

# Holding the Past and Future

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Lately, we're all living with severe restrictions in order to fight this pandemic, and many people are obsessed with the future or pining for aspects of the past. So I want to talk tonight about what the dharma and our practice offer for us to make peace with this peculiar point in the flow of time.

When teachers lead meditation, they often discourage thoughts about the past or future. After years of meditating this way, we can come to feel that we should always stay in the present, and that might be a good goal. But we have to plan for the future, and as for past events, untangling our memories and reactions to them can release us from mindstates that cause us dukkha, or inner suffering. So how do we hold the past and future in a way that supports our practice, and how can our practice help us deal with times other than this very moment?

When I picked the title of this talk, I knew what it meant to "hold" an experience, because I'd heard the expression often enough to catch the meaning by how it was usually used. But if I've ever read or heard an actual definition, I've forgotten it. So here's my definition: it's how we relate to an event and our inner response to it. It's accepting and knowing phenomena in a fairly intimate way, allowing them just to be what they are as we pay close attention to how they function, and affect us. This definition implies that the past is not entirely static, as is commonly thought, and that the future is so vague that metaphorically we need to gather it up and hold onto it.

These days, with the disruption of the covid-19 pandemic, people seem to spend the most time grappling with the future. There's a lot of fear, and hope. In general, our relationship with the future is predominantly governed by desire and aversion. In some ways, this makes it easier for me to talk about than our relationship with the past, which can be pretty complicated, so while your minds are fresh, I'll tackle the past first.

It's good to hold in mind that although memory is about events that occurred in the past, thinking about them occurs in the present. The salient aspect of remembering the past is our *current* emotional reaction to it. This usually contains some element of dukkha, on a spectrum that goes from a PTSD-type of misery to a slight frisson of nostalgia. Mindfulness lets us recognize the distinction between what happened "back then" and the memory that's in our awareness *now*.

We may also be mindful enough to note that memories of an event are not completely accurate. Because of the way they're stored in the brain, memories can be expected to degrade over time. We may continue to remember certain events frequently, but each time we do so the *memories* change.

When memories arise, we can practice with them in a way that will benefit us. Mindfulness practice is all about investigating our inner experience in response to mental formations like memories. We're in the best position to do this when there's some mental space between this replay of the past and the emotions that currently accompany it. In other words, mindfulness lets us stay aware that this memory we're having is not an actual worldly event, but a fabrication of the mind. Bearing this in mind gives us the space to do the most important thing we can do with our practice – dispassionately examine our emotional reaction, and identify how and why there's suffering mixed with it.

Our practice is a complex process of delving always deeper into the mind. Memories cause, and continue to support, long-standing states of mind like attitudes, assumptions, beliefs and values. They're a bit like plaque sticking to the walls of the arteries, potentially messing up a lot of the body's processes.

When we're mindful enough to investigate how memories affect us emotionally, we get close to seeing how these current emotions influence pre-existing states of mind, whether they add to the problem or help the situation. Just seeing this dynamic is usually enough to alter these old mindstates, and that helps free us from the dukkha they carry.

Here's an example, a made-up story. The word "you" refers to no one in particular. Say you have a strong feeling that it's an insult to leave or hang up on others without saying goodbye. This happened to you when you were getting to know someone you liked very much, and hoped to have a deeper relationship with. It had seemed like they liked and respected you a lot, too, but then they left you in an awkward situation without saying goodbye. Now, many years later, you get angry when people on TV just hang up without ending the phone call. And if anyone does this to you now, you ghost them.

It will almost inevitably remind you of the potential relationship that got away because of this rudeness, and that memory always evokes some sense that you are undesirable. If you bring mindfulness to that feeling, and remember this is just a fuzzy memory, you'll then have a chance to look at this cause and effect relationship. You might have a moment to consider that departing or hanging up without formally taking your leave is completely acceptable to many people.

One day you might remember that when you were quite young, someone scolded you severely for doing this, and made you feel really bad. You begin to see the origin of this attitude of yours, and how it has become increasingly tangled up with dukkha over the years. It's even possible, maybe in a subsequent meditation, to realize that you can just drop this old attitude and be free of that whole source of suffering.

How we hold the past determines how well we understand the meaning of our memories. It's a little like dreams. It's just the mind producing false experiences now, ones that leave us unsettled. The more "real" they seem to us, the closer we're "holding" them. When we remember that "It's just a dream," or a memory, we're holding them at enough distance to investigate *how* they trouble us.

Clearly, it's futile to try to never think about the past, because so many things in the present are related to past events. It's skillful, though, to remember that this means we still have some emotional attachment to those old events. For me, this is especially true with memories of loved ones who've died, or my favorite places where I lived or visited. If I don't hold them at some distance, these memories can make my relationship with current reality a little wobbly.

As I've already indicated, the future is about desire and aversion. It's a big blank screen onto which we project almost anything – and we do, a lot. From the best case scenario to the worst, we rifle through it all. The least skillful thing we can do is to keep replaying scenarios of what we hope – or dread – might happen.

For several years when I was young, my dad's job was to make plans for whatever might happen. That sounds interesting, and it really was, since he was a senior Army officer stationed in Germany during the Cuban missile crisis. While we were duck-and-covering under our school desks, he was calculating how many battalions should be sent where, and what the casualties might be. At night while he packed to go away on "war games," we kids would serenade him with the song, "Please Mr. Custer, please don't make me go." We appreciated the humor in that much more than he did.

We have to think ahead, to consider what the future might be and how we can prepare for that. In our present situation, fear of the future could apply to the world's economic situation, or to your health and your loved ones'. The future is always a bit scary because we simply can't know what will happen. We should give it our attention long enough to prepare for what appears possible and then stop thinking about it.

My wife often accuses me of catastrophizing. She did that more than once in late January as the news reported China's response to this deadly flu and I stocked up on non-perishable food

and essential supplies. Preparing for something doesn't mean it's going to happen. All my father's plans for disaster were happily archived, unused, to the whole world's great relief. And for the foreseeable future Carla and I will still keep canned food in the cupboard "just in case."

My mom liked to say, "prepare for the worst and be glad for better things." In thinking about the worst that could happen, there's usually fear. There certainly was in the Sixties when nuclear war seemed imminent. Whether we can prepare sensibly often depends on how we hold the likelihood of something we don't want to happen. We need a little of the distance that let my father prepare for a nuclear holocaust as just part of his job. All the dread we can muster won't keep an event from happening.

Planning and preparing can serve a therapeutic function, too, maybe letting us make peace with certain possibilities by knowing that we've done what we can. What we want to beware of is compulsive planning. When the mind has repeated the same plan more than three times, it's just making us crazier. Think through your options realistically and then put the plan aside with the hope that you won't have to use it. Just getting this much sunlight between our thoughts and emotional reactions to them will hold us in good stead, even if we can't remember the plan when something does happen. We'll at least be a little more clearheaded.

The future can also be alluring... or comforting. Now that I've prepared for the worst that can happen with this pandemic, I generally think we're in for a rocky year or so, but then things will be OK. I do project to a future when we can all get together for a big potluck or dance, and I can go camping or fly to visit family or someplace exotic.

As comforting as positive future-thoughts may be, they have a catch to them. They set us up for disappointment. For the seven weeks I was in a cast with a broken ankle, I fantasized about getting it off. The past few days without the cast haven't been what I had hoped for. My ankle is weak and sore; I'm hardly tripping the light fantastic. But I can walk fairly normally and go about my business much more freely. So it's important to hold our hopes for the future with the same distance as our fears, and remember they're just thoughts with a lot of clinging, and therefore dukkha.

Like most dharma talks, I started this one with the thought that it would be simple and short. With each paragraph I see more possibilities unfold for investigating the way the mind works. I've shared a bit about my own mental processes. You all have your own mental habits. I just hope you'll "take home" this principal: if we hold the past and future at arm's length, but still within our grasp, then we can explore the mental pathways that lead to both suffering and joy. With wise effort we can direct our thoughts in a way that will decrease that suffering and magnify the joy.