

Patience (4 of 6) Forgiveness

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

khanti, anger, resentment, hostility, goodwill, forgive, injury, prison, letting go, insult, meditation

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The guided meditation was meant to support what I'll talk about now – forgiveness, forgiveness of insult. Forgiveness is another aspect of patience (*khanti* in Pali). It's held up as a great ideal. It's a wonderful thing to be able to do. Of course, it's not easy. There can be protests of all kinds. There can even be ways of practicing forgiveness that are not so healthy or appropriate.

The Buddhist sense of forgiveness involves two primary things. The first involves letting go of resentment and anger that has hostility for others. The second involves opening up our goodwill, our heart, to others and becoming friendly or well-wishing towards others in a genuine way. We don't have to be loving. Maybe loving-kindness can seem too high of an ideal. It's hard to love everyone. But, it is possible to open our hearts and have goodwill – to wish people well, maybe from a distance. So forgiveness involves two movements: letting go of anger and then opening our hearts to include other people and have goodwill for them.

One of the reasons for letting go of anger is for your own sake so that you don't harm yourself. Resentment is a simmering suffering. It's a simmering injury that we do to ourselves. Anger directed towards someone for something they've done to us, long after the actual event, injures us.

There's a story that Jack Kornfield tells of two former prisoners. One of them says to the other, "Have you forgiven your captors?" And the second one says: "No, never! They did horrible things to me." Then the first one says, "Well, then they still have you in prison." To be trapped in anger and resentment is a kind of prison and it limits us.

I've known people who've had resentment for years until they realize that the person they're resenting had gone on with their life and maybe even forgotten who they were. The only one who was being harmed by the resentment was themselves. And they say: "Wait a minute, this doesn't make any sense to live this way. In some ways, I'm doing my enemy a favor by continuing to put salt in the wound."

We learn to let go of anger or at least put it aside. We learn to let go of being a victim. Or at least, we stop being the victim, inhabiting it, or making it our identity so that we aren't defined by the injury we have received.

Meditating is a way of reclaiming a fullness of being, reclaiming a largeness. We discover in meditation how much our thoughts, ideas, concepts, and judgments make us smaller and limit us. They keep us in check, bounded, caught, sometimes even in a kind of prison. So we learn to let go of thoughts, learn to see thoughts and let them move aside. We learn to become more embodied, more fully alive, inhabiting our life.

We might still have resentments and anger, but they get pushed a little to the side. They are like *appendages* to who we are, not who we are. They become like a jacket we wear. The jacket has a role. It's present. We can't deny it's there. But we are not the jacket. We are so much more.

We begin to shift our relationship to anger and resentment so that we're not caught by it. This, of course, is a slow process. It's not done automatically or quickly. But even the wish or dedication to no longer be caught by anger and resentment, and instead to work with it, finding a way through it, is the beginning of becoming larger. It's the beginning of becoming free. We can appreciate that there is some freedom. There is some taking agency. There is a stepping away from it and becoming more. So, this idea of our ability to let go of anger and resentment.

There might be all kinds of thoughts, these *othering* thoughts that keep us trapped in the anger. "I can't do the person who hurt me a favor. I can't condone them. I can't let them off the hook for what they've done." All those

might be true in some ways. But it doesn't mean that we have to close our heart to them. It doesn't mean we have to stay with our anger.

Our wisdom, understanding, and memory of what happened might lead us to behave a certain way around the person. For example, you might say, "Well, if you continue that kind of behavior, I can't be with you." Or, "I have to be cautious with you because I was hurt before." Who knows, all kinds of things have to happen in the world, but we don't have to be trapped in anger.

So forgiveness, in Buddhism, involves letting go of our resentment and anger. Forgiveness kind of implies we are giving something to someone else. That can complicate the social relationships and the nature of the injury or what happened. We might not be ready to give anything to people, but we can let go of the anger for our own sake.

The second step of forgiveness is loving-kindness and goodwill, because if we keep our hearts closed to other people, we're also in some ways limiting ourselves. We're injuring ourselves. And really appreciating that gives us a reason to have goodwill, which is not an argument that they deserve to have our goodwill or they don't. Independent of whether they deserve it or not (which may be a silly topic), *you* deserve to not be limited by your thoughts and contractions, so you can open up.

The heart works so much better when there's goodwill. It's freer. It breathes easier. It's not easy to do this. But this is a practice to find that: "Where can I have goodwill?" If these two things can be done – letting go of anger and having goodwill – in shorthand, we can call that forgiveness. Maybe then the forgiveness practice of Buddhism is more accessible.

Sometimes we forgive others for how they've harmed us. Some people will do that in meditation practice and even have words they say. Classically they would say something like, "For whatever harm others have done me, intentionally or unintentionally, I now forgive them." And now, when you hear the word "forgive," you understand that to be letting go of anger and opening your goodwill.

It can also be a beautiful thing to request forgiveness. We have to be large enough to let go of our conceit and negative pride to ask for forgiveness. It's a beautiful thing sometimes. "For whatever ways that I have harmed you intentionally or unintentionally, please forgive me." Maybe the person we're asking can understand that means: "Please don't hold your anger against me. It isn't that you have to approve of what I've done. Or somehow it gets me off the hook entirely for what I've done that might have hurt you. There might be consequences." But it's like asking, "Please, could you accept me again without your anger and offer some level of goodwill as we find our way forward with the challenges we have."

Then also towards oneself, "For whatever ways that I have harmed myself, knowingly and unknowingly, may I forgive myself." For some people, this is the most difficult one. But the eye that does the forgiving is the eye that is beginning to discover how not to be the victim, limited and small. It begins to breathe freely and openly and holds everything, making space for all of who we are. It's coming from a place of strength, largeness, and great capacity to be present for our experience without being caught in it.

So, as we practice mindfulness, we are slowly over time developing a greater capacity, greater strength, greater sense of unlimited quality and confidence. All the things that detract from that don't necessarily go away, but they become smaller. They become appendages. They become something we take into account that we're wise, caring, and compassionate about, but we're not defined by. To not be defined by the things that limit us is a fantastic thing.

Maybe it helps us to live a life where we're ready to forgive, let go, live without anger and resentment, and open to goodwill for the world. What a great thing to become someone who's safe for others. They don't have to be afraid of our resentment. They don't have to live with our resentment, but they live with our goodwill.

May we live in this world offering goodwill to all that we meet. Thank you.