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Week 2, The Power of Forgiveness: Forgiving Ourselves and Others
Forgiving Ourselves
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Hello. Welcome to session two of our retreat on forgiveness. Again, let's start with a practice of meditation of coming to arrive in this moment, this place of however things are. Just notice how it feels to be here. And thank you for returning.

Just allowing the sense of embodiment again, this feeling of the molecules, of all of the molecules of your body arriving one by one. Coming to rest in this place. It is a place and a time to pause and to let go of whatever our daily duties and responsibilities are, to allow time to arrive back in the heart, and to feel the simple rhythm of this breath that keeps us alive. Please remember to keep a dignified posture, in order to come into your meditative practice as a place of rest and ease and a place of sacred dignity.

Knowing whether the breath is long or short or deep or shallow, rough or smooth. Feeling the sensations. Allowing the mind and heart to gather their energy simply around this one present breath. This in breath and then this out breath. Not needing anything. Not needing anything to be different. Not wanting anything to come or to go, but simply knowing things just as they are. Being here with loving awareness.

And as we close this session of coming to presence, remember the practice of kindness. And allow yourself to again come to a place in the heart that feels deeply the presence of the life of this precious being that you are. I will continue to say you're a precious being, even though you may resist it.

Little by little, a bucket gets filled. Don't say that your practice will come to nothing. The accumulation of goodness will show itself eventually. Your task and your business is not about how this is unfolding, but simply to do the practice and to see how it unfolds—not to *make* it unfold.

So bring your presence fully to each wish that we outlined last week: The wish for our safety, the wish for our peace and happiness, the wish for our health, and the wish for our ease or not needing to struggle with life. Feel that directly in the heart. Establish your mind and heart in lovingkindness right now. It's always possible to do so, whether you're riding on a subway to work or in a car or walking or riding a bicycle. While you're paying attention to the traffic you can also be wishing, making well wishes, wishes of friendly attitudes towards yourself and towards all of the other beings who are also going about their daily lives.

So pay attention to the movement of the heart, how the heart feels right now. And even if there is resistance, we can include that resistance in our kindness. Be kind to the resistance that you feel. Be kind to whatever obstacles arise in your ambit. Just keep wishing, making these wishes of goodwill and of friendliness and kindness for your own

happiness and peace and safety and health and ease.

So once we have established presence and a friendly attitude towards ourselves and to all around us, we can begin to consider this business of forgiveness that we've been discussing, that we've been reflecting on. And I hope that you did— you engaged to the best of your ability in the reflections that I asked you to do, whether in writing or just reflecting by yourself or discussing with a friend. Because the more active you are in these practices, the more benefit will come.

I'd like to talk about forgiveness towards ourselves. This is the first part of the forgiveness practice, to consider how we begin. And we begin by looking at all of the ways that we haven't forgiven ourselves. Are there acts that you have done, thoughts that you have had, words that you have said that have felt unforgivable, for which you have not forgiven yourself? I know for myself, that because I'm in a human body, I'm not infallible. And that there are causes and conditions in my childhood. There are experiences that I've had. There are ideas that have been taught to me by my siblings, by my parents, by my teachers, by the culture in which we live that have caused me to offend myself and to offend others.

And, of course, the way we offend ourselves is probably the most brutal. Perhaps, we notice that how we talk to ourselves is even worse than the very worst thing we could possibly say to another. Take stock of that. Really begin to reflect on your own relationship to yourself, not just your relationship to others. Because if we can start with forgiveness for ourselves, as we move into the forgiveness for others, the ground has already been laid.

So notice how it is for you in your life. What burdens have you carried in your heart for things that you have done that you regret? And perhaps, there is not another single being out in this earth, on this planet, who even knows what you have done. And yet, you've carried this burden in your heart for as long as you have lived since you did this act or said these words. And you know it's a difficult thing— that once we say words, we can't take them back. And that's why the Buddha admonished that wise speech should be a very important feature and part of our eightfold path, the path that we travel from suffering to freedom. And yet, we know that wise speech is probably one of the hardest practices we can do on that Noble Eightfold Path that the Buddha set out of wisdom and integrity and meditation. That the words that we use can be harsh, can be not true. Stinging. And can hurt for— can have traces and trails for years and years and years to come. And so of course we are talking about the past and forgiving the past. But we can also establish an intention for the future, that our practice of wise speech will really be one of the most important practices that we undertake. Because we know we can't do anything about the past. We can't do anything about the things that we've said in the past, unfortunately. But we carry the burden of them.

So how do we start this practice of forgiveness? Once we have established the ground of love, we've established the ground of compassion, of joy, and of equanimity, how do we start the practice of forgiveness? As I said in the beginning, last week, we have a three-

way practice. Practice of the first way is to look at ourselves and to forgive ourselves. The second way is to ask forgiveness of others that we've harmed. And the third way is to grant forgiveness to people who we perceive have harmed us.

So first, really look at how aligned you are with your deepest aspirations. Because as we enter into a process of forgiveness, the idea that we'll simply forgive ourselves and continue to behave in the way that we have behaved before that has required forgiveness of ourselves will probably not have much effect. And so the first thing that we do is to really look at our own values. Have we established values in our lives? Have we established the integrity in our lives? And by integrity, I mean the ability to know what the heart's deepest aspiration is. And knowing that heart's deepest aspiration, to actually set out and establish the means by which we can live according to those deepest aspirations.

Everyone wants to be happy. Nobody wants to suffer. And yet, we do all of the things that make us suffer. And we sometimes do the very opposite of what we think—the very opposite of what would make us happy. And that is why on the night of the Buddha's enlightenment, as he saw—as his wisdom eyes saw all of the ways in which human beings have been traveling this world, over and over and over again, in this, what he called the cycle of samsara, the cycle of suffering, he saw all of the ways in which we do the very things that are the opposite of what would make us happy. And it's said that tears of compassion rolled down his cheek. So can you, in this moment, reflect on all of the ways that you have, in your life, worked in such a way that you caused your own suffering, rather than building towards your own happiness? Just take a moment.

And this is not about blame or shame or guilt, but a really true and honest assessment of where in your life you are not aligned with your true and deepest aspirations and values. And of course there is always a gap. We have ideals. We have ideas about how we would like to live our lives. And those of us who are entering into or have entered into a spiritual practice, have lots of ideas and understandings and wisdoms about what makes a happy life and what makes a life of suffering. And yet, there are so many ways in which we have been unable or unwilling to establish the habits of mind that are aligned with those understandings and those values. So take a moment and know for yourself what is true for you. What are the habits of your own mind and heart that have caused your own suffering?

And what habits of mind and heart would you need to establish and practice in your life that will take you in the other direction? And as I said in the first session, this is not about “should.” This is not about what I must do, what I should do, or a recital of all of the ways that we've fallen short of our ideals. But a real assessment that helps us, that provides the ground, the undergirding, for the practice of self-forgiveness. Because if we cannot let go what we think of as sins of the past, we cannot move forward. We will be forever mired in regret and self-blame and shame and guilt, none of which are onward leading. They all hold us back in the past. And the past is forever gone. It is not possible to do anything about the past. But we can work in the present moment always.

So don't skip over this step of self-assessment. It's a very important part of spiritual work. And the self-assessment must be accompanied by the kindness and compassion that we started with this session. This kindness is a way of establishing a ground that doesn't allow us to fall into self-blame or accusations or thoughts or ideas of what I should've done and what I could've done. Or what I must've done. But more: what's possible now? That there is some realization, some assessment, some honesty, some understanding of how I have caused my own suffering. So engage in that. Engage in the understanding of the habits that we've built up of mind and heart that keep us bound. And then, make a plan, as to how we can put some effort into our practice that allows us to establish new habits of mind, new habits of heart that will accrue to our happiness.

This is an important part of practice. This is not a minor piece of our practice. It's not subsidiary or secondary to our meditation practice. This practice of reflection, of knowing, consciously being aware of, being really clear about the habits of mind that we've established that are not beneficial—the Buddha said that this is a part of the eightfold path: Right Effort. It is a way to expend some effort and some energy in understanding beneficial states of mind that have not arisen that need to be established. And once we've established them, to put whatever effort is needed so that they will continue. And to look and to see what unbeneficial states of mind have not yet arisen, and prevent them from arising. There were a lot of negatives in that. But you know what I mean.

So if there is a habit of mind where our states of mind—negative states of mind may arise. Notice the tendency for that to happen. And see what you can do to prevent them from arising. So if there's somebody that you see that you don't like comes into the room and you notice the mind going, "Ugh, it's her again" or "Ugh, it's him again." Is it possible when you see the mind about to have that impulse or about to have that thought, to let it go? And not allow it to arise. And then, the Buddha said, "But if it does arise, if our efforts to prevent them from arising do arise, then to let them go, to not encourage them." So part of our self-forgiveness is the practice of knowing the mind and putting the energy and the effort into shifting our habits of mind.

And, of course, we all know that the neuroscientists have confirmed this. That they've essentially said that the brain is plastic—that there are neural pathways that we wear into the brain with every thought and every action. So each time we prevent an unbeneficial thought from arising, we create a new neural pathway. Each time we encourage a beneficial thought to arise, and we maintain it, and we cultivate it, and we allow it to grow in us, that's a new neural pathway. And they get stronger. And, of course, the Buddha said this 2600 years ago. He said, "Wherever we put the mind, that's where it will incline." "Wherever we put the mind that's where it will incline." So the Buddha was a neuroscientist who understood plasticity way before we were even a gleam in our daddy's eye, many years, many eons, many centuries ago.

So we can make an intention, a strong intention, to really continue to train the mind in that way through our right effort, through our wise effort. To really know those four efforts: the efforts to prevent the unwholesome thoughts from arising and to abandon

them if they do arise, and the effort to encourage wholesome thoughts to arise and to maintain them and nurture them when they do arise.

And if we have that resolve, if we have the understanding that it's possible to train the mind and the heart in that way, then we are creating the ground for self-forgiveness. We are creating a way in which we can forgive ourselves for the ignorance that caused us to do what we feel we need to forgive ourselves now in this moment. So if we are practicing in that way, then we know it's possible to not repeat the mistakes of the past. And it doesn't mean that we will become infallible magically. We will make mistakes in the future. And yet, how we hold them, and whether we're able to, with awareness and immediate self-assessment, do what's necessary to minimize the effects of our unskillful or our unwholesome words, thoughts and deeds. Then, it becomes easier for us to forgive ourselves.

So let's start with this practice of self-forgiveness now. Again, establish a comfortable, easy and relaxed posture. And again, bring yourself into presence, a loving and kind presence. And I will give you some words for self-forgiveness. But of course, you're always invited to compose your own words if you feel that there is a way that it would feel more resonant for you in your heart or your mind, to bring yourself to some feeling of release and freedom from whatever has bound you in your own heart, whatever offenses you think you have committed to yourself.

So you may, either now focus on wrongs that you think you have committed for which you need to forgive yourself, or you can simply know that generally, because we're human, that we have done wrongs to ourselves. And over the weeks, you can of course reflect more and more. But for right now, if one comes to mind, you can use it. If not, just simply know, in general, how you have harmed yourself.

And you can say some words, such as—and you can say these silently—the many ways I have harmed myself, I did so out of ignorance. Not knowing, not understanding. I pledge and I intend to develop wisdom and compassion, kindness, in my own heart. And I forgive myself now for the acts that I feel that I have done where I have harmed myself. I forgive myself completely. I forgive myself completely.

And if there are acts that you feel that you have done that are unforgivable, they're not acts that you need to really start with. As I said before, start with small acts that you feel are completely forgivable. Perhaps you told a lie that you really felt had some impact on you. Or you did something unskillful that did not contribute to your benefit. Can you forgive yourself completely now, knowing that you did so out of ignorance? I forgive myself now. Or you can start with a specific act and then, generalize it to all of the acts that you have done that have been harmful to you. I forgive myself now. I forgive myself now.

And perhaps, in the beginning, it doesn't feel as if it's really true, even though you're saying the words. That's okay. Still promise or pledge to forgive yourself, so that you're starting to develop the muscles for forgiveness. I forgive myself now. And if there's

something that you feel is not possible to forgive, it's okay. Let it be. Do not let hate take root in your mind. Let it go. So if there's some hatred that is coming your way, or aversion that's coming your way, for something that you feel you did, can you set it aside? Be gentle with yourself. Be kind to yourself. Is there something you feel you can completely forgive? Then, let that be the act that you use right now in your practice. And set aside those that you feel the muscle needs to be built for. For this one word that I uttered, or this act that I did, or this thought that I had, I forgive myself completely. And notice what it feels like in the body when that forgiveness is extended and accepted. And accept that forgiveness from yourself.

I know that there is nothing I can do to change the past. And yet, I forgive myself. And I pledge that I will use my utmost efforts to not repeat that behavior or thought or word. I forgive myself completely. I forgive myself, completely.

Understand the feeling of forgiveness in your heart, emotions that arise, the thoughts in the mind, and the feelings in the body. Don't ever dismiss or override or ignore the feelings that arise in the body. These will be your constant, helpful companion in teaching you what is possible and what is true. So know very deeply the sensations in the body as you go through this practice of self-forgiveness. Understand the thoughts in the mind. Perhaps there's a thought in the mind, "Oh, I can't possibly forgive that." Know that. Or "Whew, what a relief. I'm so happy that I can finally come to some understanding of that particular situation." Feel that relief. Or perhaps there are emotions of anger or kindness or joy or sorrow. Feel those completely. Don't bypass them. They are your friends, your helpers.

I forgive myself completely. So please come back into the room. And just take a moment to absorb what you have felt, if anything. And, of course, I'm not assuming that you're necessarily feeling anything that I'm describing. If you're feeling absolutely nothing, or you're feeling nothing of what I'm describe, that's okay, too. Please note that. Embrace that. And have that as part of your—and be aware of that—as part of your experience. There is nothing in your experience that is not legitimate or capable of being known or embraced or understood.

So I would invite you to again journal if there are experiences that you have with that practice. And what I would invite you to do and encourage you to do is to have—for this week, this coming week, do this practice every day. For 5 minutes or 10 minutes or 15 minutes, however long you have, after your practice of mindfulness and *metta* [lovingkindness], do the self-forgiveness practice. This is the first direction that the forgiveness comes in. Because if we have not forgiven ourselves, how is it possible to forgive others for their offenses? When we know how it feels to forgive ourselves, it begins to become a muscle that we can use in our relationships.

So the Buddha talked about internal and external awareness. So we are being aware of what it feels like internally to forgive. And it's preparing us to know what it feels like to forgive externally. And then, to see the relationship, to be aware of the relationship, between the internal and the external. Because we are not alone in this world. We

are connected to every other being that's here with us. So I ask you to be engaged in this practice of self-forgiveness. And as you go through your life, through your daily activities, notice when something arises that might need forgiving. Something that you do, some habit of mind, some way that you see someone else, or the way you see yourself. Right? You may see yourself not so kindly. Every time a thought of unkindness towards yourself arises, can you remember to forgive yourself?

And please use writing and reflecting to really settle these practices into your being. So that you're not just doing it and letting it go, but you're actually marking it. You're allowing the neural pathways to be built toward self-forgiveness. And it's preparing you for the other two directions. So again, thank you for being here, for participating in this retreat with us. And I'm so honored and privileged to be asked into your private space, and to be here with you in this private space and in this sacred way of being and practicing. And I thank you so much for your practice, which I know will bring great benefit and blessings to the whole world. Thank you.