

## “Working with a personal history”

We each have a story of “my life”. In a relative sense, we do have a personal history. This story exerts a very powerful conditioning influence on how we experience the world, our body, our mind, now. Within that relative understanding, there is no wisdom in denying it, avoiding it, suppressing it, ignoring it. It’s a fact. It is part of the matrix of conditions that we’re working with in practice in each moment.

We are not trying to deny that there is a personal history or that it exerts a powerful conditioning effect. But what we’re trying to do, or what the practice of mindfulness in each moment seems to do, whether it’s our agenda to do it or not, is to bring this personal history up for review. In spite of trying to be in the present and trying to be with present stuff, some of what comes up in the present is memories of the past. When they come up, very often, if we’re not practicing mindfulness, we just give an internal nod of reaffirmation – “Yes, that’s the way it is. That’s the way it was. That’s how I felt. That’s who I am.” This habitual behavior serves to reattach our sense of self to it.

However, when we’re practicing mindfulness and we see this historical incident come up for review, there’s a whole sequence of phenomena that happen. There is the remembering, which may include a visual component, an auditory component, or other sensory components. There is the story of what was going on then. There are emotional feelings from that time. There is the whole relationship to the memory that we have now: we remember it. We may feel fearful, or anxious, or guilty, or whatever. So it’s not just a matter of remembering and then letting it go. It’s a matter of recognizing that you’re remembering, and that there’s this whole sequence of mental formations happening.

If we can identify them, see them, feel them, allow ourselves to just recognize, “Oh, this is remembering, seeing, feeling, thinking, revenging, planning, etc.” then each of those pixels of the past is recognized as an event in the present. With this recognition, the sense of self is not reconditioned. We see these events just as the impersonal events that they are. In this way, we can slowly begin to dissolve the glue that identifies that particular memory as “myself” and “who I am now” and any resultant

agenda that may arrive with it e.g. “Now I have to fix it, finish it or process it.” We can see this process of self-creation come to an end.

When a memory initially surfaces, if there is identification with it, we relive it in all its intimate, intense feeling and detail. In time, as we begin to fill out the picture and see what was really going on there, the memory can come, we can see it and know it, and not have an entangled sense of self in relationship to it. It’s not that we’re going to get rid of memories, but we can change our relationship to them.

Then, instead of being a set piece of who I am, the memory becomes an impersonal, transient event in the present. Seen and known as it arises and passes away. “I” am not entangled within it.

Now, if we try to apply the Buddha’s injunction or instruction to perceive the *anatta* characteristic e.g. “See all these experiences as not me, not mine, not who I am.” Prematurely, there may be some suppression, denial, avoidance or aversion. But if you see each pixel of the memory as the impersonal event that it is, then you understand that it is, “Not me, not mine, not who I am!”

Initially we have to acknowledge the intensity of our entanglement with the past, with our personal history, and understand from our own experience that the disentangling from it is not a willful thing. I can’t just say, “Let go.” and have it happen! But in each moment of mindfulness, we loosen that identification and begin to understand it as “not me, not mine, not who I am.” This is what happens in practice.

The question arises, “How long must we persist in mindfully acknowledging the relationship to the memories that arise? When is it appropriate to just cut it and see it as not me, not mine, not who I am?” The danger is that we will become further entangled indulging our memories even though it is an impersonal, impermanent, random event. There comes a point in the process where the knot of identification is disentangled or dissolved enough to recognize the perception “not me, not mine, not who I am.” To know whether to apply that perception without denial, dismissal, aversion or judgment; and to see things as they truly are is a skill that we learn through experience. To be able to do that is a movement of practice from awareness of the content to awareness of the process. The result is freedom from the limitation of the memory, freedom from a limited sense of self, freedom to be all that you are able to be.