

The Trauma of Losing a Son

Buddha often teaches true stories in the sutras. These stories are used in Buddhist practices as references to correct bad conducts. The following is a story that talks about the trauma after losing a son. This is originally from chapter 2 of the *Birth Sutra (Jātaka Sūtra)* taught by the Buddha, a section that talks about the suffering of separation from what we love. Its content is as follow:

One day, while the Buddha was in Jetavana Vihara, Sravasti, there was a man whose only son passed away. This son was supposed to carry on the man's business into the next generation. Due to the sorrow of losing his son, he ran into insanity and started to act differently. He checked from room to room, searched numerous courtyards, and ran through streets and alleys, looking for his son and cried: "My son, come to see me. Where can I find you?" While crying, he unwittingly walked away from the city and came to the assembly in Jetavana Vihara. He was standing in front of the Buddha without saying a word.

The Buddha saw him and asked: "What happened to you? You looked calm before, but now you have become disturbed?" The man told Buddha: "My only son had died and I am not willing to let go. I am terribly distracted. I have become very old but I still have to face the death of my son. Such grief is bothering my mind. Because of wanting to find my son, I can't help

myself but opening the window in the hall and called out loud: ‘Son! Come back to see me!’”

At the time the Buddha told the man: “Because desire towards family members always produces attachments to loved ones. This will cause numerous sorrows and despair when they pass on. These sorrows will appear continuously as one mourns of such departures and cries. While there is encounter, there will be eventual departure. While one enjoys the accompaniment of someone or with something, one would eventually lose such a possession.” After hearing the teaching from Buddha, the man understood that all mundane matters are impermanent, changeable, illusory and unreal. Feeling back to normal self, he immediately took refuge in Buddha, accepting His teachings and keeping the pure precepts. Afterwards, he paid obeisance to Buddha and went home.

From the story above, we can observe three important points. The first is called the suffering of separation from what we love such as the separation from someone upon death. Since sentient beings do not understand the true meaning behind this suffering, when they merely notice their family member departing or passing away, they would cry and suffer terribly arousing a lot of attention. Family members are regarded as one’s self-belonging. It is referred to as external self-belonging according to Buddha teachings. This is the second point. The average people mourn profusely as he or she loses a family member. The third key point is that since family members are regarded as one’s self-belonging, they are considered as belonging to and revolving around oneself. The individual will thus not be willing to part from

this self. This self is actually formed by the five aggregates. Therefore, losing one's own family member is the equivalent of losing this self and consequently, the suffering of separation from what we love will appear. This type of suffering cannot be separated from the flourishing five aggregates.

Let's talk about the first point: The suffering of separation from what we love occurs when our loved one is separated from us or had passed away. In the mundane world, any dharma produced will deteriorate and cease. This includes the getting together and separation with family members. Thus, Buddha taught in the sutra: "Those that appear permanent will exhaust themselves. Those at a high position will fall down. Those who come together will separate. Those who are alive will perish eventually." Buddha has clearly taught us that all dharma in the mundane world is the result of supportive conditions coming together to affect such an occurrence. Once a person is born in this world, he or she will die in the future. Similarly, even though we currently love our relatives very much, we will eventually face separation or death regardless. It is just a matter of time!

The second key point is about the notion that family members are considered as one's self-belongings. It is obvious that they belong to this self. When one loses a beloved family member, one would have seemed to have lost one's self. The average person would be so distressed, they will act abnormally in the public. In the story above, the man acted very differently compared to the average person. He was considered lucky to have a chance to learn from Buddha. He is also a blessed person since he was able to return to normal life after hearing Buddha's discourse.

The third key point is that the suffering of separation from what we love, always accompany the suffering from craving of the five aggregates. External self-belonging revolves around and will never depart from the notion of the self. This self is part of the five aggregates. It is formed by the supportive conditions coming together. Consequently, the losing of self-belonging family members will still be trapped within the suffering of the flourishing five aggregates. Sentient beings do not understand this coming together of the supportive conditions as it gives rise to the sufferings. Only after understanding the true content and the workings of the five aggregates, can one completely eliminate the suffering from craving of them. Furthermore, one will eventually be able to attain the fruition of liberation of Two-Vehicle and possibly the attainment of Buddhahood which can only be realized by bodhisattvas. For this reason, we should consider the real content of five aggregates:

The term aggregates literally means covering, hiding or sheltering over something. The five aggregates refer to five unwanted dharmas hiding or blocking the wisdom of sentient beings. As a result, sentient beings will not be able to truly attain the fruition of the Three-Vehicle Bodhi and continue to transmigrate in the cycle of births and deaths in the three realms. What are the five aggregates? They include aggregates of form, consciousness, sensation, perception, and formation. These aggregates are formed by the coming together of supporting conditions which create all kinds of formations in the mundane world. Since these kinds of formations are illusory and false, not one dharma is real in the mundane world.

The form skandha refers to the physical body. It consists of the four elements of earth, water, fire, and wind and is formed by the sperm of the father and blood of the mother. Since it is formed by cause and conditions, it is not true dharma. It will deteriorate and extinguish in the future. Similarly, as one is born in the world, one will die in the future. No one will live on eternally. Since the physical body is sustained by impurities from the great earth, it is dirty and defiled, similar to the mechanics of a mobile toilet. Sentient beings do not possess wisdom and do not know the notion of an illusory physical body. They care very much about their physical bodies, trying their best to attain all kinds of magnificence for their appearances, and even try cosmetic surgery to make their appearance look younger. They put a lot of effort to make themselves look pretty, but they do not know that these decorations concern merely the external of a movable toilet. Their physical body is still dirty and filthy. How could they be considered pretty? How could they look magnificent? If sentient beings can observe that their own as well as all other people's physical bodies are being dirty and defiled, they will not treat their own bodies as real and greed to better the appearance and existence of this unreal body. Furthermore, they could avoid the continuous transmigrating in the cycle of births and deaths in the three realms of sentient beings.

The consciousness skandha is dependent on the existence of a physical body and the ability of the five sense-organs of the eye, ear, nose, tongue and body to take in the five external sense objects such as the mountains, rivers, and earth of the container world. The *tathāgatagarbha* will then generate the

six internal sense objects and effect contact between these objects with the five sense-organs and manas (mental faculty) to create the consciousness skandha or collectively referred to as the six consciousnesses. The consciousness skandha rely on and arise as a result of the contact between the six sense organs and six sense objects. This contact is a pre-requisite for generating the consciousness skandha and since it is being generated, it will eventually deteriorate and extinguish. It is a falsely perceived phenomenon born out of delusion. Again, a physical body itself is a falsely perceived phenomenon, let alone the existence of the consciousness skandha which depends on it and is thus ultimately deluded and not real. Therefore, all of the consciousness skandha or the six consciousnesses are falsely perceived phenomena themselves and not true dharma.

Subsequent to the generation of the consciousness skandha, the six consciousnesses will experience and perceive the six states of sense objects and in turn generate the sensation skandha that include the three or five sensations. These sensations are perceptions produced upon relying on the consciousness skandha and after taking in the six sense objects. The sensations themselves are falsely perceived phenomena, not true dharma because their existences rely on the consciousness skandha. Again, since both the form skandha and consciousness skandha are falsely perceived phenomena, the sensation skandha which depends on the existence of these two, is even more phony and unreal. Hence, the sensation skandha is a falsely perceived phenomenon, and not true dharma.

The perception skandha is the ability to understand and discriminate when the six states of sense objects are being taken in. It is a knowledge that depends on the three or five sensations. As mentioned before, skandhas of form, consciousness, or sensation themselves are all falsely perceived phenomena. The perception skandha, relying on these skandhas will not be an exception and will even be a more falsely perceived phenomenon and thus again not true dharma.

The formation skandha is a dharma that exists and operates over a period of time and space. This dharma's existence is dependent on the skandhas of the form, consciousness, sensation and perception all coming together. These four skandhas are already falsely perceived phenomena. Similarly, the formation skandha, a dharma that exists and relies on a combined operation of the four skandhas, will be even more illusory and hence is not true dharma. Since sentient beings do not know the illusory nature of the five skandhas, they are hindered and masked by the five skandhas. Accordingly, all kinds of formations are generated and produced during the operating of the five skandhas and will in turn create different kinds of good and evil karmas. Consequently, sentient beings will then transmigrate continuously in and unable to withdraw from the cycle of births and deaths in the three realms.

Some wise people such as sound hearers from the Two-Vehicle, upon hearing the teachings of Buddha, go through the practices of Four Noble Truths and attain First Fruit by eliminating the three fetters. Some of them can even attain the Fourth Fruit of Arhats by eliminating the five higher fetters. Because of this belief in Buddha's teaching, they know that entering

the remainderless nirvana would not result in nihilistic emptiness and the ultimate origin of the remainderless nirvana remains. Therefore, at the moment of passing away, they are willing to extinguish their own life including the five skandhas, twelve sense fields and eighteen elements as well as to extinguish their own self and enter into the remainderless nirvana. They will then accomplish one of the Three Dharma-Seals: “nirvana is tranquil”, since the five skandhas are eliminated and that the suffering from the craving of the flourishing five aggregates would no longer appear.

Practitioners of the Solitary Realizer realize and attain the first fruit through to the fourth fruit of arhats by working through observations including the ten and twelve links of dependent arising. Based on these observations utilizing one’s own wisdom, he will know that the remainderless nirvana still possesses an ultimate origin, and that entering into remainderless nirvana does not connote a nihilistic emptiness at the moment of passing away. They are willing to extinguish their own life, including the five skandhas, twelve sense-fields and eighteen elements as well as to extinguish their own self and enter remainderless nirvana. Since they no longer appear in the three realms of sentient beings, there exists no more sufferings from the craving of the flourishing five skandhas.

Bodhisattvas, on the other hand, work through the observation of the five-aggregate self, especially the illusion of a conscious self, and will eliminate the three fetters including self-view, skepticism about true reality, and misconceptions about the precepts, and become *srotaapanna* of sound-hearers as a First Fruit person. Furthermore, he will be able to exercise his

ability of Chan contemplation to realize every sentient being's true mind, the *tathagatagarbha* and attain First Fruit of bodhisattvas. Based on immediate and direct observations, a bodhisattva will know that his own self is illusory. One needs to be aware that a true self, the *tathagatagarbha*, on the other hand, coexists and operates together with this self that exist at each passing moment. The *tathagatagarbha* itself is neither arising nor ceasing, but makes use of all kinds of conditions to produce an endlessly arising and ceasing self. This self is born out of the true self. It was originally a subset of and having part nature of the *tathagatagarbha* and neither can it exist outside of the *tathagatagarbha*. Therefore, the relationship of the self and true self *tathagatagarbha* is neither identical nor different.

Also, subsequent to the direct observations and experiences, a bodhisattva will be able to comprehend that this self, at any moment of endless arising and ceasing, is in fact neither arising nor ceasing. This is because he has already aligned with and act in compliance with the true self *tathagatagarbha*. That is to say a bodhisattva is already in the ultimate origin of the remainderless nirvana at the very moment of the existence of the self. In other words, this very moment is nirvana. Why then would bodhisattvas eliminate their own five skandhas in order to enter nirvana like those practitioners from the Two Vehicle? By means of not entering nirvana, they are continuously being born with five skandhas, diligently practicing until the end of the three great countless eons to accomplish Buddhahood to benefit countless sentient beings and avoid dwelling in births and deaths or dwelling in the nirvana without abode.

The explanation above simply indicates that sentient beings basically do not know the truth about the suffering of separation from what they love. When they encounter separation from or death of relatives, they fail to accept it. This will lead to all kinds of distress and abnormal behaviors. They will then be caught up and continuously transmigrate in the birth and death cycle in the three realms of sentient beings. For practitioners of the Two-Vehicle, when they know the truth about suffering due to separation from what they love, they can accomplish the First Fruit all to the Fourth Fruit of arhats by practicing the Four Noble Truths and ten links of dependent arising. At the moment of passing away, they need to extinguish their own five aggregates, twelve sense-fields, and eighteen elements, and effect the disappearance of the self and enter into remainderless nirvana. They no longer should have any thought of their body and mind appearing in the three realms of sentient beings. They should forever eliminate the suffering from craving of the flourishing five aggregates that lurks behind the suffering of separation from what they love.

Bodhisattvas would act differently. Since they feel for sentient beings that continuously transmigrate in the cycle of births and deaths without being able to stay away, they bring forth a bodhi mind and practice the way of bodhisattvas to accumulate the virtues as their own resource, in order to seek bodhisattva's vision of reality. Upon attaining the vision of reality, they know that the formation of five skandhas (or aggregates) is actually based on the *tathagatagarbha* as its cause. *Tathagatagarbha* makes use of all kinds of supporting conditions to generate the five skandhas and that they are

originally a partial nature of *tathagatagarbha* and cannot exist outside of the *tathagatagarbha*. Therefore, the five-skandha self and the *tathagatagarbha* true self are originally neither identical nor different. Bodhisattvas also know that when the five skandhas manifest themselves, they do so in the remainderless nirvana at that very moment. They do not behave like Two-Vehicle practitioners who try to eliminate their five skandhas to enter into remainderless nirvana and no longer appear in the three realms of sentient beings. Instead, bodhisattvas would continuously generate the five skandhas, widely cultivate the six paramitas of the inner door, and continuously save and protect sentient beings as well as accumulate their own virtues and wisdom, all to perfect and complete the practices in the first great *asamkhyeya* eon. From stages above the First Ground, a bodhisattva continuously refutes false concepts and highlights correct dharma, continuously saves and protects sentient beings, teach and guide sentient beings as well as to achieve their own Buddha pure land, in order to perfect and complete the practices in the second and third great *asamkhyeya* eons. This bodhisattva will then descend into the human world when the cause and condition mature, realize true mind and see Buddha nature while dwelling in his bodhi seat and become the ultimate Buddha with four kinds of wisdom, and benefit boundless sentient beings.