

The Ancient Heart of Forgiveness by Jack Kornfield

Jack Kornfield shares extraordinary stories of forgiveness--and explains how the next story could be yours.

On the train from Washington to Philadelphia, while on my way to my father's memorial funeral service, I sat down next to an interesting fellow who worked with young boys, particularly those in jail and prison, as part of an inner-city project in Washington, DC. He told me this story.

A young kid, 14 years old, wanted to get into a gang. The way that he proved himself to enter the gang was to shoot somebody—it was an initiation rite. He shot this kid he didn't know. He was apprehended, brought to trial, and at the end of the trial, convicted.

Just before he is taken away in handcuffs, the mother of the boy who was shot stands up, looks him in the eye, and says, "I'm going to kill you," and then sits down.

After being in prison for a year or so, the boy is visited by that mother, and he's kind of frightened. She says, "I've just got to talk with you." They have a little bit of conversation, and as she leaves him she says, "Do you need anything? Cigarettes?" and leaves him a little money.

She starts to visit him. She goes every few months, and over the course of three or four years, she starts visiting him more regularly, talking to him.

When he's about to get out at the age of 17 or 18, she asks, "What are you going to do?" and he says, "I have no idea. I got no family, no nothing." And she says, "Well I've got a friend who has a little factory—maybe I can help you get a job."

So she arranges that with the parole officer. Then she asks, "Where are you going to stay?" and he says, "I don't know where I'm going to go." And she says, "Well I have a spare room where you can stay with me." So he comes and stays in the spare room, takes this job, and after about six months, she says, "I really need to talk with you—come into the living room. Sit down, let's talk."

She looks at him and says, "Remember that day in court when you were convicted of murdering my son for no reason at all, to get into your gang, and I stood up and said, 'I'm going to kill you?'"

“Yes ma’am, I’ll never forget that day,” he says.

And she looks back and says, “Well, I have. You see, I didn’t want a boy who could kill in cold blood like that to continue to exist in this world. So I set about visiting you, bringing you presents, bringing you things, and taking care of you. And now I let you come into my house and got you a job and a place to live because I don’t have anybody anymore. My son is gone and he was the only person that I was living with. I set about changing you, and you’re not that same person anymore.

But I don’t have anybody, and I want to know if you’d stay here. I’m in need of a son, and I want to know if I can adopt you.”

And he said yes and she did.

What is forgiveness?

What is this human capacity for forgiveness? What is the human capacity for dignity no matter what the circumstances of life?

As this story shows, forgiveness is not just about the other. It’s really for the beauty of your soul. It’s for your own capacity to fulfill your life.

Forgiveness is, in particular, the capacity to let go, to release the suffering, the sorrows, the burdens of the pains and betrayals of the past, and instead to choose the mystery of love. Forgiveness shifts us from the small separate sense of ourselves to a capacity to renew, to let go, to live in love. As the Bhagavad Gita says, “If you want to see the brave, look to those who can return love for hatred. If you want to see the heroic, look to those who can forgive.”

With forgiveness we are unwilling to attack or wish harm on anyone, including ourselves. And without forgiveness, life would be unbearable. It’s hard to imagine a world without forgiveness, because we would be chained to the suffering of the past and have only to repeat it over and over again. There would be no release.

It’s not easy. “Love and forgiveness is not for the faint-hearted,” wrote [the Indian mystic] Meher Baba. But someone has to stand up and say, “It stops with me. I will not pass on to my children this sorrow.” Whether it’s in Ireland or Israel, someone has to say, “I will accept the betrayal and the suffering, and I will bare it, but I will not retaliate. I will not pass this onto the next generation, and to endless generations of grandchildren.”

I remember a woman coming to see me amidst a terrible divorce. Unfortunately, her ex-husband was a lawyer and a very good one, so he wangled most of the money and a lot of the custody of their children. She was just desperate and struggled in all these ways to protect herself. Finally, she said to me, “You know, I simply am not going to bequeath to my children a legacy of hate. I will not do it. I will figure a way through this and I will not hate him—the bastard.” Humor helps, it really does.

When someone betrays you, you can hate them, or at some point, you can say it’s not worth it. It’s not worth it to live day after day with hatred. Because for one thing, that person who betrayed you could be in Hawaii right now having a nice vacation—and you’re

here hating them! Who's suffering then?

As Elie Wiesel, the Nobel Laureate, writes: "Suffering confers neither privileges nor rights. It all depends on how you use it. If you use it to increase the anguish of yourself or others, you are degrading, even betraying it. Yet the day will come when we shall understand that suffering can also elevate human beings. God help us to bear our suffering well."

Not quick or sentimental

So here is a little bit about the architecture of forgiveness. First, forgiveness does not mean that we condone what happened in the past. It's not forgive and forget. In fact, forgiveness might also include quite understandably the resolve to protect yourself and never let this happen again.

Forgiveness doesn't mean that you have to speak or relate to a person who betrayed you, necessarily. It's not about them. It doesn't condone their behavior—it can stand up for justice and say "no more."

And forgiveness is not sentimental, or quick. You can't paper things over and smile and say, "I forgive." It is a deep process of the heart. And in the process, you need to honor the betrayal of yourself or others—the grief, the anger, the hurt, the fear. It can take a long time. Sometimes when you do a forgiveness practice, you realize that you're never going to forgive that person. And never takes a while.

Forgiveness is also not for anybody else. There's a story of two ex-prisoners of war. One says to the other, "Have you forgiven your captors yet?" And the second says "No, never." And the first one then says "Well, they still have you in prison, don't they?"

Similarly, I remember sitting with the Dalai Lama and some Tibetan nuns who had survived years of imprisonment and torture. We were part of a meeting that I was running of ex-prisoners from all across the United States who'd been using meditation, contemplative practices, mindfulness, compassion, and so forth to change their lives.

With us were guys who had just been released after 25 years in Texas state prison or 18 years in Ohio in a maximum security prison. And they were sitting with the Dalai Lama and these little nuns who were imprisoned during their teenagers years for saying their prayers out loud.

The nuns were asked, "Were you ever afraid?" And they answered, "Yes, we were terribly afraid. And what we were afraid of was that we would end up hating our guards—that we would lose our compassion. That is the thing we most feared."

And they sat there, these sweet young nuns, and I remember this one guy who had been in prison for 18 years in Ohio saying, "I've seen some brave folks in my day, and I ain't seen anything like you young ladies."

The principles of forgiveness

One of the interesting things about forgiveness is that you find it in all different traditions. There are African indigenous practices of forgiveness. There is of course the Christian teachings of turning the other cheek and Jesus' teachings of forgiveness. There is the mercy of Allah in Islam.

What's unique about Buddhism—because Buddhism is more a science of mind than a religion, although it functions as a religion for some people—is that it offers practices in trainings. It doesn't say just “turn the other cheek” or “remember the mercy of Allah,” but it offers a thousand different trainings: trainings in mindfulness, in compassion, in forgiveness, in lovingkindness, in compassion for those who are different than you, and so on.

In this way, Buddhist psychology shows an ancient understanding of “neuroplasticity,” the idea that our neurosystem is always changing, even to the very end of life. So many of the modern neuroscience studies that researchers like Richard Davidson are doing, using fMRI machines and the like, validate this idea of neuroplasticity. Indeed, in Buddhism, the teaching in three words is: “Not Always So.” Things are always changing.

The Buddha was a list maker: the Eightfold Path, the Seven Factors of Enlightenment, the Four Noble Truths. Similarly, here are 12 principles connected with the process of forgiveness.

One: Understand what forgiveness is and what it is not. As I mentioned earlier, it's not condoning, it's not a papering over, it's not for the other person, it's not sentimental.

Two: Sense the suffering in yourself, of still holding onto this lack of forgiveness for yourself or for another. Start to feel that it's not compassionate; that you have this great suffering that's not in your own best interest. So you actually sense the weight of not forgiving.

Three: Reflect on the benefits of a loving heart. [Buddhist texts say]: Your dreams become sweeter, you waken more easily, men and women will love you, angels and devils will love you. If you lose things they will be returned. People will welcome you everywhere when you are forgiving and loving. Your thoughts become pleasant. Animals will sense this and love you. Elephants will bow as you go by—try it at the zoo!

Four: Discover that it is not necessary to be loyal to your suffering. This is a big one. We are so loyal to our suffering, focusing on the trauma and the betrayal of “what happened to me.” OK, it happened. It was horrible. But is that what defines you? “Live in joy” says the Buddha. Look at the Dalai Lama, who bears the weight of the oppression in Tibet and the loss of his culture, and yet he's also a very happy and joyful person. He says, ‘They have taken so much. They have destroyed temples, burned our texts, disrobed our monks and nuns, limited our culture and destroyed it in so many ways. Why should I also let them take my joy and peace of mind?’

Five: Understand that forgiveness is a process. There's a story of a man who wrote to the IRS, "I haven't been able to sleep knowing that I cheated on my taxes. Since I failed to fully disclose my earnings last year on my return, I've enclosed a bank check for \$2,000 dollars. If I still can't sleep, I'll send the rest." It's a training, it's a process, layer by layer—that is how the body and the psyche work.

Six: Set your intention. There is a whole complex and profound teaching in Buddhist psychology about the power of both short-term and long-term intention. When you set your intention, it sets the compass of your heart and your psyche. By having that intention, you make obstacles become surmountable because you know where you are going. Whether it is in business, a relationship, a love affair, a creative activity, or in the work of the heart. Setting your intention is really important and powerful.

Seven: Learn the inner and outer forms of forgiveness. There are meditation practices for the inner forms, but for the outer forms, there are also certain kinds of confessions and making amends.

Eight: Start the easiest way, with whatever opens your heart. Maybe it's your dog and maybe it's the Dalai Lama and maybe it's your child which is the thing or person that you most love and can forgive. Then you bring in someone who is a little more difficult to forgive. Only when the heart is all the way open do you take on something difficult.

Nine: Be willing to grieve. And grief, as Elizabeth Kubler-Ross has spelled out, consists of bargaining, loss, fear, and anger. You have to be willing to go through this process in some honorable way, as I'm sure Nelson Mandela did. Indeed, he has described how [before he could forgive his captors] he was outraged and angry and hurt and all the things that anyone would feel. So be willing to grieve, and then to let go.

Ten: Forgiveness includes all the dimensions of our life. Forgiveness is work of the body. It's work of the emotions. It's work of the mind. And it's interpersonal work done through our relationships.

Eleven: Forgiveness involves a shift of identity. There is in us an undying capacity for love and freedom that is untouched by what happens to you. To come back to this true nature is the work of forgiveness.

Twelve: Forgiveness involves perspective. We are in this drama in life that is so much bigger than our 'little stories.' When we can open this perspective, we see it is not just your hurt, but the hurt of humanity. Everyone who loves is hurt in some way. Everyone who enters the marketplace gets betrayed. The loss is not just your pain, it is the pain of being alive. Then you feel connected to everyone in this vastness.

I'll end with this brief story about Maha Ghosananda who was the Gandhi of Cambodia—a very dear friend of mine and a good friend of the Dalai Lama's. He led peace marches through Cambodia, through the minefields, for 15 years. He would walk people back to their villages who wanted to return, chanting lovingkindness and forgiveness the whole way. Through the jungles people would shoot at them. He would have hundreds of people behind him, and he would be beating a drum or ringing a bell and singing the song of

lovingkindness. He said that if we can chant lovingkindness 100 miles back to your village, you will be safe. He did it over and over again.

I worked with him in the UN refugee camp on the border of Cambodia in the early years of that genocide. This camp had 50,000 people in a horrible, hot, dry rice plain, surrounded by barbed wire, and it was the camp that had the most Khmer Rouge in it underground.

Ghosananda asked if we could build a Buddhist temple in the central square, just a simple bamboo room and a platform. The UN said OK. So we got materials together, built this temple, and then invited everyone to come. The Khmer Rouge underground said, 'If anyone goes to this temple, when we get back in Cambodia'—which was only 10 miles back across the border—'when we get out of here, you will be shot.'

So we didn't know if anybody would come. We went around the camp and rang a bell that morning, just as you would ring the temple bell, and 25,000 people gathered and filled the square. And Maha Ghosananda got up on this little platform—most of the monks were killed, 19 of the 20 people in his family were killed, 95 percent of the monks in the country were executed, all the intellectuals were killed. He got up and looked out at this sea of people. They hadn't seen a monk in 10 years. The faces of trauma and shock and loss—what do you say?

He began to chant in Cambodian and in Sanskrit this simple chant that is one of the first verses of the Buddhist teachings. It goes, "Hatred never ceases by hatred, but by love alone is healed." And he chanted it over and over again: Hatred never ceases by hatred, but by love alone is healed. Slowly the voices began to pick up and chant with him, and pretty soon 25,000 people were singing this and weeping because it had been 10 years since they had heard the Dharma, the Truth, the Way.

And what I saw is that he spoke a truth that was even bigger than their sufferings; even bigger than their sorrows. This is the ancient and eternal law.