Guided Meditation - The Practice of Forgiveness

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2012) · 45:42

So this evening in the guided meditation, we're going to focus on a subject that we do as a complement to the loving-kindness practice. It's not going to be straight metta tonight. We're going to talk about and practice the quality of forgiveness. If anyone knows that you absolutely do not want to forgive anyone for anything, this would be the time to exit. But if you're willing to try, this is the theme that we're going to explore tonight.

Sally made this nice comment in one of her talks that forgiveness means giving up all hope for a better past. Makes sense, right? I was curious about this quote. I've read it in Jack Kornfield's book, but I looked it up on the internet, so this must be true—it was attributed first to Lily Tomlin. Kind of interesting. Quite wise.

Forgiveness comes in at this point in the retreat really for two reasons. There are two separate dynamics going on that make forgiveness appropriate right now.

One is that we've just done metta for a friend. When you do metta for your friend—a friend is usually somebody you've gotten quite close to—you might remember things in your relationship that were easy and some things that were difficult. So often the friend in loving-kindness particularly leads into a bit of a relationship review, where some wonderful feelings come through but also some difficulty. You may remember times when you were hurt by your friend, and you may remember times when you hurt your friend. So we often like to teach forgiveness right after doing loving-kindness for a friend because some old emotions may have gotten stirred up.

The second thing that's happening, on a parallel track, is that when we sit a long retreat, for various reasons different memories from the past come into our minds. Again, we may remember ways we've been hurt, and we may also remember ways that we've hurt others. It could be human beings, it could be creatures.

When I sat my first long retreat, all these memories started coming of things that I'd done wrong, because I was really exploring sīla and the precepts as we are by taking the precepts every week. I was remembering all these times when I hadn't followed the precepts carefully—I didn't even know them. So all these transgressions came to my mind, and I felt a tremendous amount of guilt and remorse over them.

We often say, using the words of twelve-step programs, that long retreats lead one into a kind of life review. Spontaneously, we're not trying to do it, but unbidden these memories come and we review our past actions in the light of our Dharma understanding. We're getting a new view on the mind—greed,

aversion, delusion, and how fear and confusion affect us—and we see how that's manifested in our outer life. From this perspective, it feels not so right at times.

So the forgiveness practice is useful for working with ways others have hurt us, and also with ways that we've hurt others. I hope both of these will be helpful.

Now, to say a little more about our being hurt, because this is where often the forgiveness is the hardest: we may look over our life and see things that people have done to us that we're not ready to forgive them for. The pain was too great, the magnitude of the action was too wrong, and we just instinctively feel, "I'm not ready to forgive. I don't want to forgive that person. It doesn't feel right."

If that's the gut feeling, it's really important to respect that. So in the meditation, you're not going to be asked to forgive anybody that you're not ready to forgive. Sometimes the heart just isn't there yet. But we will encourage you to think about: maybe someday I could try. I'll plant the intention that someday I'd like to be able to forgive them. That will be one formulation we'll work with.

When we think about forgiving somebody, we also want to be clear that in this meditation, we're not doing it for them. It's not so that they can go about their lives with a clean conscience and forget about what they've done to us or other people. We're doing this meditation for ourselves.

The reason is that if we are carrying some old resentment, part of our whole makeup—our physical and emotional makeup—is tied to the past. And we can't come completely free as a human being in the present moment while we're still carrying that old baggage of being tied to the past. So in the total journey to freedom, we need eventually to let go of all these old holdings that we've got.

Sometimes we find them in the body. We come to sit and there's old tension. There are emotions going back to childhood perhaps, if there's been trauma or abuse. It's very common that they come out in a long retreat through the body. We have memories that are stored in the mind and emotions about those incidents. So eventually, for our own liberation, we want to be able to let the mind be clear of those old holdings.

We will not be completely free as long as there's that attachment to the past. But we can't do that all at once. Often we've had many, many disappointments and hurts and betrayals in our relationships, and it takes time to open to them, for the body to open up and reveal them, for the memories to come. Sometimes they're long buried. So we have to be really patient with this process—it can't be forced.

But forgiveness is one key element of letting go of all that old stuff, to the extent we're able today. I'm not asking you to let it all go tonight, but I want to offer these tools so that if these things are coming for you—old memories of resentment, hurt, or where you've hurt others—you'll have something to work with. And over time, by applying them, the mind can release and let go of these memories. Then we have the potential to really come into the present moment, clear and free and open, the heart unburdened.

The reason we would forgive is not to excuse somebody else. It's certainly not to condone their activities. One can see really clearly: "That was a very unskillful thing for them to have done. It hurt me deeply. It maybe hurt somebody else deeply. I don't approve of what they did, and I'm not letting them off the hook. But I don't want to carry around this burden of hatred for the rest of my life because it's a heavy weight in my own heart, and I want to be clear."

There's a lovely quotation from the Dhammapada, very near the front, that says: "Hatred never ceases through hatred. Hatred only ceases through love. This is an ancient and eternal law." So at some point, if we want to remove the hatred from our heart, we have to let go of those old grudges.

Forgiveness also doesn't mean we forgive and forget—as if by forgiving somebody, I'm wiping it off the books, erasing that person's karmic debt. No, we don't need to forget. And we may know that person isn't trustworthy for me, not safe for me to be around, and I don't want to spend time with them. All of those things are fine, and forgiveness can still take place.

I appreciate what the Dalai Lama has said in this area, because he could have a lot of old grudges, you know? Watching what's been done to Tibet, knowing what's happening to nuns and monks who are in prison now, who are being tortured, talking to them when they come out of the country and knowing how they've been treated—he could have a lot of grounds for resentment. But he says, "I do get angry, but in my heart I can't hold a grudge."

That's the kind of heart we're looking for. That's what we're looking to develop with all the brahmaviharas—a heart that is so spacious and loving that anger can't get fixed within it. Not anger against people who hurt us, not anger and hatred against ourselves for things we've done. This meditation on forgiveness can really be a helpful piece of unsticking those old resentments against others and also against ourselves.

We'll formulate the meditation in three pieces to deal with others, ourselves, and the relation between them. And one more thing I want to say about self: when we see things that we weren't happy with in our own conduct, it helps to learn to make a distinction between feeling guilty and feeling remorse.

Remorse is considered in the Buddhist tradition a wholesome emotion—to look at ways we've acted that weren't skillful, to take responsibility and say, "I really regret that," and to feel the weight of that. The impact of our unwholesome actions is a burden on our heart, and it's healthy to feel some remorse or regret about it.

But guilt isn't necessary. Guilt is where we impose self-judgment on top of regret. We keep saying, "Oh, I'm really a bad person. I'm very low in my morals. I'm ashamed of myself." We become very critical of ourselves, hating ourselves. That's not necessary. Remorse can be held without the overload of judgment. That's the quality we want to bring in.

My experience is that when we hold mindfulness, loving-kindness, and forgiveness up against these

memories of hurts we've done to others—which can be very, very painful when we first meet them—slowly, slowly, slowly the charge goes off that self-judgment. And then we can see: I did it, it wasn't a good thing, but I don't have to beat myself up about it. I've come to some degree of acceptance of it.

One thing that helps in that self-acceptance, a key part in forgiveness, is recognizing that you're not the same person today that you were when you did those things. This is part of the truth of anattā. We're constantly changing. The body is changing, the mind is changing, the understanding is changing, the emotions are changing. Where you are today, you probably wouldn't have done those things. So in a way, somebody else did them. That's not quite true, because the karma continues—the karma lands here. But it was a different you who did those things.

And so you can understand that in your present understanding, you wouldn't have done them. And maybe it's true for the other person too. Maybe the other person has changed. Or maybe they haven't. You may not know. But for you, you may see clearly that it was a younger person who had a lot of fear and confusion and acted unskillfully, not knowing. So we try to bring compassion to that. If we can see that in the other person who hurt us, that's really helpful too. Sylvia Boorstein has this nice expression: someone who causes great pain is themselves in great pain. We can maybe remember that and help us understand a little bit that these actions that are very hurtful always come out of some kind of fear or confusion.

So we're going to break the meditation down into three parts. In the first part, we're going to ask for forgiveness from anyone that we've harmed. Unlike metta, we're not going to bring specific individuals in. We're not going to bring in a benefactor, friend, neutral person, and so forth. We're going to offer it generally, with nobody particular in mind. We're going to say the forgiveness phrase, and then we're going to see who comes, if anybody. May not be anybody. Maybe somebody, maybe some actions will come to mind. We're just inviting the reflection. In a way, these phrases are just a reflection.

Then we're going to look at a meditation on offering to forgive others. For those who have hurt us, we can offer forgiveness if we're ready. But you don't have to be ready. And so if you don't feel ready, you can say something like, "Know that my intention is someday to forgive you," if you can feel that. So one or the other. Again, we don't think of specific people, but we let the phrase settle in us, and we see if anybody or any actions or any memories come to mind. You don't have to go looking for them. You can just say the phrase and see what comes.

And the third part is that we forgive ourselves for any ways we've hurt others. And in hurting others and in many other ways in our life, we've also hurt ourselves. So it's important that we bring that forgiveness in to self, that we self-forgive during this meditation.

So these are the three parts. We'll do each one for about ten minutes. And I'll suggest a phrase and give detailed instructions as we go.

Please sit comfortably. As you sit, connect with your body sitting, the sense of being at ease and relaxed.

Let yourself come into the heart center, this area in the center of the chest, a place often where we feel loving-kindness, where we feel many emotions. We'll just rest the attention there in a very open way.

And we'll start to reflect, to recite the first phrase for forgiveness, which will sound something like this: If I have hurt or harmed anyone, knowingly or unknowingly, I ask for your forgiveness. You don't always have to say the "knowingly or unknowingly" piece, but you can think it. If you think it a few times, it will find its way in there. If I have hurt or harmed anyone, knowingly or unknowingly, I ask for your forgiveness.

We also remember as we're saying this that our actions at that time came out of some degree of confusion, of not understanding, of unhappiness or fear. So simply repeat the phrase of forgiveness as you have repeated metta phrases, and just see if anything comes. If any memories come, if any people come, if any images of yourself come. If a memory comes that feels really appropriate to the phrase, you can let the person in that memory receive your phrase, so that then you might want to extend this asking for forgiveness to that particular person during the meditation. But you don't have to fixate on them. If they stay for a while, that's great. If they're light, they come in, go out, you can open it up again and see if anyone else is waiting to come in.

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

As you repeat the phrase, you may come back into the heart center from time to time, just to keep the forgiveness grounded in the present, connected with the body.

The second part of the meditation will be to extend forgiveness, if that feels right for you. And the phrase we can use, very similar, something like: If anyone has hurt or harmed me, knowingly or unknowingly, I forgive you.

And even though we don't say it, we may sometimes reflect that their actions came from their own fear and confusion. If anyone has hurt or harmed me, I forgive you.

As you say the phrase, if people come to mind where you know you're not ready to forgive, you don't want to forgive, that's fine. You can't rush this. If you feel like it, you could say, "Know that it's my intention someday to forgive you." If anyone has hurt or harmed me, know that it's my intention someday to forgive you. But if you don't even feel that, that's okay too. You could bring someone else to mind where forgiveness seems doable. You could go back to asking for forgiveness. You could go into loving-kindness for yourself. Don't push on this if it doesn't feel appropriate.

But if you like, try saying the phrase: if anyone has hurt or harmed me, I forgive you. Then just see if any memories or people come to mind. Again, you might start from the heart center, come back and touch it from time to time.

As you're doing this meditation, if someone comes to mind and you feel a lot of resentment and the

intention to forgive isn't really there, if the resentment is strong, you might just switch to Vipassana. Drop forgiveness or Brahmavihara. Just open and feel the hindrance. Let yourself feel it in the body, feel it in the mind. Allow it, and that can sometimes let it wash through. Don't keep focusing on that person. You could stay in Vipassana for a few minutes, then go to loving-kindness for yourself, or forgiveness for someone else.

The third meditation with forgiveness will be for ourselves. The phrase is something like: for the ways that I have hurt or harmed myself or others, I forgive myself. Of course you can add "knowingly or unknowingly," acknowledging it came from my own pain and confusion—those are implied. A simple phrase: for the ways I have hurt or harmed myself or others, I forgive myself.

Connecting with the heart center, repeating the phrase, just allowing any memory or individuals to come. Allowing your own image to be present—yourself at an earlier age or yourself today. There's a real sense of compassion and caring and understanding for how those things came to happen and how you're a different person today. You hold it differently. You see it differently. You understand it differently. This new understanding transforms the old memory. For the ways I have hurt or harmed others or myself, I forgive myself.

"I forgive myself" means I don't have to be perfect. I can make mistakes. I will make mistakes. All of us will make mistakes. And we can still love ourselves and feel good about ourselves. We don't have to be perfect.

We can close the meditation with just a minute or two of loving-kindness reflection. The Buddha said that it's possible to free the heart. If it was not possible, I wouldn't ask you to do it. But because it is possible, I ask you to free the heart.

Recognizing we're all embarked on this great undertaking, just appreciating yourself for your sincerity, your effort, your courage, your determination. May all the fruits of these beautiful qualities lead to your happiness and welfare and freedom. Sending yourself the wishes of loving-kindness: May I be safe and protected from harm. May I be happy. May I be healthy. May I live with ease.

And for all of us here embarked on this project, this great work: May we all be safe and protected from harm. May we all be happy. May we be healthy. May we live with ease.

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