

Tonight we'll continue our focus on mindfulness and relationships with what I consider to be the fifth Brahma Vihara – Forgiveness.

I was very privileged to participate in a daylong on Forgiveness last spring with Jack Kornfield, co-founder of Spirit Rock Meditation Center and author of *The Art of Loving Kindness, Forgiveness, and Peace*, and Fred Luskin, pioneer researcher in forgiveness at Stanford and author of *Forgive for Good*.

I was very moved by Fred and Jack's teachings in that daylong on Forgiveness. I'm not an expert on forgiveness. I'm not even a very good practitioner of it. I struggle, as we all do, to use forgiveness steadily as a practice to keep the heart open and the mind kind

I do know these are the practices that help us, when we're caught in the grudge, resentment, and hostility that can come from very real injury, injustice, disappointment and betrayal, to keep our hearts open by practicing forgiveness.

So I want to share some of those practices with you, my own integration of Jack's 12 principles and Fred's 9 steps from their books and years of teaching on forgiveness. And do some of the practice exercises they suggested, because a daily forgiveness practice is as essential as any of the brahma viharas - loving kindness, compassion, joy, equanimity - to keep our hearts open in the face of the trials, traumas, and tragedies of being human on a planet with other injured, frightened, confused human beings. Forgiveness practice is advanced Wise Effort to let go of the unwholesome - greed, hatred, delusion - and cultivate the wholesome. It's also a skill set essential to healing from psychological trauma. And so we'll explore that tonight.

1. The first principle is, of course, how universal the need for forgiveness is, whether forgiving ourselves or forgiving another or asking forgiveness from another. As Fred said, we hurt people and are hurt by people because we are people. Even though the daylong gave many examples of forgiveness needed in the multi-generational strife and hostility in the Middle East, Eastern Europe, Southeast Asia, Ireland, Africa, Congress, the practices taught focused more on opening our heart and forgiving in a more personal realm. "Beyond Hatred to a Non-Contentious Heart" is the title of one chapter in Jack's book *Wise Heart*, so we'll focus on our own personal practice today, knowing my pain is the pain of the human condition. And that wisdom, my pain is the pain, is an excellent perspective to help us move from the embedded "me," feeling the sting of an undeserved betrayal or humiliation, to the "I" that can begin to step back and observe and reflect on the broader picture, and eventually re-open the heart to embrace that larger wise understanding - the pain I feel is the pain everyone subject to injury and injustice feels.

2. Forgiveness is an ongoing practice, daily and lifelong. It's not a one-shot deal.

Martin Luther King, Jr., an exemplar of forgiveness:

Forgiveness is not an occasional act; it is a permanent attitude.

In that sense forgiveness practice doesn't focus on the content of the injury so much. I.e., it doesn't so much matter who did what to you or who; it's our response that is the practice.

Between a stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom. The last of human freedoms is to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances.

- Viktor Frankl

Sometimes a quote like that, if we know who Viktor Frankl was or the conditions he suffered in Auschwitz, helps shift the focus from what happened or is happening, however cruel and intolerable that might truly be, to the freedom and power we have to choose how to respond. That's the heart of our spiritual practice, to choose how we respond to any experience in any moment, even past experiences in past moments.

Forgiveness is something we choose to do to not perpetuate our own suffering. Fred said that not forgiving, staying in bitterness, anger, hostility, is like drinking a cup of poison and waiting for the other person to die.

Never does the human soul appear so strong as when it foregoes revenge, and dares forgive an injury.

- E. H. Chapin

3. It's also important to understand what forgiveness is: the inner peace and wise perspective that allows us to keep our hearts open in the face of injustice, betrayal, harm. We are simply poisoning ourselves when we don't. And what it is not: a bypass of condoning, pardoning, forgetting, false reconciliation, appeasement, sentimentality. Neither is forgiveness necessarily bringing to complete resolution every individual complaint or grievance, however legitimate. It's a practice, daily and lifelong, to keep the heart open in the face of trying circumstances.

Forgo your anger for a moment and save yourself a hundred days of trouble.

- Chinese proverb

4. Forgiveness practice must be anchored in a sense of our True Nature, our Buddha nature. Forgiveness practice is anchored in remembering, in knowing, that we and all beings are nobly born. And that the capacity for kindness is as hardwired into our neural circuitry as the tendencies to contract in pain and suffering. When we are frightened, or angry, or hostile, we are physiologically aroused and forgiveness becomes biologically impossible. We have to use the practices of loving kindness, compassion, gratitude, equanimity to move us to a space in our hearts and bodies from which we can forgive.

So we'll do that as our first exercise. Fred taught it this way.

Fred's guided visualization for dropping into a space of kindness and love.

“Sit or lie down comfortably. [I add place one hand on your heart; the other on your belly. Relax your jaw and let the tip of your tongue touch the roof of your mouth, where the palate meets your teeth. The latter helps calm the chatter of your mind.] Breathe gently into your belly, slowly in and out. Breathe a sense of goodness into your belly. Breathe into your belly as though you were safe.

“Now remember people or things in your life you are grateful for. Savor the gratefulness throughout your body. Remember moments of kindness in your life, when people have been kind to you, then when you have been kind to others. Savor the feeling of kindness throughout your body. Remember a moment of feeling loved and cherished by someone, then remember a moment of you loving and cherishing someone, even a beloved pet. Savor the feeling of love throughout your body.

“Let yourself claim the goodness of your own self now. Let that goodness open into a sense of the goodness of all of humanity. This is the place within that forgiveness comes from. States of kindness, compassion, good will. From here it becomes possible to forgive.”

[bell]

These practices help us bypass our body's adrenalin reactions that fuel our sense of personal threat and drama, and allows us to re-open into a spacious calmness; from there we can forgive.

Questions-discussion?

5. Then we begin to cultivate a willingness to let go of our personal suffering, our personal drama, our well-rehearsed personal stories and identities of victimhood, our personal complaints and bitterness that create that state of mind and heart and body where kindness and forgiveness are biologically impossible. As we know, those neural pathways of contraction and protection are well-established. It's so easy to go into complaining, criticism, contempt. We have to be willing to soften that neural cement. We have to stop adrenalizing to be safe enough to be kind. We have to set an intention to stop being in contention with the world, to stop projecting our disgruntlement onto the world, to give up resentment, bitterness, entitlement. Not deny our pain, but not to linger. We're not indifferent, but we're not stuck in drama either. Understanding, compassion, grief, forgiveness are the open-hearted response to a human life's vulnerability to change. The willingness, the intention, re-sets the compass of the heart so we can re-claim our larger self, our larger consciousness, our larger kindness that can open to compassion for ourselves. These practices put us back on the track of integrity, dignity, and possibility.

There comes an awareness beyond self, and eventually to compassion for others who have acted in misguided or harmful ways.

When you hold resentment toward another, you are bound to that person or condition by an emotional link that is stronger than steel. Forgiveness is the only way to dissolve that link and get free.

- Catherine Ponder

6. It is also necessary to become mindfully present to notice any unfinished business of the heart that still needs forgiving.

Noticing and naming any residual grudge, resentment, aversion that still needs forgiving. Making the implicit explicit is an ongoing practice; it does become more natural over time.

7. Both Fred and Jack emphasized the necessity of honest grieving over harm experienced as we cultivate this willingness, this intention to practice forgiveness. The heart needs to feel its legitimate pain before it can be moved to let it go. Being stuck in blame can create a sense of victimhood, but honest grief work can help the underlying hurt, fear, anger resolve and move through, making the practice of forgiveness digestible and workable.

Let the pain be pain, not in the hope that it will vanish but in the faith that it will fit in, find its place in the shape of things, and be then not any less pain but true to form....That's what we're looking for: not the end of a thing but the shape of it.

- Albert Huffstickler

8. Forgiveness is a process that happens over time, layer by layer. Start practicing forgiveness where it's easiest – your dog for tearing up the carpet or your child for spilling potato salad all over the kitchen floor. Yourself for losing your cool in rush hour traffic or forgetting to pay the phone bill on time. Then “broaden and build.” Practice forgiveness in more and more challenging situations or with more and more challenging people where the stakes get higher until you're ready to tackle the “unforgiveable” with courage and care. We may not get to the hardest today. Jack says “never” takes awhile. Life is full of “forgiveness moments,” big and small, where we practice over and over again remaining open-hearted.

You will know that forgiveness has begun when you recall those who hurt you and feel the power to wish them well.

- Lewis B. Smedes

9. Once we understand the necessity, the power, and the parameters of a forgiveness practice, and once we've established a sense of loving kindness and a steady awareness of our experience in the moment to anchor our practice in, we can begin our forgiveness practice. We'll do Jack's meditations from his book *The Art of Loving Kindness*,

Forgiveness, and Peace, which he led us in at the daylong: forgiving one's self, asking forgiveness from another, forgiving an other.

Jack's three meditations on forgiveness. And, of course, this is our first pass at this practice. These meditations can be done daily, ongoingly, for a lifetime, deeper and deeper.

Let yourself sit comfortably, allowing your eyes to close and your breath to be natural and easy. Let your body and mind relax. Breathing gently into the area of your heart, let yourself feel all the barriers you have erected and the emotions you have carried because you have not forgiven – not forgiven yourself, not forgiven others. Let yourself feel the pain of keeping your heart closed. Breathing softly, begin reciting the following words, letting the images and feelings that come up grow deeper as you repeat them.

FORGIVENESS FROM OTHERS

There are many ways that I have hurt and harmed others, have betrayed or abandoned them, caused them suffering, knowingly or unknowingly, out of my pain, fear, anger, and confusion.

Let yourself remember and visualize the ways you have hurt others. See the pain you have caused out of your own fear and confusion. Feel your own sorrow and regret. Sense that finally you can release this burden and ask for forgiveness. Take as much time as you need to picture each memory that still burdens your heart. And then as each person comes to mind, gently say:

I ask for your forgiveness, I ask for your forgiveness.

FORGIVENESS FOR OURSELF:

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.

Feel your own precious body and life. Let yourself see the ways you have hurt or harmed yourself. Picture them, remember them. Feel the sorrow you have carried from this and sense that you can release these burdens. Extend forgiveness for each act of harm, one by one. Repeat to yourself:

For the ways 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.

FORGIVENESS FOR THOSE WHO HAVE HURT OR HARMED YOU:

There are many ways I have been harmed by others, abused or abandoned, knowingly or unknowingly, in thought, word or deed.

We have been betrayed. Let yourself picture and remember the many ways this is true. Feel the sorrow you have carried from this past. Now sense that you can release this burden of pain by gradually extending forgiveness as your heart is ready. Recite to yourself:

I remember the many ways others have hurt, wounded, or harmed me, out of fear, pain, confusion, and anger. I have carried this pain in my heart long enough. To the extent that I am ready, I offer you forgiveness. To those who have caused me hurt, I offer my forgiveness, I forgive you.

Let yourself gently repeat these three directions for forgiveness until you feel a release in your heart. For some great pains you may not feel a release; instead, you may experience again the burden and the anguish or anger you have held. Touch this softly. Be forgiving of yourself for not being ready to let go and move on. Forgiveness cannot be forced; it cannot be artificial. Simply continue the practice and let the words and the images work gradually in their own way. In time you can make the forgiveness meditation a regular part of your life, letting go of the past and opening your heart to each new moment with a wise loving kindness.

Bell

Jack also suggests:

Loving kindness, compassion, grieving, letting go, and equanimity are additional practices that complement the work of forgiveness. Each offers a wise and simple form, a gracious language to encourage the heart to let go, to heal, and to come to rest. Let your own intuition guide you as to which of the meditations to practice. Stay with it as long as it serves you, then return when you are ready to the ongoing practice of forgiveness.

Questions – discussion?

The day the child realizes that all adults are imperfect, he becomes an adolescent; the day he forgives them, he becomes an adult; the day he forgives himself, he becomes wise.

- Alden Nowlan

10. Include all layers of processing experience in your forgiveness practice. When we feel something in our body, it feels so real to us “it must be true.” It can be hard to change that neural reactivity. When it feels unsafe to the body and/or the psyche to be open and vulnerable, it’s not going to. Sometimes working in somatic-based trauma therapy is necessary to release bodily-held rage, hostility, defensiveness or collapse into powerlessness. We do have to stop adrenalizing before we can feel safe enough to forgive.

Jack answered a question from someone in the audience whose husband had been killed in 9/11. Jack suggested Somatic Experiencing to work through the bodily held memories of searching through the rubble so she could begin to work with forgiveness.

I've since learned Jack now requires all the teachers in training at Spirit rock to be trained in somatic experiencing to learn how to work with the unresolved trauma that can make it difficult to forgive

Sometimes we have to learn new skills in experiencing and expressing the intense emotions that sometimes erupt as we focus on experiences that need our forgiveness. We learn to take responsibility for our emotional experience, having compassion for ourselves in moments of "there I go again."

We give up all hope of a better past and patiently, perseveringly re-structure our thoughts and belief systems, especially any lingering feeling like the universe revolves around us in an entitled way, or clinging to an identity as a victim. Forgiveness practice doesn't re-write history, but it does allow us to re-write our story of our history. We can re-perceive ourselves as hero rather than victim for all the courage and resiliency it takes to learn and grow enough to forgive.

11. Finally, we allow our forgiveness practice to shift our perspectives. We begin to take things less personally. We see the struggle of other human being (resonance, attunement, empathy, compassion, loving kindness support for that). We see that suffering is universal; that forgiveness doesn't necessarily end every bit of suffering but it makes life livable and workable. Forgiveness allows us to claim our own inherent goodness and that of our fellow sufferers.

Let's sit for a minute.

Closing Meditation

For Someone Who Did You Wrong

Though its way is to strike
 In a dumb rhythm,
 Stroke upon stroke,
 As though the heart
 Were an anvil,
 The hurt you sent
 Had a mind of its own.

Something in you knew
 Exactly how to shape it,
 To hit the target,
 Slipping into the heart
 Through some wound-window
 Left open since childhood.

While it struck outside,
It burrowed inside,
Made tunnels through
Every ground of confidence.
For days, it would lie still
Until a thought would start it.

Meanwhile, you forgot,
Went on with things
And never even knew
How that perfect
Shape of hurt
Still continued to work.

Now a new kindness
Seems to have entered time
And I can see how that hurt
Has schooled my heart
In a compassion I would
Otherwise have never learned.

Somehow now
I have begun to glimpse
The unexpected fruit
Your dark gift had planted
And I thank you
For your unknown work.

- John O'Donohue
To Bless the Space Between Us

May we and all beings find a way to re-open our hearts and forgive.