

## Facing Loss: Ayurvedic Approaches to Soothe and Support

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In this life of beauty and ongoing miracles—from the daily devotion of the breath, the heartbeat, and the pulse to the remission of cancers and the mending of torn relationships—the unavoidable issue of impermanence exists. While some days we can feel absolutely mired in stubborn issues that seem like they may go on forever, the reality is that we are here for a temporary visit. However, our cognitive understanding of this fact does not erase the shock and sadness we may feel when the jolt of loss occurs, whether the loss is a job, a marriage, a friendship, a promise, our physical well-being, or the life of a loved one. Even the deaths of strangers can affect us as news streams in from all corners of the globe. Universally, regardless of age, personality, political stance, or doshic constitution, we are united in the shared experience of grief and loss. Keeping in mind that the proportions of Vata, Pitta, and Kapha in us may bring forth different manifestations of grief, we understand that loss is often a life-changing experience that may affect our balance—mentally, emotionally, and physically.

Thankfully, Ayurveda has many pathways to soothe and support us in times of grief. As Vasant Lad, BAM&S, MASc, founder of the Ayurvedic Institute, explains in the poem “Emotional Purification” in his book *Strands of Eternity*<sup>1</sup>:

“According to Ayurveda,  
the ancient science of self-knowledge,



the emotional body can be purified  
by the same methods  
which purify the physical body.

*Srotomukha vishodhanam* is cleansing the passages  
through which emotions flow.

If there is fear, anxiety, anger—surrender to it.  
That letting go opens the channels of circulation.  
Then the emotion can move freely.”

It is not always easy, however, to surrender, to let go, especially when facing a deep and life-changing loss. The mind may be able to rationalize a situation, acknowledging that someone who has died is no longer suffering, or accepting that an opportunity that was lost may open doors to an opportunity that is a better fit. Still, sadness may flow in waves of tears.

### Tears

Ayurvedically speaking, tears are as unique as we are. Although many may feel that crying equates with sadness, this is not always the case. Bringing our attention to the location, temperature, and taste of our tears, we can come to understand more about the emotional nature of our crying:

“Tears of joy and love are sweet, scanty, and cool, and come from the lateral (outer) side of the eye. Tears of anger come from the center of the eye and are sour to the taste, and hot. Tears of frustration, grief, sadness, and fear come from the medial (inner) side and are bitter and astringent to the taste”<sup>2</sup> (pg. 64).

It may feel challenging at times to let the tears flow. This process of letting go is exactly that—a process.

“Allow the emotion to ripen.

Allow your grief and anger to flower and they will die  
their own natural death.

Suppress them and they will fight for their existence.”

~Vasant Lad, “Emotional Purification,”

*Strands of Eternity*<sup>1</sup>

## Hṛd Basti

There are many different ways of supporting the release of unresolved emotions Ayurvedically. One of these approaches, *Hṛd basti*, involves lukewarm medicated oil being placed near the heart inside a ring of dough made from wheat and/or chickpea flour, while the individual is relaxing on the back.

## Kapha Management

Given that grief is associated with *Kapha doṣha* (earth and water elements), following a Kapha-reducing diet and a Kapha-balancing lifestyle can be supportive during a time of grief. Dietary considerations, of course, will depend on a person’s original doshic ratio (*prakṛti*) and current doshic ratio (*vikṛti*) and are best assessed individually, in person, by an Ayurvedic counselor, health practitioner, or physician. Kapha aggravation may also be mitigated by vigorous exercise (*vyāyāma*), such as a stimulating yoga practice, perhaps *vinnyāsa*, such as *Sūrya Namaskāra* (Sun Salutations). On the other hand, if there is profound exhaustion from the grieving process, a restorative yoga practice may be therapeutic.

## Awareness

The emotional response to loss can be so painful that there may be an inclination to deny the pain by turning the attention away from the hurt and the loss; however, healing can come from directing the attention to the grief and being present with the emotions that arise:

Stay with your grief with total awareness.

The flame of awareness will cook your grief  
and like a dry leaf it drops to the ground.”

~ Vasant Lad, “Emotional Purification,”

*Strands of Eternity*<sup>1</sup>

As we travel through this life, the people we encounter—from cashiers to customer service agents to colleagues to neighbors to students to teachers—may be in the midst of grieving a deep loss or an

anniversary of a loss, even if they are smiling and do not say a word about their grief. Keeping this possibility in our awareness can soften our heart into compassion, especially in challenging moments.

## Anāhata Chakra

The heart center, energetically, is associated with the air element, which is associated with the *tanmātrā* of touch. Grief can lead to isolation, which can bring a lack of touch, both in terms of falling out of communication with others and in regard to lacking physical touch, such as hugs.

In Vasant Lad’s poem “Emotional Purification,” from *Strands of Eternity*<sup>1</sup>, he writes,

“*Abhisyandhan* is de-crystallization  
or liquefaction of emotion.

It makes the emotion as a fluid  
just as salt or sugar melts in the sun.

This can be done with deep tissue work,  
vigorous massage

or by reclining the body in a gentle easy posture—  
this will help your emotions become liquid.”

In addition to massage, there are various forms of bodywork, such as *marma cikitsā*, that can bring relaxation and release of emotions.

## Marma

There are specific acupressure (*marma*) points, described in *Marma Points of Ayurveda* (2008) by Vasant Lad and Anisha Durve<sup>3</sup>, which are indicated for grief:

- *Ūrdhva Ganda* (paired points lateral to the edge of the nose, in line with the point (*Nāsā Madhya*) where the nasal cartilage meets with the bony skeleton of the nose)
- *Adhah Ganda* (paired points lateral to the edge of the nose, inferior to *Ūrdhva Ganda*, level with the point between the tip of the nose and the middle of the nose)
- *Kapola Nāsā* (paired points immediately lateral to the nostrils in the nasolabial groove)
- *Krikātikā* (paired points on the back of the neck on the lower border of C2 vertebra)
- *Amsa Phalaka* (“in the infraspinous fossa at the junction of the upper one-third and lower two-thirds of a line that connects the

midpoint of the scapular spine and the inferior angle of the scapula”) ( pg. 176)<sup>3</sup>

Additionally, there are *marma* points indicated for emotional disturbance and unresolved emotions, such as:

- *Hanu* (between the chin and lower lip at the labiomental sulcus)
- *Hridayam* (at the level of the third intercostal space on the anterior midline)
- *Agra Patra* (at the center of the xiphoid process)
- *Tala Hrida* (on the palm where the middle finger touches when a fist is made)

From head to toe, there are *marma* points that can offer relaxation during the grieving process.

### **Appetite**

Grief, with its multidimensional aspects affecting the harmony of mind, body, and spirit, can have a dramatic effect on the appetite and the digestive fire (*agni*). Respecting the vitiated eating cycle in the

short-term rather than forcing meals when *agni* is low can be helpful, as well as working to restore the health of the digestive fire: “A short fast will help to kindle the digestive fire...If you are not hungry even by lunchtime, take some fresh ginger, chop a little into small pieces, add some lime juice and a pinch of rock salt, and chew it up. That will kindle *agni* and stimulate the appetite. Low appetite may also be due to emotional factors. If that is the case, make a tea of ginger, *brahmi*, and chamomile in equal proportions. Use 1 teaspoon of this mixture per cup of water, steep for 5 to 10 minutes, and drink” (pg. 128)<sup>4</sup>.

### **Herbs**

Within the vast realm of the medicines from the earth are many Ayurvedic herbs that can be supportive in a time of grief. One that may be useful is Ashoka (*Saraca indica*). In *Ayurvedic Medicine*, Sebastian Pole<sup>5</sup> explains that the name of this herb “literally means ‘remover of sorrow,’ attesting to its ability to cure pain and discomfort” (pg. 132). It is characterized as a *hrdaya*, an herb that nourishes the heart. It also has



affinity to the uterus, mitigating female reproductive issues. Ashoka is contraindicated in constipation and, as with all herbs, should be assessed individually in light of one's doshic constitution by a qualified professional.

Another herb said to be supportive of the emotional facets of the heart is Arjuna (*Terminalia arjuna*). Pole notes that it is "used to treat emotional disturbance and 'broken heart'" (pg. 130)<sup>5</sup> and that it is contraindicated in pregnancy and constipation. Tulsi (*Ocimum sanctum*), "high in sattva, imparting the quality of lightness and spiritual clarity," is another *hrdaya* with "specific affinity to the heart" (p. 280)<sup>5</sup>. Herbs that work on the lungs can also be therapeutic for those who are grieving, as well as herbs that are tonics for the mind. The realm of Ayurvedic herbs is vast and the *gamitva* of each herb is precise. Assessing the *gunas* and root causes of an individual's grief can be essential in determining the herbs that will resonate best in each unique loss.

### Meditation

Given the infinite forms of loss that may occur and the richly diverse manifestations of grief, recognizing the medicine of meditation can be a valuable part of the healing journey. Within the many forms of meditation, there is a commonality of slowing down and tuning into the internal landscape, becoming more mindful of thoughts and feelings in a process of moving toward stilling or calming the mind. Being with what is, rather than trying to run away from reality or escape it in some way, can bring relief from suffering, as expressed in the poem "Be With What Is" from *Strands of Eternity* by Vasant Lad<sup>1</sup>:

"Look at what is with all your mind,  
with all your heart  
and all your gut.  
Then your grief, your attachment,  
your longing or your discontent  
will burst into pure bliss.  
This is your true nature."

### Prāṇāyāma

The fourth limb of yoga, *prāṇāyāma*, or breath work, cleanses the internal subtle energy pathways, or *nāḍīs*. "In an emotional state, *prāṇa* becomes irregular

or disturbed. If we bring harmony to our breathing through *prāṇāyāma*, we also bring harmony to thoughts, feelings, and emotions." (pg. 309)<sup>6</sup>. A calming breath like Alternate Nostril Breathing (*Anuloma Viloma*) can soothe the nervous system (*majjā vaha srotas*), whereas a stimulating breath like Bellows Breath (*Bhastrikā*) can help clear stagnant air from the lungs, where grief may reside. "The lungs are the seat of grief and sadness" (pg. 71)<sup>2</sup>, and taking time to cleanse and nourish the lungs through *prāṇāyāma* can assist in mitigating grief.

### Dinacharyā

The shifting tides of grief can easily disrupt daily routine, bringing forth an increased need to support a daily rhythm. Keeping the daily routine simple during times of grief can be helpful. Choosing three things to do on a daily basis can be a good starting point.

Two daily activities to consider are walking and some form of creative expression. A brisk walk can begin to reduce accumulation of Kapha, and walking outdoors is a way to enjoy the benefits of receiving fresh air (*Maruta Seva*), a form of *shamana* (palliation). Further, a walk brings us into connection with the natural environment and with others who may be taking a walk as well. This communion with human nature and Mother Nature is healing, dispersing the loneliness often accompanying deep sorrow and grief.

Periods of solitude can also be healing, especially with the support of creative expression. Taking time to journal, write or read poetry, sketch, paint, sculpt, dance, cook, or taking part in some other creative act can give the emotions a chance to process, increasing digestion and absorption, kindling *agni* (digestive fire) and supporting overall health and well-being. The spectrum of creativity is diverse and can range from drafting an architectural design, working a mathematical or chemical equation, resolving a software issue, or designing curriculum to any other task pivoting upon innovation. By opening our minds and hearts to the creative process, we create the opportunity for transformation.

"On an inner level, *prāṇa*, *tejas*, and *ojas* are measures of creativity. *Ojas* is latent creative capacity, our storehouse of creative energy. *Tejas* is creative vision, the ability to see new things and break with the past.

*Prāṇa* is creative action to bring new things into being and remain in the creative state...Without sufficient, *prāṇa*, *tejas*, and *ojas*, we are unable to make positive changes in our lives” (pg. 93)<sup>7</sup>.

### The Sun’s Healing Light

Rising to experience the brilliant beauty of sunrise can help to mitigate the excessive heavy (*guru*), cold (*śīta*), and cloudy (*āvīla*) qualities of grief and elevated Kapha. “The early morning sun has a predominance of pink, orange, and golden-yellow colored rays. When these fall on the eyelids and forehead, these light rays stimulate *bhrājaka*, *ālochaka*, and *sādhaka* pitta and boost serotonin secretion” (pg. 5)<sup>8</sup>. Exposure to sunlight, *Ātapa Seva*, a form of palliative care (*shamana*), is healing as well: “Ātapa means sun and *seva* means to receive; it means receiving optimum sunlight. The sun is the source of light, heat, and life for this planet. In Ayurveda, optimal exposure to sunlight is balancing and nourishing” (pg. 151)<sup>6</sup>. However, pittagenic situations may benefit from less sunlight exposure.

### Sound Therapy

Just as the golden light of the sun is a healing presence in the natural environment, there is light within. This light may be awakened in many ways, such as through the medicine of sound. Sound, or *śabda*, is used therapeutically in Ayurveda through *mantra*, as well as chakra *bīja* sounds. For example, the *bīja* sound “‘Yam’ heals the heart chakra (*anāhata*) and brings clarity by balancing the Air element” (pg. 255)<sup>6</sup>. Listening to Sanskrit chants, chanting, singing, listening to music, or playing a musical instrument may also soothe the emotions, bringing a sense of comfort through the healing power of sound vibration.

“Half an inch behind your suffering  
there is bliss.”

“Suffering comes to awaken you.”

In these lines from the poem “Emotion” from *Strands of Eternity* by Vasant Lad<sup>1</sup>, we are reminded

that although suffering is a challenging part of this journey of life, ultimately it is a gift—if we choose to see it as such. When we look at life as a prism, we can begin to see the many facets of healing that are available and how these facets, unique as they are, are part of a unified whole. Through the healing techniques of Ayurveda, we can travel the raw miles of grief with increased support, comfort, health, and ease, nourishing our well-being—body, mind, and soul.

### References

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