

## *Approaching Painful Memories as a Meditator*

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The Buddha has a series of reflections that he has us think about every day. And one of them is a question: “Days and nights fly past, fly past, what am I becoming right now?” What you’re becoming is based on your actions. What are you doing right now? And what kind of person are you becoming as a result?

One of the advantages of meditating is that you become a meditator—a person who has skills that other people don’t have. You always want to keep that in mind, because the process of becoming exists on many levels, just as your mind is doing things on many levels. Becoming is the mind’s tendency to create worlds of experience, and then go into them and inhabit them, to take on an identity inside them. You’ve got the outside world right now and your identity as a human being, but you’ve also got the inner world of your meditation, where you’re the awareness that’s watching and doing the meditation. At the same time, you’ve also got other worlds coming up—thoughts about the past, thoughts about the future, things you did in the past, things that were done to you in the past, things you plan to do in the future—and it’s very easy to go into those worlds and take on identities in them as well.

In fact, this is what we do as we fall asleep. This is why we dream. It’s so easy. You’re drifting off and all of a sudden you’re in another world. You can be a very different person in that world, you could do things that you would never ordinarily do in this larger world. I had a dream one time in which I murdered somebody. I wouldn’t ordinarily murder people, but in the dream world anything is possible.

And you have to be careful about this tendency as you meditate. In fact, it’s going to be one of the main problems you face as you meditate: getting over distractions. Distractions are little becomings. You’re sitting here with the breath and all of a sudden you’re off someplace else, at some other time, with a different identity. At other times, as you’re working with the breath energy, you come across knots in the energy that, when you untie them, reveal... unpleasant presents, let’s put it that way. You open one up and a really bad memory comes out. When that happens, you have to remind yourself: “I’m still a meditator. I was somebody else back in the time of that bad memory, but now I’m a meditator. I don’t have to take on that identity any more.”

The Buddha’s approach is very different from some psychotherapists: They say that you’ve got to enter into the emotion, feel it fully, before you can get past it.

What you're often doing when you do that, though, is simply reinforcing old habits. You want to have the mindfulness and alertness to realize: *That's not me anymore.*

This is why we develop the observer: the one who watches the meditation. That's a lot of what alertness is about. You watch what's going on and you *don't* go into it. If you're going to go into anything, go into the breath, go into inhabiting your body as much as you can right now, finding the spots in the body that are comfortable, finding the areas of the mind that are able simply to watch and to notice what's happening.

The observer is not totally passive. It does more than just passive observing. When you step back, you try to access whatever wisdom you need in order to pull yourself out of those bad memories, because they're pretty sticky. They have lots of hooks, and it's very easy for us to get hooked on them. Unlike fish, we don't get hooked just on our mouths. The hooks seem to catch us all over. So we have to learn how to shave off the hooks, by looking at the narratives that would pull us in.

And a large part of that narrative is your identity, your role in what happened. You have to place question marks in that narrative and around that identity. You're not there anymore. You're someplace else; you're someone else.

The memory is lodged there. And you have to ask yourself, when you go into it, what's the allure of getting into that identity again? And what are the drawbacks? Then think about the allure of being a meditator: someone who can handle things like this and not be blown away. That requires skills, because so many of our identities depend on our skills. If you learn how to play the piano, you're a pianist. If you learn how to do carpentry well, you're a carpenter. And there are certain attitudes that go along with those skills, a certain type of confidence, that if particular problems come up, you have the skills to handle them well. Part of the attitude and confidence of a meditator is that "Whatever comes up in the mind, I don't have to go there, I don't have to identify with that."

Instead of taking on that identity again, you step back from it, and you watch it from outside. Then you watch for the part of the mind that *wants* to go in—that's the part to watch out for. That's when you see the allure. Then you ask yourself, "Why would I want to take that on again?" Often the mind will not give a reason at all. It'll just try to find a chance to go. But you have to be insistent. Eventually, if you're firm enough, the reason will appear.

So you step back and try to take on this identity as the observer. And develop some of the wisdom that goes with the observer.

I was mentioning this afternoon that the Buddha's teachings on kamma can really be helpful in areas like this. And not only kamma, but also the immensity of his world view: vast amounts of time, vast amounts of space. He never took a stand on whether the world is infinite or not, eternal or not, but it's long enough and big enough that it just might as well be, in the sense that injustices have been going back and forth, injuries have been going back and forth for so long. If you take on just one identity as the victim in a particular story line, it's really confining. But you can take on the longer view: that you've taken on many identities. There have been times when you've been the victim; there have been times when you've been the oppressor. Who knows how many times? Back and forth, back and forth. The other people you've been dealing with: the same sort of thing, back and forth.

That perspective can be liberating. You don't feel the need to go over the injustice any more or hide yourself from the pain. The pain is there, the pain is real, but you realize that nothing is gained by taking it on again. If you were to take on all the pains in the past, it would be overwhelming.

That's what being a meditator offers: a choice not to go in. You have the ability to step back. As the Buddha said, wisdom comes when you see things as separate. Your awareness is one thing; the memory is something else.

So you create a place in the body where you can take a stance. You try to create this new identity in the mind, where you can also take a stance, where you can have lots of wisdom and compassion as you deal with these things—compassion for everyone involved.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha lists compassion as one of the brahmaviharas. It's meant to be made universal, so that everybody in a particular story can get a dose of compassion.

When you step back and realize that the roles have changed, back and forth many, many times, that expands the range of your compassion, not only to this lifetime, but also to previous lifetimes. It makes it a lot easier to live with these things. Because there's a part of the mind that really doesn't want to even think about these things, wants to hide them. But hiding them doesn't solve the problem.

The observer, however, is able to watch them but not go into them, and yet not blot them out. Then it becomes not so much a matter of a horrible memory, but simply a choice: Do you want to go in there again or not? You don't have to. You realize it'd be a waste of time. That relaxes a lot of the tightness and tension around these things, not only through the breath, but also through the right

attitude, coming from reflection on kamma and reflection on the brahmaviharas. These attitudes, and the wisdom they embody, can help you let go.

So use the tools that come with being a meditator. Develop them. You do become a new person, as I said, as you develop new skills. So, take on these skills. They will give you a solid enough identity in the present moment that you don't feel compelled to slip back. You realize that holding onto a lot of these things really is a burden—and you're developing the skills that can effectively let those burdens down.