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Week 1, The Power of Forgiveness: Forgiving Ourselves and Others

Forgiving Ourselves

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Hello. It's wonderful to be here with you and to spend some time in these next four weeks reflecting on forgiveness in our practice. The first thing I want to do is to congratulate you on your willingness to enter into this retreat, this ability to stop, to pause, to rest and to relax, to take time from your quotidian duties and to actually reflect on your practice and the ground for your practice. As you know because you have tuned in to this retreat, we'll be reflecting for the next four weeks on the role of forgiveness in our practice and the practices of forgiveness, how we cultivate forgiveness in the heart, how we cultivate forgiveness as a way of life, how we cultivate forgiveness in tandem or in partnership with our practices of loving-kindness and compassion, our practice of equanimity.

So first I will just tell you what the next four weeks are going to be like and then we'll talk a little bit about forgiveness and we'll do some practice together. The structure of the retreat essentially will be every week we'll do a short reflection on an aspect of forgiveness and after we do that we'll do some practice together. I will ask you during the intermittent times, the times between retreats, that you engage in the practices that we discuss because forgiveness—and actually, any spiritual practice that we undertake—is a practice that accumulates over time. And so if we do a little bit and then we leave it and we do a little bit and we leave it, it doesn't have the same effect. It's like building a muscle. If you go to the gym once every month, the effect is much weaker than if you do it consistently week to week. And so forgiveness and any other spiritual practice is similar to building a muscle and accumulating. The Buddha said that drop by drop a bucket gets filled and in the same way drop by drop a bucket of forgiveness will get filled.

So this first session we will talk about forgiveness itself, what it is and what it is not, and I will ask you to do some reflections in between session one and session two. And in session two we'll actually be starting to do the progression of forgiveness. Session two will be on forgiveness for ourselves. Session three we will concentrate on asking forgiveness of others for what we may have done, how we may have harmed others. And the fourth session will be a session on granting forgiveness.

So you can see even by the way we will structure these retreats that we will not be jumping into forgiveness for others right away. We'll train the mind and train the heart to see that forgiveness is not a should—it's not a way to beat up on ourselves or judge ourselves or show ourselves all of the ways that we fall short of our spiritual goals. But really, like every other practice, it is a way to slowly build with patience, with determination, with confidence and with some balance and equanimity and certainly with kindness and compassion for ourselves and for others.

So first let's enter into a sacred space together. Let's do some practice together, which I will ask you to do over these next four weeks as we do it here, as we build on a practice of mindfulness, a practice of kindness, and then the practice of forgiveness. Let's start by establishing a posture that is at ease, noticing what it's like to be an embodied being as coming into presence right now,

being here completely, as a teacher of mine said, arriving molecule by molecule. You can leave your eyes open. If you do, soften your gaze so that you're looking at a spot in front of you about six feet. If you'd like to close your eyes, you can do so also but close them gently so that the eyes are not shut tight; we're training the body to be at ease, to not struggle, to not be tight and holding. And notice any other part of the body that's tight or holding or tense and see if you can soften it. And as you sit here, this beautiful embodied being, let the attention simply rest on the breathing of the body, the sensations of the breathing of the body as the breath comes in and as the breath comes out. Notice the sensations of the body and the sensations of the breathing. You can pay attention at the nostrils, in the nostrils or just at the upper lip where the air hits between the nostrils and the upper lip. What are the sensations like? Is it warm? Is it cool? Is there tingling? Can you feel just the whispered brush of the breath? Some people find it easier to find the breath at the rising and falling of the chest or at the rising and falling of the belly. Whatever feels right and most easeful for you is perfectly fine.

Notice how you're sitting on your seat. See if you can commit your entire weight to the seat so there's nothing held back, so that you feel completely held by the seat that you're in. Nothing to do, nowhere to go, nothing to accomplish, nothing to be, no goals to achieve or to attain—just a simple, loving, kind presence.

Keep checking in with your body to see if the habits of the body have reasserted themselves. If there is tightness that reappears, simply soften again and do that over and over and over. If you have to return to the breath because there's a distraction that arises from the breath, whether it's a thought or a sensation of the body or an internal or external sound, just simply return to the breath without judgment or analysis or commentary in the mind, just come back. If you have to do so a thousand times each time you sit, that's perfectly fine. This is a practice, a way of becoming present, knowing how things are right now in this moment. When you're ready you can open your eyes and come back to the room in which you're sitting, slowly, easily, without any idea of what's going to happen next, without any anticipation or need to know, simply keeping this feeling of presence that you've established in that very short meditation as we enter into this reflection together about forgiveness.

So first I would like you to take a moment and simply reflect on why it is you have tuned in to this retreat. What brought you here? You saw that the retreat is entitled Forgiveness. What made you come here right now in this intimate space to reflect on the idea of forgiveness? As you consider what brought you here, how does that feel in your body? Is there anticipation? Is there anxiety? Is there nervousness? Do you feel as if the idea or concept or practice of forgiveness will compel you to do something that you feel resistant to? If that's true, please notice what that resistance feels like and notice where it is in your body right now. Is there somebody that you want to forgive that you feel you have not been able to forgive for a long time? Perhaps that person is yourself. Perhaps that person is a family member, or perhaps there are social ills and injustices that you feel are unforgivable. Consider when you reflect on that how that feels in the body and then notice any stories that come up in the mind and what emotions may also appear. Because whatever practices we do, whether it's forgiveness or any other spiritual practice—awareness, mindfulness—the establishment of presence is always our first step.

So perhaps we could consider this an adventure together and not feel as if at the end of these four weeks that you will be a perfectly forgiving being. Perhaps it will just be the beginning of the practice of forgiveness for you. What I ask you to consider is that there is an incredibly beautiful and powerful transforming potential in the practice of forgiveness, that forgiveness transforms the heart, transforms the mind, and as we know, as it says in the *Dhammapada*, “with our minds we make the world.” And when we talk about mind in the *Buddhadharma* we're talking about mind *and* heart. So with our mind-hearts we make the world. However the mind is, whatever resentments, anger, hatred, ideas of revenge we've been carrying from the past, if we are able to transform those, we are able to transform the mind and heart, and if we transform the mind and heart from hatred and anger and revenge to love and kindness and compassion, then our world will become a world not of anger, not of hatred, not of resentment, not of vengeance, but a world of loving-kindness and compassion.

Now you say when I say that that we have no power to transform the world. In our practice we recognize that however we are internally that is how the world will seem to us, and so this practice of forgiveness is a practice that will indeed transform our world. So take a moment and just reflect on how that feels, how that resonates in your body or in your mind. Do you believe that? Because the ground of forgiveness is the ground of how the heart is, how the heart feels, how the heart approaches kindness and compassion and wisdom. Because if we understand why we want to forgive, then all of the tightness, everything that we've held in our palm so tightly, will loosen of its own accord. There's nothing that we need to make happen, and indeed when we ask to practice forgiveness we're not asking that we make something happen so much in the external world. Instead we do a forgiveness practice because we recognize that any resentment or anger that we hold affects only us. Because whomever we're holding that resentment or anger against is probably in Hawaii having a really good time, right, while we are here in our bitterness and our anger and our resentment.

Do you believe this? Is this true? When the Buddha taught he didn't ask that we believe things because he said so or because a teacher said so but that actually we put these things into practice and if they appear to be of benefit then he invites us to continue them, and if we put them into practice and they're not of benefit then we can let them go. So I make the same invitation—that whatever I say, however I say it, that you reflect on it and you decide for yourself whether this works for you.

So the first aspect of forgiveness is the establishment of love, the establishment of love in the heart. It doesn't mean that we establish love just for the purpose of figuring out how to forgive the person—a specific person who has harmed us—but we understand that without a ground of love forgiveness is not possible. And in order to establish love first, it is really helpful to study hatred. I'd like to read something to you from Krishnamurti who was asked by a student how to love.

A student said, "I am full of hate. Would you teach me how to love?" And Krishnamurti responded, "No one can teach you how to love. If people could be taught how to love, the world problem would be very simple, would it not? Love is not so easily come by. It is easy to hate and hate brings people together after a fashion. It creates all kinds of fantasies. It brings about various types of cooperation as in war. Love is much more difficult. You cannot learn how to love but

what you can do is to observe hate and put it gently aside. Do not battle against hate. Do not say how terrible it is to hate people but see hate for what it is and let it drop away. What is important"—and now pay attention to this—"is not to let hate take root in your mind. Your mind is like rich soil, and if given sufficient time, any problem that comes along takes root like a weed and then you have the trouble of pulling it out. But if you do not give the problem sufficient time to take root, then it has no place to grow, and it will wither away. If you encourage hate, give it the time to take root, to grow, to mature, then it becomes an enormous problem. But if each time hate arises, you let it go by, then you will find that your mind becomes very sensitive without being sentimental. Therefore, it will know love."

Again, stop for a moment and reflect. Do you believe this? Is it true that if we do not allow hate to take root in the mind that love will appear? It certainly is worth reflecting on and perhaps beginning to understand this practice of forgiveness because without goodwill and kindness, without love in the mind, even if it's just a small measure, forgiveness may not be possible. Because forgiveness is not about the other person. It's not about the perpetrator, it's not about the act that the person did. It's actually directed to ourselves, where we understand that when we allow hate to take root in the mind, that we are the ones who are most deeply affected, that without some love to counteract the arising of hate, that this poison of aversion narrows the mind. We become so tied up with the person who we believe has harmed us that the mind narrows into ideas of vengeance and we become identified with a victim, with a sufferer. And so this hatred takes root in the mind and does not allow the mind to grow, to blossom, to flower into kindness and peace. And what happens when we get stuck on the hatred is it encourages more and more hatred in our own hearts and of course in the world around us. What the Buddha said about that is that hatred does not cease by hatred but by love alone is healed; that is the ancient and eternal law. *Hatred does not cease by hatred but by love alone is healed; that is the ancient and eternal law.*

Can you allow that to sink into the mind and sink into the heart? Does that allow you even a small glimmer of hope, that forgiveness is possible, that forgiveness brings us to peace, and when we come to internal peace we make peace with the world? So rest there just for a moment both with the understanding of not allowing hatred to take root in the heart and the understanding of allowing it to flow out and allowing the spaciousness and the ability to love to grow in us. As you may know, there is a teaching from the Buddha on what is called the *brahmaviharas*, the divine abodes, a way he said for us to live in this very life in heavenly places: that if we cultivate in the mind and heart these attitudes of kindness and compassion—the fluttering of the heart when the heart of kindness encounters suffering, joy for the joy of others, happiness when others succeed and the wish that they will continue to succeed, and equanimity—and we establish some balance in our mind, understanding with wisdom that the worldly winds that blow through our lives are constantly blowing, and that if we can sit unshakeable like a mountain in the midst of these worldly winds, if we can establish these four divine abodes, that if we can live in these places of the heart, then the mind and heart can be happy and free and peaceful.

So forgiveness springs from these attitudes, these heavenly attitudes. So what is *not* forgiveness? Forgiveness is not about condoning, it's not about redeeming, and it's not even about reconciliation. As we've been saying, forgiveness is really an internal practice that allows us to free our own hearts. It's an understanding that we are the ones who are harmed by hatred, we are

the ones who are harmed by vengeance, we are the ones who are harmed when the heart is bound up in these emotions. So we are not condoning the act, we are not judging the act, and we're not saying that we have to put ourselves in harm's way ever again with the person who harmed us. We are simply looking at the effect of this unforgiveness has on our own hearts.

Forgiveness doesn't happen quickly. It doesn't condone the past, and it doesn't mean, as I said, reconciliation. What it *does* mean is that we release ourselves from the poison tip of hatred. That's what the Buddha called it. So I would like to ask you to stop for a moment now and simply reflect on all of those words, and to close the session I would like to do a short practice with you that establishes lovingkindness where we begin to prepare the ground for forgiveness over these few weeks; we use the ability of the heart to establish itself in kindness. That is a natural ability that the heart has, and this practice of lovingkindness starts with a reflection on hatred, just to look at what hatred is and what the disadvantage is of having hatred in the heart, and continues with a reflection on the advantages of patience reaching hatred. That may have surprised you when I used the word "patience" instead of "love." But when we start with patience, that prepares the ground for love to arise, and after we've reflected on hatred, the disadvantages of hatred and the advantages of patience, then we can sit, bringing our attention again to our embodied beings and establishing a comfortable way of sitting. If you're sitting on a chair allowing yourself to put both feet on the floor; if you're sitting on a cushion really establishing a place, a way that your posture is dignified and easy, that you feel at ease.

And after you've done your reflections on hatred and on patience simply close your eyes and get a sense of being here, this precious being that you are. You may not believe that right now, but for the time being simply know that achieving a human life is a precious gift and allow yourself to get a felt sense of being here in this body. And as you get that felt sense of being in this body, allow an image of yourself to arise in the mind and in the heart. You can radiate a sense of friendliness and kindness towards yourself, and maybe for some other people. That's difficult, but as we've said before, these practices are *practices*, and they accumulate over time.

So even if you feel resistance, include that resistance in your kindness. You don't need to push it away or make something else happen or deny it or avoid it or suppress it, but simply notice that feeling of resistance to feeling yourself as a precious being or feeling some friendliness towards yourself. You just feel warmth spreading over the body up through the head, down through the torso, into the legs and down through the feet, through your shoulders and through your hands; through your whole body, feel some warmth radiating and enveloping and embracing you and just feel a sense of friendliness to this being sitting here. And as you do so, can you make some very simple wishes for your happiness and your peace? That you are safe, that you can be safe from all harm and danger, and for your health and ease, your freedom from struggle in this life. The traditional phrases are "May I be happy and peaceful, may I be safe from harm, may I be healthy and strong, and may I live with ease." You can use those phrases or you can use a version of them, whatever feels comfortable and right for you. But see if you can limit the number of phrases that you use to four and make them simple enough that you can remember them and just continue to repeat them. Cover the whole body, mind and heart with these wishes. After you feel as if those wishes have permeated the sense of your presence, your being here, then allow those wishes to radiate out to all of the precious beings with whom we share this

planet and perhaps even beyond. If there are beings beyond this planet, include them in those very simple wishes for safety, happiness and peace, health and ease.

And when you feel as if you have done so satisfactorily or sufficient times, then you can come back in to the room, open your eyes and just allow yourself to feel whether that's had any effect. Perhaps it hasn't—that's okay, because as I said, we keep practicing, and the effects of the practice accumulate over time. So in the beginning it's like every other practice. Perhaps it feels as if nothing's happening or we feel awkward or we feel as if it's not for us. You remember what it was like the first time in a gym or the first time in a yoga class or a dance class or playing an instrument—your first class always feels a bit awkward and strange because it's new; it's a new habit that we're establishing. So if it doesn't feel as if anything happened, that's okay; nothing's supposed to happen, just the sense of friendliness being developed in our hearts.

So thank you for that practice. I'd like to close this session by asking you to do some reflections between now and our session next week. Perhaps if you're a writer, if you're a person who learns through writing, you can do some journaling or you can have a cup of tea with a friend and speak to them about whatever is in your heart—about what you need to do to forgive, what acts you want to forgive, whether it's forgiving yourself or forgiving others. So here are some preliminary reflections that I would like you to do as we prepare to go into the actual forgiveness practices over the next three weeks.

The first is, do you focus on the faults of others, or on your own faults also? When you think about a person do you focus on their faults or do you focus on their good attributes, the ones that you enjoy? Do you focus on harms done, actually done, or imagined by others? Reflect on how this affects you. Now consider the idea if I can find just one good thing about them, dot, dot, dot. Can you relate to the idea of not finding anything good about certain beings? How is that for you? How does that feel when it's impossible for you to find anything good? Reflect on states of aversion, hatred, anger, resentment, fear, grief, disappointment, and despair, and how they keep you from experiencing and acting on love. After those reflections, begin to look at forgiveness.

What does forgiveness mean to you, and what thoughts, reactions, bodily sensations, and emotions arise when you think about forgiveness? I'd like to just give you a short instruction here, which also helps with respect to any practice, including the forgiveness practice that you do. In the beginning, if there is some large act in your life that you feel needs forgiveness, *don't* start there. Start with the smallest offenses and see if those are possible to forgive. See if there are small offenses that you've been holding on to in your life that have been kind of nagging, small ideas or thoughts or feelings that have held you back, that have kept your mind narrow, and allow some idea of what it might feel like to let that go. Just small offenses, not the large ones—we'll deal with the large ones later—and just notice where your resistance is to any of these exercises or reflections that I've asked you to do. Do not suppress or avoid or bypass resistance in the body or resistance in the mind or resistance in the heart but embrace it and allow it to be present and allow it to be there. Because, as Krishnamurti wisely said, we want to see how hatred is in the same way we want to see how resistance is and not let that take root—first we have to know it completely.

And the last reflection is: do you think forgiveness is excusing the behavior to be forgiven? If you can engage in the mindfulness practice that we did in the beginning, the practice that we've just done of lovingkindness—the *metta* practice we call it—and these reflections, then hopefully we will have a really rich session next week. So in the meantime please take care of yourselves, please engage as deeply as you can and as your time permits in these practices. I promise you that as you practice, as you see their effects and their advantages and their benefits, that they will be a great blessing to you, to your family, to your community, and to our world. May you be at peace. Thank you.