

# Spirit Rock

## **Buddhist Psychology Training: Integrating Mindfulness, Science, and Clinical Practice**

**Instructor: Matthew Brensilver**

### **Case: Working with a Client Experiencing Grief and Loss\***

To illustrate how the insights from the Buddhist Psychology Training can be applied in a real-world clinical setting, let's reframe one of the case discussions as a clinical case.

#### **Presenting Concern:**

Sarah, a therapist, presents a case involving a returning client who is facing imminent grief and loss. Sarah's client is a mother with an adolescent, suffering from cancer. After multiple rounds of treatment, the medical team has advised the parents to prepare for their child's death. The client has specifically requested that Sarah "carry the grief that she knows is just beyond the horizon."

#### **Clinical Considerations:**

This case presents several complex clinical considerations involving a cardinal loss, which are addressed within the Buddhist Psychology Training consultation. Some points to consider:

- **The Therapist's Capacity for Presence:** Sarah is anticipating the emotional impact of her client's grief and how it will affect her own ability to provide effective therapy. She expresses concern about her "therapeutic effectiveness given the dizzying nature of a grief that runs so deep." This intensity of the clinical situation highlights the urgency of balancing equanimity and compassion in the face of suffering. As Matthew emphasizes in the training, "It's almost like us giving up on the hopefulness, too...Okay, she's hoping for a miracle, and maybe I am, too, in my own weird way... but the miracle will be the love born out of the grief."
- **Meeting the Client's Needs:** The client's request for Sarah to 'carry her grief' illustrates the ways that a loss such as this is simply more than one human can handle. In an important sense, Sarah must function as a co-meditator – holding the mind of the client so that the pain has more space. This dynamic calls for

exquisite attunement to the client's needs, moment-by-moment, recognizing that the line separating productive work from overwhelm can be thin.

- **The Importance of Allowing Space:** Matthew underscores the importance of creating space for the client's grief to unfold in all its wildness, and without the attempt to provide superficial, palliative attempts to fix it. He suggests that “part of the therapeutic process is seeing all the different things that are being evoked in this loss.” Grief of this kind is an amalgamation of feelings. This approach aligns with the Buddhist understanding of suffering and having one’s love informed by that understanding.
- **Transference and Countertransference:** The themes of transference and countertransference are relevant to consider. Sarah's concerns about her own emotional capacity highlight a countertransference concern: will the poignancy of the client’s pain overwhelm her own capacities for self-regulation? In what ways is the idealizing transference a liability and an asset?

### **Integrating Buddhist Principles and Practices:**

The Buddhist Psychology Training offers a framework for addressing these clinical considerations in a way that is both compassionate and skillful. Some specific examples:

- **Cultivating Equanimity:** Sarah's own mindfulness practice can support her in developing the equanimity needed to hold space for her client's intense grief. As Matthew emphasizes, “You are the intervention.” He asks, “How do we cultivate our therapeutic being so that our words land more deeply in the heart of the client?” He suggests that the therapist's own capacity for presence and stability is crucial in creating a safe and supportive environment for the client.
- **Recognizing Impermanence:** The Buddhist teachings on impermanence can be helpful in navigating the uncertainty and change inherent in grief. Recognizing that all things are of the nature of change, we honor the fact that some measure of grief is encoded into all love. The therapist’s capacity to meet her own mortality with wisdom and compassion – a core practice in Buddhism – grants deeper therapeutic power.
- **Practicing Compassion:** Cultivating compassion, both for oneself and for the client, is essential. As Matthew states, “the compassion that is most effective doesn't feel compulsive. It can tolerate deep sorrow. It feels freely offered, wishing for the other to be free from suffering. It is a love that is born of wisdom.”
- **Exploring the Meaning of Suffering:** The Buddhist understanding of suffering can provide a framework for exploring the meaning and purpose of this experience for the client. While the loss of the child is tragic, the redemptive possibilities of grief include a deepened meaningfulness of life, and a love that is

even broader than one particular person. A love uniformed by grief is a naïve love.

### **Conclusion:**

This reframed clinical case demonstrates how the insights and practices discussed in the Buddhist Psychology Training can be integrated into real-world clinical work. By approaching challenging situations with equanimity, compassion, and a deep understanding of the human condition, therapists can create a space for healing and growth, even in the face of profound loss.

\*Please note that to protect anonymity, the therapist and case are a composite of clinical encounters.

### **Contact us**

[courses@spiritrock.org](mailto:courses@spiritrock.org)

[www.spiritrock.org](http://www.spiritrock.org)