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# “To Whom Does Kisā Gotamī Speak?” Grief, Impermanence, and *Upāya*

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# “To Whom Does Kisā Gotamī Speak?”

## Grief, Impermanence, and *Upāya*

Richard K. Payne<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

This article develops a perspective on the nature of Buddhist pastoral care by considering the needs of the bereaved. Differentiating the interpretive frameworks of different audiences and understanding different contexts of interpersonal relations are necessary for effective pastoral care. A distinction between the goal of realizing impermanence and the goal of resolving mourning is heuristically useful in theorizing Buddhist pastoral care. The discussion also seeks to underscore the value of *upāya* as a positive moral injunction on teachers, indicating the need

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to properly match their audience and to employ the textual tradition responsibly.

## Introduction

Probably at one time or another most Buddhist adherents in the United States have heard the story of Kisā Gotamī, the mother who brings her dead child to the Buddha in hopes that with his supernatural powers he will bring the child back to life. The *Dhammapāda-aṭṭhakathā*, a commentary on the *Dhammapāda*, includes a story summarized by the translator under the title "Kisā Gotamī seeks mustard seed to cure her dead child." The prelude tells us that she was from a poverty-stricken family, but because she transforms charcoal into gold and silver, a wealthy merchant marries her to his son.

In the course of time Kisā Gotamī gives birth to a son. The child dies as soon as he is old enough to walk. Kisā Gotamī, having never seen death before, forbids the body to be removed to the burning-ground, and taking her dead child on her hip, goes from house to house seeking medicine for her dead child. Every one thinks her crazy. A certain wise man sends her to the Buddha. Kisā Gotamī asks the Buddha whether he knows of medicine for her child. The Buddha replies that he does. The Buddha then directs her to procure a pinch of white mustard seed, cautioning her that she must procure it from a household no member of which has ever died. At every house she is told, "The living are few, but the dead are many." By degrees she comes to realize that she has taken upon herself a futile task. She returns to the Buddha without the mustard seed. The Buddha comforts her, admonishing her that death is

common to all living beings. Kisā Gotamī attains the Fruit of Conversion and becomes a nun. One evening she watches a flickering lamp in the Hall of Confession. The thought is impressed upon her mind that the life of human beings flickers out precisely as does the light of the lamp. Taking this for her Subject of Meditation, she concentrates her mind on the thought and attains Arahatsip. (Burlingame 1:107)

To whom does the story of Kisā Gotamī speak? That is, how do different audiences receive the story of Kisā Gotamī? The two accounts that follow are from my own experience of telling or hearing this story in relation to different audiences. I recount these events as narratives can provide the reader access to the issues being addressed in a fashion complementary to a didactic presentation. Each audience, indeed each audience member, hears a story in terms of its own interpretive framework. This is not news to anyone exposed to the last fifty years or more of hermeneutics and literary theory (Holub 267). It is, however, something to which Buddhist chaplains and ministers need to be sensitive, as I learned myself.

### **First Audience**

Several years ago, along with four other ministers and priests from different churches in the local area, I was asked to serve as the Buddhist priest for an annual interfaith service for families who have had a member take his or her own life. This service takes place each year during that cruelest time for those who have suffered loss and grief, the Christmas holidays, when family is supposed to be the focus of our thoughts, our love, and our activities. I was unprepared for the number of people who showed up. The auditorium was a large one, and gradually filled to

standing room only—perhaps as many as 750 people, including single mothers or fathers with small children, teen-agers, and middle-aged and elderly men and women now widowed. The grief in the room was palpable. The other ministers participating in the service gave consoling messages such as that the person who was loved is now in heaven and that those present would meet their loved ones later.

Being, or at least in those days *trying* to be, a “good Buddhist,” I knew of course that the story that one employs in relation to grief is that of Kisā Gotamī. I presumed, since I didn’t think it through adequately, that the audience would appreciate being reminded of the truth of impermanence, that their suffering in the present came from their desire for permanence, manifest now as resistance to the reality that death is universal.

Needless to say, the response was not one of general acclaim. Following the service, several people approached the other ministers and thanked them for their messages. Other than a rather ceremonial thank you from the organizers, no one came to me. This paper is not about my feelings, however, but rather about the moral responsibility to communicate effectively. My failure to meet my audience’s needs, to match the teaching to what they could hear, did not meet the standard of effective communication attributed to buddhas and bodhisattvas; that is, the skill of teaching known as *upāya*. They were not an audience prepared by familiarity with the Buddhist teachings to be able to absorb the stark confrontation with impermanence made evident by the story of Kisā Gotamī; and, given the kinds of messages our society communicates regarding the process of mourning, they might well have heard me saying, “Hey, it happens to everyone, so just get over it.”

## **Second Audience**

Also several years ago, but after the experience just recounted, I co-taught a course on pastoral counseling. Having come to realize that this was an area that the Institute of Buddhist Studies (IBS) needed in its curriculum, I could think of no better way to understand what was involved than by asking a colleague at another school in the Graduate Theological Union (GTU) to allow me to co-teach her pastoral counseling class one semester. The class comprised a variety of students from different schools within the GTU, including IBS.

For a class presentation, one of the IBS students presented the story of Kisā Gotamī as a model for a therapeutic intervention with those who are mourning. Recalling my earlier experience attempting to do something similar, I began to question her about her understanding of the story. Two related problematic aspects of the student's understanding became evident.

First, the student accepted the story as literally true. When questioned about her understanding of the story, she claimed in all seriousness that there literally had been a woman named Kisā Gotamī who had been driven mad with grief, and that the Buddha had cured her. My colleague was politely appalled by such textual naïveté, just as I was embarrassed that an IBS student would hold a literalist, or perhaps, more accurately, fundamentalist, understanding of the teachings.

Second, the student viewed the story as a report of a successful therapeutic intervention—as if it were a case study. She viewed it not as a legendary story presenting a key point in Buddhist teachings, but rather as a report that provided a model for a therapeutic intervention. That is, she did not see herself recounting the story as part of a dharma talk, but rather engaging in some activity comparable to the Buddha's as part of a therapeutic intervention—perhaps sending a grieving parent

out to read the obituaries page of the newspaper, visit graveyards, or engage in some other experiential confrontation with the universality of death and impermanence.

Although I wish I could report better success with this student than with the families mentioned above, I'm afraid that the more I tried to explain to her that as the product of a literary process the story could not be taken literally, the more insistently she held to her conviction that it is literally true. The two mistaken understandings—understanding the story literally and seeing it as a case study of a successful therapeutic intervention—each appeared to reinforce the other.

### **Hermeneutics and Philology**

As far as I can discern upon reflection, each of these two audiences—the surviving families of suicides and an aspiring Buddhist minister—had their own preconceived interpretive framework within which they understood the meaning of the story. It now seems to me that the interpretive framework of the first audience may well have included a resistance to the not uncommon social message that “loss happens to everyone, so you just need to get over it.” In contrast the interpretive framework of the second audience was a literalist reading of the story as a therapeutic intervention. These two experiences led me to inquire into the nature of the story and the relation between present day interpretations of it and its textual basis in the Buddhist tradition.

One of the sources for the story is the *Dhammapāda-aṭṭhakathā*, the commentary on the *Dhammapāda* mentioned above. It appears there in relation to stanza 114 of the *Dhammapāda* (Book VIII: Sahassa Vagga, “The Thousands”):



And better than a hundred years  
 lived without seeing  
 the Deathless state, is  
 one day  
 lived seeing  
 the Deathless state (Thanissaro 36).

The version of the story given here in the Introduction is Burlingame's synopsis as found in his 1921 translation of the *Dhammapāda-aṭṭhakathā*, under the title *Buddhist Legends* (1 107).<sup>2</sup> In addition to the *Dhammapāda-aṭṭhakathā*, Alice Collett has located parts of the larger story of Kisā Gotamī's life in the verses of the *Therīgāthā*, in the *Apadāna*, in the commentary on the *Aṅguttara-nikāya*, in the commentary on the *Samyutta-nikāya*, and in other several sources as well (2016 39–40). In the Pāli canon the *Therīgāthā* and *Apadāna* are included as part of the *Khuddaka-nikāya*, and are therefore considered canonic. In the Chinese canon, however, “only the first four āgamas are preserved” (Collett 2016 4), and not the *Khuddhaka-nikāya*, which is the fifth collection in the Pāli.

Inquiry into its origin indicates that the story as it is commonly recounted in present day Buddhism in the United States is not unique. Several similar stories are, for example, recounted in the *Therīgāthā* and its commentary, the *Therīgāthā-aṭṭhakathā*. Hubert Durt notes that “In the Buddhist tradition, several stories about mothers losing their children may be found in the Pāli *Therīgāthā*, the versified sayings of the elder nuns . . . [and] we also find these human dramas in Sanskrit sources and

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<sup>2</sup> This is one of several verses in Chapter Eight of the *Dhammapāda* structured around contrasting one day experiencing some aspect of the *dhamma* with a hundred years of not. Several more verses with similar content and structure are found in Chapter XXIV of the *Udanavarga* (Willemsen 161–162). Also, the *Dhammapāda-aṭṭhakathā* is of uncertain provenance, some sources identifying it as anonymous, while others attribute it to Buddhaghosa (Obeyesekere 222).

in Chinese translations based on Indian originals" (Durt 314). Pointing out that it reflects a high rate of child mortality, Reiko Ohnuma also notes the frequency of such stories and then identifies the symbolic value grieving mothers are given in Buddhist literature: "Buddhist literature is full of bereaved mothers whose intense suffering drives them into actual madness, and the madness of the mother in grief is consistently cited as an example of the type of mindless distraction that *prohibits* any spiritual advancement" (37, emphasis in original).

Looking specifically at some of these other sources, "Kisā Gotamī Therī" (*Therīgāthā*, verses 213–221) tells a story of a woman whose entire family is killed while travelling (Hallisey 111–115; Thanissaro "Kisā"). An almost identical tale is told of Paṭācārā in the commentary to this *gāthā*, *Therīgāthā Aṭṭhakathā* 10.1: "Skinny Gotamī and the Mustard Seed" (Olenzki "Skinny"). Putatively this is a verse commentary on *Therīgāthā* 10.1. However, the names of the two main characters differ, and the woman Paṭācārā mentioned in this commentary is the subject of *Therīgāthā* verses 127–132, which briefly recount the Buddha's teaching Paṭācārā the truth of impermanence, and thereby relieving her grief (Hallisey 73–75; Olenzki "Pañcasa"). Kisā Gotamī is also the subject of the *Gotamī Sutta*, which only mentions the death of her sons in the course of her encounter with Mara. Mara tries to distract her from her meditation by reminding her that her sons were killed, and suggesting that she must therefore be seeking another husband. She bests him by replying that she has overcome the fear of death (*Sutta nipāta* 5.3, Thanissaro "Gotamī"). *Therīgāthā* verses 133–138 introduce us to Vāseṭṭhī, whose tale is similar to that of Kisā Gotamī, in that she describes herself as having wandered for three years with her mind deranged by the death of her son (Hallisey 77; Thanissaro "Vāseṭṭhī"; Durt). The intertextuality of the stories of Kisā Gotamī, Paṭācārā, and Vāseṭṭhī are discussed in detail by Collett (2016, 12–17). Sons were not the only ones whose death led their mothers to become deranged by grief. *Therīgāthā* verses 51–53 tell of Ubbiri who be-

came deranged upon the death of her daughter, Jiva (Hallisey 39; Thanissaro “Ubbiri”).

According to Ohnuma, five of the *Therīgāthā*'s seventy-three poems exhibit a shared narrative structure: “A mother loses her child to death and is driven completely insane by her grief. She then encounters the Buddha (or one of his disciples), who gives her a teaching that snaps her out of her grief and allows her to regain control of her wayward mind, whereupon she becomes a Buddhist nun and goes on to attain nirvana” (41).

Only very rarely are the textual sources of the story identified when it is recounted today. The story of Kisā Gotamī so widely known today has, therefore, the status of legend, a modern Buddhist legend. Thus, when the story is retold in the present, it is already intimately enmeshed with implicit interpretation informed by the exegetical intent of the person retelling the story. In the context of the Buddhist teaching tradition, its narrative character is not incidental, which will be expanded on more fully below. To understand it as corresponding to actual events, more or less accurately recounted, is to mistake its function as a teaching device, as an *upāya*.

While these and related texts may be examined as constituting a biographical record (Collett 2013, 140), we must at the same time recognize that what we can see are literary figures, not Euhemeristic vestiges of actual persons and events, much less biographies in the modern sense of factually accurate records of people's lives. While actual persons and events no doubt provided bases for the stories in a collective sense, the texts effectively stand between us and those bases. Collett succinctly summarizes the textual history involved.

The biographies that we have come down to us via an oral and then textual/manuscript tradition. If any part of them

can be sourced from an actual historical nun, who was a direct disciple of the Buddha, then her story would have been retold orally and informally by generations of Buddhists in north India, until it became part of the *Apadāna* (if it did), at which point it became part of a corpus that was remembered and transmitted formally, in group recitation, until the Pāli canon was committed to writing. Once written, the canon forms the basis of a manuscript culture, whereby manuscripts are used, then copied when they age, and (ritually) discarded. During this preservation and transmission process, the biographies change. An account of one nun might become associated with another, may be lost, misconstrued, reformulated, relegated as less important, or lauded as an exemplary example of a moot doctrinal point. (12)

The story of Kisā Gotamī as now employed opens the "text" of the legend to modern interpretations. The narrative character of the story, whether we mean by that its canonic and paracanonic bases or its contemporary repetitions, is itself an important part of understanding the ideas that those telling the story are conveying. When discussing *Sutta* and *Vinaya*, Steven Collins has emphasized that "very frequently the narrative framework gives a quite specific function and meaning to the doctrinal ideas it contains—and so this function and meaning can be wholly distorted if the narrative context is not preserved in interpretation" (21). In her study of Candrakīrti, Karen Lang has noted that "The lines of demarcation between story and argument for Indian authors and their audience are not sharply drawn. The decision to use stories, in addition to philosophical arguments, may also indicate an author's intention to communicate in a more direct and immediate way" (21).

Speaking specifically of the story of Kisā Gotamī, Jay Garfield says that

the narrative is essential for making sense of the actor's actions, and of the moral assessment of and response to those actions. . . . The repetition of Kisagotami's actions, the blindness of grief, the determination to find a miracle and the gradual realization are all essential parts of the story of how a person comes to grips with suffering. (291–292)

The story of Kisā Gotamī as retold today tells a story that is relevant for us, with our contemporary concerns. While this may seem obvious, it is hardly trivial when considering how the story is used as a tool in pastoral care, counseling, or therapy. Our present-day concerns may or may not coincide with the concerns either of the compiler/s of the *Dhammapāda-aṭṭhakathā*, or those anonymous tellers of tales among whom the story circulated before it was codified. A striking instance of the distance between our own values and those of the formulators of the textual tradition is Kisā Gotamī's treatment of her son's corpse after she realizes impermanence: "In the *Apadāna* she rather brashly throws the corpse away, as she does also in the *Therīgāthā* commentary. In the other two accounts, she more gently lays the corpse down in either a forest or a graveyard" (Collett 2016 44–45). The former version evidences a lack of sentimentality that present-day audiences might well find disturbing, instead of perhaps as demonstrating the depth of her insight.

As a modern legend in free circulation, there is no one proper interpretation, one that only textual scholars can discern. Even for textual scholars, the story of Kisā Gotamī is an "open text" in Umberto Eco's sense. That is, the story allows for multiple interpretations by its audience. As an open text, the story has been interpreted in ways that respond to different expectations or purposes.

Four interpretations are those of Julie Chijo Hanada, Victoria Lysenko, Robert E. Goss and Dennis Klass, and Nalini Bhushan. Hanada interprets the Buddha's intent in sending Kisā Gotamī back to the village to obtain a mustard seed from a family that has never known death as "developing a community of support for Kisā" (269). Lysenko, however, uses the story to contrast Buddhist emphasis on individual understanding with the comfort offered by theistic religions' consoling message of God's judgment and forgiveness. Yet another interpretation is the psychotherapeutic one offered by Goss and Klass, who suggest that the "Buddha used what psychologists call [a] performance-based technique to help the bereaved woman accept the reality of her son's death" (72). Bhushan's dialogic approach creates a hybrid of Freudian and Buddhist understandings of mourning and treats Kisā Gotamī not as crazed, but rather as exercising her own agency. Like Hanada, Bhushan also emphasizes "the role that society plays in the mourning process" (177) and, at the same time treats the Buddha's instructions as a kind of therapeutic intervention: "Part of the genius of the Buddha's prescription is that he prescribes a process that will be repetitive, that will be volitional, that will begin in detachment from reality, and will thereby issue in attachment to reality, and will accomplish all of this over sufficient *time* for the process to be genuinely healing" (176).

The responses of the family members surviving the suicide of a loved one appeared to me to evidence incomprehension or resistance, perhaps based on unfamiliarity with either the story or the underlying concepts. The response of a Buddhist minister in training appeared to me to be an attempt to appropriate the story as a therapeutic intervention. Given these responses, an appropriate hermeneutic question to ask is: What are the contemporary interpretive frameworks informing the ways the story is retold today in popular Buddhist culture in the United States?

The question of interpreting the story of Kisā Gotamī points in many directions. The way we present our stories, that is, the always already interpreted character of employing narratives in teaching—*upāya*, heuristic devices—not only communicates our own particular representation of the *dharma*, but also constructs an understanding of who the audience is. Constructing an image of the other is itself a moral act, one that entails a responsibility to reflect on and be mindful of the interpersonal dynamics of “care,” which we note Garfield prefers as the English gloss for *karuṇā* in place of the commonly found “compassion” (289). Here I am using the term “pastoral care” as a general term for the individual relation between a minister, priest, teacher (either lay or ordained), or chaplain, and a person requesting assistance in a time of crisis. These different roles have different social functions, ones that delimit appropriate responses. Ministers, priests, and teachers represent the tradition and gain both authority and responsibility from the tradition. Particularly because of the institutional settings within which chaplains provide care, the “contract” between the two parties focuses on the needs of the recipient as defined by that person’s values. Very early in the development of Buddhist chaplaincy, there was a discussion on a list-serve for Buddhist chaplains that demonstrates this focus. One participant insisted that the Buddhist chaplain should for example use the death of a family member as an opportunity to make survivors cognizant of the reality of impermanence. All of those with experience as chaplains, however, were vehement that the responsibility of the chaplain was to provide comfort and healing within the value system of the bereaved. The difference between pastoral care provided by a chaplain, and that provided by a minister, priest, or teacher, reflects different relationships and expectations. I would like now to turn to two sets of issues involved in the provision of care: responding to another’s bereavement and the ethics of *upāya*.

### **Resolution and Realization: Responding to Another's Bereavement**

Though the terms "grief" and "mourning" are often used synonymously, some researchers find it useful to distinguish the two. Cowan and Hatfield write, "Simply, grief refers to an internal response, while mourning is the outward expression of the loss" (377). This distinction between internal emotion and external expression is itself a social convention; the terminological distinction is not used consistently in the field. Thomas Attig, for example, uses "grief" to refer to the emotion, and "grieving" to refer to the activity of mourning, saying that "it is vital that we reject ideas of grieving as passive and embrace ideas of it as active" (32). However the distinction is made, it helps to be clear that when we speak of bereavement being a process leading to "resolution," it is not the eradication of grief that is the goal. Grief may well continue as a part of a person's way of being in the world, while mourning can change and be resolved to the extent that a person in grief is no longer impeded by the activities of mourning from engaging with other people and in other kinds of activities.

Professionals in the field of grief studies recognize that each person grieves in his or her own way and time. Orla Keegan writes, "Current thinking about bereavement is characterized by sensitivity to individual difference and variety in ways of grieving" (207). It seems that there is, therefore, little direct therapeutic benefit to be derived from making judgments regarding the manner, intensity, course, or duration of another's grieving. (The effect of the bereaved's actions on others may be subject to moral judgment, but discussion of such effects should be handled without invalidating the individual's experience of grief.) As Nalini Bhushan puts it, mourning "is an irreducibly subjective dimension. It is not apt for more evaluation. It is singular, and individual, and below the threshold of the moral domain" (178). The two models suggested here,



resolution and realization, are abstractions, and are neither mutually exclusive from one another, nor intended as stipulating “proper” or “healthy” goals of grieving. Anyone may combine aspects of both in the process of mourning.

### **Resolution: Grief Counseling**

“Grief counseling” constitutes a specialized field within counseling and therapy. It is also being developed within Buddhist approaches to counseling and therapy. The normative assumption is that the goal of grief counseling is to help the bereaved adjust to a changed situation—one in which a beloved person has died and will forever be absent from the bereaved’s life—in order to resolve the mourning process to the degree that the individual can return to some form of normal living in society. It is in this limited sense that the phrase “resolution of mourning” will be employed here.

Although resolution of mourning and realization of impermanence may be closely related in an individual’s grieving, a heuristic distinction may be made between creating a sensitivity to the impermanence of one’s own life and resolving mourning by creating an understanding of the universality of death. As in the two incidents recounted above, the story of Kisā Gotamī has largely come to be interpreted in contemporary popular religio-therapeutic culture as relating to the resolution of mourning, as, for example, in Robert Goss’s reflections (“Tibetan,” “Americanizing”). Understanding the story as primarily concerned with resolving Kisā Gotamī’s mourning places it in the modern context of concerns over the “mourning process.”

The idea that mourning constitutes a process was popularized by Elisabeth Kübler-Ross in her *On Death and Dying*. She originally formulat-

ed a five-stage process in which a person moves sequentially through a series of emotions typical for each stage—denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance (Wortman and Boerner 440). Although originally framed for a person facing their own death, later work extended the five-stage process to bereavement. John Bowlby developed a similar set of four stages of grieving based on his own theory of attachment. These four stages are "(a) initial numbness, disbelief, or shock; (b) yearning or searching for the deceased, accompanied by anger and protest; (c) despair and disorganization as the bereaved gives up the search, accompanied by feelings of depression and hopelessness; and (d) reorganization or recovery as the loss is accepted, and there is a gradual return to former interests" (Wortman and Boerner 440).

The idea that there is a process culminating in acceptance has been widely popularized, particularly in higher education settings such as medical, nursing and social work schools.<sup>3</sup> Influential in forming both the modern therapeutic and popular conceptions of grief is Freud's essay "Mourning and Melancholia," in which he refers to "the work of mourning" (Wortman and Boerner 440). Freud made use of the notion of psychic energy modeled on the physics of his era in an attempt to make his psychological theories scientific. He, therefore, conceptualized this work as the gradual withdrawal of emotional energy from the deceased so that "the bereaved person regains sufficient emotional energy to invest in new relationships and pursuits" (Wortman and Boerner 440). The idea that mourning is a process is now deeply embedded in popular religio-therapeutic culture. The idea of a process with stages leading to ac-

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<sup>3</sup> It also was popularized in religious studies courses, such as "Death, Dying and Religion" offered in the Religious Studies Department at San José State University initially in the mid-1970s, and still part of the curriculum. Such courses remain a staple in other religious studies programs, as for example with Temple University's "Death and Dying" course initiated in 1979.

ceptance as found in both Kübler-Ross and Bowlby simultaneously informs and reflects the cultural value of “getting over” one’s grief.

Both of these models have been criticized for conceptualizing grief in terms of a fixed sequence of emotional stages through which all bereaved move.<sup>4</sup> Yet in keeping with these characterizations of grief, even without the idea of a fixed progressive sequence of emotional states, grief counseling theory conceptualizes grief as a process that should eventually culminate with the bereaved being able, as J. William Worden and James R. Monahan write, to “move on with life” (193). In a chapter titled “Caring for Bereaved Parents,” they present professionals with a variety of issues related to parents facing the death of a child. Moving through the events leading to the death, they then discuss “the goals of intervention [as being centered] around the tasks of mourning” (191).

As we are investigating the social values associated with grief, it is noteworthy that Worden and Monahan discuss mourning as a set of four *tasks* to be accomplished by the bereaved with the guidance of a grief counselor. The first task is “accepting the reality of the loss” (191), and they indicate that failing to do so will inhibit the bereaved’s ability to move “through bereavement” (191). The second task that they identify is “processing the pain of the loss” (192). Processing the pain is explained as the necessity for expressing the emotions of grief. They say that if “the strong feelings and sensations associated with grief . . . are cut off or not allowed to find expression, they will remain with the person to be expressed at a later time when a subsequent loss triggers them” (192). “The third task of mourning is adjusting to an environment from which the deceased is missing” (193), referring to the ongoing sense of absence of the deceased that many people feel, particularly at

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<sup>4</sup> For a summary of critiques, see Wortman and Boerner 441.

special times—such as the Christmas holidays. According to Wordan and Monahan, the older advice of withdrawing emotional energy from the relationship with the deceased has been replaced. Instead, the “fourth task of mourning is to emotionally relocate the deceased so that one can move on with life” (193). The bereaved maintain bonds with the deceased, retaining memories, “while still going on with life” (193) by thinking of the deceased as located someplace else. The grief process that Wordan and Monahan have described for those counseling the bereaved provides a way of thinking about the various responses to loss. Rather than structuring these responses as a fixed sequence, a path that is to be traversed one step at a time, they construct those responses in terms of a set of tasks. Within this framework, successful completion of the tasks leads the bereaved to be able to “move on with life.” Although of course one has inevitably changed, one returns to a normal integration into the social order.

### **Realization: Buddhist Pastoral Care**

In contrast to placing the story of Kisā Gotamī in the context of grief counseling, a more explicitly Buddhist framework may be to place the story in the context of realizing the truth of impermanence. If we consider the full range of canonic and commentarial representations of the story of Kisā Gotamī discussed above, the story leads us to Kisā Gotamī realizing the truth of impermanence, renouncing the world, becoming a nun, and having overcome fear of death, eventually becoming an arhat. This suggests a rather different outcome from the resolution of grief leading one to “move on with life” in the sense of re-engaging one’s social roles, such as work and family. Instead, we find the realization of impermanence leading away from “normal” social life and away from reconstructing one’s life in order to move on. The goal according to the

story itself is not a return to a healthy, functioning, productive, happy life within society; it is not adjustment. This differs from concepts of self-realization, fulfillment, holding a nonjudgmental attitude, or the attainment of “true” happiness that mark much of the therapeutic interpretation of Buddhism in popular religious culture.

The path that Kisā Gotamī followed led her to renounce the home life and enter into the order of nuns. But how is this story useful for Buddhist adherents in present day America? The path of realizing impermanence does not necessarily lead to renunciation. Economic and social conditions have changed such that many people today are free from the constraints of subsistence living, constraints that once prevented most Buddhist adherents from pursuing religious practices.<sup>5</sup> In other words contemporary Buddhist laity may themselves be practicing toward the realization of impermanence. This suggests that Buddhist pastoral care with laity can take the realization of impermanence as an appropriate goal, one distinct from, but not necessarily mutually exclusive from, the return to social functions through the resolution of mourning. As any individual moves from immediate bereavement forward, their process may include both goals, one more prominent than the other at different times. The shifting character of bereavement is something that the Buddhist pastoral counselor will need to recognize in order to respond to appropriately.

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<sup>5</sup> For a valuable resource regarding the change in economic and social conditions, particularly in relation to women without protection, *anātha*, see Silk.

### **Distinguishing Grief Counseling and Buddhist Pastoral Care, or What makes Buddhist Pastoral Care Buddhist?**

What does this concern with the hermeneutics of the story of Kisā Gotamī have to do with Buddhist pastoral care? One of the longstanding issues in contemporary Western Buddhist circles is the relation between Buddhism and psychotherapy (for example, in Kearney). Several authors have described the contemporary situation as one in which the two are confused with one another. In his own attempt at delineating the two, Harvey Aronson quotes Jack Engler's contention (Engler 28) that the "triumph of the therapeutic" (Rieff) in Western culture led to "a tendency to confuse meditation and psychotherapy" (Aronson 41).

This same triumph of the therapeutic has created opportunities for chaplaincy as a profession for Buddhists, and it has also created the need to develop Buddhist institutional forms of pastoral care training for priests, ministers, teachers, and chaplains alike. Anyone engaged in Buddhist pastoral care—whether priest, minister, teacher, or chaplain—must be sensitive to the question of what constitutes an appropriate response to the individual bereaved. While it is artificial to polarize grief counseling and Buddhist pastoral care around the distinction between resolving mourning and realizing impermanence, the artifice serves a heuristic function of highlighting the different orientations of the two. Because chaplains serve anyone in need, Buddhist chaplains have a different relation with those they are serving than do Buddhist priests and ministers. They will be more likely, therefore, to find themselves providing grief counseling than doing Buddhist pastoral care, *per se*.

As already indicated, one way to characterize the goal of Buddhist praxis is the realization of impermanence, meaning both comprehending the concept and experiencing the actuality of impermanence oneself. To the extent that Buddhist pastoral care participates in this broader con-

struction of Buddhist praxis, its function may also be seen as facilitating another's realization of impermanence.

The difference between engaging Buddhist praxis in the form of Buddhist pastoral care, and the therapeutic understanding of the goal of resolving grief, is made evident by Wada and Park in the concerns they raise about using Buddhist practices in grief counseling. We should note that they characterize Buddhism by drawing on “tertiary sources of Buddhist scholarship, mostly based on Western psychologists’ interpretations of English translations of original texts” (Wada and Park 659, n. 1). In other words, their representation is neither philosophically sophisticated—either in terms of Western philosophy or of Buddhist thought—nor even superficially nuanced as to different forms of Buddhist praxis, tending to essentialize “Buddhism” and “Western” as contrasting socio-intellectual entities. Thus, although the image of Buddhism found in the following discussion may be problematic from the perspective of Buddhist studies *per se*, it is representative of the understanding of Buddhism found in such therapeutic applications. (As representations of Buddhism like these are repeated from one tertiary source to another, the sociology of knowledge creates a self-reinforcing cycle, and the representations become increasingly naturalized, that is, accepted as obviously true, in Western popular religious culture.)

Wada and Park note three “caveats” to the use of “the Buddhist approach” in grief counseling (676). The first caveat relates to the conflict between Buddhist and Western systems of belief as they represent them: “for individuals whose belief systems are deeply rooted in Western value systems, which emphasize linear causality, independence, and autonomy, the Buddhist approach may require a substantial shift in one’s frame of reference” (677). Looking back, this seems to have been the problem I faced with employing the story of Kisā Gotamī with the first audience, who were not attending the Christmas-time service in expect-

tation of being confronted by a substantial shift in their frame of reference. Although the ontological impermanence of the personal self is disjunct from concerns regarding ego-strength, misinterpreting *anātman* as primarily a denial of the existence of the personal self is common. The therapeutic difficulties consequent upon that nihilistic interpretation of *anātman* is the primary instance that Wada and Park offer: "the concept of no self in Buddhist psychology does not go hand in hand with one of the main goals of counseling which is to restore and enhance one's ego strength" (677, citing C.D. Tori and D.K. Nauriyal). The view that the purpose of Buddhist practice is to break down the ego may be termed the view that "Buddhist practice is ego-dystonic."

The second caveat is that meditation, presented here as the method for achieving mindfulness, may not be universally helpful (688). Focusing on grief work, Wada and Park note that "suppression rather than mindful acceptance may be the best coping strategies (*sic*) for the bereaved experiencing acute grief; by [being asked] to accept whatever emotions and thoughts arise, the bereaved may run the risk of losing emotional control" (677).<sup>6</sup>

The final of the three caveats concerns what the authors refer to as the "being mode" of Buddhist practice. The mode of "being" is contrasted with that of "doing," that is, an orientation in which tasks that can be completed, or accomplishments that can be finished, brought to closure. The "being mode" is identified by the authors with mindfulness, and is described as "a non-judgmental acceptance [that] enables one to be fully present in the here and now without dwelling on the past or worrying about the future" (668). The authors caution, however, that for

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<sup>6</sup> The very concept of "emotional control" and its positive valuation express values based in specific cultures.



some bereaved “grief may become more manageable to cope with, if it is broken down into small tasks” (677).

As highlighted in these three caveats, the distinction is quite often drawn between a Buddhist concern with *understanding* the workings of mind and a *therapeutic concern* with the contents of mind as articulated by Aronson above. The semiotic emphasis on control and management in Wada and Park—the control of the emotions, the management of grief—is also important to note in relation to the question of Buddhist pastoral care for the bereaved. If, as in Wada and Park, Buddhist practice is interpreted as an ego-dystonic mental technology, then clinicians attempting to employ such practices may either endanger a successful outcome, or can perhaps only with great difficulty adapt those practices to the goal of successfully traversing what is being presented by Wada and Park as the dangerous terrain of grief. Certainly grief has proven dangerous for Kisā Gotamī and the other mothers of Buddhist literature who have been driven mad. However, the underlying psychological imagery is radically different. Wada and Park’s image of the ego is that it is either fragile or strong, presenting a fundamentally agonistic image of the ego in contest with the world. In contrast imaging the ego as an ongoing process as found frequently in Buddhist thought allows for the teaching of impermanence to itself be therapeutic. As indicated by metaphor theory, the difference between these two images are not simply a matter of aesthetic choice, but rather formative of how we act. Understanding the difference between Buddhist conception of the self as an ongoing process (*saṃtāna*), and conceptions built around the idea of strength is just one reason that training in pastoral care needs to be based in the textual tradition of Buddhist philosophy of mind.

### **Ethics of *Upāya***

As noted above, this essay began as a reflection on my own failure to communicate effectively, which I understand as a failure of skillful means, *upāya*. (Since this form is more commonly used in popular Buddhist discourse than the fuller *upāyakauśalya*, the more familiar term will be employed here.) *Upāya* has become a focus of some contention in the literature of Buddhist ethics. Negative readings tend to interpret *upāya* as a warrant for deceitful or immoral actions (Goodman 2011), sometimes emphatically so (Keown). In contrast, positive readings see it as a rationale for doing good in an appropriate fashion (Reeves, Cheung).

In some cases these discussions treat *upāya* as though it were a univocal concept, specifically one that identifies a universal ethical principle and which, therefore, can be treated on a par with such principles as are found in Euro-American philosophical ethics. Euro-American philosophical ethics has a separate historical development of its concerns, concepts, and categories from the historical development of Buddhist thought. Under the interpretive system of Euro-American philosophical ethics, discussion of *upāya* is framed in terms of the ethics of ends and means, in which the positions that can be taken are already quite well structured. Because *upāya* is made to fit into one of the existing rhetorical roles, this is an instance of what Hans Blumenberg referred to as a "re-occupied position" (xxi). While there are usages of *upāya* in some canonical and paracanonic Buddhist sources that can be interpreted as indicating a universal ethical principle (Goodman 2014 22), it is worth stepping back and questioning whether such interpretations are not already informed by the assumptions of Euro-American philosophical ethics (Garfield 278, Mayer 210).<sup>7</sup> These include assuming an axiomatic-

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<sup>7</sup> This question indicates a need for critical reflection on the linguistic nuances and cultural contexts of specific texts, a task outside the scope of this essay.

deductive model of argumentation, and hence the centrality of universal principles that can play the role of axioms. It would also be an epistemological error based on ethnocentrism to consider the Buddhist use of narrative instead of axiomatic-deductive argumentation as an inadequate or inferior form of discourse (Toulmin).

A univocal treatment of *upāya* as only indicative of a universal ethical principle obscures other usages that are part of a broader nuancing of the concept, and which therefore challenge the univocal understanding. The semantic range of the term includes its being matched with wisdom (*prajñā*) and therefore synonymous with compassion. It is used scholastically to explain apparent contradictions in the teachings, and to categorize the teachings, as in conventional (*neyārtha*) and definitive (*nītārtha*). Most relevant to our interpretation here, it is also one of the ten perfections (*pāramitā*) of the bodhisattva path. (Buswell and Lopez 942, Pye 85). While there can be no one English language gloss that encompasses this full semantic range, it is valuable for us to keep it in mind. Buddhist authors were most likely aware of what may appear to us as the complex variety of this semantic range when they used the term.

As pointed out by Paul Copp in a discussion of the term *dhāraṇī*, it is inappropriate for one single interpretation of an idea to be “taken to be universally normative for that term and allowed to float free of its conditioning context” (501). More problematically, such univocal interpretations impose interpretations that distort the teachings by only presenting a single interpretation that is itself informed by Euro-American philosophical preconceptions. Rather than treating all uses of *upāya* as identifying a universal ethical principle, different usages need to be examined on their own and in their appropriate context. As Collins has suggested, “in connexion with any idea which seems puzzling, bizarre, profound, or whatever, the very first step in further understanding must be to seek the original text (or its translation) in order to set the idea in

its context" (21). Here I suggest that one instance of a distortion following from a univocal reading of *upāya* is the allegories of the Lotus Sūtra.

What the allegories of the Lotus Sūtra that employ *upāya* are pointing to is not the provision of general assistance through deception, as they are often represented to be. Rather they are analogies with the characteristically effective way in which the Buddha taught the dharma. Edward Hamlin has noted that in the Lotus Sūtra a

sharp distinction is drawn between the understanding of a *buddha* and that of a *bodhisattva*: in a dialogue between *buddhas*, communication of metaphysical truths takes place without artifice, while in the dialogue of a *buddha* and a *bodhisattva* the former must employ *upāya* in demonstrating his insights (91–92).

Although this does have moral implications, the issue is not that a *buddha* contravenes an absolute ethical principle. It is rather that what is contravened are the injunctions regarding the actions of monastics as found in the *Vinaya*: "The *buddha*'s special status as an enlightened being removes his behavior from the formulaic rubric of the *Vinaya* and places it in a realm of *upāyic* compassion" (Hamlin 92). This focus on the rules of the *Vinaya* also informs the claims of Asaṅga and Śāntideva: An "advanced practitioner who is motivated by compassion may sometimes see that an action which is forbidden by the usual rules of Buddhist moral discipline would actually be more effective at preventing suffering and promoting happiness than any action the rules would permit. Under such circumstances, that practitioner can permissibly break the rules out of compassion" (Goodman 2014 20). While it is unclear whether Goodman intends *Vinaya per se*, or *śīla* more broadly, the point is that the rules in question are those taken on by members of the Buddhist community, not absolute ethical principles.

Reeves identifies twenty-six stories used as teaching devices (245), of which the allegory of the burning house is perhaps the best known as an instance of *upāya*. A father returns to find his house on fire, and his three sons inside. Unaware of the danger, and busily at play, they do not respond to his calling them to come out. He then promises each of them the kind of cart they most desire—a goat cart, a deer cart and an elephant cart. Once outside, they realize the danger that had threatened them previously. The father goes on to give each the much more desirable reward of a great, white elephant cart. Analogously, the three sons are practitioners of the way of those who listen to the dharma (*śrāvakayāna*), the way of those who practice and realize on their own (*pratyekabuddhayāna*), and the way of those who practice both insight and compassion (*bodhisattvayāna*). The great, white elephant cart that all three receive at the end of the story is analogous to the single vehicle to full buddhahood, the *ekayāna*.

In this instance, *upāya* is not a universal ethical principle providing warrant for deceiving someone for their own benefit. Rather, the analogy points to efficacious teaching. The Buddha is skillful in his teaching of the three different vehicles, just as is a father who promises his inattentive sons the kind of carts they each most desire. As analogies, such examples of skillful teaching do not promote a universal ethical principle. Instead, *upāya* is a means of evaluating the Buddha's efficacy in teaching the dharma, an important part of the semantic range of the term.

Asaṅga is, for example, one author whose use of *upāya* is located in this semantic range. In Tatz's translation, rather than solely identifying a universal ethical principle, in one place Asaṅga says that the Buddha

. . . teaches with skill in means. In the course of teaching doctrine by means of literary expression with eight [quali-

ties] in order to reverse the misbehavior of those possessed of immoral behavior . . . he teaches so as to prepare the stingy for generosity and so forth. (124)

According to Asaṅga, in response to different kinds of questions, the skillful reply is (1) fitting, (2) connected, (3) congruent, (4) coherent, (5) skillful, (6) appropriate, (7) compliant, and (8) painstakingly resourceful (Tatz 123). Tsongkhapa's comment on this section is that in addition to the eight literary qualities "Skill in means' may also be interpreted as teaching doctrine in a way that will not give rise to hostility and cynicism" (Tatz 124). Note that in both Asaṅga's original and Tsongkhapa's commentary, although the semantic range includes other usages, "skill in means" (*upāya*) refers to the ability to teach the doctrine effectively. In this way it is not unlike the characteristic of *pratibhāna*, that is, eloquence, or in Graeme MacQueen's rendering, "inspired speech" (2005, 312). This is also a positively valenced characteristic shared by buddhas and by other teachers of the *dharma*.

Highlighting the multivocal character of *upāya* subverts any singular interpretation of the concept as a universal ethical principle. In relation to ethical theories generally Charles Hallisey has demonstrated that attempts at unified interpretations can only be misleading: "It is certainly not obvious that we should think that all of Buddhist ethics belongs to a single family of ethical theory" (35). The variety of usages of the concept of *upāya* in the literature can no more be characterized under a single formula than can the variety of ethical theories found throughout the Buddhist tradition.

*Upāya* as referring to evaluating the efficacy of a teacher is much more relevant to Buddhist pastoral care than problematically interpreting it as a universal ethical principle. As Mark Tatz has noted, Buddhist "ethics is not a speculative endeavor, but a basis for achievement" (1). In this interpretation, *upāya* is a positive moral injunction to attend closely

to the needs and expectations of one's audience so that the teachings can be effectively communicated, without creating resistance or discord, "hostility or cynicism." Compared to the abstract character of treating *upāya* as a universal ethical principle, an evaluative judgment about the efficacy of teaching may seem like a mundane and minimalist understanding of *upāya*. But in practical, everyday interactions, mundane and minimal may be more skillful.

As Buddhist chaplains operate in religiously diverse environments, they are certainly aware of the necessity of being responsive to the individual needs of the bereaved. Buddhist ministers, priests, and teachers also are expected to assist sangha members at times of emotional crisis, sangha members who have their own diverse needs and expectations. It may well be skillful, therefore, to provide consolation at one point and teach impermanence at another. The Buddhist tradition provides many resources that can be interpreted in a consoling fashion. An understanding of rebirth as the continuity after death of a person's actions, including their love for friends and relatives, might be one such that would not require hypostatizing a permanent self. Similarly, as a transition between this life and full awakening, the Pure Land of Amitābha (Sukhāvātī) can be presented in a consoling fashion. Individual chaplains, ministers, priests and teachers can find in their own traditions resources for such assistance to those in need of consolation at one phase or another in the process of grief work. However, to provide the first audience described above, the surviving families of suicides, with no message of consolation to balance the message of impermanence was unskillful.

## Conclusion

Since the story of Kisā Gotamī is an open text, recourse to “the original meaning” only functions as a warrant for some contemporary interpretation. In attempting to make contemporary use of the story, the first step is to assume that the authors and their audiences do not share our ideas about value, the nature of the human condition, or the character of the ground, path and goal. In my experience, holding one’s own worldview as local and not universal is not an easy task, since it entails becoming aware of one’s culturally transmitted and socially reinforced ideologies, as well as questioning one’s own values, assumptions, and beliefs. Such self-reflection provides an opportunity to see how audiences themselves might selectively highlight the teachings in particular interpretive ways. Therefore, rather than simply appropriating the story for our own use, we need to reflect on the goals that we presume are of value, that is, the ends toward which we will put this or any other story to use.

Just as the philological context of the story of Kisā Gotamī is needed to see it with greater nuance and awareness of our own interpretive contribution, so also does the concept of *upāya* need to be placed in a broader literary context. Formulaic treatments abstracting it as simply part of “Mahāyāna ethics” contribute to it being understood univocally in terms familiar to Euro-American philosophical ethics, specifically as a warrant for deception, for a radical relativism, or for a situation ethics (cf. Morgan 228, 231, Schroeder 18). The means–ends debate is so profoundly rooted in Euro-American philosophical ethics that without attention to the philological context, that interpretive frame will be unwittingly imposed on the concept. An alternative understanding of *upāya*, one that makes it accessible to all members of the Buddhist community (Cheung 375), is self-critical reflection on both philologically responsible



use of source materials and the efficacy of our own attempts to convey the dharma to others.

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