

“Just Eliminate the Illness; Do Not Eliminate Dharmas”: A Case Study on the Lived Experience of a Buddhist Surviving Spouse

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Abstract

There are many academic publications, based on Western theories, which investigate suffering from spousal loss, which can threaten an individual's physical health and psychological well-being; however, few studies examine how Buddhists tackle this difficulty. This case study, by in-depth semi-structured interviews, explores the lived experience of a Buddhist surviving spouse who underwent the sudden loss of her husband. Qualitative data was analysed by interpretative phenomenological analysis, with the aid of ATLAS.ti 7, a software package. In order to enhance the trustworthiness, peer analysis (inter-rater reliability=92%) and member-checking were adopted. Findings revealed that the bereaved Buddhist was living with feelings of guilt, but when she applied Buddhist wisdom, including the teaching of the law of interdependent origination and cause-and-effect, hopes of a reunion in future lives due to the cycle of birth and death, impermanence, living in the present moment, self-awareness, and strengthening capabilities to deal with afflictions, this surviving spouse could let the sense of guilt peacefully coexist with her being. This aligns with the doctrine of “just eliminate the illness; do not eliminate dharmas”. This case hints at tackling distress through a deeper understanding of the formation of the phenomenal world, and mind management, implying that Buddhist philosophy not only offers alternative views to interpret the continual relationship between survivors and the deceased, but also inspires practitioners of helping professions to extend the horizons of their therapeutic services.

Keywords: bereavement, impermanence, *karma*, spousal loss, suffering

Grief, caused by the indelible loss of a beloved one, and indicating a permanent “loss of relationship” (Nesse, 2005, p. 202), is one of the life’s major difficulties (Büchi et al., 2007; Malkinson, 2010), in particular, sudden spousal loss (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005; Khosravan et al., 2010). The death of a spouse is rated as the highest stressful life event (Holmes & Rahe, 1967), yielding disruptive impacts on physical health (Ong et al., 2011), and it is accompanied by various levels of emotional disorder symptoms (Bowlby, 1980; Chan et al., 2012; Chan et al., 2011; Hensley & Clayton, 2013; Iglewicz et al., 2013; Karam et al., 2013; Pies, 2013); for instance, anxiety and depression, especially in the female population (DiGiacomo et al., 2013), whose daily functions are affected (Lund et al., 2010; Richardson, 2010; Schwarzer & Schulz, undated).

Although grief and mourning vary from person to person (Hensley, 2008), these bereaved individuals usually undergo four phases of mourning (Bowlby, 1980): numbness, searching for the deceased, disorganisation, and re-organisation in order to cope with this adversity by “reducing, mastering, and tolerating” (Stroebe, 2010, p. 274) the loss, thus achieving healthy mourning (Hoppes & Segal, 2010). Grief, as part of the healing process (Cholette & Gephart, 2012), engenders disparate psychological reactions, including making sense of the loss (Neimeyer, 2000), personal growth (Carnelley et al., 1991), feelings of guilt, and continuing bonds with the deceased (Malkinson, 2010). The latter two interweave frequently (Paul, undated).

Forming a continuing bond (Bowlby, 1980) in order to maintain an engaged relationship for any “unfinished business” (Kübler-Ross, 1997, p. 187) following the death of a beloved one (Small, 2001) accents a coping strategy of mourning (Baker, 2001) to accept the reality of the loss (Ronen et al., 2009), and its “adaptiveness” (Field et al., 2003, p. 111). However, there is an ongoing debate about continuing or relinquishing such bonds (Stroebe et al., 2005), which is associated with the process and strategy of tackling loss, coping styles (Stroebe, 2010), values, and cultural influences (Ronen et al., 2009).

Religion, a method of healing wounds (Kübler-Ross, 1974; Ozorak, 1996) and reflecting cultural values, offers solace to individuals who suffer from trauma (Seirmarco et al., 2011). This helps to attain better psychological adjustment (Ross et al., 2009), in particular, bereavement rituals (Nwalutu, 2012) benefiting “restoration of functioning” (Shear, 2010, p. 358). While voluminous studies examine how to deal with bereavement in Western religions, such as Coleman, Ivani-Chalian, and Robinson (2004) for the aged, Flatt (1988) for grief counselling, and Pond (2012) for children, research from the perspective of Eastern religions such as Buddhism may have a different view on this issue.

Buddhists possess emotions of grief, such as guilt, regret, and anger, just like most people (Kübler-Ross, 1981), and these can be caused by unresolved issues between the deceased and the survivor (Goss & Klass, 1997), for which caring practitioners have started studying grief and bereavement counselling based on Buddhist resources, involving Japanese, Tibetan, and early Buddhism. Despite the psychological interaction in which the survivor and the deceased hold a symmetrical power through which to benefit or hurt each other (Klass & Goss, 1999), continuing the relationship between the bereaved and the deceased remains a critically cultural concern among

the Japanese, as many of their customs are rooted in Buddhism (Klass, 2001). Moreover, ritual healing (Kwan, 2007) as one of the major tasks of Buddhist priests (Kawamura, 2000; Nakasone, 2000) (for instance, funeral and ancestor rituals) (Klass, 1996) is connected to blessing the deceased and leading the dead to a positive next life. In contrast, Tibetan Buddhism aims to transcend grief (Goss & Klass, 1997), and “deconstruct egocentric grasping” (Goss & Klass, 1997, p. 392).

By comparing Buddhist psychology, and applying it to grief counselling in Western models, aided by a case illustration and a reflection on group intervention, one study discussed the concept of non-dualism (Kaori & Park, 2009) which might potentially be integrated into grief counselling. Moreover, Chen (2000) formulates a grief counselling model, supported by a passage about spousal loss in *Āgama*, one of the important collections of *Theravāda*¹. The model involves bereavement events, reactions of grief, the counselling process, and effectiveness, as explained by the four noble truths². Although this attempt provides an alternative view for grief counselling, its focus on textual analysis restricts it to a literary theoretical discourse, without support from personal narratives of the bereaved.

Since Buddhism is one of the three embedded religious faiths among the Chinese (Neuberger, 2005), further investigations into how Chinese Buddhists expunge misery towards the death of a beloved one potentially contribute to the Chinese culture, influencing large population. This current research explores a deeper understanding of the lived experience of a Chinese Buddhist relieving the feelings of guilt during the bereavement of spousal loss, through Buddhist wisdom. This has helped the informant to be able to live with the distress. This case study may inspire diverse views for caring professionals who deal with clients affected by grief and bereavement to consider.

Research Design

This exploratory research adopts a single case study, an empirical inquiry (Yin, 1989), which examines real life (Soy, 1997) through a microscopic lens (Hamel, Dufour, & Fortin, 1993), and achieves insight (Yin, 2003) through relatively new topics (Eisenhardt, 1989; Nithsdale et al., 2008; Tellis, 1997; Tsoukas, 1989). The participant, Pureté de Lotus (her *dharma* name), being recruited through electronic mail, fulfilled the selection criteria, which included the following: first, she is a Buddhist; second, she is a bereaved survivor; third, she is willing to share her personal experience; and lastly, she was emotionally stable during the interview process.

In this case study, semi-structured, in-depth interview were conducted in Hong Kong in 2012, which were transcribed verbatim in Chinese. The transcriptions were analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis that explores the “sense of self” (Shinebourne & Smith, 2009, p. 164), subjective feelings and meaning of life of the insider (Clare et al., 2008; Jackson & Coyle, 2009; Smith, 1996). The unit of analysis was an individual (n=1), and the analysis process was aided by ATLAS.ti 7, a computer-assisted programme. In order to enhance the trustworthiness, this study adopted member-checking to ensure the accuracy of transcriptions and data

¹ *Theravāda* (the doctrine of the elders 上座部佛教)

² The four noble truths (*catvāri-ārya-satyāni* 四聖諦): *duḥkha* (suffering 苦諦), *samudaya* (cause of suffering 集諦), *nirodha* (ceasing of suffering 滅諦), and *mārga* (path of ceasing of suffering 道諦).

interpretation, and a co-analysis by two analysts (the principle researcher and a peer analyst) coding separately and comparing the coding results, with a inter-rater reliability of 92%. Two “super-ordinate themes” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 107) (“just eliminate the illness”, and “don’t eliminate the dharmas”) emerged from five “emergent themes” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 91) (easing feelings of guilt, thought transformation towards life and death, mourning rites, living in the present moment and self-awareness, and developing capabilities).

Findings and Analyses

The Bereaved Buddhist

Pureté de Lotus (hereafter simply referred to as Lotus), a Chinese middle-aged social worker, has been living in Hong Kong since her husband passed away in 2009. She met her husband on a European tour and stayed in France after she married. Enjoying a simple life there, she was eager to develop her spirituality and returned to Hong Kong study Buddhism, something her husband also encouraged her to do. The couple stipulated a gradual moving arrangement, in which Lotus went to Hong Kong first following which her husband would take a sabbatical leave and join her later. Lotus settled down smoothly and delighted in her studies until one day when she received a message about her husband’s sickness. She immediately returned to France but found her husband doing well. This made her husband agree to her leaving after a few days. However, she subsequently received heart breaking news about her husband’s sudden death (due to latent aetiology) after returning to Hong Kong.

Lotus heavily blamed herself for missing her chance to be with her husband in his last days, implicating herself in not keeping her marriage vow to look after him. This made her feel depressed, regretful, and guilty (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005). While she continued her Buddhist studies, Lotus prudently managed her guilty feelings in trying to “eliminate the illness” (where “illness” metaphorically represents negative emotions towards her guilty feelings); but “[did] not eliminate the *dharma*” (where “*dharma*” connotes her guilt due to spousal loss). Being a Buddhist, she invoked insightful reactions towards her pain and regret by using Buddhist teachings along with her coping strategies.

“Just Eliminate the Illness; Do Not Eliminate Dharmas”

Buddhism was developed in India (Suzuki, 1938/1981) 2,500 years ago by the *Buddha*, which title refers to an enlightened person (Gethin, 1998). Its aim is annihilating distress (Conze, 1953), called perfect stillness³, and attaining inner happiness. *Mahāyāna*, one of the contemporary mainstreams of Buddhism, expounds on the suffering yielded by misperception of the phenomenal world, and on freedom of affliction through mind management (Suzuki, 1938/1981). In particular, the *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra*, a major *Mahāyāna* canon (Watson, 1997), elaborates on this concept summarising the teaching of “just eliminate the illness; do not eliminate dharmas”⁴. This *Mahāyāna* doctrine elicits that sentient beings have to

³ perfect stillness (*nirvāṇa* 涅槃)

⁴ “Just eliminate the illness; do not eliminate dharmas. [Bodhisattvas] teach [sentient beings] so that they eliminate the basis of their illness.” (McRae, 2004, p. 111) 「但除其病，而不除法，為斷病本而

manage their emotional reactions (the metaphorical illness) towards life's challenges; collectively termed attachment and vexations (Ng, 1994), from which they transfer challenges as such (referring to the dharmas) to the assets of helping other people, thus becoming a *bodhisattva* (a person who devotes her/himself to altruism) (Ng, 1994). Challenges are neutral, but uncontrollable and non-autonomous. However, sentient beings can manipulate only their emotional and psychological responses; therefore, they should not insistently try to alter their challenges, which more heavily aggravate the frustrations they experience. Instead, they should calmly see reality as it is and find ways to experience challenges positively, resulting in self transformation. The participant in this study underwent this process incurred through her spousal loss, as detailed below.

“Just Eliminate the Illness”.

The “illness” for Lotus refers to her emotional responses towards feelings of guilt and grief, for which she adopted the strategies of easing her feelings of guilt, thought transformation towards life and death, and mourning rites. Inspired by Buddhist teachings, such as impermanence⁵, and cause-and-effect⁶, Lotus was able to tackle her “illness” in a relax manner, by transforming her thoughts, and continuing the relationship with her late husband spiritually through mourning rites.

Easing feelings of guilt. Loss and guilty feelings always intertwine (Lamb, 1988), but guilt implicitly accepts a personal responsibility for the misfortune (Doosje & Branscombe, 1998). Lotus felt a compunction about not fulfilling her wedding pledge to stay beside her late husband when he was sick. Her absence in the last phase of his life insinuated a personal failure in loving him, and became unfinished business that she could never complete. During that time, she was unable to look after herself, remembering:

“His passing away makes my heart break. ... Friends helped me do many things, even very tiny, trivial things. ... I am so lucky that many people helped me, my friends in Hong Kong, friends in France, my family. Now, many people are still helping me.”

Time goes by but the hurt continues. Lotus was unwilling to return to the institute where she studied Buddhism because the place marked a mental scar underscoring the loss of her beloved husband. Within those years, her guilty feelings occasionally attacked her, provoking painful regrets. Instead of avoiding the pain (Shear, 2010), she faced the bereavement, accepted “the reality of the loss” (Carr & Jeffreys, 2011, p. 87), and frankly admitted her persistent feelings of guilt, revealing:

“[The feelings of guilt] doesn't increase. It may have reduced a little, at least I feel so. [It] will appear, occasionally. But, ... I won't deliberately let the feelings of guilt disappear. It's still there.”

Lotus had not considered whether or not she could remove her feelings of guilt, but had instead learned to live with it (de Silva, 2012), coexisting with imperfection. Her disregard for negative emotions towards her guilt pulled her to re-develop herself,

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⁵ impermanence (*anitya* 無常)

⁶ cause-and-effect (*hetu-phala* 因果)

but this did not interrupt her daily life. Even though her feelings of guilt sometimes arose, for which she would cry and feel upset, she accepted this wound as part of her life, which drove her to manage herself better.

“I also can let go gradually. Perhaps, [I] can’t ever let it go, then I don’t let it go. ... It (the feelings of guilt) doesn’t hinder my life. ... Then, you feel this is part of your life. ... I think I don’t know how to let go. ... There is still a scar. ... Perhaps, it is difficult to ask myself not to feel guilty when [I] feel guilty. Therefore, it is better to do something positive.”

Her acceptance of these guilty feelings made Lotus reduce her resistance to face the distress. When she admitted her misfortune, she was able to manage the feelings, which released her from the emotional reactions towards her guilt; that is, she was putting into practice the principle of “just eliminate the illness”. The reasons for this achievement were related to thought transformation and emotional ventilation through mourning rites.

Thought transformation towards life and death. Having experienced her spousal loss, Lotus viewed life and death differently based on Buddhist philosophy, such as impermanence, and cause-and-effect, through which she could cope with bereavement. Such notions of interdependence and inter-affinity, as further explained below, reveal that life and death are unnecessarily antagonistic but may hint at something ahead. With insight into the unity of life and death (death is the inception of the next life), Lotus gradually alleviated her grief and optimistically began creating favourable conditions for her desire to meet her husband again in a future life, relating:

“Accepting the interconnection of life and death ... [There is] no coming, no going. Which is the cause? Which is the consequence? That is, they are intertwined. I won’t grieve so much for my husband’s leaving. Perhaps, there is a cause missing somewhere. Another factor will create better conditions elsewhere.”

Impermanence. Life is powerlessly predicted and controlled (Long, 1975), for which Lotus had a strong feeling of uncertainty, which explains that all beings are transient and temporal, including herself. This allowed her to realise her non-autonomy, regarding which she explained:

“Impermanence ... Something you ... you can predict. But, the outcome doesn’t appear 100% as your ideal. ... That is, that stuff is insubstantial, void. Furthermore, human beings per se are non-self. You can never follow some fixed point – what you are you are.”

Despite capriciousness occurring across life that never be predicted, Lotus learned to attain an ordinary mindset in order to accept the consequences as long as she had done her utmost to carry out her own plans. Hence, she was worry-free and lived with success and failure, or gratification and frustration.

Cause-and-effect. Lotus interpreted her situation as being that her marriage had originated from her previous lives in which her husband owed her and thus loved her in this life for compensation, or vice versa, eliciting her understanding of cause-and-effect:

“[It] may be a previous cause. ... This is the cycle of cause-and-effect.”

Maybe, he did something bad to me in the past, and so I do something bad to him now. ... Perhaps, he owed me in our previous lives, and so he had to repay me in this life. [He] owed me something. This is the mutual benefit between cause and effect. ... Was it that he treated me badly in the past, or I treated him badly? What was it like to be bad or not bad?"

Lotus further perceived cause-and-effect as an opportunity in which the loss prepared them for their reunion in a future life (Conant, 1996), which energised her to look after herself and do something good for her late husband in order to take advantage of this opportunity, accounting for it like this:

"Perhaps, it's paving a path and planting a cause for the next life. I need to do more for him in my next life. ... I think I need to cultivate some good causes. ... I hope to plant more positive seeds, and hope that they will help us meet in the future. That is, we believe we have future lives, the cycle of birth and death, recycling. I also hope to meet him."

Lotus optimistically interpreted impermanence and cause-and-effect, according to the Buddhist connotations, embracing the opportunities to continue their marriage in a future life striving to take care of herself better.

Mourning rites. Mourning rites offer mourners the opportunity to alleviate complex emotions after the loss of a loved one and then reintegrate into the community (Bowker, 1997). Using a variety of "mourning aids" (Weinbach, 1989, p. 58), Lotus sensed her inner feelings related to continuing her bonds with the deceased through this ritualistic performance (Aguilar & Wood, 1976). She treasured a spiritual connection with her late husband more than the physical liaison, valuing that spiritual connection as long-lasting without geographical constraints, thus delineating:

"Our relationship also has its beautiful side. It's also perfectly halted at an appropriate time. I'm not saying it's an end. We stopped at some point in time, and I also feel there is still a certain spiritual connection between us. That is, apart from love, the connection is spiritual."

The spiritual connection was realised through tracing her late husband's past experiences with which Lotus might not be as familiar. She returned to France and visited places her husband had been to before in order to retrieve sweet memories, retain an impression of the days in which they had been united, and discover all his old stories that were new to her, as if she were in fact following him, recalling:

"Recently, for the stories he told me, I paid a visit, browsed in Paris. This left me with a deep impression. ... I felt I wanted to trace his footprints ... It was some very romantic feeling – that I could fall in love with him again. ... I tried to know him again, locate his footprints. ... So I then went to places he had visited. Would he have left any revelation for me?"

Also, Lotus shared her mourning rites with her husband's friends by gathering them to practise Tai-chi in front of his picture, displaying his friends' works of photography, and joining a marathon, illustrating that the more open she was to the memories, the greater opportunities she had to deal with grief and bereavement (Rubin, 1998). This not only showed respect to the deceased, but also converted Lotus's sorrow into energy; and more importantly, touched him spiritually, as she reminisced:

“He (her late husband) did Tai-chi in France. ... On that day, I bought a bunch of flowers and put it in front of his photo in a park. His fellow students did Tai-chi there. ... He likes taking photographs. [We] made a memorial party. ... We like taking photographs, bringing some photos. This is a kind of return to him. ... In memory of him, his friends organised a marathon a year later. Some really ran [the whole thing]. I just ran a short distance. Some were cheerleading. As a result, I also ran intensely.”

Although Lotus kept her husband’s effects for a long period of time, the possession of them maintained memories about them as a couple (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2005), and she finally decided to dispose of them. This process was a ritual for her, in which she struggled with the decision to burn these items. It marked an ambivalence towards spiritual and physical connections that she grasped, remembering:

“This year (2012), I actually burnt his stuff. ... [I brought] his old stuff to a friend’s house to burn it. ... Reluctant, reluctant! When burning, [I] felt this one piece can’t be burnt, so [I] kept it again. It would be pity if it were burnt! ... It is also a small ritual. I feel it’s good for him and me.”

“Do Not Eliminate Dharmas”.

“*Dharma*” for Lotus refers to guilt and regret due to the loss of her husband, an irreversible misfortune. Instead of being encapsulated in a “trauma membrane” (Catherall, 1986, p. 474) to avoid painful memories of the traumatic event, Lotus combated her vulnerability and transformed grief into motivation (Goss & Klass, 1997; Park & Halifax, 2011), resulting in enrichment of her life through adversities by living in the present moments and self-awareness, and by developing other capabilities. This transformation stemmed from her knowing self loving-kindness, by which she experienced Buddhist wisdom in theory, practice, and spirituality, bearing witness that religion contributes to self transformation (Ullman, 1989).

Living in the present moment and self-awareness. Lotus, as a Buddhist devotee, realised the essence of Buddhist wisdom, in particular, the here-and-now, and self-awareness. Concentrating on the present moment, she neither binged on remembering her husband and the loss, nor felt anxious about her single life. Through this practice, she was able to understand *anitya* (impermanence 無常) more deeply, including the uncontainable reality, through which understanding she reduced her grief, and the complaints regarding her doleful experience. Also, she strengthened her sensitivity to her emotional changes and psychological needs. Thus, she did not deny her vulnerability, but instead overcame her sense of helplessness by taking on deep breathing, chanting, reciting canons, or imaging a *bodhisattva*, reiterating that:

“Learning Buddhism is to live in the present moment, to rely on oneself, to have one’s own awareness. ... Sometimes I feel upset because our relationship was very good. ... When [I] am sad, I will breathe, take deep breaths, and leave sadness to the present moment. This helps me to release the pressure. ... But in helpless situations, you still need to ... chant scriptures. Sometimes, this helps a little bit. ... I recite the Heart Sutra. Do these things. Bring Kuan-yin (a *bodhisattva*) to mind. This is also enhancement, protection.”

Developing capabilities. Lotus, as if she had been reborn through “lessons of loss” (Neimeyer, 2002, p. 940), became stronger in coping with her bereavement as well as more independent. She had to rely on herself, declaring that this loss brought her to re-develop her capability of coping with difficulties, looking after herself, and attempting new things (Bennett et al., 2010), for example, riding a bicycle – something she did not know how to do before. A significant reason for her happiness is the good journey she anticipated towards her late husband’s next life (Goss & Klass, 1997):

“In the past, I relied on my husband. But now I can’t rely on him, and I find someone else or myself to rely on. ... Death has brought me a lot. For instance, it has made me learn some new skills. For example, at that time, I regretted not riding a bicycle with him. ... But now I can ride a bicycle in down town, ride a mountain bike, and try many new things ...”

Advancing greater personal growth after loss and traumatic distress (Davis & McKearney, 2003; Harms & Talbot, 2007; Joseph, 2009; Pals & McAdams, 2004), often termed post-traumatic growth (Currier et al., 2013; Tallman et al., 2010), particularly in women (Büchi et al., 2009), Lotus treasured suffering and impermanence (Goss & Klass, 1997), from which she felt enlightened, attaining life meaning (Carr & Jeffreys, 2011; Goss & Klass, 1997; Katz, 2001). Her experience is similar to that of the Buddhist story of *Kisā Gotamī* (Kaklauskas & Olson, 2009; Ohnuma, 2007), who understood the true nature of reality after failing to find mustard seeds in households in which people had never experienced the loss of their loved ones. She was capable of “resolving grief [which starts] by accepting the reality of grief” (Goss & Klass, 1997, p. 387).

Discussion and Implications

This study reveals four aspects for discussion and implications for practice, involving first, non-dualism; second, religious coping; third, reunion in a future life; and lastly, limitations and future research directions.

Non-Dualism

In spite of assuaging grief over time (Rubin & Schechter, 1995), working through distress is difficult (Schick, 2011). Psychological, family, and social support for the bereaved are indispensable (Carr, 2010; Davies, 2011) during this process of change (Yalom & Sophia, 1988). However, a continuing relationship with the dead is always desirable to the survivor, which may really disrupt the daily functioning of the bereaved for a longer period of time. Renouncing the “relocation of the deceased” (Stroebe et al., 2005, p. 62) is therefore proposed, through loosening the bonds in order to reduce grief while maintaining the continuation psychologically. In contrast, encouraging the bereaved to “construct new biographies of the living and the dead” (Klass & Goss, 1999, p. 552) enables the survivor to enrich the meaning of his/her future life (Field et al., 2003) and transform grief into self autonomy and personal development (Field, 2010; Khosravan et al., 2010).

In the context of the above debate, this study addresses an alternative, that is, the idea of neither intentionally maintaining nor surrendering the bonds between the bereaved

and the deceased (Kaori & Park, 2009), thus relinquishing this dualistic choice (Wright, 2012). Dualism is a habitual thought model for sentient beings, forming either/or patterns; for instance, the choice to accept/reject, which compels individuals to struggle with the two extremes, thereby creating resistance, disapproval, and the tension of choosing correctly. This pressure invokes anxiety that negatively impacts mental health, especially for survivors who have experienced the loss of a loved one. When Lotus surrendered the choice between “guilt-proneness” (Flynn & Schaumberg, 2012, p. 125) and guilt avoidance, she overcame her emotional responses to the misfortune, and learned to live with her regret. This leaves another option for counsellors who deal with clients struggling with self-blame.

Religious Coping

Previous studies indicate a positive correlation between trauma and religious coping (Gerber et al., 2011). However, religious coping does not necessarily present a lot of rituals, usually utilising only the funeral ceremony. Instead, personal artefacts (Riches & Dawson, 1998) and the continuation of their common social networks are also emotional props, from which Lotus regained a “romanticism” (Katz, 2001, p. 272) and created spiritual companionship (Baker, 2001). This study reports a variety of religious coping strategies originating from the social activities and personal interests of the deceased, also offering references for bereavement counselling.

Reunion in a Future Life

Hope substantiates victims to live on (Kübler-Ross, 1969). Reunion in Heaven is the hope of Christian survivors (for instance, I Thessalonians 4:13-18, KJV/AV [Holy Bible, 1991]), while the hope of reunion in a future life was the result of Lotus’s “optimistic explanatory style for negative events” (Ho et al., 2008, p. 473) through the teachings of the law of dependent origination⁷ and cause-and-effect, so that she accepted her husband’s passing away, and learned to enjoy the present moment (Fawcett, 2013) with self-loving-kindness. This significant idea from the survivor dimension urges counsellors not only to non-judgementally listen to their clients (Wang, 2007) but also to facilitate them to live well without the deceased (Worden, 1991).

Limitations and Future Research Directions

This case study presents the personal experience of a Buddhist survivor, which supplies an in-depth narrative that does not aim for generalisation. However, it reveals insight into tackling self-blame through Buddhist teachings, which may invite further discussions on how to apply these ideas to non-Buddhists. Moreover, “do not eliminate dharmas” involves two levels: first, self healing and transformation; and second, altruism after transformation. This study focuses on the former while future research on the latter is also suggested.

⁷ the law of dependent origination (*pratītya-samutpāda* 緣起法)

Concluding Remarks

This single case study explores how a Buddhist survivor can cope with guilt springing from spousal loss, and how the survivor experienced the idea to “just eliminate the illness; do not eliminate dharmas” from the level of self transformation. The participant is able to live peacefully with her regret and retain an interconnectedness with the deceased through various mourning rites, resulting in converting frustration and adversities into energy and motivation, which gives many avenues to explore for grief and bereavement counselling. This research also proposes future directions towards application of Buddhist wisdom to non-Buddhists dealing with spousal loss.

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