

## *Practicing Freedom Through Forgiveness*

If you are reading this handout, it is likely that you are experiencing some flavor of pain related to resentment, anger, fear, or shame. I'm sorry that you are in pain, and I hope that this handout can bring some relief. Be gentle with yourself. Be patient and persistent. This process is gradual, but the opportunity for freedom is real.

### **Theory**

Before delving into the practice of forgiveness proper, it would be beneficial to clarify just what it is we are talking about when we say *forgiveness*—a word that is used in many different ways depending on social, cultural, and spiritual context. The word *forgive*, a Germanic equivalent of the Latin *perdonare*, means a “complete giving (up).” The implication is that one fully lets go of the desire to harm an offending party and clears the underlying emotional tension. It is worth pausing here to ask: Does this align with my understanding and use of the term forgiveness?

Here are some questions that can help us locate some of our preconceived notions and subtle beliefs about the nature of forgiveness. Consider pausing after each question and listening for (or writing down) an internal response. *Is forgiveness a moment or a process? Is forgiveness physical, mental, or spiritual? Is forgiveness an internal or external experience? Is forgiveness an intention or an action? Who does forgiveness benefit (e.g. the one doing the forgiving, the one being forgiven, both, society)?*

After taking a few curious moments to consider your views, take another few to explore the source of those views: *Where did I learn what forgiveness means? How have I experienced forgiveness in my life? What have been the consequences of forgiveness and of refusing to forgive?*

For the purpose of this handout and the practice it describes, forgiveness:

- is *both the process* of letting go of resentment, anger, (unbeneficial) shame, ill will, and/or hatred, *and the moment* of relief that corresponds with its full release.
- has physical, mental, and spiritual dimensions, but the *felt sense* is considered primary.
- is an *internal* experience that may or may not have external/relational manifestations (e.g. a face-to-face conversation, a letter).<sup>1</sup>
- involves intention, but *is primarily active and experiential* (i.e. forgiveness is not achieved through words, intellectual acknowledgements of its benefit, nor even the desire to forgive, but by cultivation and embodied release).
- *benefits the one doing the forgiving* (i.e. forgiveness represents an act of radical care for one's own wellbeing and may have little to do with the person, event, or feeling being forgiven).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Forgiveness as a primarily internal process (rather than a relational one) becomes more intuitive when we consider that it is not necessary for the person or experience we are working to forgive to be physically present. We can forgive someone who has died or who we may never see again. We can forgive an action that occurred decades in the past. Another way of emphasizing this internal dynamic is to consider that if one person forgives another for a past action, the one who caused harm may still experience guilt or shame. On the other hand, someone who has harmed another may learn, grow, and forgive herself while the offended party still holds onto their resentment. These two are responsible for their own freedom from resentment; neither can set the other free.

<sup>2</sup> If forgiveness is primarily about the release of certain emotions and thoughts, the one feeling those emotions and their absence is the one who benefits. Forgiveness as an act of care for oneself may appear to be a departure from the traditional Judeo-Christian framing (i.e. forgiveness by God for one's sins after repentance). While there is a rich spiritual conversation to be had on the overlapping and divergent aspects of forgiveness, mercy, and grace, such a conversation is beyond the scope of this little handout. For our purposes, forgiveness is a human experience, available to people of all faiths or none.

It is important to say early on that forgiveness is *not* about condoning or permitting wrongdoing, nor is it neglectful of the need for accountability. Forgiveness does not demonstrate a lack of self-respect nor does it turn the forgiver into a doormat. On the contrary, forgiveness is a radical and empowering act of self-compassion that can be summed up in this way, “I refuse to continue hurting myself because I have been hurt in the past.” Forgiveness says, “I set myself free of this burden of tension and resentment so that I can live a more relaxed, integrated, and caring life.” Our resentment actually binds us to the person and event we haven’t yet forgiven, while our forgiveness sets us free. This is hard for most to wrap their minds around because they have learned somewhere along the way that, “Holding onto anger makes me powerful and forgiving gives away my power. My forgiving them lets them off the hook.” Anyone who has experienced full forgiveness will tell you that the opposite is true, that resentment was the source of pain and exhaustion, and the forgiveness is a liberating and empowering experience, but it is extremely useful to examine this false intuition as it shows us why we cling to our resentment.

Forgiveness is distinct from reconciliation. Forgiving someone doesn’t necessarily mean that you will choose to engage in a close personal relationship with them moving forward. If it did, this model of forgiveness would be completely infeasible for victims of trauma or crime, wherein the aim is clearly not the maintenance of an ongoing relationship, but personal healing. Lastly, and this is the most challenging aspect for many to grasp, it is important to see that someone or something doesn’t have to be bad, evil, or wrong to be an appropriate object for the practice of forgiveness; he/she/it just has to be someone or something toward whom we feel resentment. For example, we can forgive ourselves for being exhausted, clumsy, or scattered. We can forgive our body for aging or getting sick. We can forgive ourselves for exhibiting these states, not because they themselves are evil or bad, but because we resent them or resent ourselves for experiencing them. Wherever there is resentment, shame, anger, or even embarrassment, we can practice and benefit from forgiveness.

### **Practice**

A recommended range for the stillness portion of the practice is 20 to 30 minutes. You may sit or lie down for this portion of the exercise. If you choose to do this practice lying down, please set a strong intention to stay alert and focused before beginning. If sitting for this exercise, find a reasonably quiet space and try to move your body as little as possible. Position the body in an upright, but relaxed posture (i.e. a natural S-curve in the spine, upright but with soft muscles throughout the body). Consider keeping tissues close by. If tears fall, let them—this will release some of the pressure. If they don’t, that’s fine too. Invite the mind to turn away from distractions, planning, and fantasizing, and to rest *here*, with this body, with this intention, in this moment. Take three deep breaths, tuning into the expansion and contraction of the abdomen, and feel the body settle.

Start by forgiving yourself. There are many different statements you can use to access the visceral experience of softening around resentment. Pick something that feels relevant to you in this moment and experiment with the wording until you find what feels right. Some examples of starting points are, “I forgive myself for not understanding,” “I forgive myself for making mistakes,” “I forgive myself for being afraid,” “I forgive my anger,” “I forgive my mind for being confused,” “I forgive this body for being tired and sick.” You can also just let, “I forgive...” float for a few moments and see if the body or the subtle mind provides the rest. Once you find a resonant subject of forgiveness, you can use organic phrases to keep the practice from becoming rote or stale. For example, if you choose to practice forgiveness for your exhaustion, it might sound something like, “I forgive myself for being tired...I let go of this anger...I forgive *you* (the body) completely...I release this tension and hatred...I forgive myself for being tired,” and so on. Use the phrases that are most meaningful, most conducive to opening.

As you continue with the phrases you've chosen, a tender feeling will arise, most likely in the torso. It may feel like a softening in the chest and throat or a warm or cool spaciousness, which may or may not be accompanied by a visual experience of soft light. Allow the felt sense of forgiveness in the body become primary. The feeling is central. The words are just support and can be let go of when you are ready. As you gain some momentum, you may sense grudges, knots, resentments, and hard-heartedness that have been locked inside begin to loosen. Let them show themselves when they are ready and know that you can be with whatever arises.

While you are doing this practice, your mind is going to have some resistance—it will want to wander off and distract itself so that it doesn't have to deal with uncomfortable sensations, feelings, and memories as they are processed and released. The mind will also throw up obstacles because it has built an identity around non-forgiveness (i.e. resentment and attachment), and will fight to defend the status quo for the sake of consistency and to buttress a sense of control. It will likely generate convincing counter-arguments, alluring distractions, and plain old cynicism along the lines of, "Well this is fluffy nonsense. You shouldn't waste your time on this. We have important things to do and errands to run. This doesn't work anyways and even if it did, that person doesn't deserve your attention. Don't wallow in self-pity." (Hint: Generally speaking, the louder and more harsh the mind gets in its criticism of the practice and/or of you, the closer you are to a meaningful experience of release and change.) Every thought that pulls you away represents an attachment—stagnant energy in the heart—an obstacle that will be dissolved as you soften around these old injuries. Summon the courage to meet your pain with kindness. It doesn't matter how many times the mind wanders. Keep coming back to your work. Consider using the following "6R" technique when distractions arise.

- **Recognize** that the mind has wandered away from the feelings, words, and intentions associated with forgiveness. (Note: Criticizing is not part of recognizing.)
- **Release** the distracting thoughts/words/images.
- **Relax** any tension that has arisen in the process of the mind wandering. Check the temples, jaw, shoulders, and lower abdomen especially. It is important to relax the tension before returning to your primary practice so that you are not adding tightness or pressure.
- **Re-smile**. One way to assist the relax step is to bring a gentle smile to your face. The smile is not about pretending to be happy with a difficult situation; it is encouragement for the mind and a sign of confidence in one's ability.
- **Return** to the current object of contemplation.
- **Repeat** as many times as is needed. If you get frustrated, forgive yourself for that.

Remain with your object—the felt sense of forgiveness—as long as you can, and repeat the Six Rs when the mind gets pulled away with as little criticism and reprimanding as possible. Everyone's mind wanders—that's how they've been conditioned by a culture obsessed with distractions and instant gratification. Bringing the mind back gently is part of the practice, not a sign of failure on your part. When the mind is ready to rest in stillness, it will. You just set the intention and offer encouragement. Use verbal phrases when needed to support the process, but remain with the feeling whenever possible.

### **Deepening**

As you settle into forgiving yourself—for the mistakes, the confusion, the discomfort—there comes a time when some person or event that needs forgiveness arises in the mind as words or an image. When this happens, realize that you didn't ask them to come up, they arose because the conditions were right

(i.e. because the wisest aspect of the mind knows that you are ready to let this resentment go...trust it). As soon as that person or event appears, you begin forgiving them for not understanding, for harming you in their confusion. With your mind's eye, you look directly at them and tell them sincerely, "I forgive you for causing me pain. I forgive you completely."

Place the image of that person near the warm or cool, bright feeling of forgiveness in your heart-center and radiate them with forgiveness. Speak the phrases silently (or out loud if you see that as helpful) over and over, editing them as needed, in a rhythm that serves the process. Stay with that person or experience until you feel relief, until you have a strong sense of, "Enough. There's nothing left to do here. I really have forgiven you." When you are finished with that person, you will feel distinctively lighter, relieved, with notable joy—like you put down a load of rocks you didn't know you were carrying, or like collapsing on your bed after a long journey home. When and if tears come, relax around them—they are not a problem. When you feel complete with this episode, you can go back to the phrases of self-forgiveness that feel most relevant. (Note: Just because the person or event arose in your mind doesn't mean that forgiveness will happen quickly. Intellectually knowing it's good to let go of hatred isn't forgiveness. The body will let go when it is ready. Take it slow. It often takes a while for the body to soften around an experience it has been holding onto for years or even decades. Patience and persistence are your greatest allies on this journey. You may forgive one experience or person in a few minutes, while another may take multiple sessions.)

One common obstacle at this point is getting wrapped up in the story of what they did and how they did it and how it should have been done, justifying the resentment all over again. This can cause a lot of suffering and frustration. When you start replaying old memories of the harm done, apply the Six Rs—Recognize, Release, Relax, Re-smile, Return, Repeat—and trust that you are ready to give up clinging to the anger of "I can't believe they did that." Applying the Six Rs to the distractions will show you how strong the attachments are as well as how to overcome the associated suffering. You've already played these stories a thousand times—it's time to be free of them in body and mind. Remind yourself, "This is not about giving permission. It's about freeing myself from pain, resentment, shame, and hatred. This is about giving myself peace. It's not about them." Keep relaxing the tension. Keep softening. Keep coming back gently.

### **Walking Practice**

Follow up your sitting with a short walk at a normal pace in fresh air, ideally on level ground. Keep your meditation going while you walk. With the left foot, take a step and mentally say, "I." Then with the right step, "forgive." Left step, "you." Right step, "You." Left step, "forgive." Right step, "me." Keep repeating "I forgive you. You forgive me," as you walk. Use the Six Rs for anything that distracts you. Keep relaxing the body. Keep relaxing the mind. It is best to keep your eyes focused on the ground four or five steps ahead instead of looking around as you are less likely to get distracted this way. Using both sitting and walking in this practice will create momentum via continuity.

### **Final Thoughts**

This is a life practice. This is an all-the-time practice. Keep your mind forgiving as continuously as possible. See beyond taking things personally by recognizing that people harm others when they themselves are hurting, when the resentments that haunt their hearts are not processed, but instead projected outward. (Perhaps you have some familiarity with this yourself.) This insight is the root of loving one's enemies, of learning deep compassion, even in the face of conflict. You can get to a place where you are able to forgive in real time, letting go of defensiveness, resentment, and ill will as they arise, rather than letting them fester for days, weeks, years, or even a lifetime.

This practice goes beyond “blame” and “fault.” Fault-finding is a clumsy mechanism for superimposing stability in the midst of insecurity and vulnerability. Those terms lose their significance as we gain insight into the nature of pain, reactivity, tension, and release. We are talking about the mechanics of the mind and body—a much subtler articulation of the human and relational experience than “figuring out who to blame.” Forgiveness is a dynamic and empowering practice because it involves accepting responsibility for the way that we relate to our experience. We are moving the locus of control over our wellbeing inward (i.e. out of the hands of circumstances and other people). We see clearly, “Because I am the one who took the experience personally, I am the one who can release it.” If we leave the object of our resentment in charge by non-forgiveness, then they have power over our wellbeing.

When there is no mindfulness (i.e. remembering to observe the way that the mind and body interact with sense experience, including thoughts and feelings) present, we are simply reacting with habit and conditioning—we are, in a word, choiceless. When we are mindful of our experience, we see that there is a significant degree of choice in how we integrate and make meaning out of our experiences. When we pay close attention to the process by which we build an identity around past hurt, we have the opportunity to interrupt that process, and soften the rigid sense of self.

A word of warning: This idea of taking accountability for our own wellbeing can be used as a bludgeon by our inner critic. Those of us already prone to self-denigration and criticism might find themselves saying, “This is all my fault. I did this to myself. Why am I such a failure?” and other such phrases associated with blame and fault. Forgive that voice too and use the Six Rs.

Go at a pace that feels manageable for you. You don’t have to go straight to the hardest thing first. In fact, it’s best if you don’t. Get some momentum and let the mind and heart naturally build up to the more challenging experiences. Remember that patience, sincerity, and dedication to your own freedom are what forgiveness is truly about. When you really start practicing forgiveness for yourself or another your mind starts to get into balance. Your sense of humor begins to be more relaxed and natural. You are able to trust wisely (i.e. you give up guardedness and hyper-vigilance without losing awareness of unsafe people and situations). You tend to take your thoughts, feelings, sensations, and the reactionary words of others far less personally. Insecurity drops precipitously as you have a clearer sense that none of this is about you. As a result of this insight, you experience greater freedom and open-heartedness.

Thank you for doing this work. Cultivating forgiveness within yourself is a service to every living being.

You are worthy of peace and healing.  
May you be free of ill will, hatred, and resentment.  
May you know deep compassion and freedom.

For more information on this practice, consider reading Bhante Vimalaramsi’s book, *A Guide to Forgiveness Meditation*.