

Forgiveness by Ewen Arnold

First of all, I want to talk about some popular misconceptions about forgiveness. Forgiveness doesn't imply that we are weak, that we can't stand up to those who cause suffering to others. It doesn't condone behavior that causes suffering, and it doesn't stop us from acting to prevent a recurrence of or to mitigate the effects of unskillful action. Indeed, right action is always easier if it is not done from a place of pain. Otherwise, we might find that the action we take just causes more suffering for ourselves and others.

Why do we forgive ourselves and others? We do so for our own sake, to be free from anger, fear, or resentment. The purpose of forgiveness is to reduce suffering; it is not a moral injunction. There is a story I heard (I can't remember where.) about two monks who had been tortured in prison. One asked the other, "Have you forgiven your captors yet?" The second monk replied, "No." The first monk said, "Well then, they still have you in prison." It is to get out of the prison of our own negative reactions that we forgive. This is truly empowering, freeing us from having to carry our resentments, our anger, and our sadness, around with us. It makes us lighter and more able to respond to circumstances from our heart, rather than from our resentment or anger. We realize that, even though others may have acted unwisely, selfishly, or even with malice, we don't have to react in the same way.

How do we forgive others and ourselves? We need to admit what we did or exactly what happened and to acknowledge the harmful consequences, noticing and discounting any defense or justification for unskillful actions if we did something that caused suffering, or noticing our attempts to blame others for the way we feel. We need to be honest and admit our feelings rather than moving straight to anger. (Anger sometimes masks other feelings, such as sadness, loss, or fear, and prevents us from acknowledging them.) If we can, we need to correct the effects of negative action, to apologize, or to make amends.

An aside on apology. Apology is regret for the action itself, not for the results. There's a great deal of difference between saying, "I'm sorry I offended you" and "I'm sorry I spoke harshly to you" or "I'm sorry I was so insensitive." In the latter two, we completely accept our role in the creation of pain.

We renew our connection with spiritual practice, realizing that negative actions happen because we have not been attentive or mindful enough. Finally, we form or renew our intention not to harm others and to stop feeding the patterns in us that cause harm.

Part of the job of a spiritual friend is to help us admit when we have done wrong, to help us correct what we have done, and to help us strengthen our practice, renewing our intention not to cause harm to others or ourselves. As a spiritual friend to someone who is causing themselves or others suffering, we need to be honest and courageous and to point out how they can behave more skillfully.

We need to realize that forgiveness is a messy process, probably involving grief, rage, sorrow, fear, or confusion, and that all of these emotions are part of the human journey, part of the healing process.

What are the effects of practicing forgiveness? It releases us from the sorrows of the past. The past stays in the past, and the learning happens in the present. We beat ourselves up less for things we can't change. It increases our compassion toward ourselves and toward those who cause us suffering. There is a reduction in judgment, and we get to see our own sorrows and how much pain they cause us. We also get to see that those who cause us suffering are acting out of their own pain and suffering. Both of these increase our wisdom. We feel less guilty. We are more able to let go of our own pain and to heal ourselves. There is less avoidance and denial and a reduced urge to punish or to seek vengeance.

Thus, forgiveness is messy, but very worthwhile. Furthermore, it is something that we can get better at with practice.