

EXERCISE: Forgiveness

In order to be released from deeply held aversion for ourselves and for others, we must be able to practice forgiveness. Forgiveness has the power to ripen forces of purity such as love, and affirms the qualities of patience and compassion. It creates the space for renewal, and a life free from bondage to the past.

When we are held prisoner by our own past actions, or the actions of others, our present life cannot be fully lived. The resentment, the partially experienced pain, the unwelcome inheritance we carry from the past, all function to close our hearts and thereby narrow our worlds.

The intention of forgiveness meditation is not to force anything, or to pretend to anything, or to forget about ourselves in utter deference to the needs of others. In fact, it is out of the greatest compassion for ourselves that we create the conditions for an unobstructed love, which can dissolve separation and relieve us of the twin burdens of lacerating guilt and perpetually unresolved outrage.

It is much more difficult to forgive than not to forgive. Political leaders seem to rely on this fact: it may be much easier to unite people with a bond of common hatred than with shared love. It is not so easy to access that place inside of us which can forgive, which can love. Remember, to be able to forgive is so deep a letting go that it is a type of dying. We must be able to say, "I am not that person anymore and you are not that person anymore."

Forgiveness does not mean condoning a harmful action, or denying injustice or suffering. It should never be confused passive toward violation or abuse. Forgiveness is an inner relinquishment of guilt or resentment, both of which are devastating to us in the end. As forgiveness grows within us, it may take any outward form: we may seek to make amends, demand justice, resolve to be treated better, or simply leave a situation behind us.

The sense of psychological and spiritual well-being that comes from practicing forgiveness comes directly because this practice takes us to the edge of what we can accept. Being on the edge is challenging, wrenching, and transforming. The process of forgiveness demands courage and a continual remembering of where our deepest happiness lies. As Goethe said, "Our friends show us what we can do; our enemies show us what we must do."

It is indeed a process, which means that as you do the reflections, many conflicted emotions may arise: shame, anger, a sense of betrayal, confusion, or doubt. Try to allow such states to arise without judging them. Recognize them as natural occurrences, and then gently return your attention to the forgiveness reflection.

The reflection is done in three parts: asking forgiveness from those you have harmed; offering forgiveness to those who have harmed you; and offering forgiveness to yourself,

Sit comfortably, close your eyes, and let your breath be natural and uncontrolled. Begin with the recitation (silent or not, as you prefer): "If I have hurt or harmed anyone knowingly or unknowingly, I ask their forgiveness." If different people, images, or scenarios come up, release the burden of guilt and ask for forgiveness: "I ask your forgiveness."

After some time, you can offer forgiveness to those have harmed you. Don't worry if there is not a great rush of loving feeling; this is not meant to be an artificial exercise, but rather a way of honoring the powerful force of intention in our minds. We are paying respects to our ultimate ability to let go and begin again. We are asserting the human heart's capacity to change and grow and love. "If anyone has hurt or harmed me, knowingly or unknowingly, I forgive them." And, as different thoughts or images come to mind, continue the recitation, "I forgive you."

In the end, we turn our attention to forgiveness of ourselves. If there are ways you have harmed yourself, or not loved yourself, or not lived up to your own expectations, this is the time to let go of unkindness toward yourself because of what you have done. You can include any inability to forgive others that you may have discovered on your part in the reflection immediately preceding—that is not a reason to be unkind to yourself. "For all of the ways I have hurt or harmed myself, knowingly or unknowingly, I offer forgiveness."

Continue this practice as a part of your daily meditation, and allow the force of intention to work in its own way, in its own time.