

Passion for Nostalgia

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Nostalgia seems to be such an innocent pleasure: We're not taking anything away from anyone else, we're not planning to stake claims on anything in the future. We're just rifling through our own memories. But it is one of the causes for samsara. We think of places we've been and we'd like to go back. If that desire hits you at the moment of death, it's going to have an impact on where you go. And even now in the present moment, it blinds you to what you're doing right now: You're off in another world someplace.

So you have to see that nostalgia has its drawbacks. First off, you can never really go back to the way things were. Even if you go back to the same place and physically nothing much has changed, you've changed as a person, the other people around there have changed, too. You end up going back and you find out that it's not the place you thought it was.

Part of this of course has to do with the fact that your nostalgic memory is like every memory of sensual pleasure—it's very selective. When you were back at that spot, in that time, there were uncertainties, there were fears, disappointments, but the feeling of what it was like to actually live in that space at that time gets scrubbed—so that only the nice details remain.

So you have to realize: Your mind is lying to you, and you don't want your life to be directed by lies. So, as when dealing with any unskillful mind state or any unskillful habit, the Buddha offers several ways of analyzing things to get free from the nostalgia. First off, he says you have to see it as something separate: The memory is one thing; you're something else. Don't go into it. Step out of it and see: This is something the mind is creating, right now.

When you see it as something separate, then there are two modes of analysis that the Buddha would have you pursue. One is to take it apart into its individual components. The memory is composed of some feelings, some perceptions, some thought fabrications. Just tease them out: Which are the perceptions? What are the ways you're talking to yourself about them? See those as separate components. The more you see them as separate components, the more you realize that they're pretty ephemeral: hints, whispers, shadows of things—nothing really substantial. And yet you want this to guide your life, to guide your future?

The other type of analysis is to see it as part of a causal process: What gives rise to this nostalgic memory? Sometimes, of course, it just pops up on its own, but then you go for it. This is where you have to look for the allure: *Why* do you go for

it? What are you missing right now? And what are the stages by which the mind goes into it? A thought pops up and it doesn't come up fully formed: It's going to be, again, hints and whispers, and part of the mind says, "Hey, this could be a memory of my old time back then—let's go for it and fill in the blanks."

You come with a ready-made script. Where did that come from? How many times have you been over certain memories and added something new each time? Why? What is it that the mind wants to milk out of this memory? And then where does it go?

So look at the memory as part of a causal process: It comes, and then it goes, then it comes back again some other time, and goes again. When it goes, why does it go? Partly because of those component factors it's made out of. These things have to be sustained: There has to be an act of *attention* and *intention* to keep them going, and the intention has to be fed by the *allure*.

But you have to realize that this is all suffering. You're clinging to these different aggregates. And what are you getting out of them? You're placing ruts in the mind, or as the Buddha would say, you're *bending* the mind. We would say they're ruts. You get into the rut and it's hard to get out.

This is one of the reasons why the Buddha said that lack of nostalgia is one of the ways of putting an end to suffering, because you see that your memories are totally unreliable. They may have a little bit of truth to them, but each time you take them out of the mind and look at them, and put them back, something changes. It's like a person going through a library, picking out a book, and then doing what librarians hate, which is to mark up the book and put it back in a different place. Keep on doing that and the whole library gets rearranged. The books are rewritten. Nobody can find anything.

Then you have to remember that the place, the time for which you feel the nostalgia is long gone. It's the nature of *all* time. If you were to go back, you'd find it would pass, pass, pass. Think of Ajaan Fuang's comment that the sensual pleasures for which we really have strong desires are the ones that we've had in the past, but we lost them, and now we want them back again.

And suppose we do get them back again: We're going to lose them again. Where are you going to find any fulfillment? Where does anything come to any kind of conclusion? Where can you really lay claim to something and say, "I've got it for sure!"

It's like trying to put something in a net, but the net has a big hole in the bottom. Like catching a butterfly with a net like that: You catch it, and it just flies out of the net. In the meantime, you've been chasing the butterfly deeper and deeper into unknown territory.

If you create this as a habit, then this is where the mind is going to go as life comes to an end. At that point, you're not going to want to be thinking about the future very much. It doesn't present much in terms of hope, so the mind will cast back to the past because the mind is really good at looking for pleasures wherever it can find them. You see people in pretty miserable situations, and yet they're always looking for pleasure of some kind. "What are the possibilities there?" And they'll grasp at anything. Well, the mind as it approaches death is going to grasp at anything—unless it's trained.

We're training it *now*, so that when those memories come up, we can take them apart into their component parts, we can see them as part of a causal process and gain a sense of *samvega* around them, so that the next time they come, we're not quite so likely to want to go for them.

This is good work to be doing *now* so that you don't have to do all the work then. You want to master this as a skill: how to step out of mind states, how to take them apart, so that you can end this process of wandering into them—creating worlds and then wandering into the worlds. It just goes on and on and on, and never really arrives anywhere.

As the Buddha saw on the night of his awakening, if you try to cast back in the past to see how long this has been going on, you can't find the beginning point. More than that, he said it's inconceivable: What would a beginning point be?

As for how much longer it's going to go on, that depends on whether you train the mind. Think of all the lives you've been through. If you can't remember specific lifetimes, just think about it in general terms: eons and eons of being different beings. It's all gone, gone, gone. And what does the future hold if you don't get out? Just more of the same: things that come and then go, go, go.

When you think about this, it's pretty chastening. It should be enough to get the mind to be more willing to stay here in the present moment, to tell itself, "I've got to figure out the motor behind all this. What keeps generating these thoughts? What keeps wanting to go for them? What can be done to turn the motor off?"

When you see that everything it creates will fall apart, you begin to wonder, "Why should I just keep on creating?" That's when you've really got the attitude that's ready for the practice. You've been chastened, you have a sense of dismay, but you don't get depressed. You're confident that there is a way out.

This is why the Buddha has you *delight* in the Dhamma, to delight in developing skillful qualities and taking unskillful qualities apart. It's a fascinating project. Rather than being fascinated by your nostalgic memories of the past, be fascinated by what the mind is doing, and how it deceives itself right now. If you

can develop a passion and delight for that, that delight leads you in the right direction.