

Making Peace with Our Past

Buddhist Forgiveness Meditation

Forgiveness is an essential ingredient in making peace with our past and becoming whole. We can't heal unless we forgive.

What is Forgiveness?

Forgiveness diminishes, and eventually ends, our suffering in the present due to our identification with memories of past experiences. It is about choosing to focus on replacing the mind's unhealthy and harmful relationship with the past with a new and healthy one. It is a process of planting seeds of kindness, compassion and forgiveness which take hold and grow in our hearts.

Buddhist Forgiveness practice is safe because it takes place within the boundaries of our own minds, bodies, and hearts. It does not involve revisiting, reflecting on, or reliving memories. It does not require that we do anything in the outer world. It is a gradual process over which we have complete control. The process may, at some point in the future, include communication or reconciliation with another person...if we choose to do so.

Why Might We Be Willing to Forgive?

Holding onto memories of past events – not forgiving - results in our suffering in the present. Some part of us continues to live in unresolved hostility, resentment, blame and, perhaps, shame. Our mind repeatedly re-runs a painful narrative of past events that are now only memories. The historical Buddha referred to such stored, toxic memories and narratives as “knots” that need to be untied and released through practice.

The first step in making peace with our past is choosing to begin the process of Forgiveness. That decision is an expression of the most wholesome aspiration: to heal, to be well, to become whole, to stop being held hostage by the past.

Why Can Forgiveness Be So Difficult?

There are many reasons, and excuses, why we don't or won't forgive. Here are a few important ones:

We simply don't know how to Forgive, or to ask for Forgiveness.

We think that it is, or will be taken as, a sign of weakness, appeasement, or condoning or pardoning acts which were unfair, unjust, and caused injury.

We use not forgiving as a shield to avoid opening to and experiencing the pain and strong emotions that are a common part of prior injuries.

We confuse Forgiveness with the related, but separate, issues of accountability and reconciliation.

What Are the Foundations of the Forgiveness Process?

Four principles form the foundation of Forgiveness practice:

One. We suffer in the present because of our identification with memories of the past. We suffer when we revisit these memories, which include a distorted narrative about past events. This reactive process stored in the body and mind, not the past events themselves, is the true source of our suffering.

Two: All of us are human, imperfect and make mistakes, sometimes serious mistakes. This is true of ourselves. It is true of those we love. It is true of those who were involved in past events which are at the center of our suffering. Each of us acts unskillfully and causes harm because we suffer. Understanding the past from this compassionate viewpoint serves us in several ways:

It gives us an opportunity to open to our own humanness and suffering. It allows us to treat ourselves with understanding and generosity, rather than holding ourselves up for blame and criticism.

If another person is involved, it gives us the opportunity to see the other person as a fallible, imperfect human being who has made mistakes - just like ourselves. This may soften our hostility and anger allowing us to begin the forgiveness process, even though we may never fully understand the motivation for the other person's actions.

Three. The psychology of Buddhist Forgiveness arises from the experiential reality that every human being has an essential nature that is whole, unbroken, and healthy. This is the case even if it is hidden below layers of suffering, patterns of reactive thinking and emotions, deep confusion, and a problem-generating personality. Forgiveness is directed to this essential nature, the true being behind the personality.

Four. Forgiveness is rooted in Loving Kindness & Compassion. These qualities help us extend a sense of genuine care and concern to the being behind the personality. (1)

How Do We Practice Forgiveness Meditation?

Here are the basic instructions:

Move awareness into the body, allowing the body and mind to let go, release, and relax. Once the body has begun to settle, move the attention into the sensations of each full in-breath and each full out-breath. Let go of any tension, holding and thinking on each outbreath.

Setting Intention. Sincerely repeat the following phrases to set your intention for the meditation:

I choose to undertake the process of Forgiveness that will eventually bring balance and peace into my life.

I choose to end my suffering in the present because of memories of past events.

If I cannot forgive in this moment, may I start the process that will allow me to do so in the future.

Forgiving Oneself or Another. Take a few deep breaths and release on the out-breath. Allow an image or heart-felt sense of yourself to arise. It might be helpful to imagine seeing yourself in a mirror, or image as a small child or baby. If it feels comfortable, bring this image or heart-felt sense into the center of your chest, or hold it in front of the center of the chest. If Forgiveness is being extended to another person, a safe image or heart-felt sense of that person is used in the same way. Hold the image with kindness, tenderness, and generosity.

Allow the deep intention, and the heart-felt feeling, behind each of the following Forgiveness phrases to fill your mind and heart. Connect this intention and feeling with the image of yourself, or the other person. Repeat the following phrases multiple times,

each time feeling the intention, and connecting with the image of yourself or other person.

Set One:

For any way I [you] have cause myself [me] to suffer, knowingly or unknowingly, in thought, word or deed,

May I be kind and compassionate with myself [you].

May I forgive myself [you].

Set Two:

May I accept that I [you] am [are] human and have made mistakes.

May I forgive myself [you].

You can use both sets, or you may find that repeating the first or second set by itself feels right. Do this for as long as there is a good connection with the intention behind each phrase and the image of the person to be forgiven.

Staying Safe & In Balance. If you find the mind being pushed out of balance by strong emotions or troubling, narrative related thinking, do what is helpful to get back in balance. Do this with real care, kindness, and tenderness. Here are a few options:

Shift attention into the body and experience the emotions or thoughts as energy moving thru, and expressing themselves, in the body. Keep attention in the body and stay out of any story or narrative. Breathe a little more deeply and release any tension or holding in the body or mind on the full length of the out-breath; and or

Ground and comfort yourself by placing your hand over your heart; holding your knees or shoulders with your hands; alternatively placing the thumb of one hand softly in the palm of the other hand; gently rocking; slowly moving or tensing, then releasing parts of the body, particularly the hands and feet; resetting your posture; or standing up, feeling grounded into the floor, and allowing the body to find its own balance by releasing any holding in your posture and muscles; and/or

Shift to Lovingkindness, Compassion or Equanimity meditation, or use some of the balancing phrases used in these meditations. (1)

Ending the Meditation. If the mind comes back into balance and it feels safe, move back into Forgiveness meditation. If not, or if it just feels like time to stop, move to closing the meditation by doing Loving Kindness for yourself:

May I be safe.

May I be at ease.

May I be free from suffering.

May I be happy.

Asking Someone to Forgive You. We follow the same meditation format outlined above when we ask someone to forgive us. The only difference is a change in phrases as follows:

For any way I have caused you to suffer,

knowingly or unknowingly,

in thought, word or deed,

May you forgive me.

May you accept that I am human,

just like you,

and have made mistakes.

May you forgive me.

Footnote (1): A discussion of each of these forms of meditation, including detailed instructions, are available on the Sacramento Insight Meditation website under “Resources.”

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