

# River of Memory

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Sitting here, right now, in this moment of zazen, we come face-to-face with ourselves. Coming face-to-face with ourselves in this moment means to see how we are and how we have been, because right now, in this moment, the past presents itself. It rivers through us, flowing as memories, thoughts, feelings, expectations, patterns of reaction, comparisons, denial, aversion, grasping. Sometimes this presents itself simply as wandering off into thought again and again; a laziness of mind, a torpor and dullness, a kind of stupidity, blank-eyed gaped-mouth, almost drooling, going through the same old rituals again and again, liking this, disliking that.

Sometimes attention folds in upon itself, like a child burrowing beneath the covers, perhaps to avoid getting out of bed in the morning; perhaps to hide from the sound of its parents' raised voices, the sound of flesh hitting flesh. Perhaps we hide within ourselves, out of fear; perhaps just out of reluctance. Sometimes the past presents itself as this thrumming of a memory, a slippery image that begins to spool itself out into a succession of visions, of faces, of sounds, of colours and smells. Sometimes it is just a knot in the belly or in the chest. The whole bodymind is wired with the past, tied within itself. Muscles loop together. Thoughts strung one to the next, because self-image is always living out its past — now. It is always playing the same old movies, listening to the same old song, making the same old comments. Nobody is listening but it keeps muttering to itself.

As the flow, the river, the samsara of conditioned experience flows through this moment, sometimes we feel

overwhelmed by it. It is as if we are fish, swimming in the midst of the current of habit and conditioning. Sometimes there is a strong pull of aversion, a quick sweep of desire. Surrounded by the water, everything is distorted. Our lives are lived in suffocation. Nothing is accurate. We can't judge distance properly. We can't tell what is near or far because everything is distorted and filtered. Our movements are slow, heavy. Everything is painful, but so painful that it is numb; so numb that it feels normal.

But we are not living within the current of habit. The current of habit arise within us and we arise within this moment. Can we see the trickling of these habits? Can we see their movement, like sunlight shining upon water? Can we see that the patterns that are formed by these habits mean no more than the momentary images that arise in the dancing of light on the waves?

Practising this present moment in zazen does not mean absenting ourselves from our memories. It does not mean denying them because despite the fact that self-image lives only in its memories, it lives in denial of most of those memories. It edits them. It sections them off. It divides them, fragments them.

In order to realize who and what we are, we must go beyond all images of ourselves and of our world and of each other because these images are only memories. And yet, memory is how we know how to take a step. It's effortless. Memory is how we know how to cook our food, how to serve it to others. Memory is how we learn from our mistakes. And memory is also how we clarify our habits and patterns.

Mindfulness, 'smirti' in Sanskrit or "sati" in Pali, means to 'bring oneself back', to 'remember the moment'. From wherever one has been, one finds oneself back here. This is the action of smriti, of satti, of mindfulness — remembering the present. And in the present, all memories unfold. Applying mindfulness moment after moment so that it is always this moment, then it is no longer necessary to remember the moment. Instead there is simply insight. There is simply direct and unhindered seeing. Through mindfulness, through insight, whatever has been buried, whatever has been locked away, must be opened in order for us to be whole.

Does that mean, then, that we must look through our memories, look through the holding patterns of tension that we sense in the back and in the jaw, the elbows and thighs? Must we then search for what is hidden? No. We need only to open whatever is present. We need only to attend openly. If there is a moment of fear then there is the knowing of this. If there is a moment of hesitation there is the knowing of this. If there is a childhood memory of a lonely terror, of a petty disappointment, of a secret cruelty, then it is known. It is known as memory. It is known as a thought. It is known as an image, as a texture of contraction. It is known as a flickering that is arising within this whole moment of seeing and hearing and touching and tasting and smelling and thinking and feeling. It is known to be what it is. It is known that it is not what we are, but what we have been.

We do not need to inspect our memories and take inventory of them. But we need to see clearly whatever is arising, whatever blocks us, whatever boundaries are present, whatever is carrying us, whatever is overpowering us, whatever is arising within us. Whatever arises within our practice is arising to be opened, is arising to be liberated. It is liberated through open attention. As mindfulness opens into insight and insight opens into wisdom, as self opens to world and as world opens to experience, whatever we need to open will present itself. Therefore, there is nothing that we truly need to do. We need only to live this moment fully and completely, to live this moment in mindfulness, to live honestly.

Otherwise we are living a lie. We are living out our hesitations, our fears, our patterns, our denials. We are

living out our avoidance of our own freedom, our own dignity, our own clarity. And we drown. Perhaps it takes us thirty years, fifty years, seventy years to drown in that river of memory, that river of habit, but surely we do and surely each moment of those seventy years is merely a kind of death.

In this moment, allow yourselves to come alive. Intensive practice is not necessarily dependent on sesshin. There is a sesshin this weekend, but what about right now? You must practise each moment as if it were your last because this moment... is the last. It can be the last because you are simply living it from the point of view of the past, or it can be the last because what you are in this moment rises and falls and each moment is the last moment and the first moment.

**[Roshi shouts:] You have never been in this moment before.** You have never been alive now, before. You have never breathed this breath, heard this sound, felt this touch. Freedom, liberation — It's so simple, so straightforward, so easy. It is just knowing things as they are.

Please, this evening, this moment, enjoy yourself.