

TOWARDS THE END OF FORGIVENESS

CONTENTS

Preface

Acknowledgements

1: No one causes us psychological pain.....	3
Overview	3
No one causes us psychological pain	3
The chain of Dependent Origination	3
Being hurt by another	5
Hurting another	5
Shame	5
Guilt	6
Remorse	6
Understanding forgiveness.....	6
When we can't forgive someone	7
When we can't forgive ourselves	7
2: At heart we are innocent	8
3: Further reflections	9
Existential Guilt	9
Kamma	9
Punishment	9
Getting away with it	9
The child and 'innocent suffering'	9
4: How to bring ourselves to the end of forgiveness	10
Freeing ourselves of the victim's suffering	10
Someone we can't forgive	12
Freeing ourselves of the wrong-doer's suffering	13
Refusal of forgiveness	14
Forgiving oneself	14
Putting an end to unskillful habits.....	15
The practice of determination	16
Final reflection: The Simile of the Saw	17
Further reading	18

Preface

If there is one story in the whole of the Buddhist Canon that captures the imagination, it must surely be that of Angulimala, Necklace of Fingers. Here is a man steeped in murder who upon meeting the Buddha experiences a conversion that not only stops all his evil doings, but propels him into the spiritual life. So much so that he finally attains the end of all endeavour, Nibbana.

What interested me most about the story was not so much the moment of conversion, but the process of purification. That purification of the heart of all the evil committed is the process of forgiveness. It needs a language of the heart – innocence, pollution, guilt, shame, remorse, forgiveness and compassion - a process of purification to eventual immaculacy. What is that process and what insights are needed to attain this purity. This is what both the monologue and the essay try to address.

The reason why the story of Angulimala means so much to us is not simply because of how an extremely evil person can redeem themselves, but because there is in each of that which needs to be forgiven and purified. It is a way to Nibbana through the heart of love. That is why I have titled the work: Towards the End of Forgiveness.

In the Metta Sutta the Buddha encourages us:

*Let your thoughts of love go through the whole world with no ill-will and no hate.
Whether you are standing, walking, sitting or lying down,
So long as you are awake you should develop this mindfulness.
This, they say, is the noblest way to live.
And if you do not fall into bad ways, but live well and develop insight,
And are no longer attached to all the desires of the senses,
Then truly you will never need to be reborn in this world again.*

A Final Note:

The monologue I have written is based on the original scripture and various other works. If you want to read the primary sources you will find them in the [Theragatha](#), verses 866-91, and in the [Majjhima Nikaya](#) (Middle Length Sayings) No.86 the [Angulimala Sutta](#). For a secondary account see: [Angulimala: A Murderer's Road to Sainthood](#) by Hellmuth Hecker. I was influenced by the understandings in *How Buddhism Began: The Conditioned Genesis of the Early Teachings* by Richard F Gombrich,

Acknowledgements.

This work came about because a long time student, friend and supporter, Bryan Lester, wanted to write a musical score around the story. As it turned out, only parts of his score came to be used. This is a pity for I believe it to be excellent music and I hope in time it will be produced in total and accompany any further publication of this work. I have Bryan to thank for inspiration and encouragement.

The person whom you hear as Angulimala is Barry Letts. Barry is a theatre and television director, an actor and playwright. Not only did he offer his talent in reading the work, but worked on my writing and whatever polish it has is due to his direction.

Neil Hillman, another long time student, friend and supporter, who owns theaudiosuite.com, offered not only all the facilities but his own skills to produce the audio.

Many thanks also to all the many people whom I harassed to read the script and gave valuable comment. And a special thanks to Therese Caherty who offered her professional skills to edit the text.

I approached a monastic friend of mine, Bhante Sujiva, for help in getting this work published. He put me in contact with Sunanda Lim Hockeng of Inward Path Publications who took up the work with enthusiasm, raised the donations needed and took care of the production.

Katunyacitena
With a grateful heart.

Bhante Bodhidhamma

1

No one causes us psychological pain

Overview

THE TEACHINGS OF the Buddha leads us to two conclusions which directly affect the process of forgiveness: no one can cause another psychological pain; at heart, we are all innocent.

Forgiveness is that process whereby we can totally transform the heart away from hurt and revenge, guilt, shame and remorse, and self-hatred and self-recrimination towards love and compassion. When that process is over we have reached the end of forgiveness.

No one causes us psychological pain

Let us look at the idea that no one can cause us psychological pain, starting with some reflections

Can you recall an incident when someone said something to you that you experienced as painful, either a small slight or an insult?

What was your reaction: Irritation; indignation; self-justification; full-blown anger?

Were you aware of the hurt you felt? Or did you quickly pass over that to anger? Was it only afterwards that you felt the hurt?

What did it lead to? An angry exchange? A long hostile relationship? Slander?

Has anyone ever attacked you physically, perhaps as mild as a shove in a queue? Or has someone in a rush pushed you out of the way? Maybe someone has hit you? Or thumped you on the nose? What was your reaction? Was it any different from the above, but simply more intense? Was there a desire for revenge?

Can you recall an incident when you said something cruel to someone? Just a quip, but it was meant to sting. How did you feel immediately afterwards? Satisfied? Well-pleased? A job well done?

Were you aware of any anxiety or fear that they would try to get their own back?

Suppose now that the person you hurt expresses how hurt they feel so that you are moved to realise you did actually hurt them. What is your reaction? Will you still justify what you did? Or do you feel embarrassment? Shame? Guilt? Remorse? Do you apologise? Do you offer some small compensation?

If you apologise, how do you feel? Relieved? Still feel guilty?

Can you recall an incident when you physically hurt someone? It may have been as mild as a push. Or worse – perhaps you smacked a child in anger. How do you feel? Much the same as above but more so?

Where do you think these reactions of hurt, anger and revenge originate? A seed needs good soil, water and sun to grow, yet the primary reason for its existence is in the germ of the seed. What is the primary cause of these reactions? Is it you? ‘I make myself angry.’ Or the other? ‘You make me angry.’ Or a combination of both?

The chain of Dependent Origination

To understand the cause of psychological pain we need to examine the teaching of the Chain of Dependent Origination. It is called a chain because it is a series of links that depend on each other for the process of how we cause suffering and unsatisfactoriness in ourselves. It is the Buddha’s explanation of our psychology in so far as we cause ourselves to suffer. This, remember, is the sole purpose of his teaching, to guide us out of suffering. The Buddha said his teaching was concerned with suffering and the end of suffering. Actually the word the Buddha uses, dukkha, can refer to anything that eventually causes us to feel any discomfort from the slightest dissatisfaction to the deepest anguish.

Everything we experience comes to us through the six senses, called sense ‘doors’. The five senses of the body enable us to make contact with sounds, colours and shapes, smells, tastes and the feel of things; all these stimuli enter the brain. The Sixth Sense is that point where matter – the body – meets mind. Here not only external stimuli are cognised, but also what is inside the body in terms of feelings and emotions and at a more subtle level of images and thoughts.

For us to know what sensation, feeling or thought is arising, there needs also to be that awareness of it, our consciousness. Three components, then, produce an event, a moment of contact: the object, the sense base and consciousness.

A bird flies into our line of sight and we become aware of it. This is the moment of ‘contact’, the moment of simple perception. If any of these three factors is absent, there will be no contact. If there is no light, we cannot see. If there is no eyesight, we cannot see. If there is no consciousness, as in sleep, we cannot see.

How we perceive is dictated by our senses and our psychology. If we are colour-blind, we will not see the picture in the same way as someone who is not. We all have our own experience of colour and each one of us will see colour in a slightly different way. What is royal blue for one person may be a slightly different shade for another. Even at this basic level of contact, we all experience the world differently.

Although the world supplies the input, it is only a catalyst for our reaction. In chemistry terms, a catalyst is an agent which aids change in other bodies without undergoing any change itself. Psychologically, any stimulus – a sound, a colour and so on – is a given. It is simply received by the sense base. From the point of contact onward, that stimulus is taken, as it were, into the mind where a process of mentation begins.

The colour blue of a fabric is a steady signal of photons. Each person, however, has their own perception, conceptually and emotionally. We cannot say the photons are the primary cause. The direct cause of our reaction comes from our own psychology and our experience with that colour. The photons are the rain which causes the seeds of our mental processes to sprout.

This leads us to the next link in the Chain of Dependent Origination, which is ‘feeling’. Once we have perceived something, we form a relationship to it. Some people like blue, others prefer yellow. We classify the perception as likeable, unlikeable or neutral. This is the progress from basic perception to a relationship with the world, which again has been conditioned by our reactions to what we have experienced in the past and are now experiencing in the present. From the first taste of a curry, there arises that relationship of ‘like’ or ‘don’t like’. From then on any curry we taste is classified along a line from fantastic to terrible.

Once this stage is reached, there is a further reaction. What we like, we want to keep and maintain. What we experience as neutral, we tend to ignore. And what we do not like, we want to get rid of or, if it is too unlikeable, we want to get away from it. At a more intense level, this is the fight or flight syndrome. This stage is normally translated as ‘craving’, for in the main it is characterised by our desire to indulge what we want and rid ourselves of what we do not want.

Contrary to usual understanding, it is only at this point that we identify with the process. It is here that the ‘I’ comes in. This identification of ‘I’ want or ‘I’ do not want is called ‘grasping’. From now on, we cannot distance ourselves from these desires. We are in their grip. We have lost that objectivity towards them that would allow us to consider whether the desire is skilful or not. We have become enslaved to our desire.

The next stage is to empower that desire or craving. This is an act of will, which takes something out of potential and makes it actual, whether it be a train of thoughts, the spoken words or actions. This is the point where we are conditioning the psyche. I use the word psyche here to refer to both, the mind and the heart, our thinking and emotional life.

The process follows this trajectory: when an intention or desire arises, we empower it. We will it and so it becomes an action of thought, word or deed. This is what Buddhism means by kamma, not to be confused with the popular use of the word karma which means the result of what we did. This is the stage of ‘becoming’ on the Chain of Dependent Origination.

So a person can sense the desire to insult someone, but refrain from developing it in the mind, which stops it being expressed verbally or physically. Without this mindfulness, that desire to be nasty to someone immediately translates into words or actions.

But when I continue to behave in like manner, constantly ‘becoming’ an insulting person, it forms a habit. If I find that by throwing insults at someone, I win an argument, I will decide to develop that conditioning which becomes a strong trait in my personality. My personality then turns out to be nothing but a collection of traits, some unwholesome and some wholesome, of course. This aggregate of habits of how I think, speak and act, causes me to behave in a way that determines my future, my destiny. I may have started insulting people at school, developing a sneering, sarcastic attitude. I may end up as a political commentator or satirist. Or may end up very lonely!

This is what ‘volitional conditionings’ refer to on the Chain of Dependent Origination. They are our dispositions fabricated by our own acts of will.

So to develop a wholesome personality, we can see how important it is to come to know our unskilful behaviour and refrain from developing it. We do this by being aware of an intention when it arises so that there is time to decide whether it is skilful or unskilful. Then we are in control. That is, we can choose not to empower those intentions that we see are harmful

On the positive side, once we determine an intention to be wholesome, we empower that. In this way we develop beautiful conditionings and our lives become the happier for it.

Being hurt by another

What happens when we are hurt by another's behaviour? Let's take the first occasion of an insult. The word arrives at the ear. 'You idiot!' We perceive with the ear not just the sound of the word but also the tone of anger. We perceive with the eye the signs of anger on the face and in the body language. We can also sense at the 'heart' level the emotion. For instance, we can sense the tension in a room where there has just been an argument. All this is the point of 'contact'. After this the process is internal, dependent on our inner dispositions.

It is recognised and is then labelled 'unlikeable'. This is the point of 'feeling' which is determined by our past experience of insults and how we have reacted to them. Some people will be slightly hurt, others incensed. When this happens, the heart has reacted upon the hearing. It feels hurt.

Immediately there rises the 'craving' to be rid of the hurt. The normal desire is be rid of the person who hurts us and respond to the person in kind. Or if the threat is too great, the unpalatable desire to swallow our pride and retire. These 'cravings' are possessed by the self. This is called 'grasping'. It is only at this point that we actually identify with the process. Only now does the idea of 'me' arise.

Once the sense of 'I' has grasped the craving, this craving is empowered. A reaction is willed. A *kamma*, an action of thought, speech or body, is performed. This is the moment of 'becoming'. We become the reaction. We start shouting. All this, of course, happens in milliseconds. The sound of the word strikes the eardrum. It is recognised. A feeling of dislike arises. A reaction of 'don't want'. The concept of me grasps it: 'I' don't want. The reaction is empowered. 'I' do something.

Everything – from the reception of the word at the ear door and the feeling or touch door – has been an internal process dependent on our own inner conditioning. In this case, we have reinforced a conditioning of angry response, which causes mental turbulence. And so we cause ourselves to suffer.

Even should we swallow the insult and not respond, it festers. The tiny quip in the morning is relived tirelessly. It is inflated through fantasy throughout the day until the heart is so inflamed with its desire for revenge, we cannot sleep. In that virtual reality of the mind, we have punished the person a thousand-fold, even to the point of murder. And all this mental anguish is of our own making.

But what about a physical assault – is that any different in its psychology? Just as in the previous example the sound strikes the eardrum, so the blow to the nose strikes the sense door of touch. The process from now on is exactly as the above. It is recognised as thoroughly unlikeable and so not wanted. We react perhaps with a blow aimed at the offender's own nose or we retire hurt and brood over our revenge. And again, all this mental anguish is of our own making.

This process is true of any pain based on the senses. Through careful investigation of the way this psychophysical organism works, we come to realise that no one can cause us psychological pain. If this is fully realised, we also discover that there's no need to blame anyone – parents, spouse, children, workmates, politicians, society and so on – for our psychological distress.

Hurting another

What happens when we hurt someone? The reasons for wanting to harm someone are many: envy and jealousy; revenge; spite; sheer cruelty. There are as many reasons as there are malevolent intentions. And when we achieve our goal of hurting someone, there arises a satisfaction, a joy in someone's suffering. This is cruelty.

This is hard for us to accept because, for the most part, we think we act from good motives. We justify and rationalise our behaviour: 'Eye for an eye'; 'I just wanted to put them in their place' and so on. The result is a hardening of the heart and a distancing of it from its own emotions making it impervious to another's suffering.

But when we empathise with the victim, then we feel shades of shame, guilt and remorse. How should we understand these qualities?

Shame

We feel shame when our self-esteem is punctured. We lose face. We thought we were good, but now we realise we can behave in petty or malicious ways. Our self-image is bruised and we feel bad about ourselves. It undermines our self-respect and increases our self-hatred.

As an attitude proper to our spiritual life, however, it is a part of our integrity. We know how bad we will feel about ourselves if we breach our own ethical standard. So as soon as any unwholesome thought, word or deed

arises, there also arises the warning of shame. This stops us from acting unskillfully thereby strengthening our self-respect and self-worth.

Guilt

Guilt arises when we know we have acted against the moral code. (This is not the same as ‘existential guilt’ which is defined below.) This is the role of our conscience, the judge within us. It is that which has moral understanding, knowing the difference between wholesome and unwholesome actions. It may be plain wrong in its understanding or too severe, or it may be too lax in its judgements. Only through wise reflection and talking to wise people can we develop a balanced conscience. Furthermore, by acknowledging and bearing with feelings of guilt through insight meditation (vipassana), we learn not to react to them. Because we are no longer supporting these conditionings, they will begin to fade away.

Once we are guilty of doing something unskillful, the consequence is some measure of dread. We fear the consequences of our actions, especially how others will behave towards us. We feel uncomfortable with others, fear and anxiety levels grow. Paradoxically, this fear and anxiety of others makes us hate them!

However, when such fear of consequences arises even at the suspicion of an unwholesome thought, word or deed, it prevents us from contemplating such an action. This allows us to live free of guilt. When this is also accompanied by the acknowledgement of the suffering that may arise in another because of our unskillful actions, this is compassion and leads us to respect and protect the very one we wished to hurt. The relationship between guilt and compassion is intimate.

If shame and guilt are absent, a person can commit unskillful actions without feeling or remorse. These are the sociopaths and psychopaths among us. But when finely tuned, shame and guilt act as sharp warning signals that stop us doing harm. For as soon as an unwholesome desire arises, it is immediately followed by the knowledge of the personal suffering involved and the consequences it may lead to. When shame and guilt function in this way, the Buddha refers to them as ‘guardians of society’.

Remorse

Remorse, on the other hand, is the genuine feeling of regret at pain caused to another and leads us to seek reconciliation. It is painful to the heart. For just as we have come to understand that though others do not directly cause us to suffer, they can purposefully create the conditions that press our buttons, so we realise how our cruelty is a catalyst for evoking suffering in others. We simply do not want to behave like that again and this compassionate attitude towards ourselves and others guards us against similar behaviour. It strengthens the resolve behind our determination to change our habits for the good. And in so doing our sense of self-worth and self-esteem is enhanced and our relationship to others becomes more harmonious.

Understanding forgiveness

Forgiveness is a change of heart, a radical transformation of our relationship towards people whom we have harmed, towards people who have harmed us and towards ourselves, away from hatred and revenge; guilt and shame; self-hatred and self-punishing.

To forgive is to stop justifying and indulging the emotions of hurt, anger, guilt, shame associated with the incident which evoked pain. When we have forgiven fully, we remember the incident and feel only compassion for ourselves and the other party for all the suffering and pain evoked and expressed in the incident.

To forgive is not to brush an incident aside and forget it. Pushing it out of mind is a suppressive measure and the grudge works underground and sabotages our lives in ways of which we are unaware. For instance, it may be that that we have been hurt by an unfaithful partner. If we fail to work through the hurt towards forgiveness, that hurt stays within us and prevents us from forming a new relationship out of fear of further hurt. It turns us into cowards.

To forgive is not to excuse. Often when we forgive someone we try to find an excuse for them. In our liberal society, we rightly point out that the unsocial behaviour of some youths is due to poor parenting, but still the youth must come of age and start to take responsibility for their actions. To accept mitigating circumstances may make it easier for us to forgive, but if ‘excusing them’ is not genuine, but simply a way of avoiding ‘trouble’ and demanding justice, then it will not dissolve the hurt we feel. Again, it makes cowards of us.

To forgive is not to condone. Just because we can forgive in our hearts the person who has done us wrong, it does not mean we cannot ask for just compensation. To receive reparation should not affect the quality of our forgiveness, but what it does is to allow us to trust that person again. And in making the offering, the

wrongdoer regains not only your respect, but their own self-respect. Similarly if we have done wrong, then making such an offering can restore our own self-respect and respect in the eyes of the other.

Furthermore, if we confuse forgiving with condoning we can feel that when we forgive someone we are 'letting them off'. This is often because we wish to punish the person. But punishment is not the same as justice. There is just recompense for any harm or damage done, but punishment suggests retribution and the nasty gratification of vengeance fulfilled. There is also always the possibility of vendettas. A Chinese saying suggests that those who seek revenge should prepare two graves. The rationale underpinning punishment is that the suffering imposed will be such as to make the wrong-doer think twice before doing such a thing again. Therefore, punishment is not concerned with recompense or justice. It is concerned with frightening the wrong-doer. Hence, there is no punishment that fits the crime, only the punishing pain that will stop the wrongdoing. So, the suffering inflicted must be more than the crime is worth. That is why punishments such as cutting off a hand for stealing actually work. The crime simply isn't worth the risk. The question, then, is: are we prepared to inflict such suffering on an individual not as justice but as deterrent for the sake of an orderly society?

In the USA, the family of victims are allowed in some states to be present at the criminal's execution. Their sense of 'justice' is not fulfilled which illustrates the problem with fear and hatred – they simply cannot be assuaged by revenge. A system of justice based on punishment will do nothing to alleviate our own hurt.

So to forgive is rather to transform our attitude from hurt and revenge towards harmlessness and compassion. Once this is our normal response to those who harm us, paradoxically, it takes away the need for us to forgive them. We can so train ourselves that with the hurt, forgiveness arises spontaneously, even to the point where no hurt is felt. This is when the last vestiges of 'me' have disappeared. For when that sense of 'self' has gone, who is there to hurt?

Consider the story of a parrot seized by a bird of prey. The bird drops the parrot. Those around ask the parrot what it was like. It replies: 'Just one bag of bones picking up another bag of bones.' Our training can take us towards the end of forgiveness.

When we can't forgive someone

This is another of those sticking points. First, we need to distinguish between 'can't' when it means 'I am unable' and 'can't' when it means 'won't'. Parents know when their child means 'won't' rather than 'can't' – such as when they 'can't' sleep – because they want to stay up. If we are honest with ourselves and if we have come to truly understand that the hurt inside us is created by us, then it is never a case of 'can't' but always a case of 'won't' forgive.

We then need to change the internal dialogue and open up a chink of possibility: 'Maybe I can forgive ...'

When we can't forgive ourselves

What is happening when we can't forgive ourselves? For most of us, this is the hardest thing to do. On a TV programme about 'bag people', a late middle-aged woman was interviewed. She had taken to the streets and began the compulsive collection of rubbish, mainly paper. When asked why, she replied wistfully that she had been involved in the death of a child.

First we must distinguish conscience from 'the judge'. Conscience is that simple ability to know what is right from wrong. It is a wisdom based on the knowledge of what causes harm. The judge within us is that part of the self that hates and condemns the self, that wishes to punish it. So it is with the self as judge that we must deal.

This is where the understanding of Dependent Origination can be so helpful. The aversion that arises towards ourselves because we do harm is concretised into a voice that condemns us. It is being able to listen to the voice and not to believe it that undermines its power over us. Once we can distance ourselves from the voice, we can feel the underlying aversion towards ourselves the better. Then we need to remind ourselves that this also is just another mental state, arising and passing away which 'I' don't have to own.

In this way we stop indulging self-hatred and, in time, it too will die away.

At heart, we are innocent

LET US RETURN to the teaching of Dependent Origination: The first link on the chain is ignorance. This is not a culpable ignorance. Take for instance the driver who pleads he did not know he was not supposed to go through a red light. He ought to have known it. But if a toddler sets fire to a house, it would be a hard court that convicted him of arson. Perhaps a better word is nescience, simply ‘not knowing’.

Nescience is that state of not knowing that we all begin life with. What does the foetus or the new-born child ‘know’? The development of that ‘knowing’ is the flourishing of our pure awareness and intuitive intelligence. These are the two qualities of the enlightened mind, the Buddha within, which develops both gradually and in quantum leaps.

An obvious stage when we enter into a different level of awareness, a different way of relating to the world, is that passed by most seven-year-olds. Although the child steadily grows in understanding, all of a sudden at seven, there are questions about Father Christmas coming down a chimney. Imagination is reality-tested. What is more, as told in the myth of the Garden of Eden, we eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Morality enters our lives. Another stage is the introduction of sexual relationships in adolescence. A well-known one is the mid-life crisis that can turn our world upside down. Each time there can be a sea change in the way we experience ourselves, the world and ourselves in the world.

The Buddha’s teaching is concerned to continue this process of transforming our understanding of ourselves and of ourselves in the world. And it means going back to the root of the problem. This he identified as a mistake that the intuitive awareness makes at the very outset. It believes it is what it experiences. Eventually, this turns out to be the body and the psyche, our emotional and thought life. This is our essential delusion. We believe ourselves to be this psychophysical organism.

Through the process of vipassana, insight meditation, this psychophysical organism is objectified in the same way that a new-born begins to learn that there is a world beyond itself. As the body and psyche are experienced not as part of a self but simply as a psycho-physiological process, the intuitive awareness comes to realise it is itself not that very same body or personality.

The belief of the intuitive awareness that it is the body and personality is the essential delusion. This leads it into a dualistic relationship with the world. It experiences the world either as a heavenly realm or a pit of hell, though most times somewhere in between. To feel safe it needs to collect things. The more it has, the safer it feels, whether it be riches, fame, power and/or access to any pleasure. This is greed in its widest meaning of accumulation. Unfortunately, every hoard has to be defended against loss, whether through nature or predator. Defence mechanisms are developed. And when these fail, escape mechanisms. Hence the fight-flight syndrome. This is called aversion.

Although there are social norms of acquisition and protection of property, the fear of loss lies underneath our apparent safety. Hence the huge insurance industry! Worse still, that neurotic need we have to feel safe in a world that, at the end of the day, offers sickness, aging and death, can lead us to venal behaviour and even onto criminality.

This growing intuitive awareness at some point comprehends that but for this mistake – and an unblameworthy mistake it is for it did not know any better – it would never have done any harm. It sees clearly that it is therefore, at root, innocent. Yet, paradoxically, it cannot divest itself of the responsibility of putting right that which, because of its delusion, it has done wrong. For it is responsible even though not blameworthy. It cannot escape the consequences of past unskilful actions, both within the body and heart-mind and in the world.

This is why that intuitive awareness can now forgo the need to be forgiven by another for it recognises its own innate purity. And, of course, others do not need our forgiveness to achieve their purity of heart.

3

Further reflections

WHAT ABOUT EXISTENTIAL guilt? This is that deeper sense of guilt which is probably the heritage of our Judeo-Christian culture. It gives us the feeling that we are essentially bad, unable to act in godly ways by our own effort. There seems to be no way out of this dilemma save by the intervention of a Great Being who has the power to forgive.

In Buddhist understanding, however, evil is secondary. It arises out of that mistake we make because of our original state of 'not-knowing'. As this intuitive awareness cuts through its own delusion by the power of its own discernment, ignorance becomes wisdom. The essential delusion is the belief that this person with its body and personality is what we are. This is the root identity out of which all our unwholesome propensities arise. Eradicate this and all unwholesome habits cease. Having lost their source and cause, they cannot arise again.

So this feeling and judgement we have that we are essentially bad, evil, unworthy of being loved and so on, is but part of the delusionary way we have come to see ourselves. Here again lies the power of vipassana (insight meditation) which is a practice expressly designed to cut through such delusions.

Kamma

The law of kamma states that everything we do either in our thinking, speech or actions will have an effect. The effect is internal within the psyche and, as far as speech and action goes, external into the world. The former conditions our emotional and thought life. The latter sets up a chain of events which in turn will affect our relationship to the world and the world's relationship to us. These effects will be wholesome, unwholesome or neutral depending on the ethical nature of our volitions. Simply stated, when we think, speak or act in immoral ways, some harm will arise for the body, the psyche and the world. If we do so in moral ways, some good will arise.

For example, I might get away with fiddling my tax return. But now I am conditioning myself to steal and I may branch out into other sorts of theft. I may suppress the anxiety of being caught, but it is still there, working its poison in the psyche. At some point I may very well be caught and have to suffer the disgrace.

Punishment?

Here we see added reasons for not demanding punishment. For the consequence of an act will bring about its own just reward. And when, with hard honesty, we look at our reasons for punishing, we will always find hidden there an unworthy motive. This does not mean we cannot imprison people or ask them to do work as compensation, but the motive will be to safeguard the public, for the education of the criminal, to make reparation and so on. Justice, then, is not about punishment, but about reconciliation and reparation.

Getting away with it

Why then do evil people 'get away with it' and good people remain unrewarded? In Buddhist understanding this is not possible on two grounds. The first is that everything we think, say or do has an effect internally, within the eggshell of the inner world. This is the world we really experience with its physical, emotional and thinking life. The more unskillfully we behave, the more unwholesome become our states of mind. So the more unwholesome our states of mind, the more we feel dissatisfied. And the opposite is true, of course. The more skillful we are, the more contented and happy we become.

Second, this is not the only life that has been or will be experienced. This, of course, is not acceptable to many people for there is no 'compelling scientific proof'. Yet the Buddha was adamant that the dispositions we develop roll on life after life until we are liberated.

Belief in rebirth, however, is not necessary for the workings of Dependent Origination, the psychology which shows how to end unsatisfactoriness. That can manifest in our everyday life, right here and now.

The child and 'innocent suffering'

What about the child and 'innocent suffering'? It would be inaccurate to say that a child is responsible for its suffering in the same way as a fully mature adult. It is the very lack of maturity, especially its inability to reflect, that makes the child so vulnerable. Its discomfort begins in the womb, however. Birth can be a

traumatic event. Then parents can lack patience, even a true love for the child. Indeed the child may be physically and emotionally abused.

Yet, the same psychology pertains. This is why we end up with such a backlog of work when we come to meditate. We are carrying all the baggage of suffering since the earliest hours. There is also good news, however. It is because, even from those earliest times, we have been creating our own psychological suffering, that we can learn to dissolve it. If this were not so, how could we ever come to the end of suffering?

For if our suffering were directly caused by others, we would have to wait till everyone, including ourselves, was completely free of malevolence and before the world finally conspired to stop causing us psychological pain. It is precisely because we have created our own unsatisfactory inner environment – even from conception – that we can not only deconstruct it, but begin to build a healthy and more beautiful state.

This is not to lessen in any way the responsibility of an offending adult, for those who damage children bear a heavy karmic consequence. When asked, Ian Brady, the infamous Moors Murderer, said that if he thought about the torture he had inflicted on his child victims, it would drive him mad. As we have noted, it is much easier to forgive others than to forgive oneself.

4

How to bring ourselves to the end of forgiveness

Freeing ourselves of the victim's suffering

HOW THEN DO we free ourselves of suffering when we are a victim? There are several steps. We must undermine our negative attitude towards the person. Let us remind ourselves that punishment is not necessary. Those who do harm will suffer the consequences of their own actions. Remember that, at heart, no one means to act in a harmful way. It is by way of delusion, an un-blameworthy mistake, that we all behave in unskilful ways.

Acknowledge that the psychological pain we are suffering is self-made and that we must patiently allow this suffering to arise and dissolve.

We must be especially attentive so that we do not inadvertently indulge our distress. As soon as we awake from a fantasy, we must reflect on what the mind is doing and return to experiencing the feelings of hurt, anger and so on as they manifest in the body as feelings, emotional or physical. It is through the imagination that emotions and mental states develop themselves.

Beware of self-pity – the attitude that tells us we do not deserve to suffer. Why me? Poor little me! It is not fair! It may be that we have suffered an injustice, that we are innocent victims. But, as always, the reaction is self-made. It is my internal decision to indulge my self-pity. And what is the point of it? Does it help the situation? Does it help me? Paradoxically, in calling for pity, does not self-pity sink itself deeper into the mire of unforgiving-ness? As always, acknowledge this unskilful attitude. Do not indulge it. Just let it arise and pass away. But feel it, experience it fully.

Here are some meditative exercises based on vipassana insight meditation

Exercise 1: Freeing ourselves of the victim's suffering

- Let the occasion when someone has hurt you come to mind. As the memory rises, become more aware of the emotions arising around it: the hurt, self-pity, anger, the desire for revenge. Feel their texture while keeping the occasion in mind. Sometimes you may be able just to feel the emotions and let go of the memory.
- If the concentration is not strong, the mind will wander and indulge one of those emotions. When you wake up from the fantasy, acknowledge what has happened and that you have unwittingly developed that attitude. Then return to the exercise with a firm determination to stay with the presenting feelings and emotion. This is easier if you stay at the level of bodily feelings and sensations such as the heat of anger or the queasiness of anxious guilt.
- Continue to use the memory to see how you created the emotions. This will stop you blaming the other.
- Keep feeling those emotions directly until you feel they are decreasing. This will give you confidence that all you need to do to purify the heart is to suffer gladly the states of mind you have created. For since you are no longer empowering them by allowing the mind to wander off in fantasy, they will simply die away.
- Recognise also how you are reacting to those emotions.
- What do you feel about those attitudes? Do you turn away from the hurt? Do you want to indulge your anger and revenge? What is the judging mind saying to you about yourself and the other? Are you allowing yourself to agree and so indulge all the aversion and turbulence, and so increase your suffering?
- Can you see what a burden these emotions are to the heart? Acknowledge them for what they are – negative, unwholesome, unskilful, life-destructive, not life-enhancing, undermining your capacity to love, to relate.

We must change our attitude towards the person who has harmed us, especially if we harbour thoughts of hatred and revenge. This is best done at those times when the heart is not inflamed with hurt and self-pity.

Exercise 2: Developing goodwill

- Bring the person to mind and explain how their behaviour has hurt you. Tell them that you wish to be reconciled. Let bygones be bygones. Here is a formula for offering forgiveness:

*Whatever harm you have done to me,
in thought, word or deed,
by way of greed, hatred and delusion,
intentionally or unintentionally,
I forgive you.*

- Tell them what good qualities you recognise in them.
- Imagine them accepting your desire to be reconciled and offering you an apology.
- Offer them the hand of friendship with some blessings for their life. Can you take them back into your heart and embrace them?
- When negative attitudes have decreased a little, we need to develop an attitude of friendliness towards the person. We can contemplate their better nature. We can send good wishes from our heart. If this is too difficult, at least develop an attitude of no-harm.
- Resolve not to approach the person unless the heart is equanimous.
- Wait for the right time to talk to the person about the incident if we feel this is necessary. We don't have to. When we realise that we have caused our own misery, we don't have to lay it on anyone any more.
- If we do talk to the person, talk as if we were mediating between them and ourselves.
- Beware of any blame in the voice. Be clear about our feelings. Take responsibility for our part in the incident. And offer a solution to the problem if appropriate.
- Don't expect them to apologise. If they do so, all well and good. But it is so important to remember that for us to be clear of the hurt within ourselves, their apology is not necessary. The healing of our hearts comes from the first two steps.
- Sometimes we can do nothing. It may be that the person has moved on or died. We continue to work towards reconciliation inwardly until the memory is divested of all emotional pain.
- There is also a powerful technique of the 'phantom letter' in which you can express yourself fully. You can also use this for other situations – but remember, don't post it. Or at least don't post it until you've had time to reconsider what it is you have expressed.

Someone we 'can't' forgive?

If the above suggestions are not of help, then these following points are worth considering to overcome hardened resentment. In the *Path of Purification*, the great Fifth Century commentary by Bhadantacariya Buddhaghosa, there are listed nine ways to overcome resentment. You may find some useful.

- Turn thoughts of loving-kindness towards the hated one.
- Reflect on the Simile of the Saw: *Oh monks! Even if bandits should come and brutally saw you limb from limb with a double handed saw, should you indulge your hatred towards them, you would not be followers of mine.*
- Reflect on the better part of the person and if you can see no redeeming virtue then raise compassion for them.
- Since our hatred, anger, grudge and unrequited revenge continue to boil in our hearts – or if suppressed continue to boil in the body – why continue to do ourselves damage? Why do we continue to 'eat our own hearts out'?
- Reflect on the understanding that we all make our own kamma and we all must suffer the consequences of that.

*I am the owner of my deeds
I am heir to my deeds.
I am born of my kamma.
My kamma is my friend.
My kamma is my refuge.
Whatever kamma I perform, be it skilful or unskilful,
of that I shall be the heir.*

- Reflect on the patience shown by those who have suffered great injustice, for example the people of Tibet, Nelson Mandela and all victims of persecution and torture.
- Reflect on our interconnectedness, for instance because of our past rebirths, we may have been the person's mother, father, brother or sister.
- Reflect on the advantages of developing love and friendship and living in a world without enemies.
- Give a gift!

Freeing ourselves of a wrong-doer's suffering

How then do we free ourselves of suffering when we have done wrong?

Reflect on the truth that we are deluded. Remember, we have acted out of a mistake arising from our primal not-knowing and that therefore we are at heart innocent. This allows us to forgive ourselves.

It is necessary to take on our proper responsibility for the role we played. We need to accept our part in the process of 'causing' that pain, of being a catalyst. For instance, once we know how to press someone's buttons, we can use it to control, to spite them and to enjoy ourselves! Because harm comes as a result of our behaviour, we need to accept our share of the responsibility – the more so if the person is not in control of their behaviour, such as a child.

We must be careful not to take on false guilt, however. Just as it is true for us, so it is true for others. We have not actually caused them psychological pain.

We must make resolutions not to behave in a similar way again. Resolutions can be dangerous things. Sometimes we overestimate what we are capable of, in which case we need to be realistic and revise our resolutions.

Because our behaviour patterns are deeply ingrained, we will necessarily make the same mistakes over and over. So we need to accept that the process will have to be repeated and repeated and repeated. Slowly, if this is done with an earnest heart, our habits are lessened and they will eventually die away.

We have to sit in the midst of the flames we have caused in our own hearts. This is the psychotherapeutic process of vipassana insight meditation. Again we must be careful not to indulge in fantasy, but as soon as the mind has wandered into thought patterns around shame, guilt and remorse, we need to bring ourselves back to just those emotions as felt in the body and sit patiently with them. Accept unreservedly that this suffering is a proper consequence of unskilful action. So we must learn to sit patiently amid the flames.

At an insight level, we begin to realise that we cannot fool our hearts. Whenever we do harm, these mental states of shame, guilt and remorse will arise. Eventually they become automatic reminders of potential suffering as soon as any unskilful thought or desire arises. In this way they become our guardians.

It is true that all feelings of shame, guilt and remorse are unwholesome. A liberated person would not feel such states. However, if we do not look upon them as teachers, we will experience them as punishment which will make us the more bitter.

Finally, the Buddha points out that it is when shame and guilt are so internalised and therefore prevent us from doing harm that they are also 'guardians of society'.

Exercise 1: Freeing ourselves of a wrong-doer's suffering

- Let the occasion when you have hurt someone come to mind. As the memory rises, become more aware of the emotions arising around it. Feel their texture while keeping the occasion in mind. Sometimes you may be able just to feel the emotions and let go of the memory. This is very healing.
- If the concentration is not strong, the mind will wander and indulge an emotion though fantasy. When you wake up from the fantasy, acknowledge what has happened and that you have unwittingly developed that attitude. Then return to the exercise with a firm determination to stay with the presenting emotion. This is easier if you stay at the level of bodily feelings and sensations, such as the heat of anger or the queasiness of anxiety.
- Continue to use the memory to see how the emotions are created by you. This will stop you blaming the other if you find yourself defending your conduct and yourself for your earlier conduct
- Keep feeling those emotions directly until you feel they are decreasing. This will give you confidence that all you need to do to purify the heart is to suffer gladly the states of mind you

have created. For since you are no longer empowering them by way of fantasy, they will simply die away.

- Recognise also how you are reacting to those emotions. What do you feel about those attitudes? Do you find yourself not wanting to feel the guilt, shame and dread? Does a sense of satisfaction or joy arise when you see you have got your own back? What is the judging mind saying to you? Are you allowing yourself to agree and so indulge all the aversion? And so increase your suffering.
- Can you see what a burden these emotions are to the heart? Acknowledge them for what they are – negative, unwholesome, unskilful, life destructive, not life-enhancing, undermining our capacity to love.

We must change our attitude towards the person we have harmed, especially if we harbour thoughts of jealousy and hatred. This is best done at those times when the heart is not inflamed with shame, guilt and remorse. Jealousy is not just covetousness or simply wanting what another has, but the same laced with hatred of the person. It is a true cancer in the heart. The healing comes when we teach ourselves to rejoice in another's good fortune.

Hatred and dislike are overcome by contemplating the virtues of the person. We are not denying the unwholesome attitudes in them, but simply putting the person in proper perspective.

Exercise 3: Developing goodwill

- Bring the person to mind and explain your behaviour and how ashamed or sorrowful you feel. Tell them that you wish to be reconciled. Apologise to them. Offer to make amends. Perhaps a present, too.
- Here is formula for asking for forgiveness.
*Whatever harm I have done to you, in thought, word or deed,
by way of greed, hatred and delusion,
intentionally or unintentionally, please forgive me.*
- Tell them what good qualities you recognise in them.
- Imagine them forgiving you and offering you the hand of friendship.
- Offer them some blessings for their life.
- Can you let yourself be taken back into their heart? To be embraced?
- We may need to meet the person and express our remorse. It is important to choose the proper time and place. If we have done the inner work well, our body and facial language will express our contrition. It is always a good starter to let them know we acknowledge our behaviour to have been wrong and to apologise for any hurt caused.
- The person will usually take for granted that we have caused them psychological pain. But we in ourselves must apologise only for our part. Unless it is appropriate, and it usually isn't, there is no need to disabuse them of their misunderstanding, for our purpose is to undermine their suffering. Perhaps at some later date there may be occasion to discuss the true psychology of suffering. There is no point in offering this understanding to someone who is not prepared for it. It will only cause resentment for it will seem to them that we are not taking responsibility for their suffering.

Refusal of forgiveness

What if a person refuses to forgive us and continues to harbour resentment and revenge? We can but accept that. Let us remember it is not necessary to be forgiven by someone to empty ourselves of feelings of shame, guilt and remorse. These will be uprooted by the steps above. In such a case, it is best to stay away from the person. Perhaps after a passage of time we can send out feelers and see if reconciliation is possible. We may even send a present. But our motivation ought to be because we want to undermine that person's suffering.

Forgiving oneself

What if the internal judge will not forgive us even when the other person has done so? We can hear the judge within us: 'I'm terrible!' 'How could I do a thing like that?' 'Other people must think I'm awful.' 'You just can't improve.' 'This is the way I am.' 'You deserve the worst!' ... and so on; such thoughts can lead to self-harm.

It is important not to identify with this voice. It is just a conditioning within the mind. We do not have to believe it. We do not have to agree with it. Just listen. By just listening, we do not empower it.

Sit quietly with the thoughts and feelings as they arise. Simply listen to this condemning voice as if it belonged to another person. Feel fully the emotions that arise with the voice. In this way you distance yourself from them too. They are just part of the mental turbulence we have created within ourselves and it is simply not necessary. Just listening and feeling means we are not empowering those thoughts and feelings and eventually they will die away.

Ask yourself what good does this train of thought do? Surely it is better to do what you can to put right what you did wrong and accept the consequences of your actions. Then you need to make an act of humility, which properly means to accept yourself as you really are and not as you would wish to be. Accept your limitations, your failings.

You can make up your own sayings, such as: 'Because of past actions based on greed, hatred and delusion, I have developed such and such unskilful habits.' Or, 'So long as I am not free of greed, hatred and delusion, I will make mistakes.' Finally, from that starting point of 'this is the way I am', you come to realise you can change!

Do not confuse resignation – feeling unable to do anything about a situation – with acceptance which is the realistic base from which we can see how to change ourselves.

Make a determination not to behave like that again. We know we may probably act in a similar unskilful way, yet we will keep making the effort. In time, the old unskilful habit will give way. (*See exercise below: The practice of determination*)

So by allowing feelings and emotions to rise within us and experiencing them fully, we are starving them of the energy they need to develop. Eventually, they simply die away. This is the same as giving up any habit. For instance, if you want to stop snacking in between meals, you just listen to the greedy voice and feel the desire, but you do not eat anything. Eventually, because you are not feeding that compulsion, it will die away.

This is not easy, of course. We do need to build up our determination to overcome these conditionings and be persistent in our efforts.

Putting an end to unskilful habits

How do we put an end to unskilful habits? The answer is to develop the practice of vipassana insight meditation, of which there are many techniques. The word itself translates as 'really seeing', to have insight into something. The one we decide to practise will depend on availability, the teacher and our own inclination.

All vipassana techniques are concerned with seeing precisely and clearly how the psychophysical organism works, specifically in how we cause dissatisfaction to arise. In the process we come to realise our true nature.

The insights work on two levels, psychological and spiritual.

On the psychological level, it first helps us to come to terms with our negative mental states. By learning to look closely at our emotions and changes of mood and to accept them, we come to know our inner selves – in this case the hurt, vengeful, guilty, anxious, remorseful states of mind. It teaches us how to deal with them. Being aware of them means we do not suppress them by pushing them away or by trying to escape from them, but we accept them, experience them, and feel them as they really are. It means not developing and making things worse by allowing fantasy, daydreaming and thinking, for these are the means we use to develop our emotions. Instead, by developing mindfulness and attention, we allow them to be themselves.

Then we experience for ourselves that just by observing and experiencing these states of mind, they lose energy, fade away and over a period of time die out altogether. This is exactly what the Buddha taught. Thus, even deeply repressed painful memories will arise and fade away until we have purified the mind of all negative states. Gradually, we begin to experience more and more the positive states of mind – love and compassion, joy, harmony and peace. This, of course, affects our relationships and daily life, making us happier people. It helps other people to be happy.

On the spiritual level, as this process of purifying the mind continues, intuitive wisdom arises and begins to see the way things really are. It perceives and understands the basic characteristics of our human life – its essential unsatisfactoriness. We cannot find permanent peace and happiness by indulging in the sensual world if only because of its impermanent nature and insubstantial quality.

This vipassana insight continues to do this until, when the conditions are right, it penetrates into the unconditioned beyond body and psyche. This is the experience of Nibbana, the state of non-suffering, of perfect contentment and peace.

The practice of determination

Determination is a quality that has to be strongly developed. It is one of those virtues that we need to carry us to 'the other shore', Nibbana.

However there are two warnings. First, we must be careful not to overestimate what we can do. We may start with the best intentions but give ourselves a schedule that is bound to defeat us. When we fail, we lose confidence. We then blame the system that 'fails us' or we blame ourselves, confirming we are not good enough. Start small. Build up over a period of time.

The second is that fail we must. Our conditioning goes deep and we will need lots of patience to recondition our heart-mind. So be ready to 'pick yourself up, dust yourself off and start all over again'.

These **Four Steps to Determination** may be of help. As explained below they pivot on 'can', 'ought', 'want' and 'will'.

1. We need to convince ourselves of our *ability*. We 'can do this', that is, 'I can forgive the person/I can be forgiven'.
2. We need to convince ourselves of our *responsibility*. We 'ought to do this' for our own good and the good of others. We can say that to forgive/be forgiven is good for my own heart and will help the other to forgive themselves and so add to peace in the world.
3. Must, ought to, have to. These are words that in some counselling and psychotherapeutic circles are often said to cause further false guilt and self-hatred. This may be true if such demands are put upon us externally or if we take on demands we do not want. But when we take responsibility for our resolutions, when such determinations are our own desires, then they become agents of change. We need to develop this *aspiration*. We 'want to do this! This is often a sticking point. The psyche rebels. It doesn't really want to do it. It really wants to go on indulging its delicious cruelty and vengefulness or keep on punishing and blaming itself. But we can contact our better nature. We can say that in the depths of the heart, we truly want to be reconciled.
4. We need to develop our *commitment*. We need to empower, to put our will into our skilful desire to forgive/to seek forgiveness. We can say that 'I will do this'. I will forgive the person for what they have done. And whenever the opportunity arises that is what I shall do. We need to keep on repeating the phrases to ourselves until our hearts come round to accepting them. This is the way to develop skilful attitudes.

These four steps can, of course, be used to change any unskilful habit into its opposite virtue.

Final reflection – the Simile of the Saw

How much forgiveness should we cultivate? Consider again this simile. *Oh monks! Even if bandits should come and brutally saw you limb from limb with a double-handed saw, should you indulge your hatred towards them, you would not be followers of mine .M21.20*

Consider! Since we will always be in the company of unenlightened beings who will harm us, if a person's suffering is truly caused directly by another, how could the end of all our suffering ever be attained?

If we ourselves are indeed the direct cause of all our own suffering, is it possible to dissolve all the suffering within us, no matter what the initial cause?

It is necessary to distinguish between physical discomfort and pain and psychological discomfort and pain. Physical pain, which is a feeling in the body, proper to the body, will stay with us, even should we be liberated. It is psychological discomfort and pain which the process of liberation utterly dispels. Is it possible then to be with physical discomfort and pain without suffering?

Further Reading

Warning: *This booklet is only an introduction to the whole field of forgiveness. There are many books written on this subject.*

The Lost Art of Forgiving by J.C. Arnold (Plough Publishing House)
A book packed with stories of forgiveness and wonderful insights.

Loving-Kindness by S. Salzberg (Shambala)
An excellent book that puts forgiveness in the context of developing the Four Illimitables: love, compassion, joy and equanimity.

The Path of Purification by Bhadantacariya Buddhaghosa
The standard commentarial text. See Chapter Nine. Recommended for those who are acquainted with Buddhist teachings.

Forgiveness by Michael Dawson (Findhorn Press).
A Christian approach.

Request: Should you have any comments that may help to clarify and improve this booklet, I would be happy to receive them. Email only bodhidhamma@ic24.net