

## LIVING WITH THE PAST

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February 5, 2023

Every now and then a memory pops up and we take leave of the present moment and focus on some significant event that only exists now in our memories. Even if there's a video to memorialize it, that's just a two-dimensional rendering of something that was fully three dimensional as it happened. The event also contained the extra dimensions of thoughts and emotions.

Although Buddhist teachings encourage us to stay "here and now," visiting the attic in our minds can bring healing and greater freedom. On the other hand, getting sucked into a memory by the ghost of a bad experience can cause that memory and its effect on us to mutate into a nastier form than it had when it happened.

Several basic teachings of Buddhism support the idea that how we relate to our past strongly influences our experience of the present. The Five Aggregates are the aspects of our mental experience that we think of as being "us." Memories are included in the aggregate called Mental Formations.

The teaching of karma says that our intentional actions determine who we'll be in the future. Our memories have shaped who we are now. That process can continue for the rest of our lives, and perhaps beyond. But we can look at the past in a way that will clean our mental house, or that will instead compound our past mistakes.

It's important to remember that in reviewing aspects of your life, you're dealing with memories and not actual events. Memories are far more changeable than we believe. They include any errors in how we perceived the events, as they happened.

Besides that, the brain has an odd way of storing and retrieving memories. As a result of the brain's filing and retrieval systems, memories are likely to change every time we revisit them. These changes compound as we continue to remember an event, so our memory become less and less accurate.

Reviewing memories can make them more problematic if our motive for dwelling on them is not wholesome. Often, when we think about troubling past events, we focus on what made us unhappy at the time. Maybe we were humiliated, or we now feel guilty about what we did, or we still resent what someone did to us.

If it's a memory of trauma, please proceed cautiously. It may become overwhelming, so be alert for when you need to stop remembering and maybe talk to someone who can help. But for less fraught events, here are some suggestions for visiting your past. We need to let ourselves remember, celebrate, atone and heal.

## REMEMBER

We may get stuck in troubling memories because we unconsciously believe we can somehow 'solve' the experience and sidestep the discomfort it still carries. Well, we can't. Also, dwelling un-mindfully on an event that still makes us feel bad will turn up the volume on our suffering in the current moment of remembering, and probably in future instances, too.

On the other hand, a worthwhile purpose for paying attention to the past is to make peace with the current composition of our minds. When some ghosts living in neglected corners of our minds come out of hiding, it's an opportunity to heal the wounds they bear. We often miss this opportunity, though, because it's scary. It may feel like a sort of Judgment Day.

We have to face the causes of our discomfort about what happened in order to make peace with that episode. We need to investigate: why did we do what we did? Or why did someone else's words or actions hurt us so much? What is the cause that lies under what we've been telling ourselves about this event?

In reviewing memories, we need to keep the focus on ourselves, on what we did and how we felt, *not* on the actions or motives of others. This process is something we *feel* our way through, by remaining – compassionately – with the way that memory affects us *physically*: if it makes us tired or tense or a bit sick to our stomachs.

This physical part of our emotional response is like the glue that keeps this memory stuck in our minds. Once we've allowed ourselves to fully experience the emotional impact of a recurrent memory, an insight may arise which finally puts that particular ghost to rest.

## CELEBRATE

Having remembered a disturbing event, and explored the grip it has on our memory, there are other steps to take if we want to "clean house" in our minds. This next step will feel a lot better than investigating the memory itself.

We *celebrate* our own goodness. We applaud our good deeds throughout our lives overall. We cast our memories back over our own kindness. Sometimes we plan our acts of kindness, but other times it's such a part of our nature that we hardly notice. Others may be telling the story of what we did when we have no recollection of our kind acts. But the urge to be kind dwells within us always. Celebrate it.

Celebrate your generosity, the times you've shared your own good fortune to benefit others, either with money, or information, or help you've been able to give them. Look at how you love and support others, and your wise intention to end suffering for them and for yourself.

Celebrate your good fortune. Savor triumphs, hard work that's paid off, or the many forms of joy that are unexpected or always accessible to you in subtle ways. Celebrate times of tranquility, like when you meditate, sit with your pets or loved ones, or walk in the woods: the quiet "good times" of life.

Be grateful for the whole of your life that's brought you to this shining moment of embodied awareness.

Be glad you have a chance to recognize and let go of regrets and resentments.

## **FORGIVE**

Now that you have celebrated the goodness of your life, consider how precious it would be to know you are forgiven for all the wrongs you've done, however inadvertently. Imagine feeling the slate of your conscience wiped clean. All troubled relationships made whole again. No more burdens of guilt. Take a moment and imagine how that would feel.

Now consider that other people would feel that way, too. People you remember who treated you poorly would probably also want the comfort and peace of being forgiven. You may want them to first ask for forgiveness, or at least apologize, but where does that desire come from? Is it a residue of your resentment? I've often heard it asked, "Do you want to be right or do you want to be happy?"

Despite knowing that letting go of resentment is like dropping a heavy burden, there are various reasons we just can't forgive some people. I know from experience that forgiveness is a response of the heart, not an intellectual decision, and it can't be rushed.

This is true when we're still in contact with someone who's hurt us, and we want reassurance that we're emotionally safe around them. Trying to force our own forgiveness just disguises still-festering wounds, and closes the heart tighter. But the walls of protection we've built around ourselves also imprison us.

A good place to start is forgiving ourselves. As either Jack Kornfield or Lily Tomlin said, "Forgiveness is giving up all hope for a better past." While others are the ones to blame for what they did, we may have had some part in those events, however minor.

Explore around inside yourself with the attitude of a surgeon who isn't interested in blaming the patient. She just wants to find the problem and keep it from causing any more suffering. When you find what caused you to act as you did, bring compassion to it and see if you can forgive yourself. If not, form the intention to do so eventually, when your heart is ready.

You may also want to identify and make peace with things you haven't liked about yourself. If you've been aware of them for some time and they haven't changed by now, try softening your aversion to them.

Consider how these traits developed. Often, to protect ourselves we grow defenses that with time we consider "bad habits." How can you blame an older you for a refuge you sought years ago?

## **ATONE**

There's a wonderful cousin of generosity's that bestows a gift on the giver as well as the recipient. It's called atonement. I'm not talking about beating yourself up or feeling guilty, but making amends. This is a cornerstone of spiritual health in the Twelve Steps. It's remarkably liberating.

The mind is calmed by knowing that we've put right some wrong we've done. The heart is opened by giving back what someone has lost, whether it's material or emotional nature.

Atonement often requires a lot of reflection in advance. We want to do what will clear our conscience, and make the other person whole. That may take some thought to identify.

Then we need to plan how to do this without causing new harm to them or others, including ourselves. Sometimes there's nothing we really can do but send metta as a form of amends. Just working through these concerns can untie a lot of knots in our hearts.

## HEAL

Standing face to face with these old ghosts might make you feel worse at first. You've avoided this wrestling match for this long, why go through it now? Opening ourselves to pain we've been avoiding is the only way to get over it – by finally going *through* it.

It's like paying off a debt that bears outrageously high interest. We're free to be all of who we are. Parts of ourselves that we've suppressed or abandoned can come forward and finally be tended. At last, we let ourselves heal.

Always be compassionate in facing the wounds of your past. Take time to comfort any fears or griefs that arise. I like to visualize my past self as a child I'm soothing. Keep the heart open. Bring metta, compassion and equanimity to your vulnerabilities. Hold yourself like you were a little child.

No matter how troubling or numerous your "bad memories" are, bear in mind that you are immeasurably more vast than all of them combined. Thoughts of the past are like dreams, from which we can awaken to realize they have lost their power. We can befriend them, then, and let them go, to haunt us no more.