

Forgiveness

By Upasaka Fa Liang of East Tennessee

When the day is long and the night, the night is yours alone,
When you're sure you've had enough of this life, well hang on
Don't let yourself go, 'cause everybody cries and everybody hurts sometimes
-- Lyrics from Everybody Hurts by R.E.M

Forgiveness. The term most often brings to mind those people who have harmed us, or others, and our moral duty to free them from our resentment. But this is not forgiveness in the pure sense of the term. Forgiveness begins with ourselves.

We are all human. If we are honest with ourselves we'll recognize that we all say and do things that cause pain to others as well as to ourselves. It's the feelings within that reflexively lead us to act and speak in hurtful ways. The fear, negativity, and blame we project onto others are really expressions of our own feelings about ourselves. It's the separation from our own hearts that causes us to separate from others.



Before we are able to genuinely forgive others, we have to forgive ourselves. But how? How do we bring forth compassion, forgiveness, and loving kindness within ourselves when we feel so absent of them to begin with?

It happens when we *fully* accept ourselves as human beings: when we accept the “good, the bad and the ugly...” everything that’s within us. Sure, it is easy to accept the things we like – if we’re talented, smart, funny, attractive, or wealthy. Everybody likes a winner – most of all, our ego. But in order to experience true acceptance and compassion we must accept *everything* about ourselves, not just the things we like. We must accept our fear, anger, lust, envy, jealousy, sadness, and grief. And we must accept our failures. Like two sides of a coin, we’re not whole without conscious awareness of both.

But fear so often gets in the way – it presents us from looking at the “uglies” within. Yet there’s solace knowing that, in being human, we all share these same challenges. With courage and resolve we must open ourselves to them and experience them fully. We must embrace them as part of our nature, be vulnerable to them, and not deny or repress them. Through this embrace, we can begin to approach forgiveness.

Hard challenging work it is. It's so much easier to portray an artificial calm through self-discipline than to fully investigate these deep emotions, especially considering how our Western society favors restraint and suppression. We are encouraged through so much media -- TV, radio, newspapers, the Internet, etc. -- to feed our cravings and repress our self-awareness. We are led to believe that many of our feelings are simply not acceptable and that, if we have them at all (which we all do!), we are bad people. It's no wonder that the popular antidepressant, Prozac, brings in yearly multi-billion dollar sales. When society teaches that we're all bad people, a large number of us are going to believe it, especially considering that billions of dollars of advertising dollars go into making sure of it. Under such heavy weight, *it's a natural consequence that there is no soil in which to sow the seeds of compassion*. We are stuck in a vicious cycle. Our internal feelings and needs lead us to believe, often unconsciously, that we are bad people; fear builds, and feelings of unworthiness consume us. Soon there are layers upon layers of negativity pushing against us. We become pinned down by an unbearable burden.

Every practice in Zen starts with ourselves. No other person can experience life for us. Nobody can get inside our minds and observe our thoughts or feelings. Nobody can calm us or help us see things more clearly. It has to happen within ourselves. All religions recognize this. "Physician, heal thyself!" [Luke 4:23] It's the same with loving kindness, compassion, joy, and forgiveness. It all begins within ourselves, with taking an honest survey of that "dark side" we've neglected.

We can do all in our power to circumvent this dark side of our psyche, but eventually, one way or another, we *will* have to deal with it. Dr. Carl Jung called this dark side the *enemy shadow*, or sometimes just the *shadow*, and he warned us about the dangers of neglecting it:

"Everyone carries a Shadow, and the less it is embodied in the individual's conscious life, the blacker and denser it is. If an inferiority is conscious, one always has a chance to correct it. Furthermore, it is constantly in contact with other interests, so that it is continually subjected to modifications. But if it is repressed and isolated from consciousness, it never gets corrected and is liable to burst forth suddenly in a moment of unawareness. At all events, it forms an unconscious snag, thwarting our most well-meant intentions." (Jung, Psychology and Religion, 131)

In the beginning, it helps if we simply recognize the patterns of destructive action. We internally catalog old hurts that we can't let go of -- maybe something somebody did or said sometime in the past that we can't forgive. Rather than attaching blame or judgment (which also spills over into other relationships we have), we observe the pain we have sustained for so long because of our inability to forgive. We observe how it caused us to become guarded, jaded, and wary, or to no longer be able to trust.

These patterns can be directed toward ourselves, too. We recite negative self-talk. We wallow in self-pity. Our mind clings to that which we fear and that which is unresolved in our life's experience. To break out of it we have to become a non-participating observer.

As we begin to recognize the patterns (and face the fear), we can, in the Zen way, call our actions into question:

- What am I not accepting about myself?
- What is so difficult to embrace?
- What is it about me that causes me to be afraid that other people won't love and accept me if they know about it?
- What separates me from my own heart and from other people?
- How did I get locked into that sense of separation, where forgiveness seems like a barren desert?

It's no wonder that we're afraid to do this most difficult work. We can more easily forgive the most heinous criminals than ourselves. Much of the fear we have stems from the nature of emotions. While the mind is pure thought and imagery, emotions seem to be raw energy over which we do not feel we have control. When emotions are expressed in hurtful ways, it feels "out of control" and we become afraid of the consequences.

Our compensating strategy is to try to control our emotions through suppression. In reality though, in doing this we deny the very nature of our humanness. All humans experience anger. All humans experience joy. As R.E.M. says in their popular song by the same name "Everybody Hurts." Perhaps it's the universal truth of this statement and the sentiments the song conveys that sent the tune to the top of the charts in 1992.

Chan has a solution for the predicament. With Chan practice, we relinquish control to a higher source. Emotions come, we experience them, and we let them pass. We assume the role of observer, not controller. Rather than suppressing the emotions, we allow them to arise so that we may see them clearly for what they are. In this way they have no force over us and we are not manipulated to act on them in a harmful way. We are just being present with them. This is a skill that must be learned. It takes patience and practice, but it is attainable. Once achieved, it brings a sense of freedom unlike no other.

There has to be a willingness to be present with emotion and its energies -- energies that can sometimes be raw and frightening. We observe the intensity, discomfort, physical and mental reaction, and we compassionately and gently allow the experience of it to happen. We open our heart to it and accept it for what it is, without judgment toward it. We don't think, "I'm angry and I hate feeling like this." We simply observe, "I'm angry." We are present with it. It is present with us. Then, miraculously, as fast as it arose, it's gone.

If a secondary emotion arises, such as "I hate feeling angry," we recognize it but don't get caught up in the history of anger we have felt in the past. We don't open up old wounds to perpetuate the cycle of pain.

True liberation of the heart comes from stopping the war within ourselves. We must let the unhealed parts of ourselves have the opportunity to heal. If we cannot give ourselves permission to experience emotions, to heal from injury and to love ourselves, how can we begin to love others?

Our lives must be led *unconditionally*.

Finding deeper compassion and acceptance for others and ourselves does not mean condoning harmful behavior. Compassion opens the door to understanding, to wisdom. It allows us to see people as they truly are and recognize that we are all the same – that there is truly no separation. Atonement is also an important aspect of spiritual growth. We can forgive a person for something harmful done, but that person must also atone for the harmful action if spiritual growth is to happen. Forgiveness is found through our own understanding of the situation, our empathy, and our recognition that we are all in the same boat ... that we are *all* Buddhas. As our own Rev. Chuan Zhi has said, “People who hurt us don’t usually do so consciously – after all, they are Buddhas too -- but they live in delusion. They don't know themselves and it causes great pain ... pain that they take out on others as well as themselves.”

Forgiveness is a first step to true compassion. Challenge yourself. When you’ve had a bad day, look deeply into what’s *really* bothering you. Once you start working toward healing your own internal wounds, it’s a natural consequence that your outer presence will reflect the inner peace you gain. You will also find that it becomes much easier to ask forgiveness from those you have hurt.

Then, as you pray that all sentient beings may know peace and joy, you may be surprised that it carries a new and deeper meaning. Because you’ve found those things within yourself!