

WHAT REALLY MAKES ME SAD

January 2, 2011

By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Two people I care a lot about just had a horrible fight, one that they can't even begin to get over. What makes me sad is how we deal with a situation like this, our past when something bad has happened. Almost everyone I know spends so much of their time digging in that past, trying to figure out why whatever happened 'happened'. It is like trying to put the toothpaste back in the tube. You never will figure it out.

Meanwhile there is a way to deal with whatever has happened like this that has been tried and found true for many centuries. And it is simple compared to rejigging the past. What is done is done. You can't relive it and it is not even the same you that did whatever you did that you regret. Don't look back. I disagree with those who say that those who do not understand the past are condemned to repeat it. There is a better way or at least another way.

I see this often in couples when they argue and fight. It happens to me as well, but also to many of my loved ones. They spend hours and days until they are completely exhausted trying to figure out where they went wrong. Some even go into therapy, consultations, remedial work of all kinds and, while this may help, it never seems to give them the answers they seek.

It is true that the past is prologue to the future; we all know that. We don't get an award for realizing this, because that's how we define the past, as 'past'. And you can't change the past. Period. You can only change the present AND what we do in the present totally determines our future.

The Buddhists taught me how to deal with arguments, fights, blowouts, and all the other kinds of scenes we sometimes find ourselves in the middle of. And it works every time and is relatively (compared to sticking your finger in the past) easy as well. This is it:

When you discover that you are off base, have made a mistake, hurt someone you love, got carried away, or whatever... the moment you realize that something like this has happened, you simply stop. You don't dwell further on what just happened. You don't think about it, anguish over it, or even waste time regretting it. You just drop it and take your mind back to trying to do your best, to its normal state of being peaceful and kind. And you start over. You make a new beginning.

If two minutes later you wake up and find yourself angry all over again or bringing up the past, no matter what happened, you do the same thing: Stop, take your mind back to where you would like it to be, and start over.

You do this all day long, all night long, continually. Nothing else. In other words you don't prolong the past, whether it was good, bad, or indifferent, and you don't vilify your actions or the way you behave, even if they were really wrong, even if you are totally to blame. You just drop it, bring your mind back to the way it should be, and start over. You do this again and again.

This is very similar to the 12-step plan of the alcoholics in that you take it a day at a time, only here it is moment by moment, a moment at a time. And this actually works because by creating an ever more perfect present, by starting over, you automatically create a new and better past

and a better future, just like that. You are building a new habit, even if it takes time. And here is the kicker:

This is precisely what is called in Tibetan and Zen Buddhism: "Meditation." It is sad that the word 'meditation' is used for so many different things when it is so simple. The most common form of meditation is called Shamata, from a Sanskrit word meaning calm-abiding, letting the mind rest. In that form of mediation we do exactly what was described above. We sit and let our mind rest on an object (or no object). When we find ourselves carried away thinking about something else (like our next dentist appointment), we simply stop right there, drop that thought, and bring our attention back to resting the mind. We start over.

This kind of meditation builds a habit that is useful on the cushion, but much more useful as described above in life itself, because we gradually learn to catch ourselves when we are carried away, drop it, and bring our mind back to the moment and start again. By doing this we create a present that is better than the past and turns into a good future.

In summary, it is easier IMO to build a new past by making a good present, than it is to fiddle with the past, trying to figure out where we went wrong. After a while, we identify with the new present we are building and the past is no longer even important to figure out. We are no longer that.

This, friends, is why people meditate, to develop this habit and to build a secure future from the present moment. Give it a try. If you need help, I will do my best to answer questions.

— with [Lynda Wilson](#).



