The Art and Heart of Forgiveness

Jack Kornfield · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Jack Kornfield · 1:16:29

So please let yourself be settled. Find a way to sit and listen.

And if one were to ask, after the meditation that we just did, how do we live with loving awareness? The theme for this evening that Trudy and I want to talk about is forgiveness, which is one of the dimensions of the awakened heart, along with compassion and loving kindness and shared joy. It's really an expression of what it means to live with loving awareness.

So as you sit and listen, let it be a little bit of a meditation. That is to say, it can be a reflection or a contemplation in yourself of what seems helpful or true or useful to you, or a reminder of something you already know. And if it doesn't seem right, forget it. You're the one that has to live this, and nobody else has lived quite as weird a life as you have. So you might as well get used to it.

A question as we begin: How many of you have things that you would like to forgive yourself for? Notice almost every hand went up, except that one person who's fibbing—and they'll have to forgive themselves later. How many of you have things where it's like, okay, I probably should forgive somebody else? So now we're in it together. Here we are, human beings. This is part of being human.

We have all been betrayed. I won't ask you to raise your hands on that one. We've all been hurt. We've all been abandoned—sometimes individually and sometimes collectively, sometimes in small ways, but it still stings or hurts. And sometimes in this world, in really terrible ways, with lots of pain for us. Sometimes it's individual, and sometimes it's part of the collective pain that we suffer or undergo.

I was invited to give an address at the graduation of the GRIP program at San Quentin a few years ago—Guiding Rage into Power. It's run by my dear friend Jacques Verduin, who runs Insight Out there, and I'd been chair of that board at one point. There were one hundred plus men dressed in mortarboards and graduation gowns, and about three hundred guests—politicians, people from the state corrections department, mayors, and so forth—all there. The men stood up. It was so moving. They had a valedictorian who spoke on behalf of them all, about how they'd all been violent men and now took a pledge to never solve a difficulty or conflict with violence again, that they'd learned all these things from their anger management and mindfulness and yoga. They spoke in really eloquent ways.

I gave a little talk on the dignity of each person and the possibility of change and renewal. And then my good friend Luis Rodriguez, who was the poet laureate of Los Angeles, and who also ran for governor rather unsuccessfully—but anyway, he's a great poet whose book *La Vida Loca: My Gang Days in L.A.* he says proudly is the most stolen book in high school libraries across the country.

Luis was going to read a poem, and his poems are like bloodletting Mayan sacrifice—they're extraordinary. But he said, "I can't read my poem." Because these men had stood up and forsworn violence, and then the whole group had apologized, saying, "We have been violent men and we now want to apologize to you for all the suffering that we've caused to so many of you and your families."

He said, "I can't accept your apology without making one of my own." And then he paused and said, "Because most of you grew up in circumstances of poverty, of racism, of drugs, where you weren't protected, where you were hurt in so many ways, and we didn't take care of you. And so we here owe you a deep apology, as you have offered to us."

It was a really powerful moment. What is forgiveness, in small ways and in big ways? We need it because we're related to each other, like it or not.

There's a book by a Zen teacher, Koshin Paley Ellison. He writes: "At eighteen, I was on a bus in Colorado. I'd been studying Zen, and a warm-faced woman struck up a conversation with me. I started to talk about Buddhism and she was interested. She asked me which community I was affiliated with, and I said, 'I have a lot of teachers that I read, but I don't practice with any one community in particular.' 'Oh,' she said, 'you're a lone wolf.' 'Yes,' I nodded and smiled. She went on, 'You know what's interesting about lone wolves? They're sick. Wolves are pack animals and they often mate for life. So if you see a wolf by itself, there's actually something wrong with it.' I will always remember that conversation on the bus."

You understand what happened to him, what she's saying. This is the deal: we are related to one another, for better and for worse.

of the family members of people who'd been in the jungle for ten or twenty years. Here's your old mother, here's your cousin, your sister, your brother. Remember, you're still part of another big family. And it helped to lead to the peace process.

So, forgiveness. These are the words from the Dhammapada, from the Buddhist teaching:

Look how he abused me and beat me. Look how he threw me down and robbed me. Continue to live with such thoughts and you live in hate. Look how he abused me and beat me. Look how he threw me down and robbed me. Abandon such thoughts and live in love. In this world, hatred never ends with hatred. But by love alone is healed. This is the ancient and eternal law.

This isn't some petty thing that somebody did. He beat me, threw me down, robbed me. And yet it becomes critical for us as human beings. Without it, you have the Northern Irish Protestants and Catholics saying, "Your people marched through our neighborhood three hundred years ago and I'm never going to forget it." Or the Hutus and the Tutsis, or the Palestinians and the Israelis, or the Serbs and the Croats and the Bosnians. Somebody has to say, "It stops with me." Yes, this has happened. But instead of carrying the story, to actually realize that we have the capacity, the magnanimity of heart, to say yes, we can live with forgiveness. Like my teacher from Cambodia whose family was killed in the genocide, who became

famous for walking the countryside, chanting loving-kindness and forgiveness for everyone that he met.

A woman I worked with was in the middle of a terrible divorce. We worked with the grief and the loss and the anger and all those things. The man she'd married, the one she was getting divorced from—it was one of those bad divorces. He'd hired a really aggressive lawyer and he was trying to keep all the money and keep all the kids, even though he was the one who had the affairs. It was tough. So of course I recommended that she get a kick-ass lawyer, which she did, thank you. But then one day, after we worked with the grief, she came in and said, "You know, I realized something. My husband is trying to turn the children against me. All these terrible things are happening. And I realized that I will not bequeath a legacy of bitterness to my children. I will not say a single thing that's bad about their father. I will just be silent about it. It will stop with me." You can feel the courage of this.

Now, the holidays are coming up. Ram Dass says, "If you think you're enlightened, go spend a week with your family." Kind of straightens you out very quickly. But it's one of the places where we might have some difficulty. It's a good place to work on forgiveness—another reason to be talking about it at this point.

It says in the Bhagavad Gita, "If you want to see the brave, look to those who can forgive. If you want to see the heroic, look to those who can return love for hatred."

So what is forgiveness? How do we understand it? There are things we need to know in order to practice it wisely.

The first is that forgiveness does not condone what happened. It doesn't justify it in some way. In fact, the first thing you can do is say, "I will do everything I can to prevent this suffering from continuing—continuing to hurt me or someone else, to prevent this harm." So it's not like rolling over or saying it was okay. It was not okay. And you stand up for what really matters. And it doesn't mean you have to talk to somebody. You may or may not end up talking to them. Forgiveness is reclaiming your own heart.

I remember a person I worked with named Alvaro. When his father died, it was a big construction company that the family owned, and his brothers tried to get his share of the company. You know how it happens when somebody dies in families.

And it was nasty and it was really painful because they'd also been a close family. And finally he came in one day and he said, "I will stand up for myself. I will do what's needed to protect myself." And he did. He got a really good business partner who helped him do that. He said, "And I've learned that I can trust—and I can trust my brothers to be themselves. I now know who they are, but they're my family and I love them anyway."

And it was that difficulty that we have of holding the pain of something, but also recognizing often that we still love that person. Not that easy, but welcome to the human realm.

So the first thing about forgiveness is it doesn't condone. It says, in fact, that's wrong. I will do what I can to prevent the harm from continuing.

The second—and also noticing this—the second is *who* forgiveness is for. Guess who? As Miss Piggy would say, "*Moi*."

You may have noticed that when you sit in meditation, it's a little hard to control your own thoughts and mind. Have you noticed that? How about controlling others? How's that going for you?

So who forgiveness is for primarily is for oneself. The release of the burden. Not to be a hostage to the past, to what's happened. Not to be the victim of it. "Oh, he did this, she did that"—just what the Buddha was writing about. And then you live in that story as if that story were true. And the thing about the stories that we make up and then live in is they're kind of true. You know what I'm saying? And they're kind of not true. There are other sides to it.

It's like the two ex-prisoners of war who met years afterward, and one says, "Have you forgiven your captors?" And the other says, "No, never. They tortured us. All that happened." And the first one said, "Well, then they still have you in prison, don't they?"

Who is it for? It's for yourself.

And truthfully, the story that you have—if you were to let it go, who would you be without "they did me wrong"? It's not so much that we're afraid of change or so in love with the old ways, but it's the place in between where we let go that we fear. It's like being between trapezes. It's Linus when his blanket is in the dryer. There's nothing to hold on to.

So here's a poem about story. It's just such a good poem. I needed to read it tonight. It's called "Little Movies," from my favorite poetry journal, which is called *Rattle*.

I'm telling my friend Charlotte that Barbara and I are going to go to New York, where I hope to not spend a whole lot of money in fancy restaurants. And Charlotte tells me she was just in New York herself but didn't spend much money on food because she was with a group of pregnant women. I can see them now as they decide between goat cheese salad and the hummus, the hearts of palm and the orange glazed shrimp with spicy walnut crumble, as the waiter says, "Can I interest you ladies in a mimosa, a glass of Prosecco?" And they say, "No, not this time, maybe in a few months."

Barbara asked her hairdresser if she plans to have children. And the hairdresser says she's leaning the other way because she works on a lot of young mommies, and they're just not selling it. Then again, parenthood isn't about joy. Studies show that parents report significantly lower levels of happiness, life satisfaction, marital satisfaction, and mental well-being compared with non-parents.

Why do it then? Why have children at all? Probably because children add narrative to a life that doesn't have one, or add more narrative to a life that's actually pretty rich in narrative already, or seems as though it may

never have a narrative at all.

Do you know that even aliens love stories?

The woman who claims to have interviewed the alien whose ship crashed in Roswell, New Mexico in 1947 said the creature's favorite books were *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, *Don Quixote*, and *A Thousand and One Nights*—all stories of great spirit and great power. Great images.

Tom Petty says a good song should give you a lot of images. You should be able to make up your own little movie in your head for a good song. And the same is true of stories.

A man had a peacock, says playwright Tom Stoppard, and the man was shaving one morning. In the mirror, he sees the peacock atop the garden wall, about to jump to the other side. So the man drops his razor and races out just as the bird reaches the motorway and starts to leg it to God knows where. He catches it after a hundred yards or so, puts the peacock under his arm, and starts home. So the story ends happily.

But in the meantime, a good half dozen cars have sped by, and their occupants have seen a man clad only in pajama pants, his face covered by shaving foam, carrying a peacock. What did they think? That the man had lost a bet on a rugby match, perhaps, and now has to walk from Whitby to Berwick-on-Tweed with the foam on his face and the bird under his arm? Or that he belongs to a cult religion that worships shaving, partial nudity, and peacocks, and he's on his annual pilgrimage? Or that he's been slipped a powerful drug by his wife's lover, who is sending the man out into the world this way so that he will appear deranged and spend the rest of his days in a care home while the two lovers squander the man's considerable fortune?

All lives end the same way. Between the start and the finish, it's the stories that count. We can be grateful for all these stories.

Charlotte laughs as she tells me about her pregnant friends, and I love thinking about all that life around the table. And then I ask Charlotte if she plans to have children, and she wags her finger at me as if to say, "Wouldn't you like to know?"

I read this partly for the pleasure of it, because it's a good poem, but also to remind us that we make up so many stories about this world. My friend Roger Walsh—MD, PhD, on the faculty at Stanford Medical School—read the Encyclopedia of World Religions from Ahura Mazda all the way to Zoroaster. I said, "So what did you learn from this, Roger?" And he said, "All these religions have stories that they place upon the mystery." Birth stories, beginning stories, ending stories. Stories placed upon the mystery.

So when we forgive, we actually become more vulnerable in a way. Like Linus with the blanket in the dryer. We let ourselves open to something new that's not the old way, not the old holding on and the old belief of how it was, but open to another possibility.

Also, forgiveness can't be papered over. It's a process, often slow, with grief and rage and fear and blame and tears. The story I always tell is of the man who wrote to the IRS saying he was unable to sleep because he cheated on his taxes last year. So he enclosed an anonymous cashier's check for three thousand dollars. He said, "And if I still can't sleep, I'll send the rest."

It's pretty much how it works for us. You do a little forgiveness and you say, "Yeah, but I'm not really... I mean, they did it and I shouldn't..." And you can feel all that stuff inside. You know how it works. But little by little, there comes somehow a realization that it's good for you to forgive. Forget about them. They may or may not change at all. You can't make them different. But you tend your own heart.

There's a remarkable book I have here. Trudy and I were talking about it because she's going to be in Dharamsala in dialogue with the Dalai Lama in a couple of weeks. We were kind of wishing we could go. A woman named Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, a South African psychologist, was one of the central people who helped run and organize the Truth and Reconciliation process there. This book is a record of her going into the toughest prison in South Africa and spending a year in conversation with the man who was most vilified as a killer on the side of keeping apartheid going, on the side of the Dutch white folks—a man named de Kock.

She spent a year trying to understand him. And in the course of it, she changed and he changed. It's a remarkable story. Here he is, he says: "I think that I lost... It's a feeling of loss. The first thing that goes is innocence."

I mean, there's no more fairy tales, no more Bambi. That's gone. We killed a lot of people—and he did it in terrible ways. And they killed some of ours.

And then he pauses.

"We fought for nothing. We fought each other, basically, eventually for nothing. We could have all been alive having a beer. And the politicians... If we could put all the politicians in the front lines with their families and grandparents and grandchildren—if they're in the front line, I don't think we'll ever have a war again. I think it's educated people, very educated people, who sit in Parliament and decide about war. So I'm confused. I'm very confused. I'm just tired."

De Kock shook his head, shifted his legs to adjust the position of the chains that bound him to his seat, his eyes downcast, looking like somebody reflecting on the greatest loss in his life.

And it's a remarkable thing to see somebody like Pumla go and say, "I'm going to go to the person that's most considered the evildoer in our culture and try to understand them, and in some way to be understood by them." You can feel the dignity and the nobility of it. But it's a process that was a whole year of her life.

And then finally, there's a kind of perspective that we have to carry. You know the Ojibwe saying:

"Sometimes I go about pitying myself, and all the while I'm being carried by great winds across the sky." We are vulnerable human beings. It's true. The poet Rilke says, "Ultimately it's upon your vulnerability that you depend." And we depend on one another—to stop at red lights so we can go on the green, to drive on their side of the street, to be gracious in line at the store, to care for one another, to care for children who are lost. We depend on each other so much. And this is our human realm.

So the last piece is to not put another being out of your heart. Not to close your heart. And not for their sake. There they are—they might be having a vacation in Hawaii right now. They're on a beach in Kauai having a lovely time. "I hate them. I hate them." Who's suffering? But it's something very deep that's needed.

Another story. This is a story of a man who's in hospice, close to dying. And the hospice volunteer—a Zen hospice volunteer—asked him if he had any last wishes. He said, "I really want to see my daughter. I've been estranged from her for years, and that's the thing that I most want."

So the hospice volunteer took great effort, tracked the daughter down, emailed her, and then began to call her. The daughter didn't want to come back. And finally, after a long time—she kept saying, "I don't want to see him. I hate him. I'm glad he's dying"—she relented. "Okay, I'm not going to stay long, but I'll come."

The hospice volunteer was happy that she could aid a reconciliation. The day the daughter arrived, the volunteer was standing outside the door, looking to see what would happen. The daughter flew into the room. As soon as she got in, she looked at her father and said, "You're one of the most awful people I've ever known. You caused more harm to me than anyone I've ever met. I hate your guts." And then she turned around on her heel and left.

The hospice volunteer went into the room and said, "I'm so sorry. I didn't know that was going to happen."

And the father responded, "That's exactly what I wanted to have happen."

The truth is, I was a terrible father. She's never had the opportunity to tell me to my face, and I knew it was eating her alive. I needed to let her say it.

So it doesn't go the way you think it should go, but it's really an act of mercy of your heart to say, "All right, I can do this. I can forgive in some way." And a lot of it is forgiving of yourself. We're so hard on ourselves, and we define our lives by our worst moment as if that's really the truth.

Or the society, which is one of a lot of blame—especially in our crazy criminal justice system, poverty, racist poverty prisons. Most incarcerated women, two-thirds, are in prison for nonviolent, low-level drug crimes or property crime. One of the first incarcerated women I ever met was a young mother who was serving a long prison sentence for writing checks to buy her three young children Christmas gifts without sufficient funds in her account. Like a character in a Victor Hugo novel, she tearfully explained her heartbreaking tale to me. I couldn't accept the truth of what she was saying until I checked her file and

discovered that she had in fact been convicted and sentenced to over ten years in prison for writing five checks, including three to Toys "R" Us. None of the checks was for more than $150.

It could make you weep. And it also makes you weep because there's a way in which we want justice. There's something in us that knows what justice looks like, and we want something honorable. And we have to be honorable to ourselves as well—to forgive ourselves as well as forgive others.

In Hawaii, there is a temple on the coast of the Big Island called Pu'uhonua o Hōnaunau, sometimes translated as the Temple of Refuge or the City of Refuge. These are big black lava stone walls on the beach with some little temple buildings inside and a whole courtyard. It's said that in the ancient Hawaiian culture, if you had broken a taboo, or you had done something that was illegal or terrible, if you could get yourself inside the walls of this city of forgiveness, this temple of forgiveness, you would be forgiven no matter what it was.

I remember the first time I went there, I found it very moving. I wondered, "Does this place still work? Could I be forgiven? Could you be forgiven? Could we be?" And what would it be like for us as a culture to build temples of forgiveness instead of the kind of crazy prison system or all the other things we do?

So it's both the collective peace that we want to awaken to—seeing that there's another way to live as humans—and then, of course, it starts most personally at home, in our own heart.

"Thank you, Jack. I really like listening to you teach."

"And I'm happy to be here as a guest at your sitting group. Jack comes and teaches at my sitting group in L.A. It's not quite this large—we have an intimate group of about a hundred that come on Sundays. It's a great pleasure to be here with you at Jack's group. I think of this as Jack's group, although I know every week there's somebody else teaching for the rest of the month.

"So yes, forgiveness. This is a topic very dear to my heart for my own life, for personal reasons, which I'll share with you in a bit. And I've really thought too about what it is. What does it mean to forgive? We all want to forgive because it's spiritual and nice. But forgiveness takes time, and it can sometimes take a long time. It just takes as long as it takes.

"The dictionary says forgiveness is giving up any thought of revenge or harm even when it's justified. That's the hard part, right? Because I have a right to be full of rage and entertain revenge fantasies and plot...

"My own definition of forgiveness is that it's learning to make peace with life when you didn't get something that you wanted. Another understanding is that there are ways to handle that experience of not getting what we want in our life besides becoming bitter about it.

"This might be a tasteless joke, but I'm going to go ahead anyway since I've started. Somebody said to me once, 'Do you know why cannibals never eat divorced people?'"

Because they're bitter.

I'm divorced, and I'm not bitter. But of course, I'm happily married now, and I'm going to tell you a story about that—the not being bitter story.

I think forgiveness is loving when we've been harmed or caused harm. It's that decision to love. It's how we love when we've been harmed or done harm—we love by forgiving. This is an activity of love.

I love this process, no matter how long it takes. Because when it happens—when we finally can let go of whatever grudges, whatever anger, whatever sorrow, whatever terror, whatever gets in the way of our being able to honestly and truly forgive ourselves or somebody else—when that happens, what floods in, when our hearts are freed from being caught in states of various kinds of ill will, what floods in are what we call the Brahma Viharas, the divine places that the heart can dwell. *Brahma* means heavenly or divine, and *Vihara* is dwelling place. And these are love and compassion and joy and equanimity. That's what floods in. So there's a real incentive to forgive in a genuine way.

I was going to tell a story about Pumla, and I'll just say that having read Desmond Tutu's book on forgiveness and having read about that whole time, it's such a story of hopefulness. When the ANC won and Nelson Mandela was elected president, South Africa had a real chance of becoming the next Rwanda, of really having a bloodbath that would have been a genocide. And because of the work—the incredibly hard work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that Pumla was part of—it didn't happen. It's really important for us to look at examples of when something awful could have happened and didn't, particularly during a time when we feel so many awful things are happening.

What was necessary for the survivors of the violence, the people who had lost loved ones in the war in South Africa, was an acknowledgment—an acknowledgment of what had been done. And not even so much an apology, because how can you apologize for murdering somebody's family member? But an acknowledgment.

Sometimes we have to use our imagination. How can we forgive people who have no remorse for having hurt us? How can we forgive people who have passed away, who are gone? How can we forgive ourselves for not meeting our own expectations? How can we forgive things like racial bias or climate change? How can we forgive ourselves for not having prevented that when we look into our grandchildren's eyes? How can we forgive ourselves for letting go of people in our lives that we really needed to hold close?

One story of using imagination in forgiveness that I read recently—I don't really recommend this book, it's a very hard read—is called *The Apology* by Eve Ensler. Some of you might have read it. Eve Ensler wrote *T he Vagina Monologues*, which was a wonderful play of different women telling stories about their relationship with their—can we even say it? They say things like "down there" or all these

euphemisms—with their vaginas. And it's funny, it's sad, it's poignant, it's beautiful actually. It can be life-changing too, just to hear women speak this way.

This was part of her own journey of healing as a survivor of childhood sexual abuse. But it wasn't enough. She needed more. What she needed was an apology from her father who had sexually abused her for many years. But her father had passed away.

So what she did was just hard to imagine—such an act of creativity. She imagined what it was like to be her father, doing these things that he did to her. She really let herself inhabit his psyche completely, empathically, just describing what happened. And at the end of the book, she has her father—he doesn't really apologize in a beautiful way, he was not a beautiful guy—but what he did was acknowledge how much he had hurt her.

And she has him tell her how much he knows that he changed the course of her life and made it so much harder by the harm that he caused.

Now, this never happened, because he had already passed away. But she imagined it. And the power of the imagination was—and can be—so healing for us.

For many years, I worked as a psychotherapist in Cambridge, Massachusetts, about twenty-five years. We did a lot of psychotherapy through something called psychodrama, where we would take different parts and enact each other's stories and dramas. But what we could do in psychodrama that we can't always do in life is imagine a different ending for some of those stories. We could play out the way it had happened—that was the cause for needing therapy, so it was something painful. And then we could play out: what if that person had done something different? What if something different had happened?

I was a little skeptical at first. It's pretend. It's playing, it's pretend. But it's powerful.

About twenty-five or thirty years ago, when I was doing that kind of work, I was also meditating a lot. And I didn't really have the permission to use my imagination so much in meditation. I was following the instructions and kind of strictly sticking to them—not so free in that way.

But I want to encourage you in your meditation to feel free to use your imagination, to use your creativity. When you sit down to be with yourself and meditate, maybe you aren't going to just follow your breath that day. Maybe you're going to radiate some compassion to yourself or to somebody else. Maybe that's what's called for. And maybe one day you sit down and compassion is the farthest thing from your mind or what's even possible, and you're just going to sit with the breath and the sensations in the body and calm down a little bit. But having that freedom to ask: How is it? How is it for me today? What do I need? I want to encourage you. It's important.

And it also helps us in our daily life. Here's just a daily life story. Last night I couldn't find the little plastic thing my dentist made for me to put in my teeth at night. I couldn't find it anywhere, and I was so

frustrated because I get up in the night sometimes and get a glass of water or have a snack, and I'm so careful about where I put it. But I'm at Jack's house—I live part-time in LA, of course, and we go back and forth—and I was looking everywhere, and so was Jack, and it was nowhere to be found.

But what was going on is that I was berating myself the whole time. "This is so expensive. You already lost one. How could you not be more careful?" And suddenly, mindfulness—yes, some loving awareness—actually happened and kicked in. Because when we have a practice, it does that. And when it kicked in, I thought, "Actually, I'm really careful with my binky"—I call it my binky—"I'm really careful with my binky. Where would I have put it carefully?" And instantly I knew. It was in the pocket of my fuzzy bathrobe.

The happiness that I felt! But really, it's a story about forgiveness, because the minute that activity of calling ourselves names and berating ourselves for being whatever it might be that we're not happy with—as soon as that stopped, it was just clear.

Recently—Jack knows, I've talked to him about this—I've been traveling and doing a retreat and going to a board meeting, just doing some travels and work. And in the course of these travels, just coincidentally, twice I found myself with people sequentially who could not get along with each other. In other words, a gathering with one person who was upset with another person who I saw later, or having lunch with one person, then coming to the place where the other person was.

This is two sets of people who have had forty or fifty year friendships. In one case, these are two people in their seventies who were friends since kindergarten. That's a long friendship. That's a lot of trust and affection over the years. And they are mad at each other. They've been mad at each other for three years.

I know what they're mad at each other about, and it's easy for me to say, how can you let a lifetime of trust and affection go down the drain simply because they said this that you didn't like, or they did that that you didn't like? It was not horrible. It was just inconsiderate. Or thoughtless. We're all like that sometimes.

But we do this, don't we? And we sometimes do it to children. "You lied to me. You're nine years old and you lied to me. You know better." Nine years of trust. Banished. Gone. "How can I ever trust you again?" We say these things sometimes when we're upset.

But that lifetime of trust and affection is so important. And I just want to encourage all of us to hold it carefully and tenderly, to remember where we've put it. When we wake up at night and the mind starts churning—she did, she said, he did, he said—it's possible to change the channel. It's possible for us to actually shift our attention. And I'm not talking about the big horrible abuse, or the person who harmed you the most in this lifetime, or betrayed you in the worst possible way. We have to do some grief work around losses and wounds like that. We have to. And around the losses and what's happening that we can't control.

Recently I sat a retreat with Bhikkhu Anālayo at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies. He's a monk who

practices very intensively. He spends five days a week in retreat, in silence, sitting all day. And actually, he sits down to meditate and he gets up seven and a half hours later to have lunch, take a shower, maybe rest a little bit. Then he sits down and gets up another seven and a half hours later. So if you think maybe it's long to sit for half an hour, you can think—I do—you can think of Bhikkhu Anālayo and his practice. And then he writes two days a week.

He said that his whole winter retreat—he does a hundred-day retreat in the wintertime—his whole winter retreat was focused on the grief and outrage that he feels about climate change. And he said it took him his entire retreat to be able to face the various possibilities, all of which are really difficult to face, especially if you're a parent or grandparent. All the possibilities, including the end of humanity. He went that far.

And he said until he could feel all the feelings of grief, of rage, the immense sorrow, the fear—all of those feelings—until he could feel them and be with them with some measure of self-compassion and equanimity, he knew there was really nothing effective that he would be able to do.

So this is another way that our practice is so important for us. The things that we want to change and that we want to help in the world—they can't be helped when we're coming at them with this huge charge of anger and outrage, or grief, or whatever it may be. For us to be able to muster the loving awareness and the internal balance to meet what's happening with some measure of compassion and equanimity is a way for us to be effective with each other, with those who don't share our views, listening to each other, learning what it's like to be each other.

So we can't forgive too early, as Jack was saying, until we've grieved the loss. I think that's the obstacle that most people encounter when trying to forgive. We also can't cry in rage forever. And we do calm down. And then we can remember that first of all, the only life that we can be happy in is the one we actually have. Not the one that's going to happen in the future maybe, or the one that we used to have, but this one, right here, right now. This one that we actually have.

And the most famous Stanford expert on forgiveness, Fred Luskin, says, "Remember that a life well lived is your best revenge. Instead of focusing on your wounded feelings and thereby giving the person who caused you pain power over you, look at all the love, beauty, and kindness around you."

Because forgiveness is about personal power.

And forgiveness is also heroic. It's noble. It takes an immense effort when something bad has happened. We can rewrite our memoir, rewrite our autobiography when we make that noble choice. And every time we do, we're actually moving our whole society more toward love. Because what we do for ourselves and our community, we're doing for both at the same time.

The last story I want to tell you is about forgiving my husband—the man I was married to before Jack. There were ten years in between, and it wasn't my first marriage, that one either. I seem to require ten

years in between to recover, but then I start over again. I do assure Jack, and it's true, that he is my favorite of all my husbands.

There's been a lot of news recently about misconduct on the part of Buddhist teachers this past year, and it's painful news. It seems to come in waves every ten years when you've been doing this as long as we have. You can see that rhythm, and it's just so upsetting that it keeps happening, but it does. Some people are forced to step down. Some move on and start another community somewhere else. Some do the incredibly hard work with integrity—a much harder path of sincere, committed work on themselves with an expert, specialized therapist. Taking responsibility and facing their history, they can emerge stronger and wiser.

In my case, my husband was a wonderful, gifted teacher, and actually still is, but he hit a really rough patch and, like some of the recent teachers, went off the path. It didn't happen while we were together. Even in a court of law, you're not required to blow the whistle on your own spouse. I didn't tell because I wanted him to be in recovery, and he was for a while.

Whatever we've done, we all want to be forgiven for our past mistakes, don't we? We've all made unwise choices. We've all needed forgiveness. And we all want to be seen and understood and known for the more overarching good of who we are, whether we're nine years old or ninety years old. That's what we want. We don't want to be judged forever for the past unwise choices or mistakes we made.

So this story: quite a number of years after our divorce—maybe eight or ten—my daughter invited my husband to come visit, and we met for the first time in all that time. We hadn't even spoken for ten years. It took me a long while to really feel forgiving of him. It didn't take as long for what I felt had happened to me, but more for our family—the extended family, the kids.

But this time, we just spent easygoing time together, taking care of the grandkids. We were actually babysitting, making dinner, and it just felt so familial, so familiar—being family together, gradually unburdening ourselves a little bit. There was a Sunday sitting group at InsightLA where we actually taught together that weekend. We decided we could do it after that Saturday night of just taking care of kids.

That morning of teaching together, we talked about loss and repair, because everybody's lost somebody and often without the chance to repair. We really opened it up and brought everybody into that experience. It was kind of beautiful, actually.

And what I saw was this: after ten years, after all the heartbreak, all the anguish—agony, actually, at times—what was left? What was there on the other side of that suffering? I think those of you who've gone through heartbreak of great magnitude and a lot of suffering know, if you've had time to heal...

and even time to forgive, you know what lies on the other side of that suffering.

And it's really just love. Love and humility. The humility of our shared humanness. And the love of these

teachings that help us live better lives.

I don't know what I would have or could have done if I hadn't been practicing all these years. Because I have been, I don't know what the other life would look like. But I'm grateful, and I know you are too. And if you're new to this practice—keep going. Don't stop. Pick it up and keep going, even when you disappoint yourself and stop. You can still keep the intention to practice in the center of your life and come back to it, just like the Julia Child story. It's here, always waiting for us.

So we've all made plenty of mistakes in this life, and we will probably continue to do that. But through the grace of cultivating loving awareness, we can grow and strengthen our capacity for growth through practicing, and also this human capacity that we have for forgiveness and redemption.

What I would like to do now is lead a forgiveness meditation—a practice that can take us in the direction of forgiveness and redemption.

Please find a posture that you're comfortable in, because it's very hard to generate the intention to be compassionate and forgive if you're really uncomfortable. And we can forgive ourselves for getting distracted in meditation too. That moment of distraction and our noticing it is right there—the birth of our freedom.

Sitting comfortably, closing your eyes if that's comfortable for you in a large group, or just lowering your gaze if not. I like to begin this practice with forgiving ourselves, because without that it's really hard to genuinely forgive anybody else. How we do this together is I will say certain phrases that carry the intention to forgive and invite you to repeat them silently to yourself. All you have to do is listen to what you're saying to yourself and see if you can mean it too.

I forgive myself for being imperfect. I forgive myself for making mistakes. I forgive myself for being a learner in this life. And that means for being a work in progress. We forgive ourselves for being in the process of learning how to do better.

I forgive myself for being a learner in this life.

And once again: *I forgive myself for being imperfect. I forgive myself for making mistakes. I forgive myself for being a learner in this life.*

In whatever ways I may have harmed myself, intentionally or unintentionally, I forgive myself. For any way that I have abandoned myself, betrayed myself, my values, been less than who I know I can be—I forgive myself.

Taking a moment now, using whatever phrase speaks to you, resonates for you, that you need to hear. Just offering forgiveness to yourself. You can place a hand on your heart. Just offering some self-compassion, kindness, understanding, and love.

Then, when you feel ready, call to mind somebody you need to forgive—but please don't choose the person who has harmed you the most in this lifetime. Maybe start with somebody who has just annoyed you. The reason for that is simply time. It takes time to forgive, or it can.

Call to mind this being, and then we're going to offer the phrases to this one.

I forgive you for being imperfect. I forgive you for making mistakes. I forgive you for being a learner in this life.

And once again: *I forgive you for being imperfect. I forgive you for making mistakes. I forgive you for being a learner in this life.*

For whatever way you've hurt me, intentionally or unintentionally, I'm willing to forgive you. For whatever way you caused me harm, knowingly or unknowingly, I forgive you.

Again, using whatever phrase is right for you, spend another moment with this person to whom you are extending forgiveness.

And now I invite you to call to mind somebody that you have hurt.

Somebody whose feelings you hurt, somebody you overlooked. Again, not the most horrible thing you've ever done, but something that was hurtful to somebody. Call this person to mind, because we're going to ask for forgiveness.

Please forgive me for being imperfect. Please forgive me for making mistakes. Please forgive me for being a learner in this life.

For whatever way I may have intentionally or unintentionally hurt you, I ask your forgiveness. For whatever way I knowingly or unknowingly harmed you, please forgive me.

Just take a moment to say anything else you may need to say to this one.

And coming back to yourself for a moment. Once again: I forgive myself. I forgive myself for being imperfect. I forgive myself for making mistakes. I forgive myself for being a learner in this life.

And just as I forgive myself and others, may all beings find it in their hearts to free their hearts from ill will, resentment, grudges, revenge fantasies. May we and all beings free our hearts to forgive and find our way back to loving awareness.

Thank you, everybody, for your practice, for your presence, for your listening. Thank you for being here.

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