

# 2015-02-08 Exploring Forgiveness

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## SPEAKERS

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Recently, I participated in someone offering a guided meditation on forgiveness. And it was quite lovely. It was well done. And it was kind of moving for me to be part of it. At the same time as being part of it gave me a lot of cause for thinking for reflecting. And even during the meditation, I was like, you know, I tried to understand how this worked for me, not just forgiveness work for me, and does it really work for me? And does it work for me the way it's being traditionally taught? So I had a lot of thought about it, and I thought I would offer you some of my reflections on this. Hopefully, maybe it's interesting, if nothing else, to get you thinking more deeply about this important topic. I think that it's probably fair to say that until about 20 30 or so years ago, the whole topic of forgiveness was primarily probably belong to the domain of religions, religions were really big about almost all religions have something to do with forgiveness. And then about 20 30 years ago, it became a study of psychology positive psychology and wonderful research and Fred Luskin and Stanford with wrote a book and also great research and a topic. He's been here to talk about his work on forgiveness. But this connection of forgiveness to religion, I think has an interesting because of its connection to something sacred, something of tremendous significance and value in people's lives, that it goes beyond just the immediacy of repairing a broken relationship that might exist. It said that forgiveness is primarily an issue if there is resentment. So It's a way of dealing with resentment and, and maybe releasing someone from a debt that they have towards you or some obligation that they have, whatever reason might be. And I know there's there's phenomenally inspiring stories of people who've offered forgiveness to others. The, you know, people, there's a story that went around for a while of a woman whose son was killed. And she went in forget, forgave the entire whole process of developing relationship with a man who killed her son. Or I read recently about a man who had been stabbed many times in a space. And then he forgave his person who did the stabbing, and he asked the judge if please don't second sentence jail. So the judge Just seconds instead of seven cents he gets him to jail said that he had to help pay for the plastic surgery. And but then the higher courts ruled that he couldn't do that and he had to go to jail apparently.

But this idea that these people who are the victims have tremendous violence and injustice can somehow come turn around and not only forgive but more than forgive, go and touch the perpetrators art and maybe even transform the perpetrators heart is quite something, the story of the woman who forgave her son's killer and I you know, I don't know if this is a made up story, but I've heard it many times if it really happen. Um, she went to the time of day to the court time of the hearing in their sentencing. And she stood up in the face that killer and said, I'm going to kill you. And he was sentenced. And then after some years, she started a correspondence with this prisoner, this, and then they go back and forth. And then she started visiting him and visiting him. And then the person who killed them, killed her son had no family, no friends, no one was visiting him. Anyone was time for him finally to be released. She said, Well, you can come and stay with me. And then she stayed with her and she helped him get started and set up and eventually kind of, I think, adopted him as a second son.

And when when he did that, you said, You see, I killed that one. I killed the one who, that what that person who killed my son helped with the whole transformation of the person. So some people are horrified by these stories. And because of wanting justice at all cost and people retribution and people really need to be punished and suffer in order to pay their debt or something.

But that approach tends to be an approach of protectiveness kind of protecting the status quo protecting oneself. And I think what the strand of religion that I'm part of, and Buddhism and maybe other religions, is not that of protecting the status quo, but rather transforming it. And so the possibility understanding the deep possibility of transformation in oneself in another's. And that possibility of transformation. The door for that possibility tends to open most widely in times of great crisis. great difficulty, not the way you wish anyone crisis but but I've seen over and over again, that that's the time for transformation if we set through that door. So it's hard to do when there's resentment when someone has hurt us to or violated us in some way to offer forgiveness. Or it's even harder to kind of see it as an opportunity to transformation both in oneself and the other person. Here's a teaching by the Buddha. No, it's actually not by the Buddha it's by Yeah, it's by. It's in a Buddhist text and sometimes attributed to the Buddha but here it's not. One who repays an angry person with anger, thereby makes things only worse for oneself. Not repaying an angry person with anger when wins a battle hard to win. That person practices for the welfare of both one's own welfare and the others. When knowing that is that the foe is angry, when mindfully maintains one's peace, one achieves the cure of both one's own and the others. Other people might consider him a fool that person a fool. But they are unskilled in the Dharma. They're unskilled in the process of transformation. So if you follow that, what I like about this is that it talks about not repaying anger, anger with anger. But it does. So in the terms, it's good for you and for the other person. And so this idea that you'd be concerned about the welfare of the person who's done you harm is a very difficult thing to come to someone who's angry. But I think that this is in certainly in teaching Buddhism, this is part of the, you know, part of what the Buddha was clearly pointing to the possibility to live a life that's for the welfare of both self and others, even if the other someone who has done your harm. So how is that possible? And how is it possible it's what's required for that? So the idea of forgiveness, the there's no actually and this is part of the reason why I spent a lot of time reflecting on it. There There's no good obvious Buddhist word in Pali or Sanskrit to translate into English word forgiveness. And there is a word that's translated into that sometimes, but and then sometimes, these ancient Buddhist texts are translated with that word. And it gives a very particular understanding of the text because many people in the West come with if you speak English come with a particular association with what forgiveness means.

The word forgiveness in English has connotations, right? Because this giving something to someone and then associated with forgiving a debt, for example, that you offer something you pardon someone you release someone from an obligation is a little bit part of their association with that. And in and the word that sometimes translate into English as forgiveness is khanti. And it first meanings are patience and endurance, forbearance. And then if you look at the dictionary definitions and in English, Pali to English, like the end it says and forgiveness, because we really, really want to find forgiveness in Buddhism, you know. So it's such an important concept in the West there has to be a word for it. But the association is not so much that we're doing something for the other person. But rather we're not holding our resentment. We're not acting on our resentment. There's a patience, endurance forbearance, we're not giving in, we're no good the person's going to be out you're going to be safe now with me. And kind of the feeling. And I would say that forgiveness is not a big deal or not, I say differently. It's not a very important in Buddhism. Even though the reconciling of relationships and caring for relationships, the overcoming of resentment is a very important process in there in the religious tradition. And maybe on the outside, it would look the same as a Western approach to real forgiveness. But it's but it points to a very different I think understanding of the human being and the nature of

religion nature of our relationship to other people than here in the West. And it's hard for people who've been acculturated in the West, to see and understand this very different approach. So when I was doing this forgiveness meditation, part of it is saying the words to yourself, for whatever harm I have done to others, whether intentionally or unintentionally, may they forgive me. And that certainly is a, you know, can be very significant wish and hope and kind of has can be a lot behind there that's very healthy to do that. Among other things, it's a recognition that you have harmed someone and the confession, the acknowledgement of a transgression of suffering, you've caused others a very important part of the whole forgiveness process often, and it's certainly important for the perpetrator. If you have done something to cause someone harm, then in Buddhism, we say it's really important to acknowledge that fully, perhaps not to the person who you've harmed to someone who you respect. There's something about the kind of a confession or acknowledgement that helps you kind of free yourself from identification or involvement or those kinds of activities. So, for this, so asking for forgiveness, but I was sitting there listening to this, you know, asking for forgiveness. And I find myself as nice as it was, I find myself very disinclined to want to ask for forgiveness. And I don't think I'm like cold hearted person too much. You know, so it isn't that that way, you know? So don't be too worried about me yet. But if they did that, I would ask for forgiveness, just kind of like wasn't in my psyche. That was like the obvious thing to do and, and, you know, it's kind of like, I suppose maybe I've asked forgiveness sometimes, but it wasn't like that doesn't come up the first and foremost This is what I would do. What comes to my mind what to do is to apologize is to express deep apologies and express my, my distress that harm has been caused that I've caused harm and an offer, can I make amends? Can I when we talk, I'm available, I'm open, I would like to do whatever I can do to make a difference for you. I'd like to help you. So you know, now I've caused this harm. So it's me coming forward. That's what I want. That's what that's what occurs to me. And then I thought, well, if I asked if I've harmed someone and I asked them for forgiveness, I wondered I burdening them even more. I've already burdened them with whatever way I've harmed them. And now they have to condemn asking them to kind of go through this whole process in themselves and forgive me. I mean, what uh, you know, isn't it And sometimes I've seen I think, sometimes the very effort does forgiveness, for some people is a selfish act. It's like we're trying to be relieved ourselves from the discomfort of the situation. And now you who I harmed helped me out. relieve me, please. And I don't think that's, you know, so the poor victim, right?

On the other hand, I've heard that sometimes the ability of a victim to forgive the other is a way of stop no longer being the victim. So it's a way of kind of, you know, freeing themselves from that identity or from that so it can be very powerful act by the person who's been harmed. But that's their responsibility. Maybe not my responsibility to have them to ask for that forgiveness. And this is now this is where it may be you know, I don't quite understand Western culture so well or even Buddhist culture, worldview. But the impression I get is it here in the West. In some of the religious traditions of the West forgiveness is really big. And I read recently, Lutheranism is like at the heart of the Christianity of Lutheranism is forgiveness. And some of that comes out of the idea of original sin. You know, you, you didn't even know you did it. But you can't you carry it with you and someone, someone, something has to forgive you. Otherwise, there's major consequences if you don't get that forgiveness. And the idea that there's someone else, a god or someone who has tremendous power to judge, you, say what happens to you for eternity. And that's really important to get forgiven for something that you know, kind of who you are in some innate way. I think it's deeply embedded in certain Western currents of thinking. And so the idea that spirituality religion has a lot to do with a relationship with a day a day it was something external to you and your account to something external to you, that you have to kind of make your amends with are fine, I think is a very important current in the West and probably feeds into the importance of forgiveness in the Western culture that it's very important to ask for forgiveness to be part of forgiveness because of how important it is in western religion. It's a in Buddhism. It's not a theistic religion, in the sense that it's not based at the foundation on theism or God, but rather, it's in

contrast to that it's based on karma. It's a karmic religion. And in karmic religions, you're responsible for your own karma. You're so rather than looking for some salvation from some external source, you're, you're responsible for finding your own salvation, your own freedom. And so it's if I ask someone for forgiveness or say this way, if someone's angry With me, I could forgive them.

But there's that doesn't free them from their karma. It frees them maybe from the social complexity of the situation frees up their social relationship in a nice way. But they have their own legacy, their own conditionality that comes into place because of acting on anger or being angry. And they're responsible to that. And so all the forgiveness in the world might not change how they're accountable to their own karma. And karma has to do with the psychological habits, psychological conditioning, psychological legacy that we have in our hearts and mind that we carry with us, that weigh us down that limit us that constrict us, that influence how we see the world, see ourselves how we behave. And so Buddhism puts its emphasis on turning the light around on what you do in your mind and heart. How are you being constricted or limited? What are the karma means actions. What are the mental action psychological actions that you do that, that are responsible for keeping you caught keeping you identified in a way that's limiting? And how do you become free of being caught free of these limiting identifications that we have. And so if we have caused harm, there can be a strong sense of being the, you know, terrible person, there can be a strong sense of attachment to the, to the hurt that we've caused. It could be all kinds of things we're attached to sometimes getting angry and causing harm. As we're caught in something inside of us. And we're responsible to work on that ourselves. We're not going to ask someone else to do it for us. And in some way, if we have caused caused harm to someone else, the idea of offering supportive conditions for them so they can work through what they need to work through is very important. So our confession, our apologies are willing to make an If we need to, you know, do something to be available for that is important. But ultimately they're responsible for what how they hold their, hold themselves, their identity, how they hold their their resentment or hurt their anger, you know, that's their karma. And so Buddhism has a strong emphasis that we all have to work out our own karma. And so this idea so the first and foremost thing is not to look externally, to get the solution to first and foremost is to look internally. Whereas I think sometimes I've seen in the West among some people to be very quick to look externally for the solution rather than turn it in. Many years ago, I was in I spent about two years I think, a year or two, going to weekly meetings to with a committee to write up a document for the San Francisco Zen Center on ethics. You know, the ethical procedures, ethics, they're going to live by It was a, you know, you need, we needed to have the ethics document and committee in place in order to deal with a conflict around writing ethics. Because it's a, it was a very contentious, this whole ethics thing and, and so, but remember what I was at this committee meeting and we were talking about, we used to argue about commas, you know, all kinds of you mean just even even just that, but let alone big things, right. Talking about it, but I remember once, I was kind of in a meeting where I was kind of, you know, different point of view from another person, that committee and, and we were kind of like, you know, global tense between us. And, you know, we couldn't find our way. So the meeting ended. And so I spent the week reflecting on that being with that, looking at myself, what I did, how I was taking responsibility for my part of that, as opposed to staying spending the week thinking about him. If he should have done Better, I'm gonna let him know next week and correct him. I spent the week looking what was my part in this? What did I do? That was my instinct. So by the time next meeting came around, just before the meeting in the hallway, I wanted to be sure to go up to him as soon as I could. And I went up to him and said, you know, hey, you know, and I was going to apologize for my part. I by the time I realized that I had contributed maybe not hundred percent, but I had done my part. I had my contributions, I was going to apologize for my contribution to the attention. But you know what happened? He beat me to it.



He said at first. So he'd done the same thing. So I think this is a kind of, I think is kind of an example of kind of a Buddhist approach starts with oneself, not with the other, taking responsibility for what we do here. So in Buddhism, then, one of the ways we take responsibility for ourselves is to be willing to turn around at our anger at our resent And not hold on to it. Partly because it's bad for us. It's very painful. Not a few people I've known have carried resentment and anger like for, you know, ex husband or someone for years, years. And then some point what kind of woke up and thought, wow, I don't think he even remembers me. Hardly, you know, he's not thinking about this at all. And I'm the one who's hurting. You know, you know, I'm the one who's trapped in this, he's not and we're not gonna do him any good that I'm not I'm not doing him any harm. By being angry, I'm just harming myself. And then seeing the cost of holding that anger was a thing that finally freed them from it, because it's pointless to hold this anymore because I'm okay. I just, you know, hurting myself. So the emphasis in Buddhism is often is if you're angry, take responsibility for it. If you're angry, have resentment. Look at it deeply. You have hostility, turn around and really work with that before you lash out at someone else. And the idea that any kind of hostile anger, hostile resentment that you carry, that you would find on you, you'd be interested as a Buddhist to work through that and come to the other side. And going parallel to that, Buddhism puts a tremendous emphasis on having loving kindness, having having a friendliness to others. And you can't have friendliness unless you've unless you've let go of your anger. So the consequence of letting go of your anger, doing the inner work, and being interested in having a friendly relationship to other people might look like forgiveness. But it's not quite it maybe has the same social function, you know, of repairing relationships and all that. But I think it has a different kind of attitude than expecting to be are asking to be released from any obligation released from any way in which people are, you know, holding something against you. Now, I think it's a fine thing to ask for forgiveness, I think maybe it's a profound thing to ask for it. But, you know, as I, as I pointed out, it's a little complicated. And so, and I think that, you know, I spent my whole adult life in Buddhism. And before that I didn't really have a religious upbringing. So the idea of forgiveness was not something kind of Western idea. Forgiveness is not something I was trained in or acculturated in. So, when I had this forgiveness meditation a few weeks ago, I thought, you know, I think maybe I've been so thoroughly kind of in a Buddhist culture for 40 years. Maybe that's why this idea of it's not my first instinct to want to forgive or want to ask for forgiveness. But even you know, wanting to forgive it isn't that you know, I don't think it's a first instinct for me to want to forgive anyone. Isn't that terrible? It sounds terrible. I know. Don't tell anyone.

And whatever it sounds, it's pretty public soon. But it is my strong instinct desire to not hold resentment and anger towards anyone, and to be able to meet anyone with an open heart, meet them in a friendly way to be, you know, to just be there in a good, direct way with people. And I think the result might look like forgiveness, but forgiveness seems like too sticky or too, maybe too relational. In some way that's complicated. That's more complicated than it needs to be, can be simpler than that. And I think that the, as I quote read from this quote, that Buddhism were concerned about the welfare of self and other Can we have the self and other relationship kind of simple as simple open heart without obligation without shoulds? I've known been around people who their currency of which they understand the relate relatedness is one of obligation, I'll do something for you, and you do it back to me. And that's, that's complicated. The idea of generosity and Buddhism is there's no obligation of the receiver to you. or very little, maybe occasionally there's something but the emphasis is more than to give without obligation to receive anything in return. And so this, you know, it's it's simpler, it's cleaner that way. So how does all this happen? One of the thing about forgiveness, I've read a little bit about people who teach forgiveness and emphasize it. And one of the first thing they say it's very important, in order for forgiveness to happen for the four people involved. Both sides have the, the hurt the transgression, to see the humanity of the other, to see the humanists of the other, because the more the heavier the transgression, that's the crime even often the less that person has seen the personhood of the person,

humanity. And that's why sometimes can people can do crimes, they don't see the other person as a human. But if you really see that person as a human being, and you get a sense of you know that there is many ways like you with maybe with parents and children and sorrows and joys and challenges in life and capacity to feel happiness and joy and sorrow, many things really kind of present for someone. There's a whole different kind of way of relating to people. And I've seen this in myself, and one of the ways that one of my shortcomings is that when I can if I'm feeling resentful, or angry or grumpy about someone you know, I go around the person, you know. And I've learned when I've had that kind of attitude to that as soon as I can try to go meet the person that I have this attitude towards, because I'm not very accurate in my mind, you know, when it's like that I'm kind of living its kind of fantasy world when I'm grumpy about someone. And so it's very important not to kind of automatically believe my resentments and my angers. And what I found is if I go meet the person, it kind of evaporates very quickly, then we talk about it, I see the humanity of the person and it's like a whole different way. It might still be challenging what's going on, but there's a very, very diff I read, like very different to someone, when I'm seeing them sitting with them very directly than if I'm kind of in my fantasy, which are, you know, or so I know maybe you're different. Maybe you're accurate in your times. I just say I haven't gotten there yet. But I, you know, I've seen that over and over again, myself so. So the idea of seeing the humanist humanity of the other. And the same thing sometimes for the person who's caused you harm, to understand something about their humanity, their suffering, and one of the teachings in the Buddhist circles is that you want to, if you would have compassion for someone who's done your harm, you want to try to understand the suffering that has caused them to or brought them to cause that they were probably acting from some kind of difficulty. As you probably know, this famous now somewhat famous this locally a slogan from San Quentin Prison. Hurt people hurt, healed people heal. So to kind of see the person or the person's hurt, then maybe it's easier to forgive or the base easier to let go of the anger it's easier to open the heart and see the other person.

And then the other thing I think it helps forgiveness for this movement, I think is not just apology. I think apology is very important. Because apology recognizes it's a clear recognition that you've done something to cause harm, does harm someone. And I think it really helps the other person to know that you recognize it as well. But there's a word it's a kind of a guess, maybe more I associated more with Christianity, which I like it is two words that I like in this regard. I like the word confession, and I like the word repentance. And it's kind of heavy words, right? The end. In fact, what I saw in what I've seen in Asian Buddhism, is that they do have confession. And maybe repentance is a very important part of how to heal social ruptures in society. And forgiveness is not that important. Here in the West, sometimes forgiveness is important, but sometimes the whole, you know, repentance part and confession part. You know, it's different. I don't know what the difference is exactly between confession and apologies. But confession is like really, like really owning up? Like, yes. You know, let me tell you, you know, you know, and repentance, I think means I don't know what it means whatsoever you have to even though even though I like it so you have to be patient with me and maybe you know, but I think of repentance as clearly stepping away from identifying with that kind of activity that caused harm, like really think I'm not a dentist. I'm not. It's more than just apologizing for one particular event. Like say you lie to your friend. It's like, when you repent, you can not only confess that you lied, I'm sorry, I lied. I really lied for saying, lying. I don't I am no longer committed to lying. I'm committed. I'm really They're gonna try to give this up, I'm relinquishing My, my, you know, my interest in lying or something, it's a bigger movement. It's kind of like a dip someone to hear if some of you cause the harm and if it if it is not the other person, even your own heart, or anybody in your community, if they can really hear that you haven't just apologize, but you're battling to relinquish any interest in doing that kind of behavior again, like this kind of like a vow or commitment, no more of this line. repentance. I think that's kind of my it's maybe also our attention sometimes has the idea of, of making amends. Enough was a true story, but a great the end of the movie Gandhi, remember there was a Muslim who came together there

was these riots in India, and Muslim and Hindus were killing each other. And this Muslim man comes I think, I remember tearfully to the Gandhi. And confesses that he has killed, I think a Hindu child. And you know, what does he do? Or he wants to apologize or maybe he wants forgiveness. I don't know what he asks God to remember remember from the movie. And so, Gandhi says to him, yes, there's something you can do. You have to go adopt now a Hindu child orphan, and raise him as a Hindu. So, you know, repentance or making amends sometimes. Sometimes we need to be transformed and changed. I feel I feel that the more serious our hearts been touched by something, whether we were the victim or whether we're the perpetrator or were the observer of something, the more deeply we've been affected, the more appropriate is to to want to be transformed by it to want to Not to go back to business as usual not to go back to life as it was, I think to kind of just kind of fix things up, make amends, kind of make your apologies. And then forget about it and ignore it. I don't think it respects what's really the karma, what's really in your heart. And maybe that's because of this karmic emphasizing Buddhism. We're responsible for the ecology for the inner landscape for the, the, the momentum that's in our own hearts. And if we just go back to business as it was, because we've we've apologized and everything's cool again, then maybe we haven't been transformed, we haven't been changed for the better. So in all situations, how do we get transformed? rather than go back to the status quo? How do we get transformed for the better? And how do we take responsibility for that for ourselves, rather than waiting for someone else to do it for us? So those are my reflections on this topic of forgiving so I don't feel like I know this topic very well.

And I don't offer it to these top this these words I said I'm an expert on this topic at all. But kind of the intention and maybe as I said at the beginning, was rather ideally I stirred you up. So at least for a few days, you have something to think about. And now you will now think and reflect about forgiveness and, and what your relationship to is it how it works for you and how you disagree with me and, and how Of course you'll forgive me you know, and, and if you're not forgive me then I'm not going to forgive you but I'm not going to hold anything against you because of the note happy to see you again. So you know, different orientations, but it's good to think about it and reflect on it and whether it's through forgiveness or other means. Our connection to each other is a very sacred thing is a very important thing. And how to reconcile those relationships, how to develop them and how to be connected deeply and beautifully with others, I think is an important part of the spiritual life, probably in any religion. So, thank you