What to Forget

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There’s a Borges story where a character cannot forget anything. Everything that happens to him, he remembers, remembers, remembers. He’s miserable. He locks himself into a room so there’s less to remember. I think about that when I think about the Buddhist definition for mindfulness, which is the ability to remember what was done and said a long time ago. The point being that if we don’t know what to forget, we’re going to be miserable. Right mindfulness means knowing what to remember, what to put aside. It’s like that function of the brain that’s supposed to happen at night as we dream. It slips through the events of the day and unconsciously disposes of some memories. The same way as meditators, we need a way of disposing of things that we don’t need to remember that will just clutter up the mind. This is the function of appropriate attention. One passage of the Buddha defines it by the way he uses it. It’s the ability to know which questions to ask and which questions to put aside. That was what he cited as part of discernment. The questions that you put aside have to do with who you are, who you’ve been. The questions concerning the world. Not all questions concerning the world, but things like the origin of the world. Is the world eternal, non-eternal, finite, infinite? And even the questions about you. There are some that are useful. Am I capable of doing the practice? That’s a good question to ask, and the answer is yes. Who’s responsible for my actions? You are. But you don’t have to pursue it further than that. Who’s responsible for putting an end to suffering? You can be. The same with the world. How does the world work in such a way that you can put an end to suffering? The Buddha talks about that in terms of karma, the principles of action, and the fact that craving, which is the cause for suffering, can keep on going even when the body is dying. Consciousness can keep on going. That’s good to know. These are all things that are good to know as you grow older and face death. In fact, that’s one test for how to interpret what’s important and what’s not important to ask, and what’s important and what’s not important to interpret. How would that be useful in terms of dealing with aging, illness, and death? After all, when the Buddha set out on his original quest, that’s what he was looking for—something that didn’t age, didn’t grow ill, and didn’t die. When he gained awakening, the first thing that occurred to him after he realized that he was now free was that there was no more birth, which meant that’s the aging. Aging, illness, and death can’t happen anymore. So when you come across a teaching asking yourself, “How would this be useful for a person who’s getting old, getting sick, dying?” In cases like that, the question of “Does consciousness continue?” becomes an important question because then the question is, “What do I do to prepare for a good place, or to not have to be reborn if possible?” Well, you need to train it so you can be mindful, because the mind at the moment of death is scattered all over the place. It’s going to grasp at this, grasp at that, because it’s used to grasping. So you want to have some order into what it holds on to. Here we are, focusing on the breath. That’ll be something that, at that point, you will have to let go. But in the meantime, you can learn a lot about the body, learn a lot about the mind, by staying with the breath. Remember, the Buddha’s instructions for breath meditation have to do with fabrication, bodily fabrication, which is the breath itself. Mental fabrication, which is a combination of feelings and perceptions. The instructions mention those two kinds of fabrication directly. And implicitly, there’s also verbal fabrication, the way you talk to yourself. Each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out, you ask yourself, “What’s the purpose of this breath? What’s my purpose as I breathe in? What’s my purpose as I breathe out?” And as you get more sensitive to those processes, when the time comes that you have to let go of the bodily fabrication, you’ve also learned, in the meantime, there are skillful and unskillful ways of engaging in verbal fabrication and mental fabrication. And you have the choice. That’s another lesson to learn as you stay with the breath. You’re not stuck with just one way of breathing. And you’re not stuck with one way of perceiving or even feeling. We tend to think of feelings, feeling tones, as things that we’re stuck with. A pain comes in the body, and here we are sitting for a whole hour. Are you going to have to sit with the pain? Or you can ask yourself, “What am I doing around the pain? What are my perceptions around the pain? What are my thoughts around the pain?” So you’re not simply enduring. You’re taking in an acquisitive attitude. That would be an appropriate attitude to take as you approach death—inquisitive. Usually people approach death with fear. But as you get more and more used to watching the fabrications in the mind and getting a better and better sense of being in control, you can say, “Well, here’s a test. How well can I handle this?” And simply taking that attitude of being inquisitive will shed a lot of suffering right there. So as we practice, it’s good to clear away things that are going to be unnecessary, things that are going to get in the way, things that may seem interesting or intriguing. There are lots of ideas the mind can come up with that are interesting but not necessarily useful. You have to keep asking yourself, “What’s useful? What will be useful facing the fact of illness? What will be useful facing the fact of aging? What’s useful facing death?” As you look at the various teachings that the Buddha offers in terms of the Four Noble Truths—dependent co-arising, emptiness, the Three Perceptions—you’ll ask yourself, “What’s a useful way of applying these teachings to these particular problems, so that I don’t have to suffer from aging, illness, or death?” Think of the question, “Who am I?” Well, you can be whoever you make yourself. When the Buddha talks about beings, he defines them in terms of their attachments. He doesn’t say there’s really no being there. There is. But he’s not offering the definition. You’re the one who defines yourself. And you’re doing it all the time, as you hold on to this, hold on to that. So you ask yourself, “What am I holding on to that’s useful?” Learn how to take that identity apart so that your holding on becomes more of the holding on of the path. Similarly, with views. There are certain views that are useful as part of the raft. This is an aspect of that analogy that’s not often focused on. But that flood that the raft goes over, what is it? It’s the flood of sensuality, the flood of becoming, the flood of views, and the flood of ignorance. But the raft is composed of right view, right resolve. So on down to right view, right resolve. Right concentration. So there is a view that helps you get across views. If you tell yourself, “I simply won’t have any views,” you’re still standing on this side of the river. Right view is what’s needed to get you across. Because it teaches you how to look at views and take them apart. Whereas if you simply tell yourself, “I won’t have any views, I won’t hold on to any views,” your views get pretty scattered. They’re pretty random. And if you’re in denial about them, then they go underground where you can’t see them. So ask yourself what views would be useful. Right view is about action. Right view is about suffering and its cause and how to put into it. That’ll be really useful as you face the problem. And it gets you across. When you get to the other side, then you can let them go. But you don’t get to the other side by letting them go. You learn what to hold on to, what to let pass, what to keep in mind, what to feel, what to forget. Like at the moment of death, memories of past pleasures will come. And if you learn to look at those memories, that’s something that’s relevant to what’s gone and will never come back. And you realize that no matter how much you hold on to those memories, you can’t bring those things back. So that’s something you let go. When you hold on to your skills in the present moment, you hold on to your knowledge of how the mind works, both in fabricating suffering and how it works in fabricating the path to the end of suffering, that knowledge will be useful. So as you go through life, it’s like we’re traveling. You have to know what to pack in your bag and what you have to leave behind. And as you pick up certain things as you go along, you have to weigh them as to whether they’re worth the added weight and what they’ll have to replace. And you have to pay appropriate attention as your foundation for sorting through things. That’s basically seeing what’s skillful and what’s not, and abandoning what’s unskillful and developing what’s skillful. Then you know what to take and what to leave behind.

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