



Narratives of Grief, Narratives of Care

by Sarah Fleming

Whether through memorials to honor ancestors lost to racist violence, in landscapes of experience revealed through grief, during MRI scans, at the bedside of dying patients, or in close-knit prison sanghas, the authors in this issue embody and enact different modes of care and, in the process, testify to the liberatory power that stories hold.

In a well-known Buddhist story, a young mother, Kisā Gotamī, goes out searching for medicine for her dead son. Mad with grief, she wanders from house to house with her son at her hip, met at each doorstep with confusion and sometimes scorn. Finally, a wise man points her towards the Buddha, presenting him as one who will know the medicine she seeks. Following these directions, Kisā Gotamī approaches the Buddha and asks him what she can do to heal her son. His instructions are simple: get a pinchful of mustard seeds from a house where no son or daughter or, indeed, anyone else has died before.

With her heart lightened, Kisā Gotamī returns to moving about the village from house to house, this time seeking not medicine but mustard seeds. When she arrives at the first house, she asks if the family has any such seeds. They do. But when she asks if in this house anyone had died, she is met with the reply, “What are you saying, woman? The living, indeed, are few; only the dead are many.”¹ She returns the mustard seeds, stating that they are not medicine for her

Sarah Fleming 2021: “Narratives of Grief, Narratives of Care,” *Insight Journal* 47: 50–55.

son, and moves on to the next house. But house after house she is met with the same response. Evening comes, and she still has not taken mustard seeds from even a single home. Slowly she comes to realize that not only the households she has visited but *all* the homes in the entire village have known death. Before, she thought that her son alone had died; now she sees that death knows no bounds—indeed, as she reflects, “in the entire village, the dead alone outnumber the living.”² With this realization, she is able to accept her son’s death, her heart now firm as she leaves his body behind in the forest. She returns to the Buddha and asks him to ordain her.

It can be easy to get lost in the extravagance of Kisā Gotamī’s story—to place it in a world far from our own and to mythologize it as a distant folktale. In this year filled with grief, however, Kisā Gotamī’s story takes on new meaning. It asks us to consider the darkest depths of human despair, but it also speaks to the most mundane—to the everyday losses we undergo and how we might make sense of them. This is a story about grief, and extreme grief at that, but it is also a story about stories and the work they perform, as it is only through learning to attend to the narrative of another that Kisā Gotamī can find freedom. Listening to the sometimes repetitive stories that surround her, she cultivates an attentiveness that is contagious and that, over time, enables her to treat the scenes of her daily life as meditation objects. The scenes she encounters, as the narratives about Kisā Gotamī tell us, now address her directly, offering her language for her experience and guiding her towards awakening.³ Read in this light, Kisā Gotamī’s story poses powerful questions about how we interact with narrative. In particular, what do Buddhist narratives offer in the face of grief and trauma? How can stories accompany us as we learn to care for ourselves and those around us? And how can they help us heal?

The authors in this issue take up these questions from a variety of perspectives, lineages, and vocations, weaving together canonical narratives and scriptural teachings with the

everyday stories of their lives. Whether through memorials to honor ancestors lost to racist violence, in landscapes of experience revealed through grief, during MRI scans, at the bedside of dying patients, or in close-knit prison sanghas, these contributors embody and enact different modes of care and, in the process, testify to the liberatory power that stories hold.

Often, such stories start with a name. When interviewing 89 young adults for a project on Asian American Buddhism, writer and former chaplain Chenxing Han always began by asking: “What is your name and what does your name mean?” For Han, a name is a starting point. It “suggests that there is a story to tell”—and a story worth telling. Positioning naming as a ritual act of remembrance and resistance, she honors and draws out Asian American narratives that are typically caricatured, flattened, or erased altogether, whether those of the nineteenth-century Asian immigrants who played a pivotal role in establishing American Buddhism, the Japanese Americans incarcerated during World War II, or contemporary victims of anti-Asian racism. Each of these individuals has a story worth telling, Han reminds us, and each of these stories is not separate from our own. The ritual act of honoring these stories and the ancestors who carry them can help us remember that in the face of grief and despair, “healing is possible”—and that perhaps, as Han intimates, linked together through narrative and name, “*we* might be the very bodhisattvas we’ve been waiting for.”

In “A Country Called Witness,” Georgia Kashnig takes up similar themes as they navigate grief as a landscape of experience that includes the countries of Witness, Friendship, and Play. Witness is “vast and endless, stretching as far as the eye can see”; Friendship is found unexpectedly; Play emerges out of a sense of lostness, as “what is unfamiliar arrives as possibility.” Becoming acquainted with each of these terrains has changed Kashnig as a person, but also as a reader: they now feel particularly drawn to narrative

texts. For Kashnig, narrative “is not simply a story; it is an invitation to a world, and an invitation to ourselves.” With this invitation in mind, they turn to a scene from the *Sutra of the Collection of Past Activities of the Buddha* in which King Suddhodana addresses members of the Sakya clan following Queen Māyā’s death. Reading this passage with a mind toward witness, friendship, and play in turn, Kashnig explores how reading with a posture of care can transform the way we treat ourselves, others, and the world around us.

For Karen Derris, a scholar of Buddhist narrative and ethics, this connection between reading and caregiving is instinctual: after being diagnosed with terminal brain cancer, Derris turned to books—particularly, books of Buddhist narrative. Familiar narratives reach out to her, “expanding [her] understanding of what is real” and accompanying her through her new, embodied experience of impermanence. In an excerpt from her forthcoming memoir, *Storied Companions: Cancer, Trauma, and Discovering Guides for Living in Buddhist Narratives* (Wisdom Publications, July 2021), she revisits one story that has become a companion to her in her illness: that of Prince Siddhartha’s first journey outside his father’s palace. Attending closely to the three forms of impermanent bodies Siddhartha encounters, Derris offers a model of reading that centers what it feels like to be seen, held, and guided by Buddhist stories in the moments we need them most.

Stories can also function as a mode of meaning making for caregivers, as Bill Crane attests in “Into the Heart of Suffering: Lessons From the Story of the Tigress.” A palliative care chaplain at a safety-net hospital, Crane accompanies patients as they face serious illness and, in some cases, the hovering likelihood of death. Reflecting on his work through the jataka tale of the hungry tigress, Crane questions whether coming face to face with so much suffering might actually be an opportunity to recognize the mutuality of care. As Crane points out, Buddhist teachings and stories “are never meant to be swallowed whole but

rather to be carefully considered in light of our lived experiences.” Interweaving conversations with patients and meditations on the Story of the Tigress, Crane offers a glimpse into how Buddhist stories can help us reorient towards the suffering of those around us and ground us in compassion and care.

Myokei Caine-Barrett, Shonin frames this property of Buddhist teachings as “the Dharma polish[ing] the mirror of our lives.” The first woman to hold the position of bishop in the Nichiren Order of North America, Caine-Barrett now leads two sanghas in the Texas prison system. In “Practice for Self, Practice for Others: A Prison Minister’s Reflections on Faith and Freedom,” Caine-Barrett shares her own narrative of becoming a prison minister, interspersing teachings from the *Lotus Sūtra* and Nichiren Shonin’s writings throughout. While participating in her first prison program, Caine-Barrett noticed that basic Buddhist concepts began showing up in her daily life. As she learned to live the teachings of the *Lotus Sūtra*, the scent of freedom she and her colleagues gave off was contagious: “like uncaged birds, our freedom produced a desire for freedom in those around us.” In this way, Caine-Barrett suggests that the personal transformation made possible through continued practice and study can radiate outwards into our relationships in unexpected ways, demonstrating one of the primary principles of the Nichiren schools of Buddhism: *jigyo keta*, or “practice for self, practice for others.”

Perhaps *jigyo keta* can serve as an aspiration for this collection as a whole: that through our encounters with the stories of each contributor, we might be better present to ourselves and, in the process, to those around us. The narratives in this issue might “polish the mirror of our lives” and help us see ourselves—and the teachings—more clearly. As these stories address us directly, they might teach us to attend more deliberately to the stories that are often ignored or deliberately suppressed, whether due to systemic racism or our own discomfort with the visceral impermanence that the

aging, sick, and dying reveal. Through the vulnerability and open-heartedness they model, these authors offer an opportunity to cultivate our compassion and step into our own vulnerabilities, reorienting towards our own suffering. Taken together, these essays compassionately confront us and remind us that things don't have to remain as they are, as they subvert our expectations and expand our understanding of possibility. In short, they might better equip us to grieve and to care and to love.

As you read through this issue, then, may these stories be a guide to you. May they accompany you through the countries of your grief, through uncertain encounters with your own impermanence, through moments when everything seems too much to bear. May they reach out to you and call you by name, all the while pointing (impossibly) towards what is possible.

¹ DhA 8.13: *Kiṃ vadesi, amma? Jīvamānā hi katipayā, matakā eva bahukā.* Or, in another version (ThīA 10.1), “In this house, who can count the dead?”

² DhA 8.13: *sakalagāmeṇi pana jīvantehi matakāva bahutarā.*

³ DhA 8.13: *tassā sammukhe nisīdītvā kathento viya:* as if speaking having sat down face to face with her. After Kisā Gotamī takes the flickering of a flame as her meditation object, the Buddha, seated in his perfumed hut, radiates his presence to her and repeats her insight back to her *as if speaking seated face to face with her.* This detail offers a potent description of the act of reading as well (and *kathento* can also literally mean reading): a story reaches out across space and addresses us face to face.