

Hurtful Memories

September 4, 2017

We have a cool night. The moon is bright. The crickets are just the right volume. Ideal conditions for meditation.

The problem is that sometimes the conditions outside can be ideal but the conditions inside are not. You make up your mind to stay with the breath and suddenly find yourself overwhelmed with thoughts of the past, thoughts of the future, hurtful memories. You can just sit there and accept the fact that that's what's in your mind, or you can do something about it. You've got to learn how to step out of the memories.

There are basically two ways of doing that. One is poking within the memory itself. You step into that world and you change it. If it's a memory of someone who hurt you, you remember that that happened, but now you've become the sort of person who doesn't get overwhelmed by that, the sort who's not going to let it ruin your life. You've learned how to move on, you're now a meditator, you're doing something good with your life. That puts a new end to the narrative, makes it easier to pull out of it. It doesn't have the same sting it did if you just stewed over the events of the past. You now take into account that here you are meditating. You've survived, you've come out and you're doing something wise with your life.

If there's a case where *you* harmed somebody, then you remind yourself to take this as a lesson that that was a mistake. And either you've already gone beyond that kind of mistake or you're in the process of learning how to do that—which again, puts a new ending to the narrative.

In both cases, the Buddha recommends that you spread thoughts of goodwill to yourself and to the other people. Think about things in terms of karma as well, because karma goes back who-knows-how-many lifetimes: back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, until you have no idea of who started it. And after all those backs and forths, does it really matter? What you need is some goodwill for everybody, and the determination that you're not going to seek revenge, you're not going to hold any animosity. You're going to come out with goodwill for everybody, sympathy for everybody, compassion for everybody. And again, that takes the sting out.

You extend thoughts of goodwill to yourself so that you don't keep getting down on yourself about that memory—because often what happens is when you get down on yourself about a past mistake, then another part of the mind will say, "I don't like being down. Maybe it wasn't such a mistake after all," and that sets you up to make mistakes again.

So instead of getting down on yourself, you simply remind yourself: This is the human condition. We live forward but learn backwards. In other words, we can see our mistakes in the past as we're going forward into situations where we often have very little idea of what would

be the right thing to do. Or we don't have the strength to do the right thing even though we know it.

So now you're going to have compassion for yourself and then compassion for everybody else, so that if the harm you did the last time was intentional, you're not going to repeat it. Because you know what happens when you do intentional harm: It comes back at you.

It's in this way you tie up the narrative in a new way. You tie it up in such a way that you can get yourself out of it, and it doesn't have a lot of hooks and barbs to pull you back in. That's one way of dealing with hurtful memories.

The other way is learn how to look at the whole process of how a memory comes into the mind. How does the mind go for it? What are the stages? You learn this by trying to stay with the breath as best you can and then noticing what happens as the mind leaves the breath. How many suggestions, how many whispers does the mind give you before you actually drop the breath and go off with the thought or the memory? The more quickly you can catch yourself as you go off, the more you're going to see the stages that the mind goes through. And as you step back, it pulls you out of the narrative.

It's like looking at the narrative from the point of view of an author or a critic, or the producer or the director of a play. They can't let themselves get into the narrative so much. They have to be able to look for all the details of how it's being presented, how the actors are doing things. In the same way, you step back, get out of your full emotional involvement with the memory, and see it simply as a process of the mind where the mind fabricates these things and then falls for its own fabrications, forgetting that it's fabricated them.

It's like that old riddle: You're dreaming that you're in a boat and all the members of your family are there. There's a man in the boat with a gun and he's going to kill one of the members of the family, and it's up to you to choose which one he's going to kill. If you say, "I can't choose any of them," he'll say, "In that case, I'm going to kill everybody." So what do you do? Of course, the answer to the riddle is that you wake up. But a lot of people don't remember the fact that it's a dream. They get all tied up in knots about which member of the family they would be willing to sacrifice. But if you remember, "Oh, this is a dream," then you can drop it.

It's the same with the thoughts in the mind. You have to learn that these are fabrications, things you put together. There was an impulse coming from the past and part of the mind wants to go with that particular narrative, it has a particular appeal. And even if it's a horrible thought, it still has a kind of appeal. It's like dogs liking the smell of dead animals. So if you can learn how to step back and remind yourself, "This is something made up, and I have the choice not to make it up," then you can pull yourself out.

I was reading a while back, an author saying that mindfulness is a matter of saying Yes to everything. That may work for comedy improv but it certainly doesn't work for maintaining the sanity of your mind. There are things you say Yes to and things you say No. A lot of the

meditation is learning how to say No effectively to thoughts that will pull you down. You use your sense of judgment.

That was another issue I was reading about recently: When people learn about mindfulness being non-judgmental and they say, “Well, how do you exercise judgment in your life when you’re being mindful?” It’s on one of those websites where people offer answers, and unfortunately the bad answers were the ones that were being voted up. Actually, mindfulness doesn’t mean being non-judgmental, it means remembering. And part of what you remember are the things you should say Yes to and the things you should say No to, and how to say Yes and No effectively: how to say Yes to skillful things even when they’re difficult, and how to say No to unskillful things in the mind even when they’re attractive.

Think of the image of the gatekeeper at the gate to a fortress. The gatekeeper has to say Yes to some people coming in and No to others. You say Yes to the friends, No to the foes, No to the people who are dubious. That way, you keep the fortress safe. In the same way, mindfulness is here to keep your mind safe. And remember, there are ways of effectively saying No to thoughts that can pull you down, Yes to thoughts that can pull you up.

So when you’ve heard good lessons on this, try to remember them. When you’ve learned through your own practice how to deal with these things, remember that as well. Because that’s the store of knowledge that’ll really help you.