

## **Peace: The Virtue of FORGIVENESS**

**by C. Forrest McDowell, PhD**

The practice of forgiveness is an invaluable stepping-stone to peace. It is one means to healing our self, and healing our relationship with others. We can take momentary refuge in forgiveness for, if it is sincere, it can free up a tremendous amount of otherwise trapped and toxic energy within us. Upon forgiving, or being forgiven, we may feel more optimistic or lighter, feeling as if we have more energy.

Forgiveness can be characterized as: 1) a choice to reconcile, 2) an attitude about setting things right, 3) a compassionate way of communicating, 4) a specific action, and 5) an ongoing, lifelong process. Above all, forgiveness expresses kindness. Otherwise, without forgiveness tremendous amounts of resentment or hurt can build-up within. “If we practice an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth,” cautioned Mahatma Gandhi, “soon the whole world will be blind and toothless.” From your own life experiences wouldn’t you agree?

### **Types of Forgiveness**

Forgiveness can be shown in momentary ways, as in immediately saying “I’m sorry.” We all know the appropriateness of apologizing; for example, when we have spontaneously shared a few unkind words to a friend and suddenly realize they were hurtful. We should strive to make such “little forgivenesses” a natural part of our daily life. Consequently, they don’t build up inside us, and they clear the air with others.

Forgiveness can also be effective beyond the little run-ins of the day. Sometimes things we have done to others (or they to us) burden our heart or mental state. Three kinds of forgiveness characterize the action we should take:

- Self-forgiveness that enables us to release shame, guilt, pride, or the illusion that we are perfect and “without sin.”
- Forgiveness we extend to friend and foe alike, and receive from them.
- The forgiveness of God, as part of our faith or faith tradition, that reaffirms our worth and strengthens us to move peacefully back into the world.

In the first instance, we can all attest to personal symptoms that could be relieved by forgiveness — feeling so hurt or bitter that we harbor the desire for revenge; brooding and pouting over petty grievances; feeling overwhelming guilt for offending someone; worrying that we could be hurt again; stubbornly hanging on to the belief that we were in the right. As long as we are attached to such symptoms, we cannot take a first step toward healing. Our wounded pride is often the first obstacle we must overcome, therefore we have to begin within our self to re-establish some peace of mind.

Sometimes you have to be brave enough to set things right with another, or within yourself. It may be the only way to open and soften a closed and hard heart. To release the tension, just start somewhere and make a sincere attempt at reconciling your feelings and/or your relationship with another. Try these four steps:

1. Look honestly and inwardly at a particular hurt you have not been able to forgive.
2. Get in touch with your feelings about that hurt. Are they tinged with anger, shame, guilt, resentment, worry, embarrassment, pride, or denial?
3. Imagine what it would be like if things were set right, if the hurt was gone.
4. Let the hurt go — forgive yourself, or, find a kind way within your heart to forgive another, either quietly within yourself or expressing it directly to them.

### **Forgiveness as a Spiritual Practice**

All spiritual traditions uphold the virtue of forgiveness. For most people this is a welcome relief; it gives one renewed opportunity to make things right: before others and before God. As one spiritual teacher said: “A saint is a sinner who never gave up.”

Forgiveness is a key virtue in Christian behavior. In Luke 6:37-38 of the Bible, it is said: “Do not judge, and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven. Give, and it will be given to you. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.” In Matthew, Jesus Christ tells his disciples the parable of the unforgiving debtor, summarizing: “If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you.”(6:14) This pronouncement certainly inspired the passage: “forgive our trespassers, as we forgive their trespasses,” in the well-known Lord’s Prayer, and in the equally revered Prayer of Saint Francis: “Where there is injury, pardon;” and, “It is in pardoning that we are pardoned.”

The Jewish High Holy Days present an occasion for those in that tradition to come to peace with themselves by looking back at their behaviors, by admitting to their mistakes, apologizing and atoning for them by forgiving and being forgiven. During Yom Kipper, the traditional Jewish prayer for forgiveness known as the Al Chet is often cited.

Muslims often cite the Koran: “He who forgiveth, and is reconciled unto his enemy, shall receive his reward from God; for He loveth not the unjust doers.” (sura 42)

The Bhagavad Gita of Hindu faith states: “If you want to see the brave, look at those who can forgive. If you want to see the heroic, look at those who can love in return for hatred.”

### **Peaceful Ways to Forgive**

As you can see, the practice of forgiveness has a universal foundation. It is an invaluable refuge for peace of mind in what otherwise appears to be a chaotic world. The following exercise is yet another loving way to approach forgiveness. Use all or parts of it in your life.

#### **Forgiving Oneself**

- Allow memories, images and emotions to come up in your mind that you have never forgiven yourself for.

- Ask: Can I accept that I am just an ordinary human being with some bad and some good qualities?
- Ask: Did I not suffer enough from these actions?
- Acknowledge: I have learned and grown, and I am ready to open my heart to myself.
- Forgive:
  - I forgive myself for whatever I did, intentional or unintentional.*
  - May I be happy, free of confusion, understand the world and myself.*
  - May I help others to be happy, understanding, and free of confusion.*

### **Forgiving Another**

- Now imagine another person you want to forgive.
- Ask: Can I accept this person as a human being with bad and good qualities as well?
- Forgive:
  - From my heart, I forgive you for whatever you did, intentional or not.*
  - May you be happy, free of confusion and understand yourself and the world.*
  - Please forgive me for whatever I did to you, intentional or unintentional.*
  - May we open our hearts and minds to meet in love and understanding.*

Before being able to really love or forgive others, we need at least to accept ourselves as we are. Try this:

### **Loving Oneself**

- Reflect: I have some bad habits and faults, but am I really all that bad?
- Acknowledge: Many things I do don't lead to perfect results, but at least I try to do my best.
- Now simply put a smile on your face, a real smile, not just visualized!
- Next focus the attention to the heart, and sense how a warm, loving feeling develops.
- Acknowledge: We are all worthy to receive love.
- Let this warm, loving feeling gradually fill up the whole body, and enjoy it!
- When ready, say:
  - May I be healed of problems, dissatisfaction and pain.*
  - May I be able to forgive myself and find peace.*
  - May I be able to live from my heart.*
  - May I be happy, with only good thoughts and experiences.*
- Breathe in love and forgiveness with every breath, and feel the healing power of giving yourself the space for love. Breathe out this love to all in the world.
- Keep this feeling and the smile on your face as long as possible.

### **Loving Another**

- Now let this love stream out to others: friends, family, strangers, other cultures and animal species, nature, and the world.
- Remember people you don't really like; they also just want to be happy.
- Reflect: Are they only so bothersome because they need to feel loved, just like me?
- Try to have the courage of breaking through your negative thoughts, overloading them this time with love instead of hatred, indifference, insensitivity, etc.
- When ready, offer the following thoughts to others:

*May you all be healed of problems and pain.  
May you all forgive yourself and find peace.  
May you all be able to live from your heart.  
May you all be happy and give happiness to others.*

**Remember:**

Forgiving, reconciling and loving anew can create an immediate sanctuary for peace: within our self, and within others. Forgiveness can restore a sense of hope and beauty to the world. It is a daily practice of kindness that releases positive energy to make the world a better place to live. Remember: “There is no revenge so complete as forgiveness.” (Josh Billings)

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