muscles so that when conditions arise, whether we view them as good or bad, beyond preference, we are able to meet them with fearlessness and trust in ourselves, as well as with tears, anger, sadness, joy, peace, serenity, and all the unlimited variations that grief is full of. We train ourselves so that we can just include it all.

## **The Impermanence of Grief Itself**

Of course, like all phenomena, grief itself changes. It changes in each moment and it changes over time. Part of the challenge for me is knowing when to allow grief to diminish—how to let go or be let go of. I think sometimes I fear that if I allow it to complete itself, I will forget or somehow lose touch with the person or being I loved and lost. But as Darlene is fond of saying, “Tragedy will get its due.” Her teaching is to trust our own experience and fall into the uniqueness of each individual moment. This inherently suggests that each moment is unique, which across time means change, change, and more change. We refine our consciousness so that we can focus on the unique qualities of each new moment and at the same time include what the moment is full of, whether that be grief, sadness, yearning, joy, or self-doubt. To stay open in this way calls us to let go of the last moment and clear space for the new. Our practice of letting go in this immediate way is a practice of fearlessness.

## **Grief as a Public Process**

Grief is a public emotion; we are not meant to grieve alone. This is why virtually every culture holds public events after someone dies. We use tools like ritual, story telling, and shared social experiences to bond and support one another in grief. This process is greatly facilitated by open and free expressions of grief in all its facets. We connect in our suffering, and in grief we all find common ground. Practicing body-to-body is the foundation of our connection to one another and to our own subtle, varied, and nuanced experiences. Because body-to-body practice is so important in grief, when I most feel like being solitary, deep in grief, this is when I push myself most to be with people, to be seen, to be felt, and to see and feel others. In this way I offer myself (and I think, “such as it is”) and I receive others.