

## Psychology of forgetting

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Early Buddhist psychology explains in an interesting and helpful way how we forget. We forget when we are unable to locate a piece of information that we need. This information is always in the form of what is termed in early Buddhism as “NAME” (*nāma*). It is a specific function of our mind that “labels” pieces of information as we experience things through our 5 physical senses—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching—and our mind, by way of feelings, emotions and ideas.

Since feelings, emotions and ideas are generated by the mind itself, we are less likely to forget them. Often, however, we would adjust how we conceive them: this is the work of “formations” (*saṅkhārā*). Over time, with new experiences, we are likely to remember certain aspects better, add on new ideas to some aspects, and forget other aspects. In other words, we change our ideas or views usually through delusion, but often enough through wisdom.

### Experience and responses

The situation is trickier with how we remember sense-based events, that is, by way of what we see, hear, smell, taste or touch. Generally, we tend to have more detailed memories of what we see and what we hear that are significant to us. For example, we may vividly recall a forest walk we had, or an interesting chat we had with an old friend.

What we smell, taste or touch quickly comes and goes, so that we do not always remember them unless they have some significance for us (such as being attached to the experience). Perhaps, we may recall the smell of burnt toasts that caused a fire in our house; or the taste of Edam cheese may remind us of a stay in the Netherlands. For this reason, early Buddhist psychology groups smelling, tasting and touching together as “SENSING.”

### Selective memories

We are also selective of our experiences, and how we remember them, that is, whether as good memories, bad memories, or simply as neutral events. Of these we are likely to forget the neutral events most. Whether we choose to remember more of the unwholesome (unhappy) events or more of the wholesome (happy) events depends very often on our personality, but circumstances may also influence how we respond to them.

For example, when we listen to a Dhamma talk or meditate, we may learn to see a negative event in a more positive way, or not let it affect us negatively. Conversely, we may give up or forget our wholesome habits and ideas when we follow a bad teacher or fail to train our mind.

### Information

All these responses—positive or negative—depends on how we perceive our mental states; how we recognize what arises through our senses or the mind. On a basic level of experience,

we see countless things through our physical senses. We cannot possibly sense or make sense of all of them, and we don't need to. We only make sense of what are important to us.

When we notice something, we only perceive “forms” (*rūpa*) or “things.” We have “no idea” of them until we “name” them: it is these “names” (*nāma*) that become information stored in our mind for future reference. When something similar to that object—that “form” or “thing”—arises, we recognize it; that is, we “re-cognize,” cognize it again. This is called PERCEPTION.

Why we forget

FORGETTING is when we are unable to recognize something, or rather some “thing,” some “form” that is stored on a sense level, as it were. For example, we see something coiled up on the ground in the dark before us, we cannot at once recognize it, but our sense of sight warns us (as it were) that it must be a snake! This is CONCEPTION: we have created an idea of it which may not really be IT. A wrong view; but, of course, sometimes (not so often) we may be right.

When we habitually have difficulty in naming things, it may be a sign of DEMENTIA. It helps to at once calmly work to recall that “lost” NAME by mindfully examining all the clues we can until that name is recalled. This often works the first time, but in some cases, we need a more sustained mindful effort of calming, clearing the mind and focusing on the clues or a particular clue.

How we remember

When we carefully examine how we forget (this is possible when we understand the Buddhist teaching of the 5 aggregates), we will notice that there is this “thing” that we vaguely know, but which we have forgotten. We often have some clues about it—these are our memories related to the NAME of that “form,” but we cannot recall that name.

However, when someone tells us the right NAME, we at once interject, “That’s it!” We have recognized (perceived correctly) the name of the form stored as information in our mind. We have remembered. Notice that when we take the trouble to go through this process of looking for all the clues, one of them will “ring a bell.” This habit also helps improve our memory.

In other words, when we repeat a certain process, we are likely to remember better what the process works with. For this reason, early Buddhism keeps to the ORAL TRADITION which repeats the teachings in a special way so that it is easier for us to remember them. Through our meditation, we will be able to connect these pieces of information, and see the bigger picture. Wisdom then arises.

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