Forgiving Heart | Monday Night Talk

Jack Kornfield · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Jack Kornfield · 53:08

The Forgiving Heart

My teacher Ajahn Chah said, if you let go a little, you'll have a little peace. If you let go a lot, you'll have a lot of peace. And if you let go fully, you'll have complete and joyful peace.

So here we are at the turning of the next seasons. The Jewish New Year and holiday of Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, has just passed. The New Year, which is in that culture or system, follows the time of the harvest—to start the New Year after the harvest. And of course, we're always starting again. How do we renew ourselves? How do we atone, which is the Yom Kippur day of forgiveness? How do we somehow cleanse the past and start in a gracious, wise, loving way again?

Earlier this year, I joined online with a group of peacemakers called Combatants for Peace. The event was held in Beit Jallah, a town in Palestine. The two warriors on the panel with me were an Israeli commander named Tulsi and a Palestinian combat leader named Osama. They had both led their military units in conflict where their comrades, their followers, people with them on both sides, were killed. And somehow, as they said in our conversation and in the work that we did for all those who watched, they simply couldn't do it any longer. They realized we have to find a way to share this land in peace. We need to find a better way. And so they've been on this journey, trying to convince and support and awaken this possibility, which is there on all sides.

Of course, it's not easy. People get really stuck.

A few years ago, I was doing some peace work in Myanmar, or Burma. It was during the time of the targeting—which has continued—of the relatively large and long-standing Muslim population there, trying to drive them out, great anti-Muslim racism. I met with one of the main Buddhist monks who was a kind of provocateur of this, even though he was a famous monk, an anti-Muslim leader. I read to him some of the Buddhist texts and said, as an upstart I might say, "You know, this is really not following the Dharma." And he agreed and said he would change his ways. Of course it was a lie. He continued to foment violence against the Muslims.

Around the same time, when I was in Palestine, I met in Hebron one of the most vociferous anti-Arab activists, the head of one of the political parties in Israel that wanted to throw all the Palestinians and Arabs out of Israel and out of the Palestinian land. Even with a kind approach and trying to inquire—nothing. Not easy.

And we know it in the polarization in this country as well. This isn't a quick fix.

But yet we need to understand. Dear ones, we have to know: What is it that allows Northern Ireland to stop killing one another? What is it that allows Rwanda to begin to mend a country, a nation torn apart between the Hutus and the Tutsis, and find a road to peace? What is it that's allowed France and Germany, which were these incredibly violent enemies in World War I and World War II—not that long ago, in my lifetime actually—to become friends?

"O nobly born," begin the Buddhist texts. Remember who you really are. Remember your true nature, your Buddha nature, for there's a reality deeper than the conflicts. There's a truth and a reality deeper than all these conflicts.

When I was doing peace work there in Palestine and Israel, I remember joining teenagers who'd been brought together at the Sulqita. I was working with a group of Jerusalem peacemakers that included Muslim sheikhs and rabbis and Druze and leaders from all different spiritual traditions. These teenagers—mostly boys, although there were girls there as well—had been meeting together for three years, and they finally managed to bring their parents together.

There was great difficulty trying to get the Palestinian parents over into Israel, into this community that was hosting them. And there were a hundred or a hundred fifty of us all together. I remember standing in a circle with these folks—Palestinian parents and Israeli mothers and fathers, all holding hands, the Arab women holding hands with their family members, of course—and gazing at these kids in the middle, maybe a dozen or fifteen of their teenage children, who'd become heart friends. They'd become so close together.

And then one of the Arab mothers turned to me, and through a translator said, "You know, for twenty years, I've only seen Israeli soldiers. I forgot they had mothers."

It was such a touching moment—for her to see, and for us to remind one another that who we really are is not all these stories that are told, but that there's a profound humanity and connection underneath it all.

So here we are, human beings in this incarnation, in a world of unbearable beauty and an ocean of tears. How do we touch our measure of suffering? With a forgiving heart—that's how.

I remember at the founding of Naropa Buddhist University, the first summer teaching together with Chögyam Trungpa and Ram Dass and Sharon Salzberg and Joseph Goldstein and Krishna Das, and many other teachers, two thousand students or more. On the full moon that summer—it might have been Guru Purnima or some great holiday—we had a bonfire out in the flatland under the moon, where you could see the whole wall of the Rocky Mountains as you do coming from the Great Plains up to Boulder, the mountains arising above you. A huge bonfire.

It was meant in part to be a celebration, but also a Kali fire, a fire of purification—to release and atone and move on. All the students were invited to write down things they needed to let go of, things they needed forgiveness for, things they needed to release in order to start anew.

Ram Dass, in his role at that time as a kind of priest—still wearing white and beads in the beard, Baba Ram Dass was his persona then—had set up a small tent. Before you could go and throw your words and troubles into the Kali fire to be released and purified, you were invited to step in and confess, or to speak from the heart, to tell Ram Dass what troubled you, what weighed on you.

Ram Dass stood there as a thousand people went through his little tent, listening to each one. Afterward, I watched them throw things into the fire, and then they began to dance. You could feel a new freedom.

I asked Ram Dass what he had heard. He said, "Oh, so many stories. A lot of self-hatred, a lot of self-doubt, judgment, a lot of confusion around sexuality, a lot of problems in families." He said over and over again, the same kinds of stories. And he said, "All I did was gaze at them with eyes like my guru's—to see who they really are, that secret beauty underneath it all—and bless them. And then they threw it in the fire."

We all need that.

With mindful, loving awareness—the very practice we've been doing—we can step out of the tyranny of self-judgment, judging ourselves for all the things we haven't done right or haven't done or have done wrong. We can forgive ourselves for being learners in this life. Did you get a manual when you were born? Are you supposed to be an expert? This is, as some say in a somewhat joking way, a training planet. This is a place for us, when we're born, to remember—even though we've lost it in ways—to remember our nobility, to remember the possibility of heart, the great heart of compassion, forgiveness, kindness, awakening.

Yeats, the great Irish poet, probably one of the greatest, Nobel laureate—toward the end of his life he writes:

I'm content to follow to its source
every event in action and thought.
Measure the lot, forgive myself the lot.
When such as I cast out remorse
so great a sweetness flows into the breast
for we must laugh and we must sing
for we are blessed by everything
and everything we look upon is blessed.

This is the gift of forgiveness. We can be forgiven, and we can forgive.

I remember the story of a hospice worker, a woman who worked at Laguna Honda Hospital here in San Francisco in the hospice ward. A man had been brought in who was quite sick, on his trajectory toward dying and death. He was in the orange garb of a convict, a man who'd been taken out of prison, and in fact he was shackled with a handcuff to his bed.

The hospice worker, this volunteer, spent time with him. She listened to his story, she tended him, she cared for him. She asked about his family, and he said he hadn't seen his mother for thirty years. He hadn't wanted her to see him in prison. He was so deeply ashamed of what he had done. He felt he couldn't face his mother.

But the hospice worker, with her good heart, slowly, slowly convinced him that it would be worthwhile, important, essential for him to make amends, to see his mother. And so the man, shackled to his bed, finally gave her permission to call. She arranged for his mother to come.

She said an old woman with a cane came down the hall, dressed mostly in black. She met the hospice worker at the door with a greeting, then looked in at her son and just stood there.

The hospice worker, this woman who told me the story, began to weep as she spoke. She said this mother stood there and looked at her son, and she began to weep. Her countenance was like the face of Mother Mary holding her beloved child, even after all that had happened to him, after the crucifixion. It was like seeing the face of the mothers of the world, holding their children no matter what.

This is who we are.

Suffering is not the end of the story. This is the good news in this mysterious human realm. Yes, there is suffering, but there is something so much greater. There is also freedom of heart—the great heart of compassion, redemption, peace.

O nobly born, we are invited to step out of the battle. As Ajahn Chah says, if you let go a little, you'll be a little happy. If you let go a lot, you'll have a lot of happiness. And if you let go fully, you'll be truly happy.

Yes, you might say—and ask quite rightly—but what if you're being harmed?

I think of the story of Amy, a meditation student who came to talk to me some years ago after her father died. Her father had started a big construction company, and her three brothers and she were supposed to receive the inheritance. But the brothers began to fight, and especially they tried, in some very unpleasant and mean ways, to cut Amy out of her inheritance—to steal it from her. She was both in grief and confused: what do I do?

So we did a lot of inner work over some time, first to settle and steady her. I said, you know, you can go through this. Then we talked about finding the best lawyer she could, which she really needed to do to protect herself. As we talked and met over a period of time, she got the lawyer and at least saved part of her inheritance.

One day she came in and said, "You know, they're still my brothers. No matter how much I was hurt, they're still my brothers, and I don't want to abandon my family. I need to find a way to love them again." And she began doing the forgiveness practice that we'll be doing later this evening together.

In a similar way, another woman was in the middle of a terrible divorce. In this case, her husband was trying to keep all the money, turn the children against their mother, and cut her out completely so she wouldn't even be able to visit them—even though he'd been the one who had the affair. And he was doing it in a mean-spirited way, using a lot of the money they had both shared to hire lawyers to help him.

Again, as we began to work together, I said, get yourself a kick-ass lawyer, because you need it to protect yourself. And she did that. She worked in her own way to hang in there so that she wouldn't lose custody of her children.

One day she came in to see me and said, "With all that's going on, my ex is trying to turn the children against me"—as happens in these terrible divorces. And she got quiet and looked at me and said, "I've been meditating, and I realized that I will not bequeath a legacy of bitterness to my children. I will not talk badly about their father, no matter what he does."

There was such dignity and courage and bigheartedness in what she said. Yes, she was protecting herself, but even more importantly, she was protecting her children.

The principles for wise forgiveness are these. Those of you who've been with me over the years have heard them, but they're still important to remember.

First, forgiveness is not weak or naive. It doesn't mean to forgive and forget. It takes real courage, deep courage. As 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 offer love in exchange for hatred.

Forgiveness also does not condone what happened. It doesn't in any way say that it's fine or okay or good. In fact, it's critical with forgiveness, as a first step, to make sure that you don't allow the harm to continue—to step away, to intervene, to stop in any way you can, whatever you need to do. And it doesn't even mean that you have to speak to people if they're going to continue to harm you, or have contact with them. It neither condones, nor does it allow harm to continue. You can say, "I will put my body in the way of making sure this harm does not continue to myself or others," or "I will step away to make sure." It takes this courage.

Also, forgiveness is not quick. You can't paper it over. Like grief, it is a long, tender, hard process of the heart digesting the pain that's happened and, little by little, coming to terms and extending forgiveness.

The story I always tell is of the man who wrote to the IRS during tax season: "I haven't been able to sleep since I cheated on my taxes last year. So I've enclosed a three thousand dollar anonymous cashier's check made out to the IRS. If I still can't sleep, I'll send the rest."

This is how it works. Like metta, you don't start with the most difficult place. You start with what opens your heart. You do it a little at a time, at the sweet place first, a step at a time.

He led these peace walks, at the front with a bell, chanting: "Hatred never ceases by hatred, but by love

alone is healed" — followed by a thousand people walking behind him, back to their villages.

Ghosnanda was invited to the US Congress to speak because he was part of the group working to ban landmines worldwide — that group received a Nobel Prize. For Ghosnanda, it was very personal because he'd seen too many children who'd lost their limbs, who'd been blown up by mines.

When he stood up before Congress to speak, he said, "Yes, I beg you, you must sign the worldwide treaty to ban landmines." And then he paused and said, "But even more importantly, we have to work together to remove the landmines in the heart — the fear and the hatred and all of those things that create the landmines."

Yes, we need to work outwardly and do what we can for this extraordinary and amazing earth. And at the same time, we need to remove the landmines in our own hearts.

I believe it was Longfellow who said, "If you could read the secret history of your enemies, you would see suffering and tragedy enough to disarm all hostility." If you could see the secret history of even those who are doing terrible things — the fears and the trauma and all that drives them — it would disarm your heart.

Think of this story of Maria Elena. Maria Elena grew up with a lot of shame about being poor. Outwardly, she tried to overcome this with hard work. She was the first in her extended family to ever go to college, but struggling with feelings of insecurity, she felt like an outcast.

After she graduated, she worked in the city for the Department of Public Safety. Sixteen years later, she transferred to a farming community just in from the coast near Oxnard. She told me, "After I'd lived in the city, now I go in the coffee shop and see the old clothes and the uneducated farmers. It's so easy to judge them and feel myself as different. We may be different in education and politics, but these are false ways we separate ourselves. Now, when I really look, I just want to drop my judgments and be with them — be with us.

"My father was like them. He drank too much. He berated us, his daughters. He was terrible to his sons. I was desperate to get free of him, of our family, but my shame and anger and resentment stayed with me.

"When I began to practice mindfulness, compassion, loving kindness, it was hard to sit still. After a while, I realized how sad I was and how much hurt was in my body. I was just trying to cope. I was grateful to be taught the loving kindness and forgiveness practices. I did them twice a day for two years. I needed to forgive myself for being so angry and ashamed as much as I needed to forgive my father. Practicing forgiveness was like learning to stand and walk and feel good about myself."

And then I was able to go home to see my family, even my father, without hurting so much. Seven years later, when my father got sick, it wasn't hard to go back. I saw his slow decline until finally he was a weak old man on his bed. I knew that I loved him. I had forgiven us all.

With forgiveness, we repair the world. Sometimes it's your broken heart that opens your loving heart.

You all remember the famous old Zen story about the two monks and the young woman in a beautiful kimono at the edge of the river, unable to cross because the river had risen in the storms. One of the monks walked over and, with her permission, picked her up in his arms and carried her across the river and put her down on the other side. The two monks continued to walk on their journey to a distant temple.

Sometime later, some hours later, the other monk had been chewing on it and finally blurted out, "How could you do that? We monks are not supposed to look at, much less pick up women—young women in beautiful kimonos like that. How dare you do that?" And the second monk looked at him and said, "I put her down back there. Are you still carrying her?"

We've all heard this story, and it's been repeated for centuries. Why? Because it's true. We can let go. We can put down the burdens of resentment. We can see anew with a heart of tenderness and compassion. We can engage this world and care for it in a very different way.

For who you are is consciousness itself—not your conditioning and not your history. They have to be honored, but they are not who you are. Not your body or your emotions that are constantly changing, or that river of thoughts, most of which you wouldn't want anybody else to hear anyway. That's not who you are. You are loving awareness, consciousness born into this body. And this is the place of freedom.

The invitation of the Buddhist teachings is to step out of the body of fear. *Hatred never ceases by hatred, but by love alone is healed. This is the ancient and eternal law.* The invitation is to step out of the body of fear and find that beauty and wellbeing and peace that comes with forgiveness and graciousness of heart, looking at the world with tender eyes.

I like to read this story of Roberto DiVincenzo. He was the most famous golfer in Argentina some years ago—maybe the equivalent of Tiger Woods, or if you're older, maybe of Arnold Palmer. Once he won a tournament, and after receiving the check and smiling for the cameras, he went to the clubhouse and prepared to leave. Sometime later, walking alone to his car in the parking lot, he was approached by a young woman. She congratulated him on his victory and then told him that her child was seriously ill and near death. DiVincenzo was touched by her story and took out a pen and endorsed his winning check for payment to the woman. "Make some good days for the baby," he said as he pressed the check into her hand.

The next week he was having lunch in a country club when a PGA official came to his table. "Hey, some of the guys in the parking lot last week told me you met a young woman there after you won the tournament." DiVincenzo nodded. "Well," said the official, "I have news for you. She's a phony. She has no sick baby. She fleeced you, my friend."

DiVincenzo looked up. "You mean there's no baby who's dying?"

"That's right," said the official.

"Well, that's the best news I've heard all week," he replied.

We can do this, you know. We can live with a gracious and tender, forgiving and compassionate heart. We can learn to practice forgiveness, and it is a practice. When I was first taught, I was told to do it twice a day for six months or so. And then I began to think, wait a second—that's three hundred times.

And I did it, a little at a time—for my father, who had been so violent and abusive, for other people in my life, for people around me. I think Mark Twain said something about how much we only wish the foibles of other people's personalities would change. But anyway, I just did it. I did it and did it. Little by little, water on a stone. You know how that goes. Slow, soft, small, tender. And it became more and more the way that I wanted to live.

But it's not just me. It's us. The ones we admire, those who are at the top of the pantheon—Archbishop Tutu and the Dalai Lama and so many other great spiritual figures—they're not really different than us. They have simply opened themselves to that great loving heart that is who you really are, who we really are.

So let's practice the three directions of forgiveness together now for a bit. If you would, shift your body and find a way to sit comfortably and at ease. This will be a guided meditation for ten or fifteen minutes. Take it as a practice. The word *practice* means practice. It doesn't mean perfect. It's an invitation to your heart to remember what's possible, to begin the road of tenderness and forgiveness, to begin to open the gates to the inner garden of freedom—to not carry the burdens of the past.

When you're ready, close your eyes gently and take thirty seconds just to come back to breathe gently and rest with whatever has been touched in this talk. Wherever you are, hold it all in tenderness.

Now, breathing gently, let us begin the first of the three directions of forgiveness practice. There are many ways—take this as a reflection as you listen. There are many ways in which I have hurt and harmed others, betrayed them, abandoned them, caused them pain, hurt them in all kinds of ways, knowingly and unknowingly. I begin to remember these now. Let yourself remember some of the ways in which you've hurt and harmed others or caused them pain, abandoned or betrayed them. You can remember. You can know. And as you do, feel the tenderness, the regret, the care that comes in the heart.

Now reflect either generally on all that you remembered, or you can choose a particular person or circumstance. In the ways that I've hurt and harmed you, knowingly or unknowingly, caused you pain, caused you to suffer, abandoned you, betrayed you, caused harm to you in any way—small and large—out of my own confusion and fear, out of my own hurt and pain and misunderstanding and ignorance... In this moment, seeing with the heart, I ask your forgiveness. In any way, out of my own pain or fear, confusion, hurt, or anger, that I've caused harm to you—please forgive me. Please forgive me.

And sense, as you do, that you can be forgiven. That forgiveness is possible. That forgiveness is our birthright—to start over again. Oh nobly born, to ask forgiveness, to receive forgiveness, to begin again.

And now, with the same tenderness of heart, let us do the second direction of forgiveness. Just as we ask forgiveness of others whom we've harmed and caused to suffer, so too we have to forgive ourselves for all that we've done that's caused harm to others—but even more, the ways that we've caused harm to ourselves. In this moment, I remember the ways I've abandoned myself, betrayed myself, caused myself pain or suffering, just as I've done to others—the ways that I've brought hurt to myself, judged myself so harshly, harmed myself.

In the many ways that I remember now—that I've hurt or harmed myself, betrayed myself as I've harmed others at times, judged and undermined myself—in all these ways, out of my fear, out of my own confusion and hurt, out of anger and ignorance and misunderstanding, out of my pain and hurt, I now offer myself forgiveness. I forgive myself.

And if you wish, you can put your hand on your heart. Hold yourself with tenderness. In this moment, I release myself. I forgive myself. As Yeats says, "I measure the lot, forgive myself the lot."

And let the sweet nectar of forgiveness fill your consciousness and your body.

You can do this. You can be forgiven. This is tending the heart. O nobly born, this is remembering who you really are—remembering your Buddha nature, your true nature, the great heart of forgiveness.

And finally, the third direction of forgiveness. There are many ways that others have hurt and harmed me. Just as I've harmed others or harmed myself, there are so many ways and times that others have betrayed me, hurt me, abandoned me, caused me pain and suffering—knowingly and unknowingly. This has happened, and we all carry these hurts.

Let yourself remember and see all the ways that you've been abandoned and hurt, harmed, betrayed. And perhaps choose one that feels important, one where it's time to begin to forgive and let go. Remember what happened and the pain you still carry. And visualizing, say: In the way that you harmed me or hurt me, in the way that you betrayed or abandoned me, caused me pain—sometimes so much pain—out of your own fear and hurt, out of your own pain and anger and confusion, I see this now with a forgiving heart. And to the extent that I'm ready—because you can't rush this—to the extent that I'm ready, I offer you forgiveness. It might be a little or a lot. It might be just the beginning. To the extent that I'm ready, I forgive you. I release you. I will not carry bitterness in my heart.

And feel, as you do, that you're opening the door of forgiveness—maybe beginning the process of letting go, a tender release, a courageous forgiveness.

With these three directions, together we've been practicing forgiveness: asking forgiveness of others, forgiving ourselves, and offering it to those who've harmed us. Return now to a place of quiet and dignity.

O nobly born, remember that this freedom and greatness of heart is who you really are. Trust it. Practice it. Let your heart be free.

As the Bhagavad Gita says, this practice takes courage. If you want to see the courageous, the heroic, look to those who can forgive. If you want to see the loving, look to those who can forgive. If you want to see those who can laugh with joy and move on into a new season in their life, look to those who can forgive. If you want to see those who in themselves can repair the world, and who can bring this spirit to the conflicts and difficulties around us so that we might share in the repair of the world—look to those who can forgive.

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