

Gina Sharpe

Week 4, The Power of Forgiveness: Forgiving Ourselves and Others

Granting Forgiveness

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Hello. Welcome to the fourth and final session of our retreat on forgiveness. I hope that you have been engaging in the practices and that you have felt some benefit from them. This session will be our third direction in which we extend forgiveness: the forgiveness that we extend to others who we feel harmed by.

But before we go into that, I'd like to just spend a little bit of time practicing together establishing mindfulness and presence, letting your eyes close or not depending on what makes you comfortable, bringing the body to a dignified and at ease posture, establishing mindfulness of breath, of breathing, feeling the sensations one by one, moment by moment, perhaps even taking a deep breath to allow the body, mind, and heart to arrive molecule by molecule. Relaxing the body, relaxing the mind, relaxing the heart. Letting go of whatever affairs you have been attending to before you arrived here. Seeing there's nothing to accomplish, nothing to do, nothing to gain, just a simple relaxation into this moment in which we know our embodied being and its heart and mind. And as you are allowing the presence with the sensations of breathing, feel your heart open to admit this being that's here, this precious being with its life, and get a felt sense of what it is to be who you think you are, to be this being sitting here now in this body with this mind and this heart and open to the feeling of friendliness and kindness, the well wishing for this being to be safe, happy, and peaceful, healthy, and at ease, and to be free from suffering.

And as you are in your heart space, bring other beings into this heart space with you, a being that has loved you unconditionally if you have such a being in your life or a dear friend who loves you and whom you love and extend the wishes of kindness to this friend or this being of unconditional love. And if it's possible for you, can you also admit in your heart someone with whom you're having difficulty? You don't have to force it. You don't have to feel as if there's something to fix, but can you extend this feeling of

well wishing and of spaciousness to a being that you think of as being difficult in your life. And now that teaching of patience that we had in one of our earlier sessions—considering bringing some patience to this process might be helpful when we bring a person that’s difficult in our lives into our ambit of our friendly circle. To do so with some patience and softness—soften the heart. Notice any resistance that you felt when I asked you to do it and any resistance that you’re feeling now. And whatever you can offer to this being for their wellbeing will be helpful to you to help to develop this muscle for warmth and friendship and kindness. *May you be safe from harm. May you be happy and peaceful. May you be healthy and strong of body and live with ease, free from suffering.*

And this feeling of well wishing to yourself, to your dear friend, and to your difficult person can be extended into the whole world. But don’t skip over the difficult person and move onto the whole world until you feel as if you have established some connection with this difficult person. He or she is a human being just as you are. They want happiness just as you do. They want to be free from suffering just as you do. So include them in your wishes for the wellbeing of all beings. They are not outside of all beings. We are all in this human dilemma together. *So may all beings be safe from harm, happy and peaceful. May all beings be healthy and strong and may all beings live with ease.* Allow the well wishing and friendliness to permeate your whole body and mind and heart as we move into this fourth and final session on forgiveness. So when you’re ready, you can open your eyes.

So when we think about forgiveness—well, let me come back first of all to this practice since it’s our last session. This *metta* practice is a really beautiful practice to establish as the ground for your forgiveness practice, and I encourage you to do so because we just had four sessions and we were really focused on forgiveness. This practice of *metta* is not as developed as it can be. It’s a really beautiful practice all by itself and so I encourage you, if it has touched you or you feel as if it is of benefit to you, to really investigate it. I’ve abbreviated it in these sessions, but it can be a practice all by itself independent of everything else that weaves through your awareness practice and weaves

through your life. So if it's touched you or you feel as if it might be helpful to you, please feel free to investigate it and practice it.

So I'd like to talk about the practice now, this final practice of extending forgiveness to others. What is helpful in this practice of extending forgiveness to others is the practice of letting go and the practice of understanding—understanding in a visceral way the grief that we feel. So we will concentrate today on the forgiveness practice. But I wanted to just mention to you that there are also practices for letting go and there are also practices in which you can actually work with the grief that you feel, and all of these practices are worthwhile because the practice of forgiving others for harm they have caused you should not be rushed. It shouldn't feel as if we're moving—we're Westerners and so we want to get to the end. We want to get to that accomplishment and say, "Yeah, I've done it. Now I've forgiven. Okay, next practice." But this can be the practice of a lifetime. This can be a practice that actually accompanies us on our entire spiritual journey because no doubt there will be other difficulties that we encounter through the acts, through the words, and through the thoughts of others.

And so it's a constant practice, and there are different levels of activities that may impact us. There's societal harms: racism, classism, war, economic injustice, injustice through the legal system, societal disparities; horrific injustices that we have had to endure. That's one level. There are other levels of difficulties that we've had to endure. Personal and family relationships, unjust firings, oppressive systems, betrayal. So there are many ways as human beings that it is possible for us to be hurt. We've been harmed. We've been abused. We've been abandoned. And who of us who are human can say we have not experienced this? So grief and letting go can be really helpful practices that I again encourage you to look into and investigate as supports for this practice of forgiveness. So there's pain, anger, confusion, fear—so many ways, so many emotions and difficulties that arise as a consequence of actions done by others. One of the ways that the Buddha encourages us to work, to manifest the awakened heart in our lives, is to work with relinquishment and renunciation.

This quality of forgiveness is a quality of mercy. In one of Shakespeare's plays, I think it's "The Merchant of Venice," there's a speech in which Portia says, "The quality of mercy is not strained. It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the earth beneath." It's that quality of gentleness and softness that is encouraged in this practice of forgiving wrongs that have been done to us. Working through the pain, the anger, the confusion, the fear. Working through the grief and allowing the letting go of the story of the hardship in order to come to a place where it's possible to forgive. We have been through the practice of asking for forgiveness, and as I said last week when we asked for forgiveness for what we had done, it provides the ground for this stage of forgiveness. Why is that so? Because we recognize our own imperfection. And I use the word imperfection advisedly. I don't mean that we're imperfect in the sense that we fall short of any particular measurement, but imperfection in the sense that there are so many causes and conditions that have entered into our lives. As I said in the beginning in the first retreat, all of the conditioning that we've received from childhood up until the time of our adulthood... we have all made mistakes and that recognition joins us together, removes us from the optical delusion that Albert Einstein says we have of being separate, and allows us to come into the understanding of what it is to be a human being, how we can completely claim and have a rightful claim to calling ourselves human. And we call ourselves human and we understand what it means to be a human being because we see the common frailty of the human conditioned existence and the susceptibility and vulnerability of it. And when we see it in ourselves, then it's possible to recognize it in others. And when we recognize it in others, then there's the ability to soften the impact that that fallibility, that imperfection, has had on us as we have moved through life in relationship to other beings.

So we take all of that into account when we entertain the idea. It's just now a glimmer in our eyes, a glimmer in our hearts, that it might be possible to forgive. And as I've said before, please don't take the hardest offense to start with. When we did the *metta* meditation, the lovingkindness practice for difficult people, that's the entryway. That's the beginning where we wish people well. And there's no need to feel that this forgiveness of the act means that we have to reconcile or have to tolerate or have to

reunite with the other person. It might be wise to say “never again.” But what are we carrying in our own hearts? What is the germ of the idea that says this is unforgivable or that I will never forgive it? “I will never forgive it.” If you can really in your own heart just right now say that, “This is unforgivable. I will never forgive it,” and actually feel what that feels like in your own body. Can you feel the tightness? Can you feel the hardness? Can you feel how just that idea, just that thought, has on the physical being that you are? And is it possible to release that tightness? Do you want to release that tightness? Is it your intention to release that tightness or will you hold onto it for the rest of your life? And do you want that tightness to be what governs your life? If you can reflect in this way then perhaps there can be an opening that allows you to even consider the possibility that there is nothing that is unforgivable. And you can think of the worst genocide, think of the worst social ill, the most unjust social ill that has happened and perhaps you want to hold onto the idea that it should never be forgiven. But consider for a moment the causes and conditions that allowed that to happen. Consider for a moment the whole gestalt of the situation. Consider it with wisdom. Consider it with compassion. And compassion—just to speak about that for a moment—compassion is the idea, the understanding that we’re all in this together, that we’re all suffering, that to be born into a human body is to include the experience of suffering. And that’s why we have compassion. Not because we’re up here not suffering and everybody else is down there suffering, but because we’re all in this soup together. And so when we wish for an end to the suffering of one being, we’re wishing for an end to the suffering of all beings, because we’re not disconnected. It’s all one connected whole. So this understanding that whatever action this being did is not all of who that person is, and that there are some pretty horrific deeds we all know that beings have done to each other throughout the ages, and that perhaps we’re not ready to forgive the most horrific or the most horrible that has happened to us in our lifetimes, but perhaps we can begin with the smallest glimmer, the smallest opening of forgiving something that we think we are capable of forgiving now.

So right now just reflect on something that you are willing to forgive and understand it to be a gift that you give to yourself first and then a gift that you give to the other being, although you never have to tell them. We can agree to that. They don’t necessarily have

to be told. Because this forgiveness, although it has to do with an external relationship, is a totally internal experience. And so you can close your eyes and reflect on the many ways that you have been harmed, the many ways that you have been hurt knowingly or unknowingly by others, by thought, by word, and by deed. Feel the pain, the anger, the frustration, the powerlessness that you have felt as a result, and feel compassion for those feelings. They're not to be turned away from or to be denied or suppressed or avoided, but actually known. And breathe into this heart space. Breathe into this feeling of hurt. And perhaps there is rage or fear or tremendous sorrow and sadness, or betrayal. Whatever the feelings are, feel them fully. Feel where they're felt in the body. Feel the stories in the mind, the emotions in the heart, however and wherever they are felt. Remember them now. And if there is one particular harm that you are willing and ready to forgive right now, allow the memory of that to come into your heart space. In the way that you have harmed me, by thought or word or deed, perhaps I don't fully understand all of the reasons or the causes and conditions that brought you to that act and yet feeling the wish for you to be happy and for me to be happy, I extend my forgiveness now. I recognize that all beings are worthy of respect and I respect myself and I respect you and I forgive you now. I forgive you now. I forgive you now.

Allow the breathing of the body to be into the heart center. Feeling whatever resonance and whatever resistance is coming for this forgiveness to others, to this being. What is the form of the resistance, if there is some? Perhaps you feel yourself falling asleep. Perhaps you don't want to feel the feelings that you're feeling. Notice that, embrace it, and meet it with kindness and stay in the space of remembering what it felt like to be harmed, what it feels like now. And yet feel what the willingness to forgive feels like as well. Does it feel like a release or does it feel wrong? Does it feel as if we should really grasp and hold onto that hard place that doesn't want to forgive? Whatever those feelings are, they are legitimate and you are entitled to them right now. So it's not that you need to get rid of them or make them go away or think that they're wrong, but just know them and work with this small thing that you're forgiving, recognizing that it's the ground that we are establishing; that we're building the muscle for forgiveness. And you can stay with this as long as you want to or can. And when you're ready you can open your eyes.

So these have been small tastes of these practices, and they are meant to give you an outline, a template to begin the practice of forgiveness. They are by no means complete practices that are not capable of being developed or expanded, but they're a gentle outline for ways that you may want to start to train the heart and the mind to consider forgiveness. It's a difficult subject. It's a difficult subject for many beings. I've had many students who have struggled with forgiveness for many years but I have also seen openings and freedom from their ability to work through all of the resistances and the obstacles that have arisen for forgiveness in their hearts. As with all other spiritual practices, this can be a lifelong work, since we never know when the effort and the energy that we put into our practice will create a sudden opening. So I encourage you to just continue to practice daily if this is a practice that feels right for you, to continue to practice, to continue to know what it feels like to meet the resistances, to meet the resentments, to meet the anger, to meet the feelings of vengeance with an open and compassionate heart, one that's not judging or feeling that we are not entitled to or entitled to respect for the feelings that we have, but to actually go through it body, mind, and heart completely, without leaving anything out.

So my deep respect is extended to you who have stayed through these four retreats and a deep wish that your practice of forgiveness will deepen daily, weekly, monthly, yearly, and that it will bring you great freedom. Freedom of heart, freedom of mind, and deep happiness.

May you be very, very well. Thank you so much.