

A Sucker for Random Memories

July 1, 2021

When the mind has long opportunities to be quiet, you find yourself in the same situation as a lot of older people as they approach death. There's nothing much happening in the present moment, and old memories start barging in. Things dating back decades that you'd totally forgotten suddenly have an opportunity to come up to the surface. If your days are busy, there's a lot of activity on the surface of the water, so things under water don't have a chance to show themselves. But as the water at the top of the surface grows clear and still, things from beneath get a chance to come up. You have to be careful not to get carried away by them, because part of the appeal is things that were hidden for a long time suddenly come back, like old friends. Things lost in the mists of time suddenly appear very sharply—but you want to make sure that you don't fall for them.

After all, right mindfulness is not being mindful of events in the past per se. You want to see things in terms of either the body in and of itself, feelings, mind states, mental qualities, and if you go into a thought, into a memory, you're going into a state of becoming. That's wrong mindfulness. If you can stand out of it and watch it simply as a process, then you maintain right mindfulness—and there's a lot more to be learned that way, because after all, your memory of the past: Are you planning to inscribe it? What's the worth of that memory?

Think of all the things that have happened in the past, all the people in the world: They've gone away, gone away, and there's nothing left. If you try to grab after them, you're grabbing after shadows that no longer exist. But if you can stay anchored in the present moment and watch the process of these things as they happen, then you've learned some important lessons: This is how a thought appears. This is how a state of becoming appears. All the steps of dependent co-arising are right there. Which ones are you going to notice?

And if you're such a sucker for random memories right now, think of what it's going to be like as you approach death. Looking to the future, there's nothing much to anticipate, or nothing positive to anticipate. You're going to die. Often in the present moment, you've got the pain of illness, so the mind starts reaching back to the past. When some people fall into dementia as they die, it's because as they reach into the past they see nothing but their unskillful actions or things that get them depressed, so they lose all touch with reality. Even if you stay in contact

with reality and even if the memories are good, still they're pulling you off into something that doesn't exist anymore.

This is why even though craving is what pulls us on to the next life, we often fall for rebirths that are not all that desirable because we get distracted. We get involved in something that has karmic consequences. An old memory of an old wrong—either an old wrong that you did or an old wrong that somebody did to you—will pull you in a bad direction. And even if you go to a good place, there's no guarantee that from that good place you'll go to another good place.

There's a passage that talks about people who go to realms of the Brahmas that are based on the jhanas, but if they haven't really learned their Dhamma lessons well, they're going to fall. It's only the ones who've learned their Dhamma lessons who are more secure, who know they won't have to come back here. They won't have to continue in the round of rebirth and redeath and rebirth and redeath.

What does it mean to learn the lessons of the Dhamma? Precisely what I said: seeing the steps by which a state of becoming occurs in the mind, where the mind falls for the allure of a particular step in the process, and how you counteract that allure with knowledge of the drawbacks of falling for something so impermanent, so ephemeral, so unreliable and inconstant. When the drawbacks hit home to the point of engendering dispassion, that's when you're free from these things.

So instead of finding your old memories fascinating, try to be more fascinated by the steps by which they come, the steps by which they threaten to take over, and the ways in which you can maneuver around them. That kind of knowledge is really worthwhile. It's available all the time in the present moment, and it's always useful.

A question came up in today's Zoom meeting. I'd been talking about breath meditation, about developing a sense of rapture, pleasure in the present moment, and someone asked, "Isn't that enough? Why do we have to think about rebirth? Why can't we just enjoy the present moment?" It's because the moment of death really is a danger, and the fact that you've been enjoying the present moment up to that time, that you've been able to calm the mind up to that time, doesn't mean you'll be able to calm it when all of the sudden there's no body for you to stay in. And even though many of the tools that you need at that time are the tools you do develop as you get the mind into concentration, you also need the tools of insight. Knowing that you face difficulties that are going to be a lot more difficult than, say, a pain that you have to endure while you meditate, requires you to be stricter with yourself about the skills you develop as a meditator.

It's like learning a foreign language. If you plan simply on traveling for a while in a foreign country, you pick up enough for basic conversation. But if you knew

that you were going to have to move there and stay, establish a new life there, you'd put a lot more energy into learning the language and learning it well.

And it's the same with meditation. You can pick up the skills that make a pleasant day of meditation, hour of meditation, and think that that's enough, but it's not enough, because leaving the body is going to be a lot more challenging than staying in the body, and you really have to have your wits about you. As I say, if you're a sucker for random memories right now, just think of what it's going to be like then. The mind will go for anything at that point if it hasn't been well trained.

So be heedful. Here's your chance to train the mind well. If a memory comes up, look at it not in terms of its content but in terms of a process. What were the steps in the process? If you didn't catch the steps, let it go. Wait for the next chance to come around, because there will be more. Just be more alert to it. This is what you have to do. The memories have a lot of self around them: "This is 'my' memory of 'my' childhood or 'my' youth or what I said or what someone did to me or did for me." There's a lot of me, me, me in those memories, but when you try to grab hold of them, they vanish into thin air. They leave you simply with that habit of grasping at the next vapor and then the next vapor that comes.

So when old memories come up, remember there is a skill that you can develop in the way you approach them. Instead of thinking about finding some pleasure indulging in an old memory, you can learn how to understand the mind as it shapes these things, and that kind of knowledge is a lot more valuable. It'll serve you in good stead now to deepen your powers of concentration, sharpen your powers of insight, and it'll be a useful tool as you deal with the inevitable, the things we know we all have to face some point at death. So it's good to learn how to master these skills now while you've got the chance.