Forgiveness Meditation

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 49:05

This evening, as part of our series on the Brahma Viharas and metta in particular, we're going to undertake a meditation on forgiveness.

It's important to announce this destination upfront because sometimes people don't want to go on this journey. You know how when you board a plane these days, they announce, "You've boarded a flight to San Francisco. If San Francisco is not your destination, this is the time to get off." So if you don't want to explore forgiveness, this is the time to step away.

This is not a formal Brahma Vihara as the Buddha taught it, although it's embedded within the Buddhist tradition. Within the monastic community, there are forgiveness ceremonies that happen at the end of periods of being together as a community. So while it's not foreign to Buddhism, this meditation is a modern adaptation. You won't find these exact instructions in the Pali Canon, but the spirit of it is there.

In tonight's meditation, we'll be bringing to mind or inviting recollection of three areas: ways that we may have hurt others, ways that others may have hurt us, and ways that we may have hurt ourselves. The meditation will take up each of these.

The purpose of undertaking a practice like this is for our own benefit. It's not about being good people in particular. It's really about removing a load on the heart that we may have been carrying for a long time. Life is a rough and tumble business. In the course of living, people—including ourselves—don't always follow the precepts closely, and we hurt one another. Generally, growing up without understanding how to deal with the effects of being hurt and hurting others, things tend to accumulate. Old hurts build up, old patterns of remorse build up.

This meditation particularly is designed to allow those things to come to the surface, and by being understood and looked upon with some acceptance and compassion, to be released. Really, the point of this meditation is to unburden the heart of old loads that it may have accumulated and been carrying.

I like the way Lily Tomlin put it: "Forgiveness means giving up all hope for a better past." If you thought by meditating you might make your past better, that's not going to happen. But we can change our relationship to it.

We bring this practice in at this point for two reasons. One is that in any long retreat, a lot of memories surface. In my first long retreat, I had so many thoughts that I had to make a list of the ten worst things I'd ever done and write them down just to get them out of my mind because I was really beset with memories. Partly, things come up in ways that we haven't been skillful. Memories may come up of ways

that others haven't been skillful toward us. We want to be able to work with these, and by bringing greater acceptance and understanding, they can be released to a really large extent.

The other reason to bring it in now is that a week or so ago, metta for friend was introduced in these evening meditations. As you do metta for friend, often you review that relationship. With friendships, there are some things that have gone well and some things that have been difficult. Often it's the meditation on friend that brings up some of these old memories, both of hurting and of being hurt. This meditation then becomes useful.

We're going to invite looking at ways that we may have hurt others. Remember that we talked about the difference between what I call guilt on the one hand and remorse on the other. Remorse is considered a wholesome quality in the Buddha's teachings. We recognize that we've done something that wasn't skillful and we feel regret, we feel badly about it. By acknowledging that, it's considered a positive development in the Buddha's teachings. "Oh, I did something that wasn't skillful, that wasn't correct. I acknowledge that." That's a positive. We will feel badly about it, and there's a wholesome quality in remorse.

But that can tip over into the quality that I call guilt, where we really judge ourselves harshly for having done that thing. We beat ourselves up, we give ourselves recrimination, and we think what bad people we are. In the Buddhist teachings, that extra level of self-judgment isn't necessary and it isn't helpful. It's just coming out of aversion. It creates pain and it's not useful. We want to see the difference between feeling remorse, which is natural and wholesome, but try not to layer on top of it a lot of this quality of guilt and self-judgment.

One of the ways that we can work with these memories that bring remorse is to reflect on how we came to act in those ways. When you think about it, when you were younger, you probably didn't have the same understanding that you have now about how actions impact others.

And you probably didn't have the same mindfulness around emotions and the precepts. So I look back on the actions early in my life, especially in my late teens and early twenties, before I'd heard the precepts, when a lot of emotional turmoil was going on for me. And I reflect—I was really a different person then.

By reflecting in that way, you see you're not the same person now as you were when you committed these earlier kinds of actions. And so you can think, if you like, "Oh, that was a different person. So why should I feel guilty?" Of course, that's not quite true, because the karma continues to influence us. So it's not quite true, but it was a very different version of you.

When I look back on my actions, I see that at those times, leading up to those acts, there was fear, or there was confusion, or there was unhappiness. And looking in that way, I can see the causes and conditions that led me to act that way. When I understand that, I can feel a lot of compassion for that younger person. So that can be a helpful reflection—not quite the same person as now.

Now, in looking at ways that we've been hurt, as these come to mind and the mind is inclining toward

forgiveness, you may find there's a big resistance and you think, "I don't want to forgive that hurt. It hurt too much. It went too deep. It was too big a deal. The magnitude of the act was too great, and I'm not ready to forgive."

That is totally fine. If you come upon memories, people, or situations where forgiveness is really not feeling appropriate, you don't have to go there. We'll be repeating a phrase, something like, "If anyone has hurt or harmed me, I offer forgiveness." But if a particular memory comes up, you don't have to say it about that person. You can switch to metta for yourself. You can bring somebody else to mind. If the feelings of hurt are really strong, you could move to vipassana and just hold them. Or if you like, you could acknowledge, "I'm really not ready to forgive this person, but someday I'd like to be able to." So you might say, "I know that it's my intention someday to forgive." That would be fine. That would still be significant.

When we come upon ways that we've been hurt, especially, know that it doesn't get resolved quickly. It can take some time, really, of living with these memories and touching them little by little. I think Jill talked about how to touch a difficult emotion and then back away to something neutral or positive. We can do that with these old memories. We don't have to be with it on and on and on at one time. Touch it a little bit, go away, feel safe, touch it again, go away, and so forth. So this is a process that takes some time. You don't need to rush it.

But until we start to relate to some of these old memories, we're tied to the past to a certain degree. Some of our physical and mental and heart energy has been held captive by past memories, and we're not able really to come fully and freely into the present moment. So again, a lot of this is about how can we release those burdens so that we can come freshly into the present moment with a state of some innocence—just like we were a child, that kind of fresh openness that children have.

Forgiveness extended to someone else who has hurt you also doesn't mean that we excuse their behavior or we condone their behavior. We don't say, "Oh, that was all okay that you did that to me," because it may have been really wrong and really inappropriate. So we don't surrender our discernment about whether that was an appropriate action or not. We might see really clearly that was really an awful thing that someone did. But what we give up is the tie to it as something from the past. And we can release that. So if that becomes able to be released, that's helpful. That feels good.

But it also doesn't mean that when you release some degree of that hurt, it doesn't mean that you have to like the person, or want to be in relationship with the person, or have them be a friend again. Sometimes going through these really difficult situations with other people, you realize, "That person's not safe for me. That person is really not trustworthy."

They broke the trust in our relationship. And so then you can say, "Okay, I want to release this old hurt, but I don't really want to be back in a close relationship with you." And that's perfectly fine. If it gets healed to the point that you can wish them well, that you can have metta for them, that's as far as you

need to go. That's actually wonderful. That could represent a profound shift.

I think someone has mentioned this line from the Dhammapada. When we may have been hurt and may have held resentment, the value of letting go becomes clear. As the Dhammapada says, "Hatred never ceases through hatred. Hatred only ceases through love. This is an ancient and eternal law." In a way, what we're doing is letting go of old grudges. And as the Dalai Lama said, "I do get angry, but in my heart I can't hold a grudge." That's what we want to be able to find—a heart that's so open and wide that anger doesn't really stick in it. If we can find that, then much opportunity opens for peace and deepening.

Now we can move into the meditation. We're going to do it in three parts. The first is asking for forgiveness from anyone we may have hurt or harmed. The phrase will be: "If I have hurt or harmed anyone, knowingly or unknowingly, I ask for your forgiveness."

This "knowingly or unknowingly" part—you don't have to say it out loud, but you sort of realize that it's part of the deal. You may have hurt someone and not known it. So whichever way it worked, you recognize that's part of it.

In distinction to the metta phrases which we send to specific people, in the forgiveness practice we just leave it open. "If I've hurt or harmed anyone"—we're not directing it to specific individuals. We're saying the phrase, dropping it into a centered place, and just seeing what comes. Memories may arise, they may not. It's okay. You just continue to say the phrase and hold an open space to see if anyone is going to visit, to see if any memories or incidents come up. If they do come up, then you can let them be there for a while. And then you might want to direct it to the individual who's come. But it's up to you. You don't have to.

The second part of the meditation will be extending our forgiveness to others who've hurt us. And this is where you can just see how it feels. The phrase is going to be something like: "If anyone has hurt or harmed me, knowingly or unknowingly, I forgive you."

You can just try saying the phrase not directed to anyone. If memories, images come up, you can see if that phrase fits that person. And there may be people you say, "I'm not ready to offer that phrase." So you can try: "Know that my intention is someday to forgive you." And if that doesn't fit, you can just let that person go. Continue to say the phrase. See if someone else comes. If strong feelings come up, you can move to metta for yourself or vipassana as a way to hold that.

The third part is to forgive ourselves for the ways that we've hurt or harmed others. So the phrase is something like: "For the ways that I have hurt or harmed myself or others, I forgive myself."

This third part can help the self-blame and self-judgment be eased. We can extend the forgiveness to ourselves too. We can let go of the blame, the guilt, the self-judgment around ways that we've acted because we can bring a heart of compassion to that younger person who didn't understand quite what they were doing.

I think that's enough foundation. We can move into the meditation. So please begin by sitting comfortably.

Yes, the question is: Is it okay to extend forgiveness or allow into forgiveness people who have passed on? Yes, that's absolutely fine.

In this phase, anyone who comes to mind with whom you've had a connection is welcome to enter your practice.

Now please sit comfortably. Let your mind settle, allowing your attention to rest into the body and feel yourself in sitting. Bring your attention into the heart center, the area of the center of the chest—this place where emotions are typically felt. As you connect with the heart center, let this be your avenue to connecting with yourself.

Begin with a sense of your own being, your character, and your good qualities. Simply think of your good qualities in this retreat: your dedication, your skillful effort, your returning again and again with mindfulness and metta. Grounded with an appreciation of your own goodness, you can begin to say the first phrase in the forgiveness practice:

"If I have hurt or harmed anyone, knowingly or unknowingly, I ask for your forgiveness."

Continue to repeat this phrase. Sit with attention in the body, perhaps centered in the heart center or the belly. Simply stay open to whatever appears in terms of memories, images, reflections. Not forcing anything—just saying the phrase and seeing what comes.

If specific memories come of unskillful actions on your part, you can stay with that person for a while. Make the phrase personal to them if you'd like. Also reflect on your state of mind and heart at that time. What were you feeling that led you to act like that? Bring in compassion for that younger person.

Now let go of the reflection on asking for forgiveness and move into the second phase of the meditation. This will be extending forgiveness. In this section, the phrase is something like: "For ways that others have hurt or harmed me, I offer my forgiveness," or "If anyone has harmed me knowingly or unknowingly, I forgive you."

Begin to repeat the phrase, not necessarily directing it to anyone, and see what comes. If a memory comes and it just doesn't feel right to extend forgiveness, see if it might feel right to say, "Know that it's my intention someday to forgive you." If even that intention doesn't feel right, that's fine. No pressure at all on this. Let them move out and let someone else come into your mind, into your images, or you can return to metta for yourself for a bit.

From time to time, come back into the body. Feel the heart center, the belly. Feel whatever emotions may be present. Just allow any feelings—hurt or fear or resentment—to be there, to be felt, and continue to repeat the forgiveness phrase.

If strong emotions feel like they really block the intention of forgiveness, you could open to the emotions with vipassana, just feeling them, acknowledging. You could turn to metta for yourself, or a benefactor or friend, or self-compassion. Bring the mind back into balance using other skillful means.

Now let go of that reflection, letting go of any images or memories that have come with it. Just reconnect again with yourself as you're sitting, connecting through your heart center, your sense of yourself, your good qualities, your commitment and effort.

With that sense of your own goodness, start on the third phase of the forgiveness meditation, the phrase something like: "For the ways I have hurt or harmed others or myself, I forgive myself." Say this phrase of self-forgiveness and see what memories come, see if any images come.

If memories like this arise, just look for a moment: What was going on for me when I did that? How was I feeling? What did those acts come out of? Remember that our younger self may not have understood so well, or even more recently, we may have fallen into some kind of confusion, obscuration.

Now let go of that reflection on self-forgiveness. Just come back into the present moment and feel yourself in sitting, feeling the body, connecting with the heart center. Allow whatever emotions are present to be there, to be filled with acceptance.

Conclude with a little bit of loving-kindness for yourself, connecting with your good qualities.

With all you've put forth on this retreat—all the work you've invested in developing mindfulness, understanding, love, and compassion—these beautiful qualities that are so needed in the world. Reflect on what you've given to bring them about. So with deep appreciation for yourself and your dedication to this process, to this practice—because happiness follows goodness in some mysterious way—directing these loving phrases to yourself:

May I be safe and protected from harm.
May I be happy.
May I be healthy.
May I live with ease.

Now thinking of all of us in this meditation hall, all of us drawn together by this same interest, this same deep wish for welfare and happiness, send the good wishes of loving-kindness to everyone here:

May we all be safe and protected from harm.
May we all be happy.
May we be healthy.
May we live with ease.

And recognizing that this wish extends to all beings everywhere, send your metta outward in an unlimited way:

May all beings everywhere be safe from harm.
May they be happy.
May they be healthy.
May all beings live with ease.

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