

The Solvent for Sticky Narratives

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When you spend a lot of time by yourself, you find that a lot of old memories come up. Sometimes they can be really disturbing, especially when you've been wronged or you've wronged somebody else. Those are painful memories, and yet the mind likes them. It can spend a lot of time with them. Especially with the feeling that you've been wronged: Of all the ways of defining yourself, that's the most tenacious. You feel that if you let go of that particular memory, that particular identity, you're denying the fact that wrong was done. A very tender and sensitive part of yourself, a very wounded part of yourself, seems to be denied.

But it is a hindrance, and not just a hindrance to concentration. If you allow yourself to stew in thoughts like this, it becomes more and more of a habit, and the mind gets more and more bent in that direction. Then you may find that as you're dying, you're suddenly going to take birth with the intention of getting revenge, seeking justice, seeking a settling of old scores. And that's a miserable life to take. So you've got to see the danger in these thoughts and learn how to think in ways that get you out them.

One has to do with the narrative: The Buddha has you reflect that the narratives of our lives go *way, way* back—so far back that even the idea of a beginning point is inconceivable. Not just hard to think about or hard to find: inconceivable. With a story that has a definite beginning and a definite end, it's possible to tally up the score: who did the first wrong or who overreacted to the first wrong. But when there's no beginning, how do you know who did what to whom first? If you seek justice, then the other side is going to feel wronged, and it just keeps going back and forth, back and forth.

There's a story in the Commentary where the major wife of a king realizes that she can't produce a child. So she thinks she can curry favor with the king by finding a second wife. The second wife has a son, and suddenly the first wife realizes that, by having had a son, the second wife is now in a superior position. So she arranges some poison—kills the son, kills the other woman—and the other woman, as she dies, swears revenge. Then they're reborn as animals. I think in one case, one animal is a chicken and the other is a fox. And the fox comes and eats the chicken's eggs.

We had a case like this in the monastery in Rayong. Someone brought some chickens to the monastery, so we had a little coup. The dogs would sneak in and eat the eggs and the baby chicks. Then the chickens would come out and whenever the dogs had puppies, they'd come and they'd peck at the puppies. One puppy was so wounded that it was paralyzed for days.

But in the story in the Commentary, the back and forth goes on and on and on, to the point where you forget which person was the original wrongdoer in the first story. Finally it comes to the time of our Buddha: A woman is chasing after another woman and wants to kill

her child. So the woman with the child comes running to the Buddha, bows down at his feet. The other woman stays away at a distance. And the Buddha talks to them, “Do you realize how many times you’ve killed each other’s children? And do you want this to go on?”

So here’s a case of not denying that wrong has been done. A *lot* of wrong has been done. But the thing is, you don’t know how much, so why continue the back and forth?

Years back, I was reading a piece by an economist talking about student loans and how outrageous they’ve gotten. He was campaigning for student loan forgiveness, and one of the arguments that was put up against him was that “There are all these people who had to pay heavy student loans in the past, and they would feel it was unfair that later generations got away without paying those loans.” The man campaigning for loan-forgiveness said that that argument was like having been mugged, and saying that from now on you want everybody else to get mugged. There’s no purpose in carrying on with this insane back-and-forth when something is harmful.

So that’s one way of thinking about the narrative: putting it in the context of karma and rebirth. And although we in the West tend to dismiss karma and rebirth as part of the cultural baggage of the Buddha’s teachings, it’s an essential part: a treasure inside. The Buddha didn’t simply pick up an idea that was universally accepted in his time. It was actually hotly debated. There were those who said there was no rebirth, those who said there was. And even among those who said there was, there were those who said that your actions played no role in determining rebirth. So when the Buddha said there was rebirth, and you’re your actions did play a role in it, he was taking a stand, based on what he’d seen on the night of his awakening.

So when you find yourself involved in narratives like this, remember the Buddha’s solvent for the stickiness of those narratives: Think about karma and rebirth, and what the results will be if you keep on thinking these thoughts. They can take you to some pretty bad places. You’re better off just dropping the whole thing.

I know I had that reaction when I first went to stay with Ajaan Fuang. It was soon after my mother’s death, and I still had a lot of resentment toward the people I felt were responsible for her death. Then one night, sort of out of the blue, Ajaan Fuang said, “You know, in a previous lifetime you were a soldier. You killed a *lot* of people, orphaned a lot of children.” That was all he said, but it put the fact that now I was now orphaned in a new perspective. I was able to let it go, with a lot less sense that I was abandoning my desire for justice.

So that’s one way of dealing with the narratives, by using the Buddha’s solvent: his teaching on karma and rebirth.

Another way of dealing with them is to remind yourself that you’re now a meditator, and as a meditator you have new tools at your disposal that you didn’t have before. The teaching on rebirth is one of them, but you’ve also got your ability to develop goodwill and to try to make your goodwill independent of circumstances. It’s one of the reasons why the Buddha pairs his teaching of goodwill with endurance. You put up with difficult circumstances *and* you

maintain your goodwill even then. Think of his image of the man being pinned down by bandits who are sawing off his limbs. As the Buddha said, even in a case like that you should have goodwill: goodwill for the bandits, goodwill for all beings. That's a tool you can develop.

You can say, "Okay, in the past I was a victim of these wrongs," and look at the continuing narrative of your life. You could either have the narrative that says, "The rest of my life was ruined by those wrongs," or "I was able to rise above them." Which narrative would you prefer? Well, it's up to you. You're shaping the narrative now with the choices you make as you meditate. That's another way of dealing with the narratives, reminding yourself that you can give them a happier ending, a more noble ending, and it's within your power.

Then, of course, the Buddha has you step back from this whole process of creating narratives in your mind, and remind yourself that it's all just fabrication. You happen to breathe in a certain way, talk to yourself in a certain way, certain perceptions come up, and all of a sudden you're back in that old thought world. Well, it doesn't have to be that way. You can breathe in a different way, think in a different way, hold different perceptions in mind. Take the narrative apart. Create something better in its place. You can breathe in a way that gives rise to concentration; think in a way that gives rise to concentration; hold perceptions in mind; create feelings through the way you breathe and think: That can all get you into concentration.

So which would you rather do? We find that the old ways have their appeal, and this is precisely why the Buddha has you get the mind into concentration. It can stir up some of these old issues, but it puts you in a position where you can look at them from a different perspective. You can see the part of the mind that's going after the old ways of thinking and you say, "Okay, why? What's the allure?"

Then you can think of the drawbacks. You realize that that thought comes and it goes. It's not there all the time. The potential may be there, but there are a lot of potentials in the world that we know better than to disturb. So why are we disturbing this one?

You keep at this analysis from the point of view of a mind that's settled in, so that you're not feeling threatened, and you have a safe place to go when things get overwhelming. But you can begin to take it apart—what the allure is—and realize that it's pretty miserable food. When you think of the dangers down the line, it's like those foods that may be tasty but they're going to make you sick: Do you want that?

When you can think in these ways, you develop a sense of dispassion. Notice, dispassion's not saying we're going to kiss and make up and pretend that everything is okay. Things are *not* okay. That's the underlying condition of samsara: *It's not okay*. And if you want closure, samsara's not going to provide it.

Part of the mind doesn't like the idea that there are all these dangling ends that are not tied up. But our lives are nothing but dangling ends. How many dangling ends are left over from your previous lives, you have no idea. We've been going through samsara with lots of ends

dangling. The only closure is to admit that the whole business is not okay and it's time to get out. It's only when you get out that you're really free.

So when hurtful memories come up like this, remind yourself that as a meditator you now have new tools and a new identity: the person who's mastered those tools. That changes the narrative and heads it toward the only point of genuine closure—nibbana—which no longer involves ill will, thoughts of getting back, or thoughts of settling scores. You get to a point where the scores don't matter. And you realize that you really can't tally up the scores, because how do you know when the period of the game began? You're much better off getting out of the game entirely. And the Buddha shows you how.