The Introduction to Forgiveness Practice

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Bhante Bodhidhamma · 15:19

Namo tassa bhagavato arahato sammāsambuddhassa (three times)

Homage to the Buddha, the blessed, noble and fully self-awakened one.

Excuse me, I'm out of voice. I've not been talking for a while. It's all gone husky.

Tonight we're going to have a look at forgiveness. Most of you, I'm sure, have done exercises on this. So I'll just go through the basics and then we'll practice it.

I think there are two fundamental attitudes which really inform all our virtues. The first one is gratitude. Once we realize we cannot pay back what we've actually received—our life from our mother and father, and so on—then it moves you. You want to give something back. So it moves to all those qualities of love, compassion, generosity, and so forth.

And forgiveness is the other one. That's dealing with all the dark side, all the guilt, the shame, the unforgiveness, all that stuff. So with these two fundamental or basic attitudes, I think we can have a happy life.

The first thing to reckon, the first thing to remind ourselves is that all the emotions we suffer around forgiving—trying to forgive somebody, being forgiven, asking for forgiveness and forgiving ourselves—all the emotional stuff, remember, is all self-made. When somebody says something that is a bit nasty, our response is our response. They didn't cause that. So that's the first thing to remind ourselves. All the stuff we're going to work with has been made by me. And the idea is to undermine them and then they will transform naturally.

So that's the other thing we have to remember: all negative states will eventually transform themselves to the opposite. Nothing is lost. Where there's hatred, there'll be love, and so on.

And the final note on this is, it's for us. So forgiveness is for us, it's not for them. Which might sound a bit selfish, but they've also got the same problem with us. So whatever we're doing here now—asking for forgiveness, forgiving—they also have their own problems. And when they're doing forgiveness practice, they're doing it just for themselves.

So it's basically a practice for our own benefit. If the other person is affected by it, all well and good. For instance, if we apologize to somebody, and they feel moved to respond, that's good. We've been a catalyst for their movement, their heart movement. But they don't have to forgive. That's sometimes difficult to

accept.

The next thing is about attitudes. So these are *saṅkhāras*. Most of you know that word, saṅkhāra. It's normally translated as volitional conditions, which doesn't mean very much, but it's basically the choices we make, the habits we have, which are conditioned and conditioning. That's the important thing. So these are energetic conditionings.

The way I think of them is like they're balloons of particular types of reactivity. So, I might, for instance, be very annoyed when people are late. Every time somebody's late, I get irritated. And I don't look at it, I don't think about it. So this balloon of irritation around people being late grows and grows and grows. And then one day, somebody's too late. And it's like a pin touches this balloon and all this irritation and anger just burst out and that's where you get this rage, this road rage and all the stuff we hear about. So what we're doing is we're letting the steam, we're letting the bad air out of that balloon.

So there are three subjects, obviously. We have to make the ability to ask for forgiveness easy for ourselves. It's against our pride, but we have to make it easy. And then we have to ask for forgiveness. That's also something we don't like doing. And then finally, we've got to forgive ourselves, which is often the most difficult.

Now, the process is we remember something and we have an event, and that event carries with it all the loadings that we put on it—the hurt, the anger. So the event comes to mind. Now, we have to be really careful it doesn't shoot up into a fantasy. Once we're up there in the clouds fantasizing, whether we like it or not, we're making things worse. Whatever that emotion is, it's being exercised and made worse by storytelling. So as soon as we see that happening, we just come back. And we try to hold that frame fairly still.

While we're doing that, the attention is drawn to what's coming from the heart. So what might come up is hurt. Somebody said something, so hurt. And the next protocol is how we're relating to this hurt. Now, we don't like to accept that because it's against our pride. So we have to allow that aversion, that not wanting to disappear until we can allow the heart to express its hurt completely. That's the healing process.

So we're using this little image that we've got, this event to get in touch with the hurt. And that hurt is connected to all the hurts that we have, just like the anger in that balloon is connected to all the other angers. And as we let out one little bit of anger, everything else is affected. So it's systemic. Everything we do has a systemic effect on our own hearts and minds.

Now, when we're doing this, as you come to forgive somebody, you can't do it. Fine, you don't worry about that at all. You just keep working on the hurt and then eventually the heart softens and you can do it. And we always start with a bit of *mettā* just to warm the heart up a bit and then we ask for forgiveness. We forgive others and then we forgive ourselves.

When we're asking for forgiveness, the first thing that might come up is the reason why the person did it.

And so you've got to be aware of that relationship you have to the person. But basically, you're looking at the hurt. And when that passes, perhaps the desire for revenge, and you have to let that go too.

When it comes to forgiving, that's the next bit we're doing. Again, there's that hardness that's in the heart. It doesn't want to forgive. And there's a story here. When the Islamist blew himself up in London, this is going back a bit, there was an Anglican priest that left the order saying she couldn't carry out the ministry because she couldn't forgive the bomber who'd killed her daughter. But it's actually never a case of can't, it's a case of won't. And let's just hope that distraught mother has found a way eventually to open up her heart. And if we look around the world at this moment, there must be a lot of mothers who are utterly distraught at what's happened to their children, young and old.

But then you get a story like the mother who went to see her son's murderer and finally took him home when he was let out of prison and treated him like her son.

So we have to remember that to forgive somebody is not to try and forget something. That's suppressive. We're just trying to release the emotional charge. Sometimes when we do that, we feel we're condoning what they do. But that's not so. That's just wrong feeling. We're letting them off. But obviously where amends and compensation is needed, definitely we should ask for it. And especially where there's justice—where we need justice for grievous bodily harm, rape, all that dreadful stuff, which I hope none of you have suffered from. But then you have to seek justice, but not with that anger, not with that desire for vengeance. And sometimes you have to stay away from people who harmed us. You have to protect yourself. That's not a problem.

And then finally, forgiving ourselves. So forgiving ourselves. There are two contemplations that are really helpful.

First one is dependent origination. So remember, in dependent origination, we start off with *avijjā*, this ignorance, which produces a delusive idea about the world. And it's really based along the idea of a self. And we're trying to seek happiness in the world. And we do it in this way that creates suffering. And as we practice, we can see the cause, the psychological cause of that, which is the desire, the wrong desire. And the fact that we're holding on to things which are impermanent, it doesn't make sense. And eventually, to undermine that whole concept of a self we have—it's a feeling concept, it's not just a head concept. And what this does is takes us towards wisdom.

So one movement is from ignorance, delusion, and then the process of insight, which takes us to wisdom. From the heart's point of view, just as the delusion, we cannot be blamed for the delusion. The ignorance isn't culpable. So from the heart's point of view, we're never meant to do any harm. The heart has always been pure in its intentions. But because of this delusion, it leads itself to being acquisitive, to being aversive, to being fearful, and so on. So all these have produced unwholesome actions. And then there's the consequence of that, which we're dealing with now or forgiving.

And when all that's purified, we end up with the pure heart. So that's the process from a pure heart to all this negativity. We work with it and it's basically most—it's the sweat when it comes to the spiritual practice. The other bit's easy. The insight's not a problem. It's just all the gunk in the heart that we're trying to get rid of. And that leads us to purity, immaculacy, back to purity and immaculacy.

So the Buddha talked about it like dirt that gets on a cloth. And when you wash it, the cloth goes back to its original loveliness. So that's the projection that we're on. That's what we're doing.

And the other one is about *kamma*. So that's pretty—I mean, at its simplest equation, you do something which is harmful, some harm will come of it. You never know what. And remember that the harm, if it's outwardly to what we speak and what we do, you don't know what the effect will be. It goes into a matrix of relationships. And the same happens to us when we do something. Every time we say something or do anything, whether it's good or bad, it affects the whole—it's a systemic effect inside us. It affects the whole psychology in some way or other.

So now the bit that I found really relieving was that when we do something wrong, there is a karmic response to it, there'll be something comes back to it. And that's all we have to suffer. All the business about punishment and the way we talk to ourselves and the recrimination, the self-recrimination, the anguish and all that—all that's not necessary. All that's necessary is to receive the consequence of unwholesome action, just to receive it with patience and bear with it until it also will dry up, pass away. So that's an interesting reflection on *kamma*.

So don't feed the critic. That's the big thing.

So we'll do the practice. We'll do the practice together. And then I'm going to put what is actually a written piece here as a PDF on the website with this video so that if you want you can download it and use it.

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