

There are times when contemplating a particularly powerful insight can be helpful, especially if we are powerless to stop it. After his enlightenment, the Buddha spent almost a month hanging around the Bodhi tree contemplating the implications of what he'd realized.

We don't want to get into the habit of contemplating everything. Most insights are clear and full in a moment and need little more than to be recognized and released.

However, when an insight has many implications, spending some time with it can be helpful. But when thoughts start to repeat themselves, we know it's time to Six-R again.

## **Forgiveness**

There are times when our meditation becomes laden with sadness, fear, worry, grief, anger, frustration, struggle, or other heavy emotions. We Six-R these. Yet they arise again and again so quickly and deeply that we become discouraged. It may be a time to shift to forgiveness meditation.

The comedian Lily Tomlin said, "Forgiveness means giving up all hope for a better past." This is as good a working definition of forgiveness as I have come across. It sounds so obvious when expressed this way. But there are many other ideas about what forgiveness is. Before looking at forgiveness as a meditation practice, it may help to consider what forgiveness is not.

## **Condoning and Forgetting**

Forgiveness is not condoning or forgetting.

When I was working as a psychotherapist, several of my clients were incest survivors. As children, they had been raped repeatedly by their fathers or other relatives. When they learned I was a minister as well as a therapist, they invariably asked, "Do I have to forgive him?"

My short answer was, "Absolutely not." I said this because they were usually asking, "Do I have to condone what he did as if it were okay? Do I have to forget what he did to me?" Many had already spent years blaming themselves or trying to forget what had happened. It didn't work. It never does.

After developing some trust, I could give a longer answer: “You and I both wish it had never happened. But it did. It need not ever happen again. But we can’t get rid of the past.

“In the present, you still have hurt, anger, and grief. As you explore these and find safe ways to recognize, express, and release them, you’ll find a place that is deeper than these feelings—a place that he was never able to touch. As you trust your deeper essence, you’ll lose interest in putting attention into what he did years ago. You’ll find a wholeness that just wants to live fully now.

“This doesn’t mean that what he did was okay. It wasn’t. It doesn’t mean that you have to forget it. How could you? It merely means that the past will feel more like the past. And you’ll be with your life unfolding today.

“That is the essence of forgiveness. Nothing more and nothing less.”

Few of us have had the horrendous abuse of incest. Yet most of us have suffered things that were not right by any reasonable standard. Forgiving is not saying these things were okay or that we have to live as if they hadn’t happened.

Most of us have done things we regret. Out of hurt, fear, or confusion, we’ve done things we wish we hadn’t. Asking for forgiveness or forgiving ourselves does not mean that what we did was okay. We recognize our remorse, do what we can to make amends, and figure out ways to help us not repeat the same mistake. Then it is possible to be with what is now without having to try to forget or condone the past.

## **Naïveté**

This suggests something else that forgiveness is not. True forgiveness is not naïveté. If someone hurt us, it may be naïve to believe they could never do it again. If we did something we regret, we may be kidding ourselves if we think we’re incapable of doing it again. It is naïve to think that forgiveness magically changes another person or changes us.

We can forgive a person and still be mindful. We can do reasonable things to not put ourselves in a position where they could hurt us again consciously or unconsciously. We don’t have to throw away our defenses.

It is wise to protect ourselves reasonably from other people's unskillful habits.

And it is wise to figure out how to attenuate our own unskillful habits.

In fact, resolving to take reasonable steps to deal with these difficulties may help forgiveness arise more easily.

## **Reconciliation**

And finally, forgiveness is not reconciliation. Reconciliation is a meeting of minds and hearts. It is usually preceded by both people being open about what they did, taking responsibility, making amends where possible, taking credible steps to assure they won't do it again, expressing genuine remorse, and forgiving the other person and ourselves.

Reconciliation requires that both people do these things.

We cannot reconcile with someone who is unwilling. We cannot reconcile with someone if they don't want to reconcile with us. Yet we can still forgive that person regardless of what he or she does or doesn't do. Reconciliation requires forgiveness, but forgiveness does not require reconciliation.

Forgiveness comes more easily with reconciliation, though it is not a prerequisite. We let go of trying to change the past and come fully into the present.

## **Three Arenas**

There are three arenas of forgiveness: forgiving those who have harmed us, asking for forgiveness from those we have harmed, and forgiving ourselves. In our relationships with the people in our lives, each of these arenas has special considerations. They are rich arenas that go beyond the scope of this book. But none of them requires condoning, forgetting, naïveté, or reconciliation. Knowing these are not required is enough to turn to forgiveness meditation itself.

## Forgiveness Meditation

Like mettā meditation, forgiveness meditation begins with simple phrases. In choosing phrases consider three things: (1) not fully understanding a situation is the most common source of mistakes. We act out of partial ignorance. Or we're blinded by emotion. (2) Remorse and guilt are stronger when we harm someone or ourselves than when no harm results. And (3) our inner critic is the most unrelenting when our behavior violates our values.

These considerations lead to four forgiveness phrases:<sup>26</sup>

*I forgive myself for not understanding.*

*I forgive myself for making mistakes.*

*I forgive myself for hurting myself or others.*

*I forgive myself for not following my deepest values.*

We can begin by saying our version of one of these phrases. We choose a phrase that has some pull for us. I like to begin with: "I forgive myself for not understanding." Whatever phrase we start with, we repeat it slowly until it becomes real. As we feel the forgiveness, we let it radiate from our heart as a soft, kind acceptance. We let it surround us.

The mind may wander off on all kinds of errands. Often we resist forgiving ourselves. So if the mind wanders to blame or distractions, six-R and gently come back to repeat a phrase.

Depending on our situation, the mind may naturally go to the person who hurt us or made us angry or who left us. If this happens we can shift the focus to them:

*I forgive you for not understanding.*

*I forgive you for making mistakes.*

*I forgive you for hurting me or others.*

*I forgive you for not following my deepest values.*

In our mind's eye we look directly into their eyes and really forgive them. It's best not to get involved in storylines. We just use the phrases.

Sometimes things may turn around so that we're looking into their eyes and asking for their forgiveness:

*Please forgive me for not understanding.*

*Please forgive me for making mistakes.*

*Please forgive me for hurting you.*

We keep asking until we can hear them forgive us.

It helps to carry the practice into everyday life, forgiving everyone and everything that comes along. Most of us have a zealot inner critic. To soften the inner judge we can forgive ourselves for everything we do:

*I forgive myself for stubbing my toe.*

*I forgive myself for bumping into the table.*

*... for burning my finger.*

*... for being distracted.*

*... for making a mistake.*

*... for getting angry.*

*...for breaking a shoelace.*

*...for repeating that bad joke.*

As the mind-heart gets lighter, we understand more clearly, make fewer mistakes, cause less harm to ourselves and others, and live more gracefully by our deepest values.

The forgiveness practice does not get rid of distractions, change other people, or stop us from experiencing hindrances. However, over time, it changes our relationship to them. We can let them be what they are. We release them. We let the past be in the past. And we experience whatever is in the present with less and less judgment.

After a while, the phases may become very simple. We may not need to name the distraction. We simply say "I forgive myself," "I forgive you," or "I ask your forgiveness."

With this we come into a more loving acceptance of the flow of life as it is. We continue with the forgiveness meditation until the mind and heart feel lighter. Then we ask, "Is there more I need to forgive?" If there is, we continue. If there isn't, it is time to move back to the regular mettā practice.

This practice may be useful no matter where we are in our meditation. I've seen it used effectively by people who were having difficulty getting into the first jhāna. Bhante recommended it to me when I was having trouble getting into the eighth jhāna—and it made the difference that allowed me to get past some subtle blockages.

However, it is important not to move quickly in and out of the practice. If forgiveness meditation is to be most helpful, we use it for several days before switching back. If we try switching back and forth often, figuring out when to switch becomes another hindrance. So it's best to stay with it for a while.

## **Everyday Awareness**

Whether doing sitting meditation, walking meditation, contemplation, or forgiveness, the point of developing a meditation practice is not to become a good meditator. It is to cultivate heart and wisdom in our everyday life. It helps to remember to cultivate mindfulness, send mettā, and Six-R distractions everywhere we are. One thing I love about this practice is that it is relatively easy to bring it into everyday life. We can even be in the midst of an argument and recognize, "Oh, I'm really mad. Far out." After recognizing, we release, relax, and even smile a little. As we do this, we may even continue arguing. But we aren't so attached. And with this, the exchange may move into a wiser, more heartfelt place.

When I was running a counseling center for street kids, one day one of the adolescents took advantage of me. Even though we were closed, I had let her come in to use the phone because she said she had to let her mother know where she was.

I left the room as she was talking to her mother. Ten minutes later, I came back to find her gabbing with a friend on the phone. I felt anger rising in my body. I was just back from a retreat, so I saw this anger with some dispassion. I realized that if I gently expressed my disappointment, this