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Week 3, The Power of Forgiveness: Forgiving Ourselves and Others

Asking for Forgiveness

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Hello. Welcome to our third session on our forgiveness retreat. I hope that these past two weeks have been of some benefit to you. That this, understanding of the heart of kindness and compassion from which springs forgiveness, is becoming more easily realized for you. That you've been doing the practices of awareness, coming to rest in this moment, practice of loving kindness, understanding that we start with ourselves. That we establish friendliness, openness, spaciousness first with ourselves and then with others, has been of help to you.

This week we'll be working with expanding the forgiveness practice from forgiveness for ourselves to asking forgiveness from others. It begins to become a little bit more nuanced as we move our practice now outwards from the internal practices of goodwill and well-wishing and self-forgiveness to our relationships. Our meditation practice can be of great support to us as we return to it over and over and over again in the midst of any difficulties that we're feeling with the forgiveness practice. So let's start by sitting together for a few minutes. And as always we come to an understanding and a feeling and an establishment of presence through coming into an embodied feeling of being in the body and knowing what it's like to be embodied. If you want to close your eyes, you can. If not, leave them slightly open. And come into presence.

Simply knowing how it is to be here in this body with this mind and this heart arriving as we said molecule by molecule in this moment— putting down whatever we were engaged in before and allowing a sacred space to enter into the mind and heart. Allowing a kind presence, a knowing, of being here with nothing to do, nothing to get, no goals to achieve, nowhere to go. Just being here with this precious breath that keeps us alive. Knowing the sensations of our breathing in and out, knowing when it's a long breath or a short breath. Knowing if it's rough or smooth, deep or shallow, letting it be, knowing the breathing, fully, each breath gathering all of our attention around this one in breath. And

then as it goes out allowing the attention to be, again, gathered around this one outbreath. Knowing the sensations intimately. Your thoughts or emotions arise, simply let them come and go without needing to analyze or judge or criticize. They're not distractions. They're simply natural occurrences coming through the life. So we can allow the breathing in this moment to attract our attention. And yet, embracing, whatever else arises allowing it to naturally come and go as it will, whether it's a sensation, a sound, a thought or an emotion. And you can either stay with this practice of simple awareness, loving and kind awareness or you can move into the loving kindness practice that we've also been doing. As a matter of fact, yes, move into the loving kindness practice and recognize and feel, have a felt sense of how it is to be here with kindness and friendliness. Have a felt sense of this precious being that's sitting here and shower this being with your kindness. Allow it to radiate throughout the body, the mind and the heart, this well-wishing, this hoping, this wanting the happiness and peace, the safety, the health and the ease, the lack of struggle for this being that's sitting here. Radiate this feeling of friendliness of kindness throughout the body and the mind and the heart with these wishes. May I be safe. May I be happy and peaceful. May I be healthy and live with ease.

And you can do that as long as you want. And then I would like to expand that practice to a friend, a dear friend, maybe someone that you love unconditionally or who unconditionally loves you. I know that's difficult to find in this world but come as close as you can and extend that same friendliness and kindness and wishes for their well-being to that being. Get a really vivid and as real a picture as you can of them or a really good felt sense of that being, being here with you in solidarity and open to a spaciousness and a kindness and a wonder of that being's existence on this planet with you. And wish for their happiness and peace, their safety, their health and their ease. And you can even call their name silently or out loud if you'd like. May you, John, be safe from harm. May you, Cynthia, be happy and peaceful. May you, Trudy, be healthy and strong of body. May you, Andrew, live with ease. So that feeling of wishing well is really vivid and strong, as strong as you can make it. Not a kind of wimpy friendly kind of sort of warm but really strong, with conviction and with great spaciousness. And it's not to make something happen but really to cultivate this kindness. And then allow that well-being and that

well-wishing and that goodness to permeate the whole world. And you can add one wish for the world on top of the other wishes that we have for safety and happiness and health and ease. You can wish for the freedom from suffering of all beings in this world. So that we begin to also expand our practice through loving kindness and into compassion, the recognition that there is suffering in this world and allow the heart to flutter, this heart of kindness that we're building to flutter in response to the suffering of this world and wish for its end. And when you feel that you have sufficiently made these wishes and this feeling of loving kindness and compassion is beginning to build in you, you can open your eyes.

And this week, we'll talk about expanding the forgiveness practice to ask for forgiveness not only from ourselves but from the beings that we feel we have harmed or hurt by thought, word or deed. And as we were saying last week, this way of asking for forgiveness stems from wisdom. It's not a kind of rote practice that we kind of carelessly do but one where we really have been building our muscles for wisdom for understanding the effects of harmful acts in our own hearts and in the world. And we have been building the muscle for self-reflection to really think about and reflect on what we have done to harm ourselves— that's what we did last week. And this week, we're going to think about and reflect what we have done to harm others. And eventually, we will ask forgiveness in the next step of our practice. I'd like to just read a short saying from the Dhammapada which is a text that collects all of the sayings of the Buddha. He said that people who recognize their own mistakes and change their ways illumine the world. This is the quote, "They illumine the world like the moon when freed from a cloud," "That beings who recognize their own mistakes and change their ways illumine the world like the moon when freed from a cloud."

So it's hard work to recognize our own mistakes! We spend so much time recognizing the mistakes of others that we tend to ignore our own faults. And yet we know as spiritual practitioners that the work begins here. It begins in our own hearts. But we can't do that work if we don't recognize what we may have done that's possible to be corrected. And what is beautiful about spiritual work and about the work that we do in reflecting on

the dharma and practicing is that we joyously remember that it's possible to shift our lives. And that shifting of our lives comes through a change of heart, a change of mind, a change of the habits that we have built up in the heart and in the mind. So when the Buddha says that when we recognize our own faults, that we illumine the world like the moon freed from a cloud, that's a beautiful expression of how it feels for us when we are released from the shame or the suppression of acts that we have done, that we would rather we hadn't done. And sometimes we do them out of ignorance. And sometimes we do them out of a sense of helplessness or powerlessness or rage or vengeance or a feeling of having been wronged, a feeling of being the victim of injustice. And yet none of that ever excuses our harming another. And it's not a sense of wrongness or a way to impose guilt or blame because you know our culture is one that is so engaged in punishment and so believes in punishment rather than forgiveness that it has become a kind of epidemic size, so much so that we have two million people incarcerated in our prisons. We have more people in prison per capita than some of the countries that we think of as brutal dictatorships. I think we may even have the highest per capita incarceration rate in the world. So, in fact, this idea of punishment rather than forgiveness or redemption or reconciliation has gotten completely out of our ambit or out of a reasonable way of working with wrongs done. So how can we work in our own personal lives to let go of whatever conditioning our culture has imposed on us for this idea of punishing the wrongdoer? And that's not to say that we don't need to have a civilized society or that there are rules that cannot be broken in order for us to have a civilized society. But how are we to conduct our own lives?

It starts internally. It starts with ourselves. It starts with our examining our faults. And it starts with our valuing those friendships and those beings that we know who are willing to help us, who are willing to point out our faults. And in a way for us to have to joyously see our faults. Not to see them with a sense of shame or guilt or blame, but to see, oh yes, this is a way or this is an area that needs work. That's a different way of looking, isn't it? It's a different way of seeing our, what we think of as wrongdoing or faults. That we don't shrink from them but we actually move into them in a way that is helpful and that encourages forgiveness, forgiveness in our hearts and forgiveness in the relationships in

which we are engaged. So that's the sense on which we build this understanding of this next phase of forgiveness, of the forgiveness practice. That our asking for forgiveness from other beings is based not on shame or guilt or blame, but on our recognition of what has happened, or the ways in which ignorance has worked in our lives, or unawareness has worked in lives that has led to our actions, our thoughts, or our words being the cause of someone else's unhappiness, sorrow, suffering. And we can't do anything about how they are relating to what we did. And perhaps they will never forgive us. And yet, that doesn't prevent us from feeling remorse or regret for what we have done out of our ignorance. And from that remorse and regret and from that recognition, from the new wisdom that we have gained of how we were not in alignment with our own values or our own goals or intentions or our deepest aspirations when this happened or the recognition of our fallibility; when our asking for forgiveness comes from that place. Not from a place where we expect to be totally excused or where we think that they should just get over it, right? Because now I've recognized what I did so they should just get over it. No, they have their own rage. They have their own difficulty, their own sorrows, their own hearts, with which they must deal. So just as we said in the first session that forgiveness was an inside job it's not really so much about the external. It's really about the gift that we give to ourselves and to the other being and we can do that even without the other being ever knowing that we have forgiven them. And we also recognize that forgiveness does not necessarily equate with reconciliation, that it doesn't mean that we necessarily have to then reform a relationship. But that forgiveness is our own releasing of the burden of rage or vengeance or giving up our right to vengeance.

So when we ask for forgiveness for misdeeds or harsh words or anything that has caused harm to someone else, all of that is part of our wisdom, all of that understanding is part of our recognition. That we're not necessarily asking for reconciliation although that might be really beautiful. And so let's just talk about reconciliation for a moment because as I said that, the understanding of what happened in South Africa after years and years of oppression and repression and terrible difficulty and violence, out of a very unjust system of apartheid is a real beacon to all of us in the civilized or even uncivilized world. When a commission on truth and reconciliation was formed the ability that people had to come

to confess what they had done, to own and take responsibility for what they had done with the understanding that that recognition and that willingness to come forth and say yes, I did this, would be an avenue, a way for them to be forgiven and for reconciliation. What an amazing example of forgiveness. And having that system established allowed a whole country that may have sunk into bloodshed for untold years was avoided. And so that's the power of our willingness to confess what we have done and to ask forgiveness. And we see that all over the world in different places in Bosnia, in Cambodia, in Rwanda. That the ability to ask, to say yes, this happened, to not push it away, to not ignore it, to not avoid it, to not suppress it, to not deny it, but to actually say yes this happened, to bring it forward is an opportunity for respect to be afforded to all of those beings that we affect. And perhaps reconciliation is impossible because it is not identical with forgiveness. And yet, our ability to come forward can allow us some measure of peace. And, again, forgiveness does not mean forgetting necessarily because there are some things that it's not wise to forget; that our wisdom says yes we need to remember that this is possible and to never, ever let it happen again. And the necessity for reconciliation may not appear in the first moment but it's certainly cannot be based on lies or avoidance or suppression or denial.

Our own practice comes from that. So we take stock, we reflect, what have we done? What needs forgiveness from others? And to illumine the world like the moon released from a cloud by bringing into consciousness those words, those thoughts, and those deeds that have indeed been of harm. So this piece of the practice, the second arm of the practice, after we've established presence and after we've established kindness and spaciousness and dignity is to reflect on those things for which we would like to be forgiven. And it doesn't mean that we have to go to that person but perhaps it does. First, we need to actually, in our own hearts begin to feel the sorrow and the pain of having created that suffering for another being. We need to understand deeply how we have impacted another being. We cannot ask for their forgiveness if we don't understand that. So there may be a difficulty, for instance, a family difficulty or a friendship difficulty where words have been said both ways, where you feel as if you've been harmed, but you

have also done your part to harm. Really sit back and imagine in your memory what has happened.

So I'd like you now to come to a place of awareness and presence and, again, establish in your heart, a sense of kindness and spaciousness and friendliness and well-wishing. And from that place, remember how you have harmed and do so, again, without guilt or blame or shame, but just a really honest assessment. Bring the person to mind that you believe you have harmed, or maybe you really know for a fact you've harmed. And ask for their forgiveness. I know the ways that I have harmed you by thought, word or deed. I did so in ignorance, or parenthetically you can say whatever the causes were. And I feel the sorrow deeply for the harm that I have caused you by my words, my thoughts and my deeds. I sincerely regret them. And I feel deeply for your suffering. And for all of the ways that I have been an instrument of that suffering I deeply apologize and I ask for your forgiveness. Imagine this person being here with you. See if you can join and feel the sorrow that they feel, the hurt, the pain. And allow yourself to feel a fluttering of the heart for their suffering, while you are also feeling a fluttering of the heart in response to your own pain for having been the instrument of the suffering. I ask for your forgiveness now. I ask for your forgiveness now. Please forgive me. And allow yourself to feel deeply whatever is true in this moment. Perhaps you're not feeling real remorse. That's okay. Or how does it feel to have that out in the open, to not deny your part in the suffering? How does that feel in the body? Is there a story in the mind? Does the mind want to give excuses or reasons why you did whatever you did? Allow them to come and go. And what are the emotions that are felt? Don't bypass anything. Allow those emotions to arise and feel them completely. I am so sorry. I ask for your forgiveness now. I am so sorry. I am truly sorry. And I ask for your forgiveness now.

And when you feel that you would like to open your eyes, you can do so and arrive back into the room feeling whatever resonance that you had in your heart or lack thereof. Perhaps there was no resonance for you and that's okay. This is a practice that accumulates over time. So I'd like to end this session by asking you, again, to engage in some practices that are centered in this understanding of needing forgiveness for harm

that you have caused. One way I might suggest is to write a letter. We're not going to mail it necessarily. We're not going to send it necessarily. And don't make it an email. Write it in your own hand. And that letter can include memories that you may have had with a being that you need forgiveness from, that you would like to have forgiveness from. And take time with this letter. Have it include memories, good memories that you had in a relationship with this person. Recall ways in which you felt together as friends or family or whatever the relationship is, maybe even just work colleagues. I shouldn't say just. Maybe work colleagues. And recall the good qualities of this person. And also recall your own good qualities. And set out the intensions that you had for this relationship with this person that may have gone off the rails or gone askew, gone astray. And then without explaining yourself or why you did it, just talk about the regret that you have for what has come to pass, and the harm that you may have caused to this being and apologize. You don't have to send it. But it's very helpful sometimes to actually engage physically in a request for forgiveness. And perhaps you want to take a picture out of this person of the two of you together when there were happier times and actually look at it and recall for this person how there were happier times. And maybe you'd like to return to those times. Maybe that's what you want to ask for. But since you know it's not a letter that you may ever send you can be wild, ask for unreasonable things like let's really reconcile. Let's sit down and talk about re-establishing trust. This is difficult. Or you can simply ask for forgiveness. And use that as the bridge for next week's session in which we will come to the pièce de résistance in this retreat, the icing on the cake, as they say which is granting our own forgiveness for harms that we feel have been done to us.

Now we have entered into seeing how we've harmed ourselves. We've looked at how we've harmed others. We see how it feels to have been the perpetrator of the harm. And so we're being prepared to understand that since that action is not all of who we are, similarly next week we'll talk about the fact that that action, that that being did that caused us harm is not all of who they are. And we've now been prepared to see that good and evil runs through every heart including our own. And that everyone has sorrows enough to fill a whole world. And so as we write this letter, let our hearts really feel the sorry, let our hearts really feel the pain of another. And let our hearts soften towards

ourselves for having caused the pain and to the other for whom we have caused the pain. And I'll also ask you to engage in the practice of awareness and mindfulness and the practices of lovingkindness before we do anything else when we engage in these practices and do that before you write the letter. And if you can do that practice every day of mindfulness and metta, mindfulness and lovingkindness, loving friendliness. Because as the more we use that as the way of as we said last time we do the effort of really training the mind to having wholesome and skillful thoughts and to letting go of unskillful and unwholesome, the stronger the muscle will become. So as we practice every day we are building the muscle. And as we write this letter and we reflect perhaps this isn't the only person we've harmed. I would bet that she or he is not the only person we've harmed. Maybe we begin to see others that we've harmed and maybe even before unknowingly. And can we understand our own ignorance and our own awakening wisdom and out of that ask for forgiveness. And as we move around our lives, if you step on someone's toe and you say, sorry, recognize that that is a form of asking forgiveness. So we start to recognize all of the little ways that we ask for forgiveness so that, again, we're building the muscles so that as we get to the larger and larger issues in our lives, the muscle will have been built. So we don't attack or tackle the hardest and most difficult thing to be forgiven. But we actually start with the small things and we build from there.

So, again, thank you for being with us in the third of this series of retreats on forgiveness. And my deepest wish is that you have begun to forgive yourself and that this muscle for forgiveness is beginning to feel strong and built in your life. And that from this cultivation of forgiveness there is a strong feeling of release and freedom deep in the heart. And that your kindness will become infectious to all of the people with whom you interact in your daily life, your family, your friends, your community and the whole world. Thank you.

