

# 2009-09-07 Emotions Forgiveness

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## SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

So Good evening, everyone. I would like to continue on my series on emotions. But I'd like to do it a little differently today, not so much addressing emotion, but address a practice that is really helpful in the field of clearing emotions, working with emotions and all that. And I'll start then introducing, telling you a story about a monk who was a very diligent monk in the monastery. He practiced meditation quite diligently, quite hard, long hours. He dedicated himself to do the monastic work that he was assigned with reverence and care and sensitivity. He was always caring for the other monks when he could and He was also very dedicated sincerely to really delving into the sacred scriptures of Buddhism and really trying to understand what the Buddha had to teach. And he was a monastery for many years. But he made no spirit, he made no spiritual progress whatsoever. So what was it? And the reason he made no progress whatsoever was he did not know how to forgive. Without being able to forgive, many people will be stuck in their lives. And the capacity to forgive is very, very important ability. And it's not an ability that's necessarily so important for the people that you forgive, though it might be very meaningful for them, but it's really important For you, if you are holding anger, holding resentment, if your heart is closed forgiveness is held up as a beautiful ideal in many religions. And as an ideal I think of it kind of similar to compassion. They have kind of the their siblings in the practice those two compassion and forgiveness. And both of my health has high ideals. But what's often overlooked in holding this up as beautiful ideals is that both of them arise out of the messiness, the difficulties, the failures and the hurts of life. Compassion arises in contact with suffering. The ways that people hurt, harm each other Feel each other, all those things. And the compassion is needed because of that. And just, you know, kind of kind of romantic, Hallmark idea of compassion. It's all about being sweet and nice and everything. It misses perhaps the idea that compassion is really actually a difficult way of meeting the world because it meets the difficulty of the world, the suffering of the world, and learning how to meet it in a healthy and productive useful way. So the same thing with forgiveness. Forgiveness is an idea beautiful ideal, but it it arises only because there's we hurt each other. We suffer we fail. And there's so much of this in human life so much hurt, harm, failure, disappointment. That we, that go on. That is important to me, I think to consider that maybe the what it means to be a human being is a big part is to be a human failing. That part of being human is not it's not a personal failing, that we fail. When we do these things. It comes with being human. And so kind of being a little bit holding a little bit more, more generous, generously, graciously, and then meeting it with our compassion and meeting it with our capacity or interest or intention to forgive. When we need to forgive for our sake, someone can come to you and ask for forgiveness. And maybe you don't have no resentment at all, and it's easy to forgive. But when we forgive for our own sake, it's because there's some place of the hardest closed I remember once someone hurt me

something not so nice. And after some period of time, I thought I'd forgiven her. And it took me a while to realize that I hadn't. What had happened was that I had become neutral towards her. But neutral is

not forgiveness. Forgiveness, I think when it's done fully allows our goodwill, our warmth or loving kindness, to be open towards that person again, there's a warmth to that person I set or at least the kind of feeling of goodwill to that person that's there. And so I took me a while to realize that I hadn't forgiven her yet there was still the new the neutral feeling wasn't actually the full movement of forgiveness. And I like that The word forgive as the word given it. So it's a, you know, what does it take to come to a place where we're willing to have some generosity of heart to the person who we've been holding a heart close to? before? It's been said sometimes that forgiveness is primarily for the sake of the forgiver. Though if you're on the receiving end of someone's forgiveness, it can feel very helpful to receive that. It's pointed out that forgiveness is not the same thing as excusing someone for what they've done. Oh, it's okay. You know, you know, I understand why you did it. And, you know, it's no big deal and, you know, going to Putin for that reason, then Okay, what wasn't really so bad after all this whatever. Forgiveness is not excusing someone healthy for you. If someone has caused harm and transgressed it's really important to keep that in mind not forget that. It's not forgetting and forgiveness is all Not pardoning, in the sense of letting someone off the hook. Sometimes people have to continue living out the consequences of their deeds and what they've done. It's possible to forgive someone and still call the police. It's possible forgive someone and still expect them to make amends for what they've done. So it's not pardoning and since I think they're off the hook then. But forgiveness i think i think of him early is his willingness to open the heart to them and feel goodwill to them. To not not exclude them from our love or for openness suffer from our hearts. I received this summons my mother in law sent me this some years ago.

It's a article from the Boston Globe, some Some years ago and the title of the article is hate is a useless emotion. The nice Darryl Williams was 15 years old, a sophomore playing varsity football for Jamaica Plain High School. People said he had a bright athletic future ahead of them, including college scholarships. But on the ninth of September 28 1979, Williams was just focusing on the next play. Williams Williams and his coach, were standing in the end zone. The coach congratulating Williams on catching a bomb, a deep past that, that had put his team on the five yard line, which led to a touchdown, which put them ahead of the home team. Charlestown high. One minute, Williams was elated. The next he was on his back wondering why is that teammates were fleeing. He tried to get up and run with them, but he couldn't. I thought someone had hit me good in the game. He recalled in a recent interview, I wanted to meet that person and tell them it was a good hit. The hit however, was a bullet fired by a white Charleston teenager from the roof of a nearby building. Police called it a racially motivated shooting. tensions over the busing were still simmering. Williams, who was black was hitting the neck and left a quadriplegic. In an instant, the violent act of a stranger ended his dreams by athletic stardom. For the rest of his life. Williams would have to depend on someone else for even the most basic physical tasks from eating a meal to turning pages in a book. undeterred, Williams finished high school, got a degree and went to work as an outreach specialist. Perhaps even more remarkable is that Williams has forgiven his assailants two of whom were convicted serve 10 years in prison and had been released. Angered, did well up at first, he says, the situation would have been a lot easier to take headed occurred during the game in an actual football injury instead of a pure act of hatred. Even though his assailants never apologized, and he never saw them. Williams chose to forgive. Although they put me in an unverifiable position. I never hated because I never hated because I will not give anyone that control over me. Hate is a useless emotion. That takes up too much energy, says Williams now 39 if I were to retaliate in anger, what would make me different from them? Forgiveness he believes has helped him helped him heal. And you know, I've read, you know many stories personally in newspapers of dramatic movements of forgiveness of people who had been the victims are in something of a tremendous atrocities. It's almost superhuman. So almost like the stories are senior more than we can imagine. It's a mythic people. mythic, almost like people should do this. But there are people and I would imagine that some of you would rise to the occasion. If some of these things

happen to you, but it's unimaginable now. And prophecy would rise to the occasion because the alternative is too painful. It's too painful to go through life hating. It's too painful to go through life. angry, bitter close. down, and that it takes too much energy, as he says, and that somehow to find some way to release the holding and in pursuing or thinking about forgiveness. I think it's very important to realize that there's a very important distinction between relief and release. And many people pursue relief. They want relief for their pain, their suffering, and not a few family of victims have sought for relief and having a murderer executed and felt some degree of relief. watching an in depth throw watching someone be executed by the state. Feel the relief, but never feel the release.

Never be freed from the anger The bitterness and the hurt that they carry with them. And it's very hard to release it, because it can feel so justified. They can feel so much like the call for fairness and justice demands it. How can we, you know, if I, if I forgive someone, I'm getting off the hook or you know, it's the cosmic justice is not happening, then there has to be something that you know, I have to hold on to my anger and bitterness so that justice can somehow be made it out. But we don't forgive, I think, for the other person's sake, or you can certainly, but I think the primary reason to forgive is really, I think, sometimes for your own sake. That's what I think maybe some of you think differently. Sometimes perhaps the motivation to forgive is really because we see how beneficial it's going to be for the other person, how meaningful it is to the other person. I've heard people say that the best way they could get back to their under enemy was to forgive them. That was really the one thing they were, you know, rub it in somehow. That's not good, that approach.

There's this remarkable story. And now I've heard a number of times, I hope it's true. These wonderful stories of a mother, whose son teenage son, was killed by a young gang member who was proving his putting his way into the gang. And she showed up with a trial of the murder. And after the men, the young man was convicted. She stood up in court and looked at the murder in the eye and said to him, I'm going to kill you. Six months after the young man began his prison sentence, she went to visit him. And he had no family to visit and no one visited him. He was living on the streets. And so at the end of that visit, she gave him some dollars to buy something cigarettes or something in the prison. And then she started to visit him and kind of helped him a little bit in the prison was probably the only person that visited him. And after many years, some years it was time for him to be released. And she said to him, you know, do you have anything to do when you go? He said, No, I'll find you a job. And then when it got even closer to being released, I said, you have anywhere to go. And she said, No. Well, I have an empty room in my house. Stay temporarily with me. He did for a while. And then it's after some time she called him into the dining room table. And he said, she said to him, remember at your trial, I said, I was going to kill you. And he said, Yep, I can never forget that. And she said, I did. That boy who killed my son is gone.

And I have no son now. Will you be my son? And she adopted him. That's quite remarkable. I hope it's a true story.

I was surprised In myself one point to discover that in the undercurrents of my life, as I lived my life and not paying any attention to certain that, you know, maybe you didn't think about some things for a decade or 15 years something. At one point I was surprised that my resentment towards someone was still there. It hadn't gone away, that I hadn't thought about her for 15 years. And wow, now that I'm thinking about her, not I think about how good she and it took me almost 20 years to be released. What I took actually, for me was meeting her again, I hadn't seen her for 20 years or something. And somehow in the meeting with her again, we didn't talk about what happened, but somehow in that meeting, there was some clarity for me and I was able to let something go And no longer she was no longer I no longer carried her in my, on my back. River so forgiveness forgiveness is not easy to do.

And because it's an ideal some people hold themselves measure themselves up against some high standard of forgiving, I suppose to forgive just like that and supposed to use completely and well and supposed to be going down the street smiling to everyone especially that no good lousy and, and I don't think it happens quickly. Sometimes it may. And, and I don't think it's easy, but it begins not by being able to do it. But it begins by wanting to and this desire, the intention to want to begin doing the work for forgiveness is really a big turn and then it takes its time. Sometimes it takes a long time, sometimes it's the heart, the inner life, the mind, the heart has to kind of digest what happened and sort through a lot of different things in order to kind of come to it. But simply that you set the course direction towards forgiveness makes a big difference. It helps also a lot, if you no longer being victimized. If it's ongoing, there's no way harm is being done. It probably doesn't make sense to forgive. But then maybe something else is needed, like you know, tell them to stop or something. It also helps a lot, if we kind of look at our issues of our self identity. How do we see ourselves as a person? How do we identify ourselves or represent ourselves to ourselves in relationship to the pain and the suffering and all that because if we see ourselves some people see themselves as a victim, as primarily as a victim and that identity is something they hold on to For support for comfort force for recognition to other people, and it's very hard sometimes to let go of it because of the way we think is the benefits that come with that kind of identity. also connected to this idea of identity is kind of like the issue of how much personal strength we have. It's a lot easier to forgive if we have some inner strength or confidence, or feel our own dignity or feel our own worth. And then in the analogy I'd like to give maybe I gave it here three years recently. You know, if a fly, falls and slides down and settles on an end, it's a big deal for the end. If the same fly, flies away and lands on an elephant, it's not a big deal. So as you go through your life, do you go through the life as an end or like An elephant. And the suggestion in the Dharma is that you can be an elephant. It says yes in the Dharma is that you don't have to take all the circumstances of your life and what have details of what happens and the ups and downs of your life. As such a heavy burden as if you're, you're, it's, you know, it's heavy fly in the land. Not to diminish the difficulties that happen in life. But how big we feel how much confidence we feel is really important. So perhaps we don't make sense doesn't make sensitive to offer forgiveness until we do some inner work on ourselves in order to grow up and become stronger and be able to stand on our own two free feet. Also, then the forgiveness I think, has more power. Because the person we're forgiving can see, wow, there's a real person there is forgiving, as opposed to someone recovers in the corner and says, Oh, I you know, I'll forgive you.

You know, a lot different. That's one thing to say, I forgive you with a, you know upright standing in your own two feet looking in the face that has carries a lot more meaning than just kind of cower. You know, doing it very weakly. And I would say that forgiveness is not for the meek. And sometimes one of the reasons sometimes forgiveness gets a bad rap, because it's associated sometimes with meekness. And I don't think that's the you know, meek forgiveness maybe is no forgiveness at all. That hopefully it comes from our strength or taking our places being here.

Another thing that can help with forgiveness is understanding the understanding the other person so that there can be some compassion or some understanding, not to excuse them, but many people have found it easier to Forgive, when we understand that the person who's harmed us, that person suffers, and perhaps is out of their suffering, but the act of really have done. So what does it take to forgive? What any more importantly, what does it take to think that forgiveness is useful is important.

So the monk who was diligent in the monastery made no progress, because he hadn't learned to forgive. There might come a time for some of you. Something like meditation practice, you'll reach an impasse in meditation. And no matter how diligent you try to practice and get concentrating, be mindful and stay present. The real issue might be how you're holding resentment, anger. Hurt, how you're

holding the heart closed. And then when maybe what's needed is not some meditative technology or focusing on the breath, entering into bliss. Maybe what's rather needed is to this very human, messy process of forgiving. The forgiveness can go in many directions. We can forgive someone else. Sometimes what's needed is not forgiving someone else. But sometimes what you need is to ask someone else to forgive you. Sometimes the way that our heart is closed, or maybe maybe better expressions way down, is not by what's been done to us but what we've done to others, and therefore the spiritual progress to continue for the heart to keep working. It has to somehow be freed of how to weigh down by its regrets. Its guilt and shame. Its sense of kind of, yeah, those things. And so what's needed is we have to go to someone and say, Will you forgive me? I confess, and I repent. In most religions and Buddhism included, there are these three very important steps and interpersonal difficulties. There's confession, repentance and forgiveness. And confession is a really important part. So if you need to be forgiven, confession is part of it. Repentance for me means making amends. Sometimes it's not enough to say you're sorry. Sometimes you actually have to do something about it. The dramatic example for this is one from the movie Gandhi was no. Were in the movie. This I think it's a Muslim man comes to Gandhi. This strat because he's killed some Hindus. And he wants to know what to do. He just feels terrible what he's done. And Gandhi turns to him and says he has to adopt a Hindu child and raise him as a Hindu. In the movie, I think remember the movie in the guy's face just kind of goes in shock. And, but that's, that's, you know, he makes a make amends, he needs to somehow do something in order to free his own heart. And he can't just do it overnight. Take, you know, all those years of raising someone. So sometimes we have to forgive someone else, or we have to ask for forgiveness. And perhaps we then it's not a matter of the kind of a different kind of strength or maybe similar kind of strength. Maybe it's kind of it's a real strength of character, to be able to go to someone and apologize. I'm sorry. Again, it's not an act of meek meek act. And perhaps if we come to someone meekly, weakly maybe the apology doesn't count as much as if we come really chasin but strong and really clear. You know, this is really important for me, and I apologize. And then the third step of forgiveness is that of forgiving ourselves. And so for some people, that's really a crucial step. Some people hold a lot of anger towards themselves and feel a lot of shame for themselves what they've done in the past their shortcomings, and somehow, you know, no one else. Really forgiveness from someone else doesn't really help doesn't really support or free the heart. And so there's actually movement of turning towards oneself, and opening the heart again towards ourselves, be forgiving, for what we've done on that. So elephants.

I wonder if you need to forgive someone who would it be? If you were to leave tonight or thinking Oh, yeah. Oh yeah 20 years ago 15 years ago, 10 years ago. Today Who do you need? Do you need to forgive

And I asked you also to reflect. Is there anyone for whom a very helpful for you, meaningful for you supportive of you for you, if you could forgive them? Is there anyone out there? Maybe for their sake, but also for your sake? Anybody that you need to forgive, to offer your forgiveness?

And then finally, there ways are there things that you could forgive yourself for this long life that you've had so far It's unimaginable to me that you that you would not have made mistakes. I think you're all humans. Of course you've made mistakes.

Do you hold those mistakes against yourself? And if so, could you forgive yourself?

Could you release yourself from the way that you hold yourself down?

I like it. The word forgiveness has the word give in it. It's forgiveness is a subspecies of generosity.

Can you be generous? The world needs people who are generous, and the world needs forgiveness. And then perhaps we can consider that I gave last week's in this week's talk in reverse order. Maybe I should have done gratitude after forgiveness. And I hope that as you leave tonight, that you can leave grateful that a human heart has the capacity to forgive. Every human heart has the capacity. And when the need is great when the need is there, it can be done. And then you'll be able to go back to that monastery and tell that monk what he overlooked. Thank you all.