



As we find the strength to surrender, even the hardened places within us can give way to tender buds of compassion.

Through practice, self-reflection, and letting go, yoga helps us move past old hurts that threaten to derail us. **By Linda Sparrowe**

Sweet Forgiveness

Several years ago I had a falling out with my close friend Becca, someone I'd known forever. She said some really hurtful things to me, and I vowed never to speak to or see her again. And I didn't. For years. Well, at least not directly. However, she took up permanent residence in my mind, and no matter how hard I tried, she wouldn't leave. I woke up each morning, reliving the conversation we had; I went to bed inventing the conversation we should have had; and during the day the memory of her words knotted my stomach and ruined my appetite. I talked about

it to my family, my friends, pretty much anyone who'd listen. And the more I talked, the hotter the flame of my outrage became. Of course, I focused solely on her role as the perpetrator and my role as the aggrieved, never even entertaining the thought that my actions may have contributed a tiny little bit to the problem.

The only time I could break free of this obsession was on my yoga mat. Trying to practice while carrying on an internal diatribe didn't work too well, so I parked my troubles at the door, and my body and my mind breathed a collective sigh of relief, grateful for the 90-minute respite. Despite the peace I felt during and after each class, however, it took me a few more years to learn how to use the principles of yoga to relieve the hurt I felt and to forgive both Becca and myself.

Why Forgive?

How can you forgive someone who's hurt you that much? First, don't confuse forgiveness with acceptance. "You don't have to condone someone's behavior to forgive," says John Friend, founder of Anusara Yoga. Forgiveness



simply "allows us to let go of the hold that person has on us," he says, "leading us to greater freedom and peace of heart." Second, forgiving is not the same as forgetting. Not forgetting, Friend says, "honors our feelings and helps create proper boundaries," so we don't keep putting ourselves in situations that are out of alignment with our true nature. Not forgiving, however, can make us sick.

According to Alex Lickerman, MD, former director of primary care at the University of Chicago hospitals, 50 percent of all people who have had a heart attack can describe at least one emotional trigger that may have led to their illness. When someone has hurt or angered you, your sympathetic ner-

vous system springs into action to protect you, unloading stress chemicals to prepare you to fight or flee the situation. Unfortunately, the sympathetic nervous system has no way of knowing whether the perceived threat comes from an immediate danger or from something that happened 20 years ago. So every time you relive a painful memory, your autonomic nervous system rises up to fight the oppressor until it finally exhausts itself and gives up.

Stuffing down the hurt or anger only makes things worse. When you vow not to think about your pain, you may be "letting go" of it mentally, but in reality, you're pushing it deeper into your body and heart, both of which constrict around the hurt. Karol Ward, author of *Worried Sick*, says, "Eventually the physical tension becomes so habitual that we don't notice how much we are holding our breath, locking our knees, or clamping down our jaws, until it shows up as physical pain."

These physiological warnings suggest that to withhold forgiveness goes against the first and foremost yoga commandment: do no harm. *Abimsa*



(literally, “non-violence”) means more than promising not to beat up your oppressor, no matter how aggrieved you feel. It also means not hurting yourself. In my case, getting stuck in righteous indignation over Becca’s transgression made me an anxious mess. I turned to the yogic path—from asana and meditation to self-reflection and faith—to find forgiveness and move beyond the past.

Asana: The Gift of Release

When my nervous system is all a-jangle, the only thing that calms me down is doing physical yoga. I can’t meditate, I can’t do pranayama, until I can somehow ground myself, slow

“Our issues are in our tissues.” The inability to forgive definitely manifests as physical contractions, she says. And the pain can get lodged almost anywhere—in the heart, diaphragm, belly, or, for many women, the hips.

“By focusing on the breath,” Walden says, “we can notice where we’re holding pain. And by releasing tension in our muscles, we can let go of that discomfort.” Backbends, which allow the breath to flow unrestricted, can open up the heart. But sometimes, unsupported backbends are too intense, so poses like *supta baddha konasana* (reclining bound angle pose) with bolsters, blankets, blocks, and an eye pillow, offer a gentler

between poses” and create a practice that contains mostly restorative poses, pranayama, *bandha* work, and chanting. Such a practice, she says, “reaches all the parts of our mind-body network that might be holding the pattern of anger in place.” As the mind-body network heals, the anger simply no longer fits.

On my mat, I almost immediately feel how my emotions affect my body, noticing how I stiffen up when I get frustrated or forget to breathe when my anger resurfaces. As I commit to experiencing the poses more fully, however, my conscious exhalations release my neck, shoulders, and jaw. I feel my hard exterior soften, and, as Forbes predicted, my defensiveness suddenly seems out of place. Chip Hartranft, in his commentary on the *Yoga Sutra*, says that our growing familiarity with these subtle internal experiences in our practice helps us recognize the ways in which our body-mind contracts when we feel hurt. So, off the mat, we can “begin to catch ourselves earlier in the process of tightening viselike around difficulty, disagreement, or frustration,” and perhaps let go a bit sooner. “Loosening the valves,” he says, “seems always to allow things to resolve, and wisdom to enter.”

Meditation: A Direct Route to Forgiveness

Alisa Bowman, a freelance writer, told me she had decided she wanted a divorce

IN OUR PRACTICE, WHETHER ON THE YOGA MAT OR THE MEDITATION CUSHION, WE LEARN TO SURRENDER AT EVERY MOMENT, DISCOVERING THAT THE MORE WE LET GO, THE MORE FREEDOM WE GAIN.

down a bit, and (let’s be honest) shut up long enough to feel some relief. Moving through my yoga sequence, I become acutely aware of how the pain has impacted my muscles—my neck and shoulders feel stiff, my lower back hurts—and my breathing, which feels labored and shallow. As renowned Iyengar teacher Patricia Walden explains,

alternative: the same heart-opening effect, with the added bonus of making us feel nurtured and loved. Forward bends (standing or seated) can release myriad emotions and yet still allow us to feel protected and safe.

Bo Forbes, author of *Yoga for Emotional Balance*, suggests that we take “slow, mindful transitions

just two years after her baby was born. For a variety of reasons that had been building up for quite a while, she was one angry, resentful woman and didn’t think she could ever forgive her husband for the litany of misdeeds she recounted on an hourly basis. “I despised him,” she said. “I didn’t want to be around him. I soothed myself by planning his funeral

on the off chance he might conveniently drop dead.” A friend of Bowman’s convinced her to give the marriage one last chance, so she embarked on a four-month-long “marriage project.” Nearly every day she would practice loving-kindness meditation (see sidebar for practice). It was really hard at first, she says, “I didn’t want to wish him happiness. I would start to meditate and then get angry all over again.” But she kept at it and slowly her resentment faded. Much to her surprise—and delight—love grew in its place, so much so that she and her husband renewed their marriage vows. She chronicles her path in her memoir, *Project: Happily Ever After*.

Susan Piver, author of *The Wisdom of a Broken Heart*, believes meditation provides “a direct route to forgiveness of all kinds.” What you’re doing on that cushion is softening your heart. However, when you’re angry, as Bowman discovered, it’s not that easy to sit and let your thoughts bubble to the surface and then dissipate. Piver suggests an alternate

approach—notice your feelings. First, get really clear on what your story is—exactly why you feel what you feel—so that it will help you conceptualize what happened. And then drop it. Retelling the story, Piver says, “is a way of *justifying* your feelings rather than forgiving.”

Piver recommends a variation of the traditional Tibetan Buddhist *shamatha* meditation, in which you sit, eyes partially opened, and observe the breath. When a feeling rages to the forefront of your mind, label it as “sensation,” and notice where it shows up in your body. As you experience anger or sadness, for example, does your jaw suddenly tighten or your chest feel like it’s caving in? “Put your attention on the sensation,” Piver says, and begin to soften and release those muscles where you experience the sensation. Don’t focus on the story, but when the story does come up, simply pause, let it go on an exhale, and return to the part of your body where the sensation lives. If you feel your low-back muscles clench, notice the tightness and

breathe there for a while, unwinding the tightness with gentle exhalations.

Three Steps to Transformation

The ability to bring the mind back to present-moment focus so we don’t fan the flame of indignation takes diligent, persistent practice (*abhyasa*). *Abhyasa* is subtle effort, however, to redirect attention, followed by the ability to let go of our need to hold onto the experience (*vairagya*). *Vairagya* literally means “not getting stirred up,” according to Hartranft, and applies to our willingness to observe something without reacting to it. Yoga and meditation help us in this process by fully engaging the body, mind, and heart in the moment. But in order to forgive completely, we must commit all our energy to the process (*tapas*), engage in self-reflection and introspection (*svadhyaya*), and cultivate a mind that sees the divine essence in all sentient beings (*Ishvara pranidhana*). Together, these three practices comprise *kriya yoga*, a blueprint for putting *abhyasa* and *vairagya* into action. >>

Breath of Forgiveness

If you feel angry, hurt, resentful, or any other heated emotion, try several rounds of sitali or sitkari pranayama. These cooling breathing techniques (sitali means “cool” in Sanskrit) counter the fight-or-flight response your autonomic nervous system may be stuck in right now. They stimulate the parasympathetic nervous system, which calms the mind, cools the body, and even lowers blood pressure.

Caution: If, at any time, either practice makes you feel light-headed, dizzy, or in any way uncomfortable, stop and breathe normally for several rounds. Begin again when you’re ready.

Sitali Pranayama

1. Sit comfortably with your back straight, your shoulders away from your ears, and your eyes closed. Inhale and exhale normally for several breaths as you settle into your seat.
2. To start the practice, stick your tongue out, just beyond your lips, and roll it like a tube. Inhale gently through your tongue, raising your chin slightly and feeling your chest and lungs expand with air (taking care to keep your shoulders relaxed). Allow your mind to focus on the cooling sensation.
3. At the top of the inhalation, bring your tongue back into your mouth and rest it just behind your front teeth on your upper palate. As you exhale, slowly bring your head down toward your chest in a gentle chin lock.
4. Stick your tongue out again, roll it, and inhale as you raise your head and chin. Repeat the sequence six to eight times.

Sitkari Pranayama

For those of us who cannot roll our tongues, sitkari offers a perfect alternative.

1. Assume the same pranayama posture, but instead of rolling your tongue, open the lips and keep your teeth together (as though you were smiling through clenched teeth).
 2. Inhale, raising your chin slightly and create a hissing sound. You should feel the cool air enter the sides of your mouth.
 3. As you exhale through the nose, bring your head down toward your chest, creating a gentle chin lock.
 4. Repeat the sequence six to eight times.
- L.S.

In the Heat of Practice

All of us have old scars (*samskaras*) we can't seem to heal, hurtful parts of ourselves born of memories we can't let go of. These *samskaras* or psychic impressions deepen through the stories we attach to our aggrieved feelings and create tendencies and habits that affect our daily lives. We get stuck replaying these stagnant old stories over and over again

Yoga Sutra, as “deliberately acting in a way that causes positive change in ourselves.” By acting consciously and compassionately toward yourself and others instead of reacting negatively, Bachman suggests we can “build new, helpful, positive *samskaras*” and push the old ones out. The heat generated in practicing day after day with the intention of opening our heart will “incinerate physical, mental,

we burn ourselves out without ever truly understanding what caused us to get so caught up in our pain in the first place. Without *svadhyaya*, self-study, the second element in the *kriya yoga* triad, we can purify our body all we want, but if we don't understand how our actions cause us to suffer, we doubt that we can prevent a repeat performance. Traditionally, *svadhyaya* meant turning to ancient

HOLDING A GRUDGE GOES AGAINST OUR TRUE NATURE, WHICH IS KIND, COMPASSIONATE, AND PEACEFUL.

in our heads and we need impetus—a fire lit under us—to get unstuck. That fire comes in the form of *tapas*—the heat generated through intense commitment to practice and self-discipline. Committing fully to a daily yoga practice of *asana*, *pranayama*, and meditation, it turns out, can help burn up our *samskaras* and replace them with positive impressions that support us being kinder, gentler, more open people.

Nicolai Bachman, a Sanskrit scholar, defines *tapas*, in his commentary on the

and emotional impurities and refine the body, sensory organs, and heart-mind.” *Pranayama* techniques that emphasize the inhalation—as well as *vinyasa asana* sequences—can generate such heat and energy in the body; poses that restore, and breathing techniques that emphasize exhalation, can create space in the body and heart to receive positive change.

The Art of Self-Reflection

Of course, we need more than an intense discipline to enact lasting change, lest

scripture for guidance and applying the teachings to our own life. These days, I may reach for Mahatma Gandhi's *Autobiography* or Pema Chodron's *When Things Fall Apart* instead of the *Rig Veda*, but the results are the same.

Reciting a personal mantra (*japa*) is also an integral part of *svadhyaya*. Repeating a syllable or word over and over again can draw our attention inward and keep it there, closing off the outside world and infusing our self-study with purpose and meaning. Bachman says that repetitious sound “has a way of reprogramming the consciousness and dissolving obstacles” like doubt, fear, anger, and disease.

The fewer noisy distractions, the easier we can listen intently to what's going on inside. We can experience the breath and how it changes when we feel agitated, and quiets when we calm down; we can feel our muscles contract around pain, and expand and release in joy. Once our heart is open, we can see that being in emotional pain feels awful. Holding a grudge goes against our true nature, which is kind, compassionate, and peaceful. It suddenly doesn't feel so good to hold back forgiveness from anyone, least of all ourselves.

The Bliss of Sweet Surrender

Patanjali's yoga prescription doesn't end with *svadhyaya*; otherwise self-reflection could easily move into

Loving-Kindness Meditation

The Dalai Lama once said that anything that is not love is fear. Seeing the primary emotion as fear instead of hatred or anger may help you forgive transgressions a little easier. The following loving-kindness meditation will help with the process of easing your heart.

Sit in a comfortable position. Set the intention to practice this meditation without judgment and with a healthy dose of affection for yourself. Inhaling and exhaling through your heart, visualize a time when you were really happy and experience that feeling now. Recite, silently, the following statements:

May I be filled with loving-kindness;
May I be peaceful;
May I be healthy;
May I be happy.

Repeat the prayer over and over again for several minutes, feeling as though you're swaddled in loving-kindness. When you feel ready, substitute the name of the person you wish to forgive for the word “I.” Set the intention to wrap this person in the love you now hold in your heart. Don't worry if this seems impossible at first. Be patient, and ever so gradually, you'll begin to feel a shift. —L.S.

self-absorption. *Ishvara pranidhana*, surrendering to a higher power or universal consciousness, represents the third aspect of kriya yoga. In our practice, whether on the yoga mat or the meditation cushion, we learn to surrender at every moment, discovering that the more we let go, the more freedom we gain. It is through *Ishvara pranidhana* that we learn to accept our shortcomings with grace, patience, and non-judgment. Hartranft says as we sit in meditation, *pranidhana* allows us “to let nature unfold exactly as it will, without our attachment or aversion.”

One day last spring I lay in *shavasana*, mat up against mat in a crowded yoga class. I allowed myself to play with opening up my heart and silently connecting with the person next to me, and the person next to her, and on and on throughout the room, offering each one joy and contentment. I suddenly understood what yoga’s been trying to teach me all along—that there is no difference between me and the others in this room, between me and my friend Becca. By keeping our rift alive, I was carving deep *samskaric* trenches in my heart and in hers, too. I understood what Mahatma Gandhi meant when he said, “To slight a single human being is to slight those divine powers, and thus harm not only that being but with him, the whole world.”

What really brought Becca and me back together, in the end, came a few months later. I heard through the grapevine of old friends that someone had broken her heart. I simply couldn’t bear hearing that—how’s that for irony? So I took a deep cleansing breath, picked up the phone, dialed her number, and opened my heart. ■

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