

DON'T LOOK BACK!



BY SWAMI JYOTIRMAYANANDA

The statement, “Don’t look back,” has profound implications. Why? Because there is a tiger on your trail. It is not an ordinary tiger, mind you, but rather a monster that is pursuing everyone. At every step in life, your mind turns back and looks for causes somewhere in the past that have brought you to your present situation or problem. And since that something from the past that has created problems today is gone and cannot be captured, your problems seem to have no resolution. Hence, you should think deeply about allowing the past to constantly pursue you.

That the past is constantly asserting itself is a great predicament for the vast majority of people. When we say, “Don’t look back,” what is implied is that you **DO** learn lessons from your past, but you **DO NOT** let your mind indulge in the memories of the past. You do not waste your time or energy by blaming it for the way things are in the present or by indulging in sentimental nostalgia for the “good old days.”

During the times when people have nothing to do, they often sit back and reminisce. Generally older people do this. They like to look back on the

way things were in their early days, developing a nostalgia for those fascinating times.

But that is a great illusion, because every situation in one's life is relative. When you played with your toys as a child, things might have been fascinating at some level, but you were not truly joyous; there were many shortcomings. When you are thinking of the past, you are thinking of only one aspect of it; it is an incomplete recollection. From a distance, things appear wonderful—because distance lends enchantment. If, however, in some magical way you were really transported back to an episode from the past, you would probably be horrified and feel miserable.

Further, what one remembers of the past at any given time depends upon the nature of one's mind at that time. When your mind is *satwic*, or in a harmonious state, you will remember situations that were *satwic* in your past. You will remember *satsangas* (spiritual gatherings) you might have attended and the good people you might have met there who inspired you.

When your mind is under a *rajasic* influence and highly distracted, you will remember people who agitated you and created much mental disturbance. You will recall memories of confusion, delusion, and attachment.

And if you are in a *tamasic* state of mind and feel intensely negative, you will remember the grossest experiences of your life: situations that caused intense bitterness, jealousy, anger and hatred. And so, your view of the past depends upon what type of *guna* (mode of Nature) is operating in your mind.

Another problem involved in thinking of the past arises from the fact that as an incarnating soul you have had countless lives. In the Divine plan, Nature, out of Her great compassion, has shut out the memories of most of that past. If that were not so, human life would be extremely miserable. Not only would you have to handle the problems of this life, but also the problems of past lives.

Imagine what a distressing thing it would be to walk down the street and see the faces of

people whom you knew in your past lives: “He was my uncle, he was my grandfather, he was my great enemy. I borrowed so much money from him. I shouldn't have treated her the way I did. I should have been kinder to him.” All that will come crashing down on you with terrible pressure. If the memories of this life keep you in a state of stress, imagine what would happen if the memories of your past lives were to come pouring down into your heart. But that does not happen because Nature is compassionate. Therefore, you ought to be equally compassionate towards yourself and shut out the useless and illusory details of the past in your present embodiment.

When Nature shuts out the memories of your past lives, you continue to experience the lessons learned, but you do not recall the details. Things that you acquired in the form of insight continue. This explains why some people, even at a young age, show great genius in a particular direction: the seeds of their extraordinary talents were sown in previous lives.

For example, if you were a great mathematician in your previous life, or you were advancing greatly in that field, in your present life you may be a mathematical genius. Nature has allowed you to remember that much. But Nature does not allow

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you to remember who your professors were, when they taught you, or whether or not they were kind to you. If you did remember all acts of unkindness, you would be burdened by great bitterness towards others. So you do remember some things about the past, but nature shuts out the unnecessary details.

In the same way, you should be able to remember the lessons learned in your present life, but shut out the details of things that are not necessary. Do not let your mind move towards the past with a sense of nostalgia, because then you are sustaining illusions.

In order to allow your personality to undergo total spiritual transformation—rather than just to undergo repeated change—it becomes extremely important not to constantly turn back to the past. Although you change throughout your life as you pass from childhood to adulthood to old age, deep within you remain more or less the same personality with the same vanities, complexes, likes and dislikes. When you take up the project of Self-realization, however, you are not contented with change; you want transformation.

If you developed certain phobias or complexes in your childhood, you should not go on hammering upon your mind: “That is the way things happened in my childhood. What can I do? I am irritable because my parents made me so as a child. I am insecure because in my childhood my mother always told me about ghosts in the darkness. And I don’t like certain foods because in my childhood I ate them so much that I vomited.” That helpless clinging to the past may be fine for normal society, but people who want Self-realization must aspire to become super-normal: to free themselves of all limitations.

Whatever you may have been in your past has nothing to do with your potentiality now and in the future. What you ought to be or what you can be are up to you, because the transcendental Self lies within you and you are essentially That. You have the possibility to tear yourself from the past and become completely transformed, regardless

of what your situation and circumstances might have been in your early days.

Such outgrowing of the past is possible if you follow Yoga psychology. Normal psychology cannot help you enough in this process because it usually tells you to turn your mind to the past to look for the cause of your problems. Yoga psychology, on the other hand, turns your mind to the Self that transcends time. It is by moving in this direction that you are able to bring about a transformation.

You must realize that nothing in your past can put a stigma on you forever. The past gives you a certain stamp, but it fades through self-effort. If you read about the lives of Saints and Sages you will understand this. A simple illustration is that of Valmiki, who was a robber and a plunderer in his early years; and yet he attained a transformation that made him a completely different person.

In his lifetime, Valmiki wrote voluminous works of Vedanta and devotion, such as Yoga Vasistha and the Ramayana, which are among the greatest sources of inspiration for all time. He turned away from the past and smashed it completely. That was possible because his mind turned to God and he became Self-realized.

WAKE UP FROM THE DREAM OF PAST AND FUTURE

Yoga and Vedanta philosophy remind you that you are essentially *Brahman*, the eternal Self. In *Brahman*, time is transcended. There is neither past, present, nor future. There is eternity. Therefore, the time-space experience of those who are unenlightened is not the ultimate reality known by the wise. Time and space belong to the long dream of the world-process, not to the eternal wakefulness of the enlightened Sage.

To understand this better, reflect upon your experiences in dream and waking states. For example, perhaps you had a dream in which there was some problem that you had to deal with. You

sat morose and melancholy, thinking of the things that happened in the yesterday of your dream world. And then, still in dream, you began planning how the future would make things better. But when you woke up you realized that neither the yesterday nor the tomorrow of your dream really existed—that the time-space of your dream was illusory.

In the same way, conditioned by the limited mind, your soul has developed the illusion: “I am the body. I am a soul that has lived through so many centuries, that has gone through so many incarnations.” But in reality you are not the individual soul; you are the eternal Soul—*Brahman*. Past and future do not exist for you—there exists only eternity.

Thus, you must realize that the world that you experience is a kind of dream. There seems to be a past to blame for every situation, to justify your imperfections—but in truth that past is an illusion. And it is also convenient in your day-to-day world to enter into a dream about the future to elude the present. Many sit back and say, “There is no reason for being sad or miserable. My future is going to be great. Why should I look for a job? Why should I make any self-effort? My astrologer told me that the future is going to smile on me.” But that future, too, is an illusion.

You should neither be caught by a fanciful future expectation nor a past memory. The past and future both have to be set aside as you begin to enter into eternity.

You must remember the past only so that you can learn lessons from it. You must have expectations for the future in order to motivate your self-effort in the present. But, as you handle today’s practical realities, do not become deluded by your memories and expectations. Rather, you must develop an insight into the art of transcending time. That is your central goal: not to go on moving along through the vicious cycle of past, present, and future, but to outstep it.

In conclusion, then, there are various constructive means at your disposal for overcoming the habit of looking to the past or future:

First, do not let your mind indulge with nostalgia in the fascinating memories of the past. Understand that the past was not as delightful as you are now envisaging it. Also, do not waste time and energy blaming the past for your present circumstances.

Secondly, do not let empty space fill your mind; keep it involved in fruitful action so that your mind will not have time to entertain fanciful thoughts. Utilize all your talents for the good of others. Your future will be determined by what you are doing now. If you are living and acting rightly today, you are preparing an excellent future for yourself and for others.

Thirdly, seek an association or fellowship that will allow your mind to turn to the teachings of Yoga and Vedanta—teachings that will enable your mind to understand that you are an incarnating soul, having had countless lives and countless pasts.

Going one step further, develop the higher understanding that you are essentially *Brahman*, the eternal Self, wherein time is transcended. In the real You, there is neither past, present, nor future. There is only eternity.

Thus we began by saying, “Don’t look back,” because there was a tiger behind you; and it was not just an ordinary tiger, but a monster of illusion. When you understand that properly, you look back and see that the monster is not there; and not only is there no monster, but the past itself is not there. All you see is Eternity!

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