

## **The Spirituality of Connectedness and Care: a Buddhist Perspective**

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Buddhism teaches that suffering occurs when people are isolated or detached from wholeness due to ego-centeredness. Thus, we are released from suffering when we realize that we are part of wholeness or we are wholeness itself by connecting with something beyond ego-centeredness.

It is this sense of connectedness that I particularly value when I am engaged in spiritual care. The object of connectedness will vary with people—it may be a precious family, true inner self, something great like gods or Buddha beyond oneself, thought, nature, and so on. depending on how they have lived, each individual seeks it differently.

This connectedness is not just a one-way street, but rather an interactive or multidirectional chain that fosters wholeness through encounters with precious people or specific matters. I believe that wholeness does not fall into the realm of the world that human beings have formed, but it is “Life” itself beyond—but including—this world.

Through the presence of a chaplain who has a sense of connectedness with wholeness, a patient begins to realize his or her connectedness with what matters and that connection leads to wholeness. That process is essential for me as I enter into the patient’s struggle or suffering. When that process works, I feel that the atmosphere is surrounded by wholeness including the patient and the chaplain, and energy that is disrupted within the patient starts to flow within the patient and circulate between the patient and the chaplain.

#### **When Connectedness Heals: A Case**

This process was evident in my work with a 71-year-old married female patient. The principal diagnosis was malignant pleural effusion due to metastatic adenocarcinoma of the lungs. The control of suffering from sharp pain and difficult respiration was good during the hospitalization. The patient stayed in the hospital for 18 days and then died.

Before visiting the patient, the chaplain was informed about the situation of the patient from the unit staff. The patient had just been notified by a doctor that it would be difficult to have any more aggressive treatment and she had only a short time to live. The chaplain anticipated the patient might feel uneasy for that.

The chaplain offered presence and listening to the patient out of respect for how she was feeling. Contrary to the chaplain’s anticipation, the patient’s main concern was not her own prognosis, but the matter of her family.

The patient started sharing that she had been especially worried about her husband who was suffering from parkinson’s disease and her daughter who had a disability because of a car accident. The patient felt very sorry she could not help nor further support her beloved husband and daughter.

The following is a transcript of our first conversation. please note that the patient’s words are designated with “p” and mine with “C” for chaplain.

p: My husband is suffering from parkinson’s disease. I have been looking after him. He is in a nursing home now because I am here in hospital. (Tears appear on her face.) I was thinking who will take care of him... (Her tears dropped from her eyes.)

C: You feel sorry for your husband?

p: (There is silence for a moment.) I have two daughters. My younger daughter was in a car accident one year ago. She is mostly all right in daily life but she still has a walking disability. She is not yet married...if I lived longer, I could support her, even if anything wrong should happen to her. I cannot help

them. I don't know...I don't know why I live now. (Her face revealed the depth of her anguish.)

The Chaplain nods.

p: I know I have little time left. When I think about it, I regret I have not done more for my family. I just worry about them. I think of them. I am sorry for them... (The patient is sobbing.)

After the patient expressed feeling sorry about and helpless toward her family members, I asked, "How are the people who make you feel so precious?" Then she started to mention how wonderful they were.

C: When I listen to you, I feel how wonderful and how precious your beloved husband and daughter are for you. They are such wonderful people. do you know how they think of you?

p: (She looks at the Chaplain unsurely.) They worry about me?

C: They worry about you?

p: (She takes more time to think about it.) Am I supported by them? (Something hits her)...I am supported by them!

C: You are supported by them, aren't you?

p: Yes, I think I am...I am supported by them.

C: So now, what do you want most of all to do for them?

p: What do I want to do the most for them? (She hits upon something and her face changes.) I want to say "thank you" to them.

C: You want to say "thank you" to them.

p: Yes, I want to say "thank you" to them.

The patient continued to share with me for a while. Then the topic about afterlife came up. There was such an atmosphere that we talked about the topic openly with each other.

C: Who do you want to see there?

p: Let me see...I want to see my father. He was very kind of me...

C: He was kind of you? So what do you want to say to your father when you meet him?

p: Well, I have nothing special to say to him. Instead, I will smile at him. He understands what I mean by that.

C: He understands you? Well, how is he now? What is he doing?

p: I feel he is looking at me even now.

C: He is looking at you? How do you feel?

p: Well, how can I say... (She seems to feel his eyes as if he is here.) I see him. When I smile at him, he answers me with his smile. do you think he understands me?

C: I think he does. (The Chaplain answers naturally without any hesitation.)

p: He understands me, doesn't he? When I go to heaven, I would like to watch over my family from there.

This case shows how the patient begins to realize her connectedness with family members, parting from her ego-centeredness because of her encounter with the chaplain. The patient is worried about the family members she is leaving: her husband who has parkinson's disease and her daughter who is disabled. This is her spiritual crisis.

#### The Transcending power of Being Connected

The ability of the chaplain to trust his connection with wholeness enables the chaplain to offer presence for the patient. That creates an atmosphere beyond the intention of both the patient and the chaplain. This very atmosphere also lets the patient touch her innermost suffering or grief. When the patient mentions "I know I have little time left..." we have to be careful lest this attitude becomes a self-centered view. We need to check it clinically all the time. In this case, the chaplain senses the patient's affection to her family members behind the guilt or regret she expresses in words.

This leads the chaplain to ask the patient, "How are the people who make you feel so precious?" This question from the chaplain brings to her mind the close relationship with her family members that is greater than her burden or guilt to them. Then the patient starts talking about her family

members as a precious presence with a feeling an emotional connection to them. The chaplain who senses the presence of the patient directly feels the atmosphere surrounded by warm and heartfelt space, in which an energy that had been disrupted in the depths of her soul starts to flow, then circulates between the patient and the chaplain. Once the energy is flowing naturally like this, the chaplain keeps his eyes open as much as possible so as not to spoil the deep connectedness with a patient. It may happen when an intellectual or intentional intervention by the caregiver parts from 'staying in the flow' and disrupts the deep relation with a patient.

Buddhism teaches that people are made to live by ceaseless connectedness which is interactive or multidirectional as well as moving away from ego-centeredness. The question about the patient's family members, "do you know how they think of you?" is asked by the chaplain from a standpoint of Buddhism. Although the patient feels completely powerless toward family members from the perspective of ego-centeredness, because of her inability to do any more for them, she begins to realize herself as 'being' loved by her family members and moves toward connectedness beyond ego-centeredness. She feels a surge of gratitude toward her family members when she agrees that she is loved by them completely. And more, because the patient realizes connectedness with her late father beyond the here and now and supposes that the connectedness with him exists not only in this world but also in another world, she can feel his smile. This sensational experience also makes her aware of the new connectedness with her family members beyond any limitation as human beings in this world. Because of this, she can naturally say "I would like to watch over my family from there."

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