

The Power of Forgiveness

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

By [Gina Sharpe](#)



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.

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 behaviour; 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."

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develop the practices that cultivate and strengthen forgiveness and the natural compassion within us.

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 Ghosanada'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 Ghosanada 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 honours the grief and it honours 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.

FORGIVENESS PRACTICE

This practice of forgiveness comes in three parts: forgiveness from others, forgiveness for ourselves, and forgiveness for those who have hurt or harmed us. This is not a coercive practice, so if we feel that we don't want to ask for forgiveness, then we don't have to. If we think we can't forgive ourselves, we can sit quietly and see if there's any small, even tiny little opening in our hearts that can allow just the smallest amount of light to come in. And if we feel that we can't extend forgiveness to others because we think that something is completely unforgivable, then we can know that too. During this practice we reflect on whatever resentment or bitterness we're holding onto and how that is working in our own hearts. And if you think that there is just a tiny little amount that you can forgive, then that's fine too. This is a deep, unfolding process that can take a lifetime to work through.

You may not want to take on the largest thing that you've not been willing to forgive up to now, but maybe you can address some small offences. Let your heart get some exercise in forgiveness. You want to start with something that isn't quite so overwhelming and allow the heart to begin to exercise. It's like exercising a muscle in our bodies. We don't start with the 500-pound weight. We start maybe with a couple of small barbells, and we work with those to get the muscle going. And then eventually it may be strong enough to take up heavier and heavier weights. In the same way, with forgiveness practice, you may want to start small.

Sit comfortably and allow the eyes to close and the breath to be natural and easy. Let the body and the mind relax. Feel your connection to the earth. Breathe gently into your whole body, especially into your heart.

As you're breathing, feel all the barriers that you've erected and the emotions you've carried because you haven't forgiven yourself or others. Let yourself feel the pain of keeping your heart closed.

Forgiveness from Others

As you are breathing into your heart and feeling any hardness there, repeat silently to yourself, "There are many ways that I have hurt or harmed others. And I remember them now. Ways that I have betrayed, abandoned, or caused suffering, knowingly or unknowingly, out of my pain, fear, anger, or confusion." Let yourself remember and visualize the ways you have hurt others. See pain that you may have caused with your own fear and confusion. Sense that you can finally release this burden and ask for forgiveness. Take as

much time as you need to picture the memory that burdens your heart. And as each person comes to mind, just gently say, “I ask for your forgiveness. I ask for your forgiveness.”

Forgiveness for Ourselves

To ask forgiveness for yourself, repeat silently, “Just as I have caused suffering to others, there are many ways that I have hurt and harmed myself. I have betrayed or abandoned myself many times in thought, word, or deed, knowingly or unknowingly.” Let yourself remember the ways that you have harmed yourself. And extend forgiveness for each act of harm, one by one. “For the ways that I have hurt myself through action or inaction, out of fear, pain, and confusion, I now extend a full and heartfelt forgiveness. I forgive myself. I forgive myself. I forgive myself.”

Forgiveness for Those Who Have Hurt or Harmed Us

To extend forgiveness to those who have hurt or harmed you, repeat, “There are many ways I have been harmed by others, abused or abandoned, knowingly or unknowingly, by thought, word, or deed.” Picture the ways you have felt harmed. Remember them. We’ve each been betrayed. Let yourself remember the ways that this may have been true for you, and feel the sorrow you have carried from the past. And now, sense that it’s possible to release this burden by extending forgiveness gradually as your heart is ready. Don’t force it; every harm does not have to be forgiven in one sitting. The point is to exercise in a very small way something that you think you are ready to forgive right now. Gently repeat to yourself, “I remember the many ways that I

have been hurt, wounded, or harmed. And I know that it was out of another's pain, confusion, fear, anger. I have carried this pain in my heart long enough. To the extent that I am ready, I offer you forgiveness. You who have caused me harm, I offer my heartfelt forgiveness. I forgive you.”

These three practices for forgiveness may be gently repeated until you feel a release in your heart. For some great pain you may not feel a release. Instead, you may experience again the burden or the anger that you're holding onto. If that is the case, then you can just touch this softly. Be forgiving of yourself for not being ready to let it go, and move on.

Gina Sharpe is a co-founder and member of the Teachers Council of New York Insight Meditation Center and teaches at other centres.