

The Power of Forgiveness | Tricycle

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Our ability to forgive allows us to meet suffering—our suffering as well as the suffering of others—with a kind heart. Gina Sharpe



Forgiveness is not simple. When we have been harmed, hurt, betrayed, abandoned, or abused, forgiveness can often seem to be out of the question. And yet, unless we find some way to forgive, we will hold that hatred and fear in our hearts forever. Imagine what the world would be like without forgiveness. Imagine what it would be like if every one of us carried every single hurt, every single resentment, all the anger that came up, when we felt betrayed. If we just kept that in our hearts and never let it go, it would be unbearable. Without forgiveness, we're forced to carry the sufferings of the past. As Jack Kornfield says, "Forgiveness is giving up all hope of a better past." In that sense, forgiveness is really not about someone's harmful behavior; it's about our own relationship with our past. When we begin the work of forgiveness, it is primarily a practice for ourselves.

Maha Ghosananda, a Theravada monk who was known as “the Gandhi of Cambodia,” used to lead *dhammayietra* (“pilgrimage of truth”) walks in the early 1990s, after peace accords ending the civil war between the Khmer Rouge and the new Cambodian government had been signed. When Maha Ghosananda died in 2007 at the age of 78, an obituary in *The Economist* detailed his experiences walking through Cambodia after the war: He often found war still raging. Shells screamed over the walkers, and firefights broke out round them. Some were killed. The more timid ran home, but Ghosananda had chosen his routes deliberately to pass through areas of conflict. Sometimes the walkers found themselves caught up in long lines of refugees, footsore like them, trudging alongside ox carts and bicycles piled high with mattresses and pans and live chickens. “We must find the courage to leave our temples,” Ghosananda insisted, “and enter the suffering-filled temples of human experience.”

Now, though the Khmer Rouge had outlawed nostalgia, had razed the monasteries and thrown the mutilated Buddha statues into the rivers, old habits stirred. As they caught Ghosananda’s chant, “Hate can never be appeased by hate; hate can only be appeased by love,” soldiers laid down their arms and knelt by the side of the road. Villagers brought water to be blessed and plunged glowing incense sticks into it to signal the end of war. . . . He could not stay out of the world. Rather than devoting himself to monastic scholarship, he built hut-temples in the refugee camps.

Maha Ghosananda built those temples even though he was told by the remnants of the Khmer Rouge that if he dared to open these temples he would be killed. As thousands of refugees arrived at the temples, Maha Ghosananda handed out dog-eared photocopies of the Buddha’s *Metta Sutta*:

With a boundless heart
Should one cherish all living beings:
Radiating kindness over the entire world,
Spreading upwards to the skies,
And downwards to the depth.

This story is a powerful reminder of what forgiveness can do. Maha Ghosananda’s family was wiped out by the Khmer Rouge, and during their reign Buddhist monks were labeled as social parasites. They were defrocked, forced into labor fields, or

murdered: out of 60,000 monks, only 3,000 remained in Cambodia after the war. But despite all that he had suffered during the Khmer Rouge regime, Maha Ghosananda was able to find forgiveness in his heart.

Forgiveness releases us from the power of fear and allows us to see kindly with a wise heart. First, we need to understand forgiveness: then we learn how it is practiced, and then how we may forgive ourselves and others. The Buddha said, “If it were not possible to free the heart from entanglement and greed, hate, fear, and delusion, I would not teach you or ask you to do so.” The power of forgiveness releases us from the power of fear. Our practice of lovingkindness can be enhanced by our practice of forgiveness, because it allows us to see with kind eyes and to rest in a wise and peaceful heart. In any moment, we can learn to let go of hatred and fear and rest in peace and forgiveness—it’s never, ever too late. But in order to cultivate a truly loving and kind heart, we need to develop the practices that cultivate and strengthen forgiveness and the natural compassion within us. Our ability to forgive allows us to make space for our ability to meet suffering—our suffering as well as the suffering of others—with a kind heart.

Forgiveness does not gloss over what has happened in a superficial way. The practice is not about planting a smile on our face and saying, “It’s okay. I don’t mind.” It’s not a misguided effort to suppress our pain or to ignore it. If you’ve suffered a great injustice, coming to forgiveness may include a long process of grief and outrage and sadness and loss and pain. Forgiveness is a deep process, which is repeated over and over and over again in our hearts. It honors the grief and it honors the betrayal. And in its own time, it ripens into the freedom to truly forgive. And if we look honestly at our own lives, we can see the sorrows and pain that have led to our own wrongdoing. We’re not just victims; sometimes we also need to be forgiven. And in this way we can finally extend forgiveness to ourselves and hold the pain that we have caused in the heart of compassion. Without such mercy we would live in isolation or in exile.

As you do the following forgiveness practices, let yourself feel whatever small or large release there is in your heart. Or if there is no release, notice that too. And if you are not ready to forgive, that’s all right. Sometimes the process of forgiveness takes a lifetime, and that’s perfectly fine. You can unfold in your own time and in your own way. We’re not trying to manufacture some kind of feeling, so if all you can muster is the understanding that harm was done, that’s perfectly okay. Emotions will come not because we force them to but because they’re there, because they’re an expression of some deep feeling inside. So if as a result of the harm, there were ways in which your heart closed or your feelings closed, you can acknowledge that too as part of the

harm. Whatever you feel, you feel. And whatever you don't feel, you don't feel. Forgiveness is an attitude of welcoming and inviting and spaciousness rather than some emotion that we pump up in our bodies and minds and hearts.

We practice with the faith that as we do the repetitions, the body, mind, and heart learn. That's the beauty of these practices, we learn that we're not in control of the fruits of our practice, but we are in control of how we do the practice—whether we do it with patience and diligence and determination and wisdom and effort and energy. We're not in control of how it then manifests in our life. We're not trying to make anything happen, because in the trying to make something happen, we will miss the beauty and the delight of what does happen.

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Image: After Attar's 'The Conference of the Birds' V, 45 inches by 45 inches, watercolor/paper, 2006. © Francesco Clemente. Courtesy: Mary Boone Gallery, New York.

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