



Forgiveness as an Expression of Right View

Anna Ossensfort

Forgiveness is a difficult subject. Organizing my thoughts around it has been difficult, too. First, it's a profound topic that could fill several newsletters. And then, there is a part of me doesn't want to face it. It's so humbling to consider the ideas that forgiveness reflects: that I am not in control, and that no one else is either. At its core, the principle of forgiveness expresses the essence of not-self.

Perhaps some will disagree with what I'm putting forward here, and I encourage that. I don't mean for any of what I write to be taken as the final word on the subject. It's not the ultimate truth -- simply a perspective I've been considering lately. But we can learn so much just from noticing our reactions to concepts, and that's my intention here: to provoke thought in the hopes that awareness of our responses will bring us a step closer to freedom.

And that's what this whole life and practice is about for me: freedom. I feel bound by my beliefs, strung up by my fear of pain, hindered by my attachment to how things ought to be. The solution is forgiveness. It goes straight to the core of the problem. It suggests that I accept what I've done (or not done), what others have done (or not done), how the world is (or isn't). And by acceptance I do not mean condonement, only acknowledgement. So it's a core issue, but it's also a difficult one.

Forgiveness is also challenging because it begins with harm and pain. By habit, when harm and pain are involved, shame and blame often come close behind. Our conditioning steers us in this direction. The attraction of shame and blame is that we imagine they will provide some sort of relief, or some measure of safety. Something in me still believes that if I fault myself for my pain, then I will be able to avoid pain in the future.

For example, when I was 12, my mother was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, and she died six months later. Like most teenagers, I was extremely sensitive to whether I fit in with my peers and I was the only girl I knew of whose mother had died. The conclusion I drew (mostly unconsciously) was that I was a freak, that there was something wrong with me. My thinking was along the lines of "If I'd been worth living for, she wouldn't have died." So the shame and self-blame solidified under that misunderstanding.

And I didn't just blame myself -- I blamed God. One of my stuffed animals had become a talisman for me, a vessel into which I put my faith that Mom would recover from her illness. So when she died, the bottom dropped out of whatever belief I had in the friendliness of the world.

A few years later, as I felt life beginning to normalize, my father died suddenly of a heart attack. Stunned, and virtually unmoored, I began to seek pleasure in boys and partying as a way of coping. Hence more suffering, more self-blame, and more shame.

Then blame of others arose as my siblings (who are 6, 9 and 11 years older than I) found spouses and started families of their own. A few years after my parents' deaths, I was the only one left in our hometown, and I felt abandoned all over again. But this time I held a grudge against my siblings, since I (again unconsciously) felt like they should have stuck around to take care of me.

All of this suffering, this shame and blame, was an additional load of pain on top of the original losses. And it was based on a misunderstanding of how the world works. The more I practice, the more I see that it's my attitude that is misguided, not life events or the actions of others. I have this attitude that the world, and especially the people in it, should be different -- should result in more pleasant events and fewer painful ones, more gain and less loss. As one of my dharma friends said recently about having to go through grief, "I'd like something different, please." The problem is that the world is how it is, not how we would have it.

So the world is not how we would have it, but what are we going to do about it? The answer is in awareness. When conditions come together such that I'm able to see the struggle I'm creating with reality, peace of mind naturally arises. When the fog lifts in these brief moments of realization, I see that Wrong View is the true cause of my suffering. A kind of joy spreads through my heart. Reality hasn't changed -- my parents still died, my siblings still moved away -- yet I'm free from the painful thoughts that say it should be different. That second dart of suffering has been removed.

So in contemplating forgiveness, we're actually looking directly at Right View. We're seeing that this life is not always the way I would have it, and that my suffering comes from failure to accept the way things are. This is why forgiveness is one of my favorite topics: It's absolutely radical. It goes straight to the root of our suffering, and it's at the root that we can experience the most freedom.

On a recent silent retreat, we were practicing in the style of Sayadaw U Tejaniya, focusing on noticing greed, hatred, and delusion in the mind. The beauty and simplicity of that practice is that it shows us directly how Wrong View generates suffering. I began to notice how I would wake up in the morning with no problems, just starting my day with the usual routines (teeth-brushing, sit-ups, stretching). Then I would leave my room to go downstairs, and the problems would start. "Entering the public realm," I

called it. I'd notice someone had carelessly tossed a used tissue in the corner, missing the trash can. Then when I wanted a hot drink, someone would be standing in my way at the counter, deeply contemplating the dozen tea canisters. People were leaving lights on where they shouldn't, talking loudly in the kitchen when they weren't supposed to, even wearing outdoor boots in the indoor-shoe areas!

As dharma would have it, I began to see for the millionth time that I am the source of my difficulties. One of the insightful thoughts that arose was "Unpleasant is going to keep happening." In an attempt to orient myself wisely, I began saying a prayer before leaving my room in the morning. It went something like this: "Dear God: Many, many, many things are going to happen today that I find irritating, unacceptable, stupid or just plain wrong. Please help me to see that these judgments are all in my mind, and to remember that it's not my world, I'm just living in it. Please save me from this suffering." From then on, when something happened that was not in line with my preferences (and it happened a lot!), I had a much better chance of not suffering over it.

Years ago, I heard somewhere that forgiveness is the core teaching within The Course in Miracles. And it's forgiveness with a twist: We're learning to forgive God that we're not God. It's essentially accepting the idea of powerlessness, but who wants to do that? The dominant culture trains us that the point of life is to shore up our self-concept as much as possible, accumulate more and more, run the show more and more, and throw our weight around more and more. The problem, though, is that reality is not set up that way. Although I certainly feel like I should be able to control outcomes, I'm coming to see that I have almost no control over anything. Thanks to the practice, I sometimes am able to change my attitude, but even that ability seems to be based on conditions.

So I've addressed somewhat the shame that can arise when life events harm us, and the blame that arises from the actions of others, but I also want to touch on the shame that arises when we ourselves cause harm. That can be the most difficult place to respond with forgiveness.

I was once married, about 20 years ago, long before coming to the dharma. In my second year of marriage, I broke my vows and deeply betrayed my husband. Foolishly, I came home and told him about it, thinking that the revelation would tear the faulty marriage down to its bedrock and we could start fresh. That isn't the way it went. My actions resulted in months of torment for us both, while we tried to continue living together and tried counseling. Then finally, mercifully, he filed for divorce. For years afterward, when we would cross paths, much rancor arose between us, mostly due to my attitude and behavior. Some time later I made amends to him and stopped harming him.

The spiritual teacher Byron Katie once shared a meditative inquiry that I found really helpful in forgiving myself for those harmful actions. She suggested that we get quiet

and go back in time to the shame-inducing event, making it as fresh as possible in the mind. She said that if we looked closely enough, we'd see a point where we had no choice but to do what we did. I did the practice as she suggested, and I had the same result. I saw clearly that all of my conditioning up to that point had culminated in the thoughts I was having and the actions that resulted. I understood that it was nonsense to continue to pile on any self-induced blame or shame. Now, to be sure, my actions still caused grievous harm, and making amends and stopping the harm was still imperative. But I have been able to give myself a break around what I "should" or "shouldn't" have done. When I keep my vows and promises now, it's not because of the fear-based shame or blame that come from egoic attempts at control, but because of the love-based wisdom and compassion that come from clear seeing.

With this article, I've just tried to clear the ground a little, to express some of the insights that have come to me around the origin of suffering and how it can end. I'll be offering a daylong retreat on forgiveness at SIMS on Saturday, October 6, where we will have the opportunity to contemplate, practice and discuss these matters in a much broader and deeper forum. I would love to hear your experiences and thoughts on the subject. I hope you'll come!