Transcript of Awakin Call with Sujatha Baliga
by awakin.org

Sujatha Baliga: Forgiveness of Unforgivable Acts

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Preetha: I'm really excited to be having this conversation with my dear friend Sujatha Baliga, who I have every interaction I have had with her, I've learned and grown immensely from every pearl that comes out of her mouth. She's someone who leaves me always wanting more, and I hope you'll have that experience today.

Sujatha is the Director of the Restorative Justice Project at the National Council on Crime and Delinquency in Oakland, where she helps communities implement restorative justice alternatives to juvenile detention and zero tolerance school discipline policies.

She's also specifically dedicated to advancing restorative justice as a tool to end child sexual abuse and inter-familial sexualized violence in the US as well as South Asia.
Her work is characterized by an equal dedication to victims and persons accused of crimes. She's a former public defender herself and also a victim advocate, and she's been a frequent guest lecturer throughout the world at universities and conferences. She's been a guest on NPR's Talk of the Nation and the Today Show, and her work has been profiled in an extensive article in The New York Times Magazine. She speaks publicly and inside prisons about her personal experiences as a survivor of child sexual abuse and her own personal path to forgiveness.

She is a graduate of Harvard College and the University of Pennsylvania, and she's also had some Federal clerkships. Significantly for our audience she's a longtime meditator, about 20 years, I think.

I think, Sujatha, where I'd love to start with you is you're one of the remarkable people whose work and external, your outer life flows so organically from your inner journey and your inner work. Maybe you could start with that and tell us how did you come to your work on the justice system and on helping victims of sexual abuse?

Sujatha: Sure. Thanks, Preetha, and I'm so pleased you're moderating today. It feels comfortable to be having a chat with a friend in front of an audience. It's lovely.
A little bit about how I ended up doing the work that I do today. I grew up in rural Pennsylvania in the 1970's and '80's. We were the only immigrant family

in our town, and there was a larger region there. It was not an easy childhood. I was experience abuse in my home at the hands of my father. My father sexually abused me for as long as I can remember.

It was challenging to be a religious minority and a cultural minority in a small rural place, so I was having a lot of bullying experiences at school as well. Just a lot of struggle personally.

My father passed away when I was 16, which created a whole other set of struggles. I think all of that suffering catalyzed me to want to do something about it. Over the years what that looked like was moving towards victim advocacy. So I became a victim advocate during and after college, working with battered women's shelters and on crisis hotlines and with sexually harmed children and women.

What I noticed during those years is that while I was effective, I didn't like who I was personally. A lot of my work was fueled by … well, all of my work maybe at that time was fueled by my own unresolved traumas and wanting to undo my own childhood by quote, unquote, "fixing other people's lives."

Really the anger was eating at me personally. I had migraines regularly, several times a week, blinding migraines, and really terrible stomach problems. I'm sure it was some sort of IBS thing that was never really diagnosed just by going to countless doctors and going through so many procedures. Nothing could really solve it. I remember really resenting being told that it was something psychosomatic. While in retrospect I don't think it was psychosomatic, it was all definitely happening, it was definitely what I realized caused, psychologically caused, caused by my unhappy state of being and my angry, angry state of being and also wrecking havoc on my friendships and my boyfriends and many other things at that time.

It was interesting. I had followed the man I was dating at the time, I had followed him to India for a year and was working, trying to help him start a program for the children of sex workers in Mumbai. That was the way I'd conceptualized at the time. When I got there and tried to get involved in the project, I realized the degree to which these women and their children were basically slaves. It was just too much trauma for me to handle. I hadn't worked out my own stuff, and I basically had a breakdown and realized that I needed to heal myself.

I was just about to start law school. I was 23, 24 years old. I was just about to start law school, and I realized I had to work out myself before I could possibly go to law school. I was not going to survive the emotional and intellectual rigors of law school in the current state I was in.

I went backpacking. I landed in the Dharamsala by myself and befriended a number of Tibetan families, who I was so engaged as a crisis counselor kind of person that I really would dig into stories of people about how did you escape and what's the landscape of Tibet today for your people. I really wanted to understand people's trauma, journeys and the suffering that they'd experienced.

I think that maybe was a rare experience for them, in that a lot of people I think come to places like Dharmsala, which is where the Tibetan government in Nigal at that time was and where His Holiness's offices still are. People come for more of a spiritual journey I think. I came sort of on my trauma journey, which I think people appreciated to some degree, where I wasn't making them prisoners of Shangri-La in a sense.

What I noticed in my conversations with them was that they would shift from these stories, these heartbreaking stories, where people could cry and express anger eventually toward some sort of just letting the subject matter go and then a few minutes later be laughing and sharing happy stories.

I was never really able to make that transition. I lived in the anger and the rage. Eventually somebody had the courage to ask me in through my hard external way of presenting at that time, said, "What are you so angry about? What's going on with you?" which was a wonderful question.

So I started to share for the first time in my life with people outside my inner circle. My father had sexually abused me. There was a lot of horror and shock from the people that I would share this with, and many of them would say, "You should ask His Holiness how does forgiveness play a role in this." I would ask them, "How are you so happy? How can you be so happy given what you've been through?" The answer would often come back, "We practice forgiveness." Then the dialog would then turn into what's the role of forgiveness in inter-familial harm. People would say, "You should ask His Holiness. You should ask His Holiness."

I found this amusing. I said, “He’s busy. How do you ask the Dalai Lama a question like this?” Somebody said, "Write him a letter and drop it off at his monastery. You'll get some sort of response." I followed the procedures, and a week later I went back to see if there was a letter or something, and I was ushered all the way in to the desk of His Holiness's private secretary who said His Holiness's schedule had changed. He was supposed to be in Assam or something. “Would you like to have a private audience with him on Wednesday or Tuesday” or something, a few days later. I had this unbelievable opportunity to have an hour with His Holiness.

The conversation started very much from the perspective of talking about gender-based violence and sexualized violence, and then it shifted towards His Holiness sharing very deeply about his own path to forgiveness. I was so moved by his own personal sharing of times earlier in his life when he had felt anger towards the Chinese and what practices and work that he had done on himself to do this.

I could see in front of me this living embodiment of someone who had eschewed anger, let go of anger, but was still working on behalf of those who suffer without anger as the motivating force. That had been my question in my letter to him. I was unable to write the words, "I was sexually abused by my father." What I said was, "Anger is killing me but it motivates my work. How do you work on behalf of abused and oppressed people without anger as the motivating force?"

I was seeing this. I was seeing someone clearly far more effective at achieving positive ends for others without anger, even in the face of unthinkable mass atrocities against his people and his nation and himself. So how does he do this?

I said, "I want to forgive my father. I want to follow this path." The first question that came out of his mouth was, "Do you feel you have been angry long enough?" I thought this was the most brilliant question I have been ever asked, especially about forgiveness, when so many people who would say to you, "Oh, you need to forgive. You need to forgive and forget." It's very clear that when people are praising forgiveness as some freedom for you that it's really about them wanting you to get over what's happening when your natural, normal response is to unthinkable harm that you suffered.

His Holiness asked me this question, and it was a genuine question. I could feel how genuine that question was. I actually took a moment to sit in silence with him and reflect on anger's diminishing returns on my life, on my personal life, on my relationships, on my boyfriends, on my family, on my effectiveness in the work, on my happiness. After surveying the landscape of the graveyards of what anger had left in my life, I said, "Yes, I'm ready. It's served me to this point. Maybe ... not maybe ... It is a big part of why I was able to survive to this day, but here I am ready to let it go. Yes, I want to."

So His Holiness gave me two very particular pieces of advice. The first one was to meditate. He said, "This level of rage," and even in that audience with him I was extremely angry in describing the work that I did and really raging about it and very angry. He said, "A mind that is this rageful is just out of your own control and so you need to meditate in order to reign it back in." The first piece of advice was to meditate, really learn to be the master of your own mind. So I was, "Okay, that one I can do;" right? "I'll sign up for meditation course."

His second piece of advice was to in some way open my heart to those who have done me harm or do harm. "Open your heart to your enemies or those you perceive to be your enemies." I started laughing. I was laughing out loud at him, saying, "That's crazy. I'm about to go to law school to be a prosecutor to lock all these abusers and batterers and child molesters up and put them behind bars." He thought this was hilarious. He pats my knee. He's, "Okay, okay, you just meditate."

Immediately after leaving him, within the next few weeks went and sat a ten-day Vipassana Course, the Goenkaji Style Vippasana Course, and it was the hardest and best thing I had ever done in my life.

That body-based experience of feeling in my body where my anger resides, healing when images and memories of the terrible things that had been done to me came to my mind. That Vipassana scanning, that body scanning, was incredibly powerful for me to really be able to dissect where in my body those memories live and what the physical sensations around those memories and what they lead to in terms of this endless loop of suffering that my mind goes into.

I think having done that, for the first nine days you're doing breath observation for three and then six more days of body scanning and really feeling embodied for the first time in my reaction to the things that had been done to me so many years ago and also being able to be present with the present moment realizing my body is reacting to things that aren't currently happening. It was very powerful for me physically to feel, "Wow, I am having residual physical reactions to things that are not current in this beautiful meditation hall in Massachusetts;" right?

What flowed from that was the Metta Bhavana [Dala 00:14:52], loving kindness practice, that they teach you the last day. I had a spontaneous sort of vision of one of the times in which my father molested me that usually brought up experiences of rage and anger. I used to replay that memory as a fantasy as if I stabbed him to death instead of him being able to achieve what he was trying to achieve. I would imagine stabbing him to death instead.

I think that when I started doing that with that memory, adding the stabbing him to death thing was right about when my migraines started in my late teens.

Instead I just allowed the thing to happen as it happened. That doesn't mean that I condoned it. It doesn't mean that I thought it was okay, but rather that … I love this quote about forgiveness I've heard. "Forgiveness is giving up all hope of a better past." I just let the past be what it was. I just observed it for what it was.

In this memory, rather than feeling the rage, I felt my father dissolve into light. That subtle sensation, that awareness in my own body, sort of just that lovely molecular flow that you can feel sometimes after a long sit flowed out of me and into him and he dissolved into light.

From that moment onward I have never felt any anger, rage, any of the things, feelings, desires for retribution, feelings for getting back at him, anything. All of these things of course would be impossible now that he's passed. But I still carried all those desires as if I could bring him back from the dead so that I could punish him somehow. All of those needs were gone with regard to him.

I’m not saying that I'm over anger when someone cuts me off in traffic sometimes or when some atrocity is happening in the world. I'm not beyond anger but I am beyond anger about that and about many other things. Probably beyond the feeling of retribution as being useful or even a desire for that coming up in me anymore.

I started law school a couple weeks later and I had no juice for being a prosecutor. I thought I should drop out. So I went to my criminal law professor and I said, "I think I'm dropping out." He said, "Don't drop out." I didn't tell him why. I said, "I came here to be a prosecutor. I have no interest in being a prosecutor. I came here to help battered women, and I don't know how to do this now."

He said, "You should think about being a defense attorney who defends women who kill their abusers." I was like, "Well, that's brilliant." He didn't tell me at that time, but one doesn't get to specialize in that right away; right? So I had to be a public defender for many years defending even those folks who had done exactly what was done to me as a child.

I really feel like I gave them excellent representation and had a wonderful opportunity to be of service to folks who've done things that were done to me. At the same time the entire criminal legal system always felt not okay to me. There was a way in which it was so fundamentally binary, like it was us versus them. It felt divisive and it wasn't a healing way. It wasn't what I had learned in my own life as my way of moving past terrible things that have happened. It couldn't be more different really.

I think of a court of law and I think of Susan Herman who wrote, the author of Trauma and Recovery says you couldn't create a better circumstance for bringing up traumatic stress than a court of law. We really re-victimize victims and we really … It's a damaging process for everyone who goes through it, almost everyone who goes through it. I kept in touch with His Holiness’s office and they suggested that I read his book on Tibetan justice called The Tibetan System of Justice Prior to Chinese Occupation called The Golden Yoke, Y-O-K-E. It was a wonderful book describing many ideals that were there in the Tibetan law code about healing and victim-identified needs being attended to and notions like atonement and reconciliation that I thought, "My goodness, how could we do some of that here?"

A friend who had been saying these words for years, "restorative justice." When I was describing this to her, she said, "I've been telling you about this for years." Susan

said, "It's called 'restorative justice.'" "I'm sorry. I didn't understand." And I started to go to restorative justice trainings and learned so much about this model that I work in today as what I think is the better way to address wrongdoing, even the most terrible forms of wrongdoing, when it's at all possible.

Preetha: I want to get to that in a second about this better way, but your story is so overwhelming and compelling. I just have to ask a follow-up. You talked about your first Vipassana I guess 20 years ago right after you met His Holiness and before you went to law school, I guess between college and law school; right?

Sujatha: Yes.

Preetha: You described this spontaneous experience you had on the tenth day, the Metta Bhavana portion of forgiveness, of overcoming your anger. How did you keep that up? It's one thing to have these magical moments and lightness. Was it just kind of gone forever? Is this something you had to keep cultivating?

Sujatha: About my father and about the sexual abuse I endured, yes, it is gone forever. It is gone forever. That being said, I kept doing ten-day sits, Preetha, so I don't know if it would have been gone forever if I hadn't kept doing sits.

Every summer during law school, every internship I had, I was like, “I can't do it the whole summer. I have to go do this ten-day sit." That was a prerequisite for choosing opportunities in my life, that there would have to be a way for me to do a ten-day sit often, at least once a year, during those years.

I kept up my practice to some degree. It would have been wonderful if I could have done the whole two hours that are recommended every day. I never did that, especially during law school. I probably would have done better to have studied less and meditated more. But I did definitely do the ten-day sit every year, and I would try to fit some period of sitting practice, even if it's 15 minutes, into every day during law school and since then. I've just kept that up.

It's hard to know. I think I also just shifted what I thought of as entertainment away from ... What I would do with holidays and vacations more towards this practice and started going to teachings with His Holiness any time I could get to a teaching, two days. Something is happening in Boston. I would just make that the priority instead of other things. I just think constantly feeding your brain with certain ideas, your mind and your heart, with certain ideas. Being in the presence of those who are embodying it, who have truly trained themselves in these ways. Thich Nhat Hanh, others. If I could just get in front of people who were walking it, who were living it, who embody it, then I would take the time to do those things.

At the expense of my career or whatever, I would be getting that advice all the time, like, “She's doing what? She's going where? She's giving up what to do what?” But I would. For me, if I didn't, then I wasn't going to be able to do what I do.

Preetha: Right. I know it's a huge part of your ongoing life, the meditation and stuff, which we'll get to in a second.

Let's turn to the criminal justice system. You talked about how the current system re-victimizes victims, how it's the antithesis of the kind of recovery and healing that

you yourself experienced. Can you describe to us a couple things, and I'll let you address this in whatever way you feel like addressing it, what is the ideal criminal justice system? What is wrong with the current one? And how does restorative justice, what is it and how does it fix it to some degree?

Sujatha: As a restorative justice practitioner, I have very concrete ideas that I take entirely from Howard Zehr, who is known as the grandfather of restorative justice and my mentor in this work. He did this brilliant thing where he just really called us to a paradigm shift.

In our current system of justice, particularly with regard to criminal harm, we ask a very specific set of questions when we're confronted with harm. It's what law was broken? Who broke it? And how do we punish them? The paradigm shit that restorative justice calls us to is a very different set of questions. It starts with who was harmed, what do they need, and whose obligation is it to meet those needs?

The primary focus is on the crime victim. The initial focus is how the crime victim defines the harm themselves. That is inherently incredibly empowering.

To me, an ideal justice system would be attendant to those three questions. It would be a problem-solving and a healing system rather than a punitive system. What's broken with our current system is that it is driven by punitiveness and we know that doesn't work. Our recidivism rates, our re-offense rates are through the roof. In the juvenile justice context it looks like if we never caught kids in the first place, they would be less likely to re-offend than most of the vast majority of the juvenile justice interventions that we give them. In fact, the processes themselves are what we call criminogenic, that the juvenile justice system itself increases the amount of juvenile harm that will flow from the kids that get in contact with that system.

Preetha: Some people say, "I had to go to jail to become a criminal."

Sujatha: Exactly, right.

When I think about when you're a kid and you throw a baseball through your neighbor's window and if you're so lucky to have the kind of parents who would take you by the ear to your neighbor, have you apologize, find out how much it costs, and if you're so lucky to have an allowance, redact it until you have paid them back for how they paid to have that window repaired; right?

You've learned something and you've redeemed yourself; right? I say this and people remember that moment when they got busted for shoplifting as a kid and their mother dragged them back to the store clerk to give the lipstick back, look the person in the eye, apologize.

Whatever it is, those are wake-up moments for us, and I think our justice system should be about those things. I think that would cause the moral change within us. It would be driven by notions of empathy, compassion, repair, atonement, these types of things. That really is what restorative justice is about.

Number one thing, relationship. We are in relationship with the people we harm, whether we created that relationship when we mugged a stranger or whether or not that relationship, as it is with most child sexual abuse cases; right? We are in relationship with those people. What does it mean to heal that relationship as a way ...?

The field of restorative justice flows from many different ancient indigenous paths, be it the Maori in New Zealand or Navajo Peacemaking. We gain so much from these indigenous wisdoms about what justice looks like. They don't bifurcate out justice as a different thing. Everything is addressed from the perspective of how are we in right relation with the earth and with each other.

I believe that we could have a justice system that attends to those same questions and concerns. That really in a very brief nutshell is what restorative justice is and what an ideal justice system would look like to me.

That doesn't mean that there would never be incarceration. I think about literally a couple of the people I have represented in my life who are not safe for us and others and for themselves really to be out and about in the world, and there might be some period of confinement that is required in order to help people readjust to their best selves, but that confinement would look really different than the way we do confinement today. It would be a mental health-based model, and it would be an opportunity for people to change themselves.

Preetha: Right.

Sujatha: Maybe meditation, et cetera, would all be a part of that.

Preetha: You say that you'd like to see the justice system move from one of punishment to healing. In your experience, what is it that people, communities, as well as perpetrators, need to heal? Is it truth-finding? What is it?

Sujatha: Truth is huge; right? It's probably why I named my kid Satya. I'm obsessed with it and I think many child sex abuse survivors are quite interested in this truth-truth. We have to tell the truth. The truth has to be uncovered.

What's gorgeous about the restorative justice process is when they're done well, are happening in a way, and the programs that I helped start, we have this thing that we call the Reverse Miranda Rule, and we get prosecutors from the county to sign this thing. Nothing that's said in a restorative justice process can ever be used in a court of law. When I was a public defender, I never really wanted to know the whole truth about my client's case. I did, but then it put me in this awkward position where I wouldn't want them to testify if they wanted to testify, because I wouldn't want them to perjure themselves; right? We have a system that minimizes truth-telling right now because the stakes are so high for telling the truth.

But what crime victims really want are answers to questions, like, "Why did you pick me?" and "What were my daughter's last words?" and "Where's her body?" These are things that no one in their right mind, if they've got the answers to these questions, would answer honestly. But what if the response was, "We're going to move forward in a positive way and heal this and help you never do this again" instead of "We're going to lock you up for the rest of your life or kill you." Who's going to tell the truth under those circumstances?
With the Reverse Miranda Rule, I get to sit down with a young person and say, and I train other people to do this too, how do you get a young person to tell the truth? You say, "This is not about punishment. We just want to help you make it right. We're going to help you make this right, so what's going on?" "Nothing you say I'm going to tell the cops. Nothing you say I'm not going to tell the DA. It's not going to

come out in court. Tell me what's going on with you. Tell me what happened." And working with that young person until they can, so the truth can come out. Then prepping them to tell that truth in a way that is palatable, that is what the crime victim wants to hear when we finally bring them together.

I don't know if I answered your question, Preetha.

Preetha: Yeah, it does.

Sujatha: For me, that truth-telling piece is so critical, it really gets at what people are most often asking for. What do all of these people need? What's interesting is that all the parties in any given case in any community, we say we hold these three in equal compassion in our hearts, the folks who do the harm, the folks who have been harmed and the communities that they come from. Every situation is unique and different.

This is what's radically different from our cookie-cutter approach to justice in America, that we try to move to a uniformity in sentencing, et cetera, which has its value, because if we didn't have that approach, then we know that the racial disparities in our justice system would be even worse; right?

If we're asking communities and people to solve problems in this more compassionate way and where most harm in America is actually intra-community. It's folks harming their own communities and their own families. We're not going to have to worry so much about that sort of stuff.

Preetha: Get the community involved in the healing; right.

Sujatha: Yeah. We get the community involved in the healing journey. We can get really gorgeous different tailored outcomes in every case. Some kids are asked to paint an oil painting for a crime victim. Some kids are asked to rebuild a fence that they burnt down and work with a carpenter to do that.

I worked on a homicide case where the outcome was that the crime victim, the young man was going to have to serve time for having killed his fiancé. In addition, they wanted him to ... It was a shortened sentence, 20 years instead of the death penalty or mandatory life, and during those 20 years he's agreed to learn all about teen-dating violence, start Restorative Justice Programs inside his prison, speak publicly if he's allowed in shackles at high schools about taking his girlfriend's life as a part of teen-dating violence. This is really remarkable stuff, that the crime victims were part of deciding with him about what it needed to look like for this to be made right. It's literally different in every case. Preetha: There's so much I want to ask you about this, but I'm mindful of our time, and I want to leave room for questions. But there's two things I just really want to cover with you. One, I know you're doing a lot of work with sexual abuse in the South Asian community. I'd love to hear a little bit about that.

Then I really would love to hear you talk about as a participant in the criminal justice system, you're surrounded by such muck, so to speak, in a single day, you have to put your armor on and deal with unspeakable agony and pain every single day. How do you keep yourself grounded in your values? How do you keep yourself grounded in your work? And to go back to the question you asked the Dalai Lama, how do you do this without being motivated by anger?

Sujatha: Well, I'll answer that one first. I just have a set of practices that I try to do as much as possible. One is Tonglen, this notion of giving and taking. I ask folks to look it up, T-O-N-G-L-E-N, but it really is just breathing in the suffering that I see in front of me and breathing out my relative calm or my relative happiness or my love towards them, whether or not there's somebody insulting me in front of me. In some heated meeting, in some criminal justice context or whether or not it's when a kid is really enraged at me that they have to do this diversion program at all and whatever it is. The practice of Tonglen is critical for my sanity and my effectiveness in the work.

The other thing is I read the Eight Verses of Thought Transformation every morning, and that really again just trying to start my day with that thinking the verses of thought transformation.

The other is just I keep up with that sitting practice, and whatever it is, whatever is coming at me, starting with just the breath, return to the breath. I just return to the breath over and over again before I act, before I respond, especially when I feel in my body ... I know where in my body I feel that anger starting to rise up in my face and my arms. Everyone has their place where they can identify maybe in your body where it is that you feel that heat starting to rise.

So I breathe into those places and I sit with my breath, even if it's just one breath. I have a few techniques with that.

Then the child sexual abuse work in the South Asian community is brand new. I'm super-excited about it. The circle processes, the basic peacemaking process can be used to answer those questions, "Who was harmed?" "What do they need?" and "Whose obligation is it to meet those needs?" You could do that with the person who has done the harm and the person who's experienced the harm, or you can just bring a group of survivors together and sit in circle and do peacemaking process.

What I've been doing is sitting down with a group of adult survivors of child sex abuse of South Asian descent, and we are doing what has never been done before really, which is just to share our stories. We're Hindu and Muslim and Buddhist and from different countries from across South Asia, and we're just starting to identify answers to those questions. "How was I harmed?" "What do I need?" "Whose obligation is it to meet those needs?"

Interestingly, no one has said that they would like to see their abuser incarcerated. People have said they needed a lot of other things, but sometimes we start with meditation and then we end with meditation [inaudible 00:37:16] as well. Just a moment of silence, being together, and then sharing our stories. Holding each other's stories in compassion and finding commonality in our journeys has been very powerful.

In India we have a pandemic of sexual harm there, and I know, Preetha, I think of this as a trans-generational trauma that is being transmitted, and we need to be thinking about this rate of child sexual abuse, which the Indian government says is over 50%. Fifty-three percent of Indian children are sexually abused. Over half of them are boys. That is a very heavy number to hold.

Our solution can't be ... You could pave the nation from Kashmir to Kanyakumari with prisons, and we would not have enough space to lock up everyone who's doing this harm. As we know from America, our failed experiment in mass incarceration is not an example to be followed.

What would it look like for us to start to come to these problems with a healing solution, with a repair-based solution, with a "How do we end child sexual abuse" solution, which is as concerned with helping those who do the harm stop doing it for their own moral and personal healing journey as we are with crime victims. I think we need to hold all of those things in our work.

This is the very beginning, and we're really excited about ... My coworker and I are really, really excited about what the future could look like if we just start to examine these questions with an open heart.

Preetha: That's funny. When you first went to Dharamsala and you said you met the Tibetan community in exile, I remember you saying once that when you told them your story of anger, they said, "Oh, well, that doesn't happen in our community." Are you hearing that now from the South Asian community, both in the US and in South Asia? Do you hear ...?

Sujatha: No, Preetha, pretty much everybody says, "Yes, we know this is a pandemic in our community, but what do you do about it?" No, I've never heard people say that other than ... No. Everybody says, "That doesn't happen in our community" to some degree. What it is is among South Asians, I hear people say, "That doesn't happen in our family. We know that happens, but that happens in bad families."

I like to say, "It happened in my family, who was often seen as one of the good families." When you think about educational background or privilege or caste and all that stuff. It happened in my family. It happened with educated, et cetera. It happens in every community.

Yeah. But it is a particularly alarming number. I don't know whether or not it's higher. In the United States one in four girls and one in six boys are sexually abused. That is the largest form of harm that children experience in the country. Those numbers are way higher than gun violence and abductions and bullying. It's the number one form of harm children experience in the United States.

I think that it is under-reported in the United States because the legal consequences of Child Protection and the incarceration are so much greater in the United States; immigration consequences, so much greater here in the United States.

In India it's a problem that they're ignoring it or it is not being prosecuted. But because it is not, because Child Protection isn't going to come take your kids away at the same rate that it happens here, then I think people were much more comfortable telling these government authorities who interview tens of thousands of families across India and children to tell the truth because you can say that without fear of consequences. That's problematic and also lets you get a better sense of what's happening.

I don't know that India has more sexual abuse than the United States. In some ways because we're just starting to unpack it in South Asia what should be the response to sexualized harm that would actually solve the problem. I think that there's some openings there that would be exciting to explore.

Preetha: Wow. I know you're in such high demand as a speaker, as a healer, helping communities heal themselves. You can spend 24 hours a day just running around the world helping victims, helping communities. How do you prioritize your work, and how do

you take care of yourself?

Sujatha: I know you love this quote too by Anne Lamott, which is, "Lighthouses don't go running around the island looking for boats to save. They just stand there shining." That, I try to remind myself that. I have an inbox full of 6,800 unanswered emails; right? Many of them are from child sexual abuse survivors. Many of them are from people saying, "My child was locked up for a crime he didn't commit and he's being beaten." They are heartbreaking emails.

I have an eight-year-old child that I have to make the number one priority in my life, and I have an elderly dog who's not long for this world, and a partner and family that I need to also be present for.

A part of it is self-forgiveness; really about I'm not a Buddha. I'm not fully enlightened. I can't manifest in multiple dimensions and realities. Maybe YouTube hits on my talks can help me in that direction, but I literally can't. There's a certain point at which if I don't centralize my own healing journey, if I don't take that time in the morning to sit, if I don't take that time to do my child's homework with him in the evening, I'm not going to be bringing my best to them.

I'm going to writing bad responses to those emails. Being able to apologize when I respond late. “So sorry you invited me to give this talk and it was last month.” Writing apology emails and saying, "I am really limited, and I'm so sorry" is really freeing for me. To just be able to say, “I can't” is really good and “I hope to be able to be of benefit you in some other way in the future.”

Preetha: Together with that Anne Lamott quote, I know that you and I have talked about Vivekananda’s views about how at the end of the day we're not saving the world. Just keeping that sense of humility about ...

Sujatha: Absolutely.

Preetha: You said to me, "Every question about what work we choose to do is advancing our own healing journey, because at the end of the day that's what we're on earth for."

Sujatha: That's exactly right. All I can do is continue to work on myself. I don't actually have any ... I love that [inaudible 00:44:28] yoga text that Vivekananda does, the notion that it's folly to think that we are actually doing anything.

We really don't know, and I think about this huge cosmic interdependent web and the karmic web of the universe. Whether or not my keeping, my healing, helping other people heal in this context is really, it might create some chain of events that causes harm. Who knows? All I can do is work on myself and my intention, my intention every day in ever single thing I do. That's all I can continue to work on.

The ripple effects really flow from me out to my kids, my family, to other people I interact with, my coworkers hopefully, that if I can show up as me every day in the work that I do, that that can be the best me that I can be, then that's going to be of benefit hopefully.

Vinya: Hi, Sujatha. This is Vinya calling in from Berkeley. I want to thank you so much for being part of our call today. I appreciate it. Every insight has been so incredibly helpful. I

just bow to you for your courage and for your honesty with us. Thank you so much for doing that. My question is, I work with children who are just short of going into the juvenile system, children who are very angry, who have been abused at home, who go through a lot of violence every day, and they bring all of this anger to the school system. It's a very tricky situation right now in supporting the school site. The staff are just completely burnt out and doing the best they can. The students, there's just so much anger. We don't really have a well-thought-out behavior management system, so to speak. I was thinking it would be so great to incorporate some of the restorative justice system's approach.

My question is, are you aware of any curriculum or an easy-to-use kind of resource where they can get some help or just any resource at all that restorative justice would be used in the school?

Sujatha: In the schools, I can't say enough good stuff about somebody who's local if you're in Berkeley, California. Rita Alfred. She also goes by Renjitham, and she works at the Restorative Justice Training Institute, and she does amazing work. If you just Google "Restorative Justice Training Institute." She trains schools in this work. One of the most important thing she does is she encourages schools when they are doing restorative justice transformations to start the circle process with staff and only the grown-ups and that the grown-ups are learning to fit in circle and listen and do deep listening and do the type of sharing and conflict resolution amongst themselves first and building the notions of relationship amongst themselves.

That just flows really naturally into the kids when you take it from the adult setting. The principals, the teachers, the staff, start to embody this restorative way of being really in good relationship, that when you then take it to the kids, it feels hard to put it off for a year before we take it to the kids. We see the kids as the problem, but once the grown-ups do it, children really vibe with what grown-ups around them are expressing and being, and so Rita's really brilliant at that kind of work. It's Rita Renjitham Alfred, Restorative Justice Training Institute for schools-related stuff, and she's right here.

Vinya: That's great. I want to just thank you again. I think the whole meditation part that you spoke about and how it helped you is so affirming. I'm going to do my sit after this call. Thank you so much.

Angeli: Hi. My name is Angeli, and I'm calling from Chicago. I definitely wanted to thank you. You have such a compelling story. My question actually, I have two of them. My first question is, do you really believe that all people can be rehabilitated? You work with young people. I just don't know if that's a large part of why you see encouraging results. What are your thoughts about just the concept that maybe some people are beyond that or as you grow into adulthood like maybe your father, is there still a possibility for rehabilitation?

That was the first question. The second question I have is, how do you forgive repeated wrongdoing without feeling like you're enabling it and not giving yourself a chance to be taken advantage of by the wrongdoer. There's really extreme acts like sexual abuse, but even in the more mundane setting, whether it's your family members or somebody that you can't necessarily extract yourself. It's your family. It's a loved one and someone you care about, but it's somebody who for whatever reason you think there's repeated wrongdoing or disrespect or things like that. How does somebody deal with that effectively, and how do you forgive that when it's just maybe a very present thing?

Sujatha: Great, wonderful question. Can all people be rehabilitated, or can all people become their best selves? No. Yes. Some folks have serious physiological harm to their brains. It's a teeny, tiny percentage of those that we currently have behind bars, teeny, teeny, teeny, tiny.

Again, to my mind, the question isn't about whether or not they can be rehabilitated, but what is the most compassionate and effective way of addressing their behavior instead of looking at them from the perspective, "This is a throwaway person. Let's lock them up forever."

I think the vast majority of people, and definitely adults. To be frank, my preference isn't to work with children. I feel like grown-ups get it better. Grown-ups have lived experience and have been on the receiving end of unbelievable harm. I do forgiveness circles inside prisons with adults, with guys who are in for life. I go inside all the time and spend lots of time with guys inside jails and prisons and women inside jails who've done really unthinkably terrible things.

Really, absolutely believe in sometimes more about them than the rest of us who walk around unthinking lives on the outside about their capacity to change. The question is what kind of things are we offering people to do that change? We all need tools. I need tools. I need Vipassana. I needed therapy. I needed years and years of therapy. I needed all that to become who I am today.

If we offered that same stuff to the folks who are locked up, I absolutely believe the vast, vast majority of them would make the kinds of transformations they would need to make in themselves to come out on the outside and be amongst us as wonderful parts of our community. But we're not doing that right now. Between now and then we have to figure out what to do.

In terms of repeated wrongdoing, what a challenging question; right? It's even more than the big things. Sometimes those constant repeated slights by the coworker or the ... whatever it is ... the neighbor, the daily, small … A thousand paper cuts really. The death to our compassion via the thousand paper cuts is sometimes the hardest thing to do. That's definitely where I need my most amount of work.

What does forgiveness look like in that context? One of the things I try to look at most in those situations is self-forgiveness, forgiving myself for the frustration and anger that I feel, starting with that and centering myself and where my disappointments with myself are, and why am I bothered this little thing that my mother says over and over. So working with that first.

Secondly, in terms of repeated wrongdoing, condoning it, letting people off the hook. When I think about the Dalai Lama, he both said that he forgives the Chinese for what they have done, and he's not in Tibet. He's not in relationship.

There are people who I don't have in my life. I hold them in my heart with love and compassion, but I am not in close relationship with very few people who are really damaging to me. Allowing myself to be the continued object of their hardening behavior is not of benefit to me or them. It doesn't mean that you'd stay with your abuser. It doesn't mean you'd stay with that girlfriend or boyfriend who does constant harm to you. Really the most compassionate act for both of you might be to make that break.

This is really hard and I think it's really hard for South Asians, in particular, even when those people are family members, even when those people are, that we may need to separate ourselves and that that can be done out of a place of compassion. The forgiveness isn't letting people off the hook for their behavior. For me the forgiveness is simply letting go of anger, hatred, right to retribution, revenge, that I carry in my heart.

I don't need to be angry at you anymore, but our continued being together may not be of greatest benefit to both of us or to the work that we both have to do in this lifetime. I wish you well. I pray for you. I pray for myself in relationship to how I feel about you. But that's not what my forgiveness is about. It's not about continuing to subject myself to stuff that's not okay. That's for the big, big stuff.

Amith: We have a question from someone over email, from Patrick. He says, "I've suffered what I could call unforgivable acts as a child. I then grew up, joined the Marines, went to war and did things I regret. Then after the military I did things in my life that have hurt others deeply. I've struggled to forgive those who have harmed me and struggle to forgive myself for the ways in which I've harmed others. I'm more than just a victim of violence, I'm also a perpetrator. In some ways it's easier to forgive those who have harmed me than it is myself." Patrick wanted to hear your thoughts on that.

Sujatha: What a beautiful question, and I just really appreciate the transparency and willingness to share that. I think we've all done harm and we've all done good. If we believe in rebirth, then we've all definitely done unthinkable harm, because here we still are in this wheel of some sorrow; right, coming back over and over to work this stuff out.
A part of it is for me sitting with that feeling and just not feeling it so personally and like I did these terrible things in this lifetime, and I have done some pretty awful things in this lifetime too. So self-forgiveness I think is just such a critical, critical piece. I think it's the starting place.

When I do these practices, like Tonglen and whatever, sometimes I imagine the child that I was that received harm and do Tonglen for me in a sense in that way or the me, the little child that still lives inside myself. I think that's really important.

Another thing in that particular, holding those two truths about ourselves, that we are capable of doing good and bad, that we have done harm and that we do really wonderful acts of kindness as well.

There’s a poem by Thich Nhat Hanh called, "Please Call Me by My True Name." Patrick, I really hope you'll read that poem, and maybe it should be a daily practice, to just wake up and read that poem or read it before you got to bed. There's a way in which that poem, Please Call Me by My True Name … You can just Google it … really allows us to hold … There's this amazing passage where he's talking about a child who throws herself into the ocean after being raped, a Vietnamese child, throwing herself into the ocean after being raped by a sea pirate, a refugee child. And he says something like, "I am that child, who after being raped by a sea pirate, throws myself into the ocean." And he says, "And I am that pirate." It’s just, whose heart is incapable of seeing right now.

We hold these two pieces of ourselves with equal compassion. I think that that's such an important piece of the work, to be able to hold ourselves and the worst things

we've done in compassion and to really do the deep dives, either through therapy or meditation or whatever about where did my harmful behavior come from without letting ourselves off the hook for it; right? But examining the roots of it and taking compassion into the practice all along that way.

Anita: Hi, Sujatha, you are just very inspiring and I just can't even tell you how inspiring your talk was today. Going a little bit more into forgiveness and the Vipassana and the meditation, I do believe with time and with meditating that the anger does start to release and you start letting that go, but at what point does the hurt start going away? There's a difference between being able to not be as angry about a situation, but then also not feeling the hurt that's associated with that.

Sujatha: Wow. I don't know. I think it varies from person to person. Thanks for your question and your honesty. It is so true, sometimes there are layers. It's like an onion. Everything is an unbelievable onion where there's anger, there's pain, there's anger, there's pain. I've heard different theories about whether or not anger is just masking our pain or pain is just masking our anger. I tend to think anger is masking our pain, so that when we reduce the anger, then there's the next layer under it is the pain about the things that we've suffered; right? Under that pain there may be something else; right?

I love the description it has about meditation. We think it's going to be this panacea, and then what happens is we've got these raging waters and we still the waters, and then we look down into the water, and what we see is the tire and the rusting cans and the skeletons. Meditation doesn't remove those things; right? It just let's us see what's there. Then as we continue to do the practice, we understand how to hold the truths of those things that are in our past.

What I can say now is today, I don't feel either anger or pain about the sexual abuse I endured. I don't know. I think that the anger left first and then, yes, and then the pain left second shortly thereafter and within a couple years probably.

There's people who harmed me, and what I like to do is think of them as having left a hole in my heart. I name those holes in my heart. So there's a So-and-So shaped hole in my heart about someone who's no longer in my life who I still care about quite deeply.

What it is is I've come to love that hole and what that hole teaches me. It's not that the things didn't happen or that that space where there could be pain-filled and isn't going to always be there, but that person who's no longer in my life. This ex-boyfriend that I cared about quite deeply, there's a hole in my heart that's shaped like him, and I think about that hole all the time. Not all the time. Sometimes it pops into my mind, but it doesn't cause pain anymore. It's something that I've come to look at as a piece of the journey that I've been on in this lifetime and things that I have to learn from. I try to fill that space with wishing him well now, but that one took a long time. That one took a long time.

Amith: Thank you. Thank you for your question, Anita.

Sujatha: While we're waiting for that caller to come on, just one other thought I wanted to add to the last question, which was that I loved what somebody had said when they called, about the person behind the act is a message. That's a hard one to think of my father as just being a message in a sense.

In some ways that almost takes away his responsibility for what he needed to have done differently, and he did need to do that differently, but as I sit here all these years later, there's nothing I can do about that, and rethinking what do I have to learn from what's happened I think really helps, so I really like that person behind the act is a message.

Speaker: Hi, Sujatha. I really wish I could give you a deep hug now. Thank you. So much gratitude. Thank you so much. I have myself been through sexual abuse. In that moment I really to the point that Thich Nhat Hanh, you were talking about. I just wanted to fall into the [...] that they had in their house. Right then that was my thought. Of course having transformed it slowly over a period of time, like what you were saying, there's so much to learn from it. There is so much potential for transformation coming from that, and what can I do with that experience? How can I help people that I see have gone through the same thing that I have gone through?

Those are the thoughts that come to me and ... Recently I was watching this movie called The Railway Man, and in that it's the same thing. It's like a forgiveness one-on-one for me, that he meets his perpetrator and talks to him and asks him, "See, this is what you've done to me." It's a refugee situation where the other person has put him through a lot of tortuous acts.

So he talks to him. He goes back and talks to him and says, "You have done this to me," and he puts him through the same thing, just to give him a feeling of what he went through. That really threw a lot of light for me on what forgiveness could mean. It's just not a passive thing in your mind that, "Okay, I forgive you and that's it." It's a two-way thing; right? That's where it's very holistic and a wholesome thing happens there, transformation from both sides.

What are your thoughts on that?

Sujatha: That’s a challenge me, the two-way street. My personal [inaudible 01:05:11] people vary on this. My personal feeling is that forgiveness doesn't require anything from the person being forgiven. The forgiveness is a gift that I've given myself. My father passed away before I was ever able to say everything I would like to say to him if he were alive today; right?

Speaker: Right. Right.

Sujatha: For me it was just my own intra-individual inside myself, relinquishment of my anger, my hatred, my retribution, my [inaudible 01:05:39], my desires towards him. That for me is freeing myself.

For me there's another incredible layer that can occur through a direct dialogue with the person, whether it be letter, through whatever, with the person that has done that harm. If those opportunities arise, from my mind it’s the same with all old confrontations that people do.

I ask us to ask ourselves, "What are we expecting to receive from this? Am I doing this for me? Am I doing this because I need to hear X, Y and Z from that person? What will happen for me if I do not hear those things?" to really prepare myself for that conversation in a way that my expectations are about my journey and me and not about what I'm going to hear back from that person.

That being said, in the restorative justice processing … Restorative justice doesn't require forgiveness as a prerequisite for an outcome, but I see it happen quite a bit, because I think when we create situations where people can take responsibility and genuinely apologize and offer something to repair the harm, that that's the perfect cauldron for cooking up some forgiveness; right? It's again never expected. It's never required. It's not a part of the model.

Speaker: Oh, beautiful.

Sujatha: When it happens under those circumstances, I think there's something very beautiful about it.

Speaker: Beautiful. Thank you. Thank you.