

chapter 4

Taking in the Good

*I am larger, better than I thought,
I did not know I held so much goodness.*

—Walt Whitman, “Song of the Open Road”

Much as your body is built from the foods you eat, your mind is built from the experiences you have. The flow of experience gradually sculpts your brain, thus shaping your mind. Some of the results can be explicitly recalled: *This is what I did last summer; that is how I felt when I was in love.* But most of the shaping of your mind remains forever unconscious. This is called implicit memory, and it includes your expectations, models of relationships, emotional tendencies, and general outlook. Implicit memory establishes the interior landscape of your mind—what it feels like to be you—based on the slowly accumulating residues of lived experience.

In a sense, those residues can be sorted into two piles: those that benefit you and others, and those that cause harm. To paraphrase the Wise Effort section of Buddhism’s Noble Eightfold Path, you should create, preserve, and increase beneficial implicit memories, and prevent, eliminate, or decrease harmful ones.

THE NEGATIVITY BIAS OF MEMORY

But here's the problem: your brain preferentially scans for, registers, stores, recalls, and reacts to unpleasant experiences; as we've said, it's like Velcro for negative experiences and Teflon for positive ones. Consequently, even when positive experiences outnumber negative ones, the pile of negative implicit memories naturally grows faster. Then the background feeling of what it feels like to be you can become undeservedly glum and pessimistic.

Sure, negative experiences do have benefits: loss opens the heart, remorse provides a moral compass, anxiety alerts you to threats, and anger spotlights wrongs that should be righted. But do you really think you're not having enough negative experiences?! Emotional pain with no benefit to yourself or others is pointless suffering. And pain today breeds more pain tomorrow. For instance, even a single episode of major depression can reshape circuits of the brain to make future episodes more likely (Maletic et al. 2007).

The remedy is not to suppress negative experiences; when they happen, they happen. Rather, it is to foster positive experiences—and in particular, to take them in so they become a permanent part of you.