

Forgiving the Unforgivable

Practicing forgiveness is something you do for your own sake, in order not to be locked in anger and fear.



that if you practice forgiveness you are somehow accepting or pardoning an act that is itself unforgivable. How could this be? Any crime against humanity, no matter if it's perpetrated for personal gain, political expediency, or religious fervor, is and remains horrible and unforgivable. Another mistaken impression about forgiveness is that it implies you are weak or not standing up to those who do evil acts.

Closely aligned with this is the belief that if you forgive or allow others to forgive, justice will be abandoned because people will lose the resolve necessary for action unless there is unrelenting fury to fuel it. But forgiveness is not about helplessly accepting, giving up, surrendering to defeat, being weak, or avoiding the cost of justice. It is about how you hold in your heart a terrible wrong while you act in the world to correct that wrong and try to prevent it from happening again.

Forgiveness As a Spiritual Practice

SINCE THE SEPTEMBER 11 terrorist attacks, many yogis have struggled with questions about how to forgive the men who carried out those horrendous acts. Maybe you have some of these same questions: In a time of such deep grief, how do you forgive the unforgivable? Should you even be thinking of forgiving? Is it unpatriotic? Doesn't forgiveness weaken the will to respond, and isn't it seen as helplessness by those who perpetrate such acts? What about your anger, fear, and sorrow? What about all those thousands of lives lost and their devastated families? Isn't even thinking about forgiveness disrespectful of them? If you are committed to living life from a spiritual perspective, how do you behave now? What actions do you support? These are difficult questions, and in the end no one but you can answer them. You may well have misunderstandings about forgiveness that lead you to reject it out of hand. It is often mistakenly thought

FORGIVENESS CAN be understood as a spiritual practice and has been taught as such by Jesus, the Buddha, and many other spiritual teachers. *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* defines forgiveness in this manner: "To cease to feel resentment against on account of a wrong committed." This definition is poignantly illustrated in a well-known Tibetan Buddhist story about two monks who encounter each other some years after being released from prison where they had been tortured by their captors. "Have you forgiven them?" asks the first. "I will never forgive them! Never!" replies the second. "Well, I guess they still have you in prison, don't they?" the first says.

Forgiveness practice is about liberating your own feelings and finding meaning in the worst of life's events. You practice forgiveness to be free of the inner violence of your rage, and you do not abandon the pursuit of right action. In fact, you gain clear seeing that

allows you to use skillful means in bringing sustainable peace.

So you practice forgiveness for your own sake, to not be locked in anger, fear, and resentment. Resentment, whether cold fury or smoldering rage, hardens your emotions, narrows your options in responding to life, clouds your judgment, locks you out of experiencing the flow of life, shifts your attention from those who matter to you to those whom you disdain, and deadens your spirit. Why would you choose to live in this manner? It gives those who wronged you an even greater victory than their original act.

You also embrace forgiveness practice as an act of selflessness, something that you can do to stop the seemingly endless cycle of hatred in the world. The Buddha said, "Hate never yet dispelled hate. Only love dispels hate." By holding the truth of our interdependency and refusing to participate in this endless cycle of hatred, you can help to heal the wound of the world. Jesus said, "If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? Even sinners love those who love them. But if you love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back, then your reward will be great."

No one can accuse Jesus or Buddha of being cowards in the face of injustice; therefore, their teachings are about how to hold the difficult in the heart. You have to decide if you share their beliefs, and if so, you practice living in this manner as a reflection of your deepest values. It is a proactive, courageous way to live. This does not mean responding passively when you encounter wrong action, for you should always act to stop those who harm others.

Anger's False Promise

FORGIVENESS IS difficult to achieve because whatever has occasioned the need for forgiveness has caused the mind to be clouded by pain, loss, and confusion. The natural response to pain is to stamp out the source and make the pain go away. When there is trauma, this response tends to be locked in. Feelings of loss play over and over again, arising from your wanting things to be different. The

feeling of loss is compounded by survivor guilt, a false sense of "should have known" that arises in hindsight, and by the need to make loss seem rational by assigning someone the blame and acting out retribution. Confusion comes from the dramatic change caused by trauma: Things were one way, now they are another, what is one to do? These emotions are spontaneous and natural, but by practicing mindfulness, you can avoid identifying with the feelings. The mind will become clouded over and over again; many times you will not even notice there is any other choice. But eventually you remember your commitment not to live in anger, and you act to align with your true values.

If pain, loss, and confusion cloud the mind, they can be worked with directly. Far more difficult are the emotions that block the mind in a more permanent fashion, such as anger, lust for revenge, hatred, and attachment to these emotions, which causes you to become identified with them. This negative identification is static in nature, so you tend to stay the same through time, not to heal, not to look forward but to look back.

Tragically, you become one with anger; you are now its servant. It is a reactive rather than a proactive manner of living, one that is based on doing to another, not on being with your Self. It implies a false promise of peace: "If only you could make them pay." There are many examples of this resentment becoming a person's identity to the degree that he is made grandiose by it, thinking he uniquely knows the will of God to punish and is therefore supposed to act on it.

Refusing to forgive leads to other forms of darkness as well. First, there is the "lowest common denominator" effect in which the victim feels justified in saying, "If my daughter lost her life, then my enemy should lose hers." This is one of the roots of escalating conflict, which causes a downward spiral of what each has.

There is also the darkness that results from using hatred or anger as a substitute emotion when you cannot stay fully with your loss, fear, and vulnerability. And last-

ly there is what happens when your refusal to forgive continues because the real resentment is against God, or your faith, or life itself. Unable to directly be angry with God, you stay fixated on the immediate enemy.

Why Bad Things Happen

IN MY OWN STRUGGLES with questions about responding to events such as the World Trade Center destruction, the invasion of Kuwait, the Hutu massacres in Rwanda, I have found it necessary to begin with the question of how forgiveness fits into my personal life. Only when I am grounded in the truth of my own immediate reactions when I or someone I care for is treated cruelly do I have the clarity to think about my response to acts that affect thousands of innocent people, my country, and the rest of the world.

We each have experienced or know of acts of violence that were so horrible they are unforgivable. You may not have directly experienced it yourself, but someone you deeply care for has. Maybe it was in your family of origin, a friend, your employer, or a stranger. Maybe it resulted in death, or maybe it was the violence of rape, robbery, cheating, or torment. The loss was real, and your life was inevitably shaped by it. You may have lost your childhood, been left with an inability to trust or an unending anger toward others who even slightly offend you, or experienced problems with intimacy. In these personal situations the challenge is just the same as with a national tragedy. You first act to find your own safety, then you act to stop the person from continuing the violations. These outer actions are followed by the hard work of loosening the grip of the experience on your own emotions. Initially it may seem that there is nothing you can do—it happened, it was awful, and your life was ruined. But, gradually, after telling your story again and again, you realize it's not the circumstances of the trauma, or even the perpetrator, that's hindering you from moving on. It's you who are clinging to the trauma in shock and hurt. You understand that as long as you continue to do so, like the monk who was still imprisoned by his torturer, you will never be free,

and so you begin the painful inner work.

I took part in a meditation group not long after the September 11 events where we discussed forgiveness. One yogi talked about how it had taken nearly 40 years for her to forgive her father for something heinous, and the moment she did so all the power of the story to rule her life just disappeared. This is the power of forgiveness: It benefits you, empowers you in relation to your loved ones, and even benefits those who have acted harmfully. Forgiveness takes a long time because when there is loss and uncertainty, you are not able to see clearly a ground of meaningful existence that is so solid it can support even the weight of the most awful tragedy. You become fixated on the surface of life's experiences—a terrible thing happened, you were helpless, it felt horrible, it was wrong. In the fixation there is an unconscious emotional demand for the surface of life to be fair and just, and there is rage because it is not. You fail to see that deeper down, below the surface, life is lawful. All events, pleasant and awful alike, arise out of causes and conditions that are interdependent. Just as good things happen in life, so bad things happen to innocent people because of these conditions. Life, even your life, is at its root impersonal and therefore not to be identified with in such a way that you are imprisoned by the actions of others, no matter how awful or wounding.

Rage Versus Outrage

WITH THE FREEDOM that comes from forgiveness, you are motivated to work not for retribution but for fairness. You understand that only in a just and fair world can there ever be peace and safety. Power alone, as events have shown, always has a weakness that in time reveals itself. Horrible things arise because of conditions; therefore, once you change the conditions, you greatly reduce the chances of horrible things happening. You also receive much more cooperation in putting an end to horrible things if there is a sense of fairness. Think of it as the difference between rage and outrage. They both have determination, passion, and lead to action; but rage is narrow,

short-term, and blinded by fury, while outrage is broad, clear, steady, and committed to a sustainable solution. With forgiveness comes sympathy for life's uncertainty and determination to be there for others when they experience loss and to help in any way possible. If one has embraced the intent to practice forgiveness, then one is willing to share one's own story and allow others to share theirs in a mutual search for a way out of the clutches of anger and rage.

Forgiveness is an intention with which to approach life. The Bible says, "Forgive, and you shall be forgiven." Know full well that you, like everyone else, have to account for your own acts of greed, hatred, and delusion, many of which you have no awareness of at present. This is the humility of the human condition. It is the basis for understanding that the best you can do is to seek to know what's true, to be willing to examine and learn about yourself from your own actions and the actions of others, and to act with kindness and fairness to all, even the enemy.

Forgiveness when it involves your community or country has additional challenges. You may feel as though you are being disloyal to others or betraying the victims. You may experience great comfort and a sense of belonging through sharing in the anger of the larger community and not want to lose this feeling. You may feel secure in the energy of the community's rage and feel more frightened when you start to walk your own path. You may question, "Who am I to follow my own path?" Each of these emotions is understandable, and maybe you are not ready to embrace the act of forgiving.

But remember this: Forgiveness is inclusive. It includes forgiving those who cannot let loose of their anger in your community, and it even means forgiving those who commit misguided acts of revenge against innocent people. By practicing forgiveness you are not trying to separate but to include, without forsaking discernment or abandoning your commitment to law, safety, and fairness for all.

Forgiveness Meditation

IT IS POSSIBLE TO cultivate forgiveness through meditation. Some Western Buddhist meditation teachers begin loving-kindness practice with a three-part forgiveness practice asking forgiveness of all those you may have harmed, through thoughts, words, or actions. You then offer forgiveness for any harm others have caused you through their thoughts, words and actions, as best you are able. Finally, you offer forgiveness to yourself for any harm you have done to yourself. These phrases are repeated a number of times, then you move on to loving-kindness practice, having cultivated the intention to remove the reactions that cloud the mind and the emotions that block the heart. Your responsibility is for your intention; you are practicing clarifying and purifying the intention to be a forgiving person, no matter the difficult circumstance. Many times your actual emotional experience will be anger, rage, fear, grief—anything but forgiveness. This is why it's called forgiveness practice.

Webster's provides a second definition of forgiveness: "To give up claim to requital from or retribution upon an offender." This too offers the possibility of insight. When a horrible act is committed, there is understandably a clamor for justice, and it often carries with it a sense of entitlement. Every society throughout history has evolved a way to mete out justice, whether it's banishment, loss of privilege, shame, isolation, physical punishment, forced compensation, or execution. Justice is a symbolic ritual with two purposes: to stop the behavior from occurring again, and to bond back together the harmony that was disrupted by the violent act.

When a life has been lost or great physical or mental damage done, there is no going back; there is only going forward. If you hold on to a personal claim because of what you lost, you assume the identity of the victim. It may seem right and proper, but oftentimes it is just another form of self-imprisonment. In the Mustard Seed Sutta, a crying woman comes to the Buddha with her recently dead baby in her arms, pleading with him to bring her baby back to life. The Bud-

dha says he will do so if she can bring him a mustard seed from a household that has not known death. The woman frantically goes from house to house asking if they have not known death until finally she realizes that all households have known death, and she is able to accept that great loss is part of life.

When you suffer a great loss, you are entitled to feelings of loss and to ask for and expect redress. But there is no entitlement for revenge, no right to hate, and no right to think your grief, loss, and confusion are unique or entitle you to torture another. From the perspective of the inner life, each of these factors arises out of aversion and delusion, and they are degrading to your life, a form of self-affliction that is the opposite of being loving to yourself or honoring someone whose death you mourn.

Of course, you may lust for revenge and be filled with hate, but these are mind states that are antilife and lack compassion and wisdom. Such unskillful mind states would never be considered an entitlement. It is this understanding that distinguishes forgiveness as a spiritual practice from using emotional processing to achieve psychological well-being. Certainly your psychological well-being matters. How you deal with fear, anger, and bitterness in relation to acts of terror is critical to having a life that works. But forgiveness as a spiritual practice is an even more daunting task; it involves using the very acts that seem so horrific, disconnecting, and alienating to deepen and expand your relatedness to both other human beings and to life itself.

To meet hatred and loss with love and a generous heart is the most difficult practice imaginable. Sometimes I hesitate to teach it, for I have my own struggles with anger and hardening of the heart as a reaction to terrible and unjust acts. Yet what is the purpose of a practice if you are not going to use it in life's difficult moments? It requires humility to surrender to the mystery of life, its unpredictability. It requires an equal amount of courage to face life's losses and be willing to say, "This too is life," and bear it as you find it, even while doing everything in your power to change

it into a gentler, safer experience.

The spiritual practice of forgiveness, along with compassion and love, is the most powerful ground you can prepare for the future well-being of today's children. If they see you violent in thoughts, words, and actions, they will learn violence as a reaction, no matter what you tell them. But if they see you meet hate with love, they will manifest this as adults. To repeat the Buddha, "Hate never yet dispelled hate; Only love dispels hate."

The Fruits of Forgiveness

THERE IS ONE OTHER hindrance to the practice of forgiveness you need to examine. This is the fear that if you forgive the story of your loss will be forgotten. This is such a painful misunderstanding, and it is widespread. When you suffer a great loss, often all that is available to comfort you is the story of the loved one or the story of the incident of the loss. It is truly precious, and naturally you do not want to lose the story for it is the thread that connects the present to the past, providing shape and meaning to the now. But forgiveness will not cost you your story. First of all, the horrible act will never be forgotten, accepted, or seen as anything but what it is—an outrage. Yet in forgiving the person who committed it, you separate the terrible act from the flawed human being behind it. By your own noble response of forgiving, you honor and give meaning to the dead and to those who must live with great loss. Trust yourself to open to forgiveness. Believe that you can redeem horrible acts by your own vulnerability. Let go of anything that separates you from other human beings. In so doing you honor all those lost. Your act of forgiveness holds their story in its highest possible glory. And you honor life itself; There could be no greater legacy.

If my words have caused you harm in any form, I ask your forgiveness. To those whose actions prompted the writing of these words, I offer my forgiveness as best I am able at this time. ■

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