APPROACH TO LOSS AND GRIEF

A Hindu Philosophical Perspective

In our continuing series on the needs of ethnic and immigrant groups at times of death and bereavement, we have already published an article on the needs of grieving Hindus in Britain, written by a consultant psychiatrist. The article below also has a Hindu perspective, but is written by a social worker, with the problems of other social workers in mind. Many of the points made in this article could be, however, of much wider relevance. They could be of interest to health care workers and counsellors, whether they are working with Hindus, people of other ethnic or immigrant backgrounds, or WASPs, for that matter (White Anglo-Saxon Protestants). We might all want to place a bit more emphasis on an intuitive view of life, a bit less on the rational view into which most of us westerners were reared and educated.—Ed.

by

REBA BHADURI Ph.D.

Senior Social Worker,
Withington Hospital,
Manchester



This article aims to highlight some of the issues from my PhD Thesis, which is a comparative study of the assumptions of **Bhagavad Gita,** the most popular and important landmark of Indian philosophy, and selected social casework models concerning death and grief.

I am attempting to focus on some of the essential features of Hindu philosophy which deal with the ways of coping with grief. A Hindu's ways of approaching death and grief are most likely to be influenced by such thought.

Only when I became involved with dying and bereaved patients, and especially with the relatives of the miners from the Goldborne mine disaster, did I become aware of the gap in social work literature and training, which hardly prepares a social worker to cope with such tragic eventualities of life.

Ruth Wilkes writes, "This managerial approach to social work means that people are undervalued when there are no solutions to their problems, because, strictly speaking, they have no specific problems but are merely caught up in life's general misfortunes."[1]

In our work it is necessary to take both an analytical and intuitive view of life as advocated by Hindu philosophy, so that as counsellors we can communicate a sense of the meaning of life with our clients. As a carer or counsellor our attitude to life, its purpose, and the stance we take towards destiny is as important as our knowledge from psychology and psychiatry. For instance, how can we help a dying or bereaved client if we ourselves fear death and condemn ourselves to a life of misery, or if we choose to be unaware of the paradoxes of life and see the world divided into good and bad and assume that death is a punishment for the bad? An eminent Hindu philosopher, S. Radhakrishnan, said, "Modern civilisation with its scientific temper and rationalistic self-sufficiency is creating a void, a restlessness which calls for a filling—by the spirit of philosophy . . . When a man gets a feeling or a fear that after all life means nothing, leads nowhere, no one is really necessary—he cannot live."[2]

Perhaps we may need to fall back on the spirit of philosophy to cope with loss and grief. There are two reasons for choosing Hindu philosophy with a view to applying some of the ancient wisdom to modern problems. Firstly, there has always been a prevalence of disease, death and suffering in India, being a tropical country. Many things take place in the open air: death is not private—it is fully watched. Hence concern with suffering and how to cope with it has been a main theme of Hindu philosophy. Every major system of Hindu philosophy begins with the practical problems of life and seeks the truth in order to alleviate pain and suffering. Philosophy is seen here as an art of life and as an art of looking at life. It seeks truth not for academic interest but for understanding the self. Social work is also an art of life because it seeks truth and makes us aware of ourselves.

Secondly, I am becoming increasingly aware of the importance of culture and religion to one's attitude to life and death. As society here has become multiracial, it is time to evaluate social work methods and models with a view to evaluating their effectiveness in dealing with clients from different religions and cultures, for example the Hindus.

Hindu philosophy started c. 2000 BC and has been kept alive up to the present day. It is one of the oldest collections of speculations about the nature of reality, the nature and causes of suffering. As G. Parrinder points out, Indian philosophy is neither "prescientific" nor "ancient"—it is about the ultimate truth which is ageless and important to men and women in any age.[3]

The most important features of Hindu philosophy are: (a) it holds a strong belief that the soul is indestructible. Life and death are but two phases of a single eternal cycle which is without beginning and end and which consists of vast periods of creation, maintenance and dissolution; (b) belief in the law of **Karma** or action is another key feature in Hindu philosophy, in its interpretation of the causes of suffering and the ways of dealing with it.

Practising the law of **Karma** and belief in the immortality of the soul are the two basic requirements prescribed by Hindu philosophy, which may help a person to cope with grief and attain inner peace of spirit. Peace of spirit, according to such thought, contains a sense of joyousness. It is not acceptance of the things one cannot change, or rejection of the world because

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it seems nothing but evil. It is acceptance of necessity, ultimately of death. According to Hindu thought, suffering becomes a problem when one cannot see that it is not the final truth. Like all other forms of existence it is an aspect of manifestation of the greater reality. This means grief or suffering, however distressing it may be, is still only relative. Attachment to anyone or anything as if they have an eternal validity gives rise to suffering.

The law of **Karma** needs a bit of elaboration. The word **Karma** literally means work or action. Generally speaking in Sanskrit the word means volitional action, and it shows the causation of things. **Karma** effects transmigration. Those whose conduct has been pleasant will have a pleasant re-birth, and those with unpleasant conduct will have an un-pleasant re-birth. Actions follow the soul from one life to another. The teaching is not necessarily fatalistic for one can improve one's lot by accumulating good **Karma.** The law of **Karma** advocates doing duty for the sake of duty without a selfish motive. Mahatma Gandhi described **Karma** yoga where one needs to give full effort with detachment.[4] In other words Hindu philosophy and especially the **Bhagavad Gita** recommends **Karma** yoga as a practical way of attaining peace by disassociating work from egoistic reasons. It is the journey rather than the arrival that matters. The emphasis is on appropriate action with dispassionate involvement.

Karma yoga can be useful for social workers or counsellors. We will not need to become so preoccupied or hindered by anxiety as to whether we are going to resolve someone's grief, or become eager to be seen as helpful, which is heavily related to our egoistic thinking. David Brandon wrote that we should try to do the job like a Zen archer who could fire an arrow with perfection when he was inwardly at peace. He is no longer hindered by the anxiety of whether or not he is going to hit the centre of the target[5].

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CONFERENCE IN 1985

There will be an **International Symposium on Grief and Bereavement** in Jerusalem between 11th and 14th November, 1985. It is organised by the Division of Rehabilitation, Israel Ministry of Defence, and the Israel Rehabilitation Society. Main topics will include: Bereavement (in Childhood, of Parents, after Violence), Cultural Factors in Grief, the Nature of the Mourning Process, Crisis Intervention, Counselling (the Bereaved, Friends of the Bereaved), Training of Counsellors, the Rehabilitation Approach, Religion & Bereavement, the Therapeutic Approach to Prolonged Mourning, Social Rehabilitation of the Widowed, Long-Term Effects, the Impact of Bereavement on Family Dynamics.

The conference is open to health care workers, funeral directors, social workers, socialogists, religious and community leaders. Participants wishing to present a paper should submit an abstract of not more than 200 words to the Secretariat before 1st May, 1985. Their address is: International Symposium on Grief and Bereavement, PO Box 50006, Tel Aviv 61500, Israel.