



# Tricycle Teachings

# FORGIVENESS

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A TRICYCLE E-BOOK

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# LIGHTEN YOUR LOAD

Cleaning out your attic—and your mind

ALLAN LOKOS

We're going to look at one of the perfection practices known as the *pa-ramis* (see below). It's the practice of *nekkhamma*, which we translate as "renunciation" or "relinquishing." It means letting go: letting go of material things as well as views, concepts, ideas to which we may have been clinging for years, things that cause us stress, suffering, *dukkha*.

A simple action that can be helpful in terms of relinquishing is this: on a regular basis—perhaps once or twice a year— choose something to give away. Not some old relic you don't care about any more, but something you do care about, that has value to you. There's no need to go overboard by giving away something that will change your lifestyle or will make the kids resent you for the next twenty years. Give away something you like yet are willing to relinquish. During the entire process of selecting and relinquishing, be mindful of your feelings. This can be more challenging than it may at first appear, but it can help us prepare for the day when we must relinquish all that we hold dear.

Now, what about views and concepts? Relinquishing is the ground for practicing "beginner's mind." It helps us see things anew, as they really are; to be willing to listen to the thoughts and ideas of others with an open mind. So the relinquishing of thoughts and ideas about which we have been adamant can give us a sense of freedom, joy, and spaciousness.

It can feel as if a weight has been taken from our shoulders. However, this also may be easier said than done. We might wonder, “Am I giving up something that I *should* believe in?” So relinquishing offers an opportunity to look more deeply at our beliefs.

Sometimes we have been holding onto anger or bitterness related to a particular person or event. Something to think about is: What would I have to give up in order to free myself from this bitterness? We might think, “Well, yes, but what he or she did was absolutely *unforgiveable*.” Consider the possibility, and I am only saying consider the possibility, that maybe nothing is unforgiveable. Maybe there is a way to find forgiveness even for what we have believed for so long to be unforgiveable. Explore this mindfully.

To forgive does not necessarily mean to forget. Sometimes to forget is not wise, but to forgive is wise. And it is at times not easy. It can, in fact, be quite challenging. It will come as no surprise that one of the most difficult people to forgive can be yourself. Yet with patience and gentle determination, it can be done.

**Parami** (Pali), **Paramita** (Sanskrit): literally, perfection, or crossing over (to the other shore).

The paramis are practices that can lead one to the perfection of certain virtuous or ennobling qualities. They are practiced as a way of purifying karma and leading the practitioner on a path to enlightenment. In the Theravada tradition, the ten paramis are *dana* (generosity), *sila* (morality), *nekkhammai* (relinquishing), *panna* (wisdom), *viriya* (effort), *khanti* (patience), *sacca* (truthfulness), *adhitthana* (determination), *metta* (lovingkindness), *upekkha* (equanimity). In the Mahayana there are six paramitas: generosity, morality, patience, effort, concentration, and wisdom.

It is interesting to note that the parami of generosity comes first,

before the other practices, even morality. Some commentators suggest that the list begins with the easiest practice and becomes progressively more challenging. Another view is that until one sees the interconnected nature of phenomena and has a heart open to the needs of all beings, the other paramis can remain beyond reach. With practice, the virtuous qualities become stronger and support one another. Generosity supports relinquishing, which supports morality, which supports truthfulness, which supports wisdom, which supports equanimity, and so forth.

The paramis are seen as the heart of our true nature but greed, hatred, and delusion cause them to become somewhat blurred. Practicing the paramis is said to help us see in a different, more beneficial way. His Holiness the Dalai Lama has said, “These deeds, called the perfections, constitute the essential and comprehensive path to enlightenment, combining method and wisdom.” Thus the paramis are important practices for one who seeks to become an awakened being and to end the cycle of samsara, or cyclic existence. The key point to remember is that the paramis are offered not as philosophy but as practices. To be effective, practices need to be practiced.

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THE GIFT OF GRATITUDE

Ajahn Sumedho recounts the joyful unfolding of a deep appreciation for his teacher and parents.

AJAHN SUMEDHO

*Even if one should carry about one's mother on one shoulder and one's father on the other, and so doing should live a hundred years . . . moreover, if one should set them up as supreme rulers, having absolute rule over the wide earth abounding in the seven treasures—not even by this could one repay one's parents. And why! Bhikkhus, parents do a lot for their children: they bring them up, provide them with food, introduce them to the world.*

*Yet, bhikkhus, whoever encourages their faithless parents, and settles and establishes them in faith; or whoever encourages their immoral parents and settles and establishes them in morality, or whoever encourages their stingy parents, and settles and establishes them in generosity, or whoever encourages their foolish parents, and settles and establishes them in wisdom—such a person, in this way repays, more than repays, what is due to their parents.*

—the Buddha, *Anguttara-nikaya* 2.32

My father died about six years ago. He was then ninety years old, and he had never shown love or positive feelings toward me. So from early

childhood I had this feeling that he did not like me. I carried this feeling through most of my life. I never had any kind of love, any kind of warm relationship with my father. It was always a perfunctory “Hello son, good to see you.” And he seemed to feel threatened by me. I remember whenever I came home as a Buddhist monk he would say, “Remember, this is my house, you’ve got to do as I say.” This was his greeting—and I was almost fifty years old at the time! I don’t know what he thought I was going to do.

My father was an aspiring artist before the Depression. Then in ’29 the crash came and he and my mother lost everything, so he had to take a job selling shoes to support us. Then the Second World War started, but my father was too old to enlist in the military. He wanted to support the war effort, so he became a ship fitter in Seattle. He didn’t like that job, but it was the best way he could help in the war. After the war he went back to his shoe business and became a manager of a retail store. He never really liked that work either, but he felt he was too old to find another profession. He had sacrificed his own preferences to support my mother, my sister, and me.

When I was at university in the 1950s, it was fashionable to study psychology. At that time the trend was to blame your mother for everything that went wrong in your life. The focus was on mothers and what they had done to cause us to suffer now. I didn’t realize then that suffering was natural. Of course my mother was not perfect, so naturally there were things she could have done better. But generally speaking, the dedication, commitment, love, and care were all there—and directed mainly to making the lives of my father, my sister, and me as good and as happy as could be. She asked very little for herself, and when I think back like this, *katannu*, Pali for gratitude, arises in my mind for my mother and father.

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The Buddha encouraged us to think of the good things done for us by our parents, by our teachers, friends, whomever; and to do this intentionally, to cultivate it, rather than just letting it happen accidentally.

My students who have a lot of anger toward their parents ask me how they can develop gratitude toward them. Teaching lovingkindness, or *metta*, on too sentimental a basis can actually increase anger. I remember a woman on one of our retreats who, whenever it came to spreading metta to her parents, would go into a rage. Then she felt very guilty about it. Every time she thought about her mother, she felt only rage. This was because she used only her intellect; she wanted to do this practice of metta, but emotionally felt anything but lovingkindness.

It's important to see this conflict between the intellectual and the emotional life. We know in our mind that we should be able to forgive our enemies and love our parents, but in the heart we feel "I can never forgive them for what they've done." So then we either feel anger and resentment, or we begin to rationalize: "Because my parents were so bad, so unloving, so unkind, they made me suffer so much that I can't forgive or forget." Or: "There's something wrong with me. I'm a terrible person because I can't forgive." When this happens, I've found it helpful to have metta for my own feelings. If we feel that our parents were unkind and unloving, we can have metta toward the feeling we have in our hearts; without judgment, we can see that *this* is how it feels, and to accept that feeling with patience.

Once I began to accept my negativity about my father rather than suppress it, I could resolve it. When we resolve something with mindfulness, we can let it go and free ourselves from its power. The resolution of such a conflict leads us to contemplate what life is about.

A life without gratitude is a joyless life. If life is just a continuous complaint about the injustices and unfairness we have received and we



don't remember anything good ever done to us, we fall into depression—not an uncommon problem these days. It is impossible to imagine ever being happy again: we think this misery is forever.

When I became a Buddhist monk in Thailand, I was very fortunate to meet a teacher, Luang Por Chah, known widely as Ajahn Chah, who became the catalyst for the gratitude in my life. At that time I was thirty-three or thirty-four years old, and I must say gratitude was not yet a part of my life's experience. I was still very much obsessed with myself, what I wanted, what I thought. However, after training as a Buddhist monk for some years, in about the sixth year of monastic life, I had a heart-opening experience that was very much the experience of *katannu katavedita*, or gratitude to one's parents.

I had been a Buddhist for many years before I met Ajahn Chah. I had tremendous interest and faith in Buddhism, as well as an eagerness to study and practice it. But it was still coming from the sense of my doing it, my studying it, my trying to practice it. When I became a monk, there was still this tendency: "I want to get rid of suffering. I want to be enlightened." I was not much concerned about other people, about my parents, or even about Ajahn Chah, with whom I was living at the time. I thought that it was very nice that he was helpful to me, but I did not feel a deep gratitude.

I had the idea that life owed all this to me—an unpleasant kind of conceit. When we are brought up in middle-class comfort as I had been, we take so much for granted. My parents worked hard to make my life comfortable, but I thought that they should have worked harder, and that I deserved more than what they gave me. Even though this was not a conscious thought, there was the underlying attitude that I deserved all I had: people should give me these things; my parents should make my life as good as possible, as I wanted it to be. So from that viewpoint,

it was Ajahn Chah's duty to teach and guide me!

In Thailand, I practiced with diligence and was determined in my monastic life. After participation in five rainy season retreats (*vassas*), a monk is no longer considered a novice and is free to leave the monastery. I felt that being with a teacher was fine, but I wanted to go away on my own. I left for central Thailand from the northeast. After the vassa I went on a pilgrimage to India. This was in about 1974, and I decided to go as a *tudong*-bhikkhu, wandering from place to place as part of an austere form of monastic practice. Somebody provided me with a ticket from Bangkok to Calcutta, and I found myself in Calcutta with my alms bowl, my robe, and, abiding by the rules of monkhood, no money. In Thailand it had been easy, but in India the prospect of wandering around with nothing more than an alms bowl seemed quite frightening at first. As it happened, the five months I spent in India were quite an adventure, and I have very pleasant memories of that time. The life of a mendicant worked in India. Of all countries, it *should* work there, where the Buddha lived and taught.

I began to think of Ajahn Chah and to recognize the kindness he had extended to me. He had accepted me as his disciple, looked after me, given me the teachings, and helped me in almost every way. And there was his own example. If you wanted to be a monk, you wanted to be like him. He was a full human being, a man who inspired me, someone I wanted to emulate—and I must say there weren't so many men that I had had that feeling toward. In the States, the role models for men were not very attractive to me—John Wayne or President Eisenhower or Richard Nixon were not my role models. Film stars and athletes were given great importance, but none of them inspired me.

But then in Thailand, I'd found this monk. He was very small; I towered above him. When we were together sometimes that surprised

me, because he had such an enormous presence. There was this feeling about him that attracted people. So I found myself going over to see him in his hut in the evenings, or whenever it was possible; I wanted to take every opportunity I had to hang around. I asked him once what it was in him that drew people to him, and he said, “I call it my magnet.” He used his magnet to attract people so that he could teach them the dhamma. This is how he used the charismatic quality he had: not in the service of his ego, but to help people.

The Lord Buddha, after his enlightenment, at first thought that the dhamma was too subtle, that no one would understand it, so there was no point in teaching it. Then, according to the legend, one of the gods came forth and said, “Please Lord, for the welfare of those who have little dust in their eyes, teach the dhamma.” The Buddha then contemplated with his powerful mind who might understand the dhamma teaching. He remembered his early teachers but through his powers realized that both of them had died. Then he remembered his five friends who had been practicing with him before, and who had deserted him. Out of compassion he went off to find these five friends, and expounded his brilliant teaching on the Four Noble Truths. This makes me feel *katanu katavedita* to the Lord Buddha. It’s marvelous: here I am—this guy, here, in this century—having an opportunity to listen to the dhamma, and to have this pure teaching still available.

Just having a living teacher like Ajahn Chah was not like worshipping a prophet who lived twenty-five hundred years ago, it was actually inheriting the lineage of the Lord Buddha himself. Perhaps because of visiting the Buddhist holy places, my gratitude began to become very strong. Then, thinking of Ajahn Chah in Thailand, I remembered how I had thought: “I’ve done my five years, now I’m going to leave. I’m going to have a few adventures, do what I want to do, be out from under the

eye of the old man.” I realized then that I had actually run away.

When I felt this gratitude, all I wanted to do was get back to Thailand and offer myself to Ajahn Chah. How can you repay a teacher like that? I did not have any money, and that was not what he was interested in anyway. Then I thought that the only way I could make him happy was to be a good Buddhist monk and to go back and help him out. Whatever he wanted me to do, I would do it. With that intention, I went back after five months in India and gave myself to the teacher. It was a joyful offering, not a begrudging one, because it came out of this *katannu*, this gratitude for the good things I had received.

From that time on, I found that my meditation practice began to improve. That hard selfishness cracked in me: my trying to get something, my desire for harmony, my desire to practice and have a peaceful life, free of responsibility. When I gave up all that, things seemed to fall into place. What used to be difficult, like concentrating the mind, became easier, and I found that life had become joyful to me.

The last time I went to see my father, I decided that I would try to get some kind of warmth going between us before he died. In the last decade of my father’s life he was quite miserable and became very resentful. He had terrible arthritis and was in constant pain, and he had Parkinson’s disease. Eventually he had to be put in a nursing home. He was completely paralyzed. He could move his eyes and talk, but the rest of his body was rigid. He was resentful of what had happened to him because before he had been a strong, independent man.

When I saw him, his body needed to be stimulated, so I said, “Let me massage your leg.” “No, no, you don’t need to do that,” he said. “You’ll get bedsores, because you really have to have your skin massaged. I would really like to do it.” He still refused, but I could tell he was considering it. “I think it’ll be a good thing,” I told him. “So you’d really like to do it?”

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he asked me. “Yes.”

I started massaging his feet, his legs, his neck, shoulders, hands, and face; he really enjoyed the physical contact. It was the first time he had been touched like that. Physical contact is quite meaningful, it's an expression of feeling. And I began to realize that my father really loved me, but didn't know how to say it. I had this great sense of relief and immense gratitude.

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BROKEN GOLD

Three dharma practitioners share their stories  
of healing after a spiritual crisis.

LYNN CRAWFORD, ISAN SACCO, AND JANE  
KINGSTON. EDITED BY NOELLE OXENHANDLER.

“I’ve got to tell you about the dream I had last night,” a friend told me. Seven years had passed since her Zen community had come apart in an emotionally turbulent way, and she was still struggling to absorb the experience. In her dreams she often found herself back with her teacher and sangha—yet something felt distinctly different to her about this particular dream: “I walked into the little interview room with the roshi, as I had so many times in the past. I felt disoriented, because I knew that so much had happened and he wasn’t my teacher anymore. Then I looked directly into his eyes and I heard my own voice say, ‘It’s not about the story line. It’s the practice.’”

In the following essays, three long-term practitioners reflect on spiritual regeneration, on finding one’s way again after some form of profound spiritual disillusionment. We’ve all heard the stories—teachers who turn out to be psychologically unstable, misuses of power and money within a sangha, sexual transgressions on the part of the teacher or other students. Yet at a certain point what matters most is not so much

what shattered one's trust and scattered one's sangha, but the question: What heals?

For each of these three practitioners, the process has been long and arduous—and much of it has, indeed, involved a struggle with the story. Like a jilted lover, or a parent who has lost a child, one goes over the sequence again and again, asking, “How could this have happened?” “What was my part in it?” “Why didn't I see the warnings?”

Why is the process so difficult? As the realtors say, “Location, location, location.” Spiritual disillusionment occurs in the very place where one comes to seek relief from suffering. It occurs in a context that demands an extreme degree of trust, surrender, and self-exposure, a context in which one has made an immense investment of oneself and thus been deeply complicit with whatever it is that has happened—whether or not one had a starring role in the drama. It occurs within relationships that engender profound affection, admiration, attachment. In sum: it occurs in the exact spot where one has laid up one's greatest treasure.

In a famous koan, the great Zen master Dogen declared that while “one may practice upward, step by step,” each step of the practice is “equal in substance.” Teaching this koan, the modern master Harada Roshi held up his Zen teacher's stick and said, “Always golden. If it is cut, golden. At each end, golden still.” In their own way, the following stories embody this koan. Separated from the teacher and the community that had been the very center of their lives, at first these students were overcome with the sense of rupture, depreciation, ruin. But gradually they began to see in a new way, to understand that we can't ever be truly separated from what is most precious. In the stories that follow, three broken hearts praise the home that can't ever be lost, the gold that never stops shining.

—Noelle Oxenhandler

**Noelle Oxenhandler** *began Buddhist practice in 1970. Her most recent book is* The Wishing Year: A House, A Man, My Soul.

**THE IDEAL LANDSCAPE**  
BY LYNN CRAWFORD

In the thangka I'm painting, I've come to a section of landscape that I designed several years ago. Nestled in the foothills is a temple surrounded by plants that bloom not in the Himalayas but here in California. Translated into the iconography of Tibet, this landscape will become archetypal—yet for me it is imbued with the energy of numerous retreats on American soil. I have swept its paths, as have many students before me.

But here's the rub. I am no longer among them. My teacher and I have had a serious rupture. For some years I had intuited hidden unethical behavior. This intuition led to an impasse. Ultimately, I was cut off. Loss of trust in my own perceptions, as well as in the teacher-student relationship, was the toll. And so there is a brokenness in this idealized buddha-land that I so carefully drafted years ago.

Do I really want the temple and its gardens to remain? I may have this thangka for the rest of my life. Dot by dot, I work my way down from the sky to the deeper ground, always questioning: *What heals?*

In hindsight my path appears to have an order, but for a long time I was lost in disorder, grief, confusion. I felt like a fool for misplacing my trust after years of practice. Filled with shame and blame, I could no longer sit. Not that I didn't try. For two years I struggled each day to keep the form of meditation as taught by my teacher. Again and again, obsession with the story hijacked my sittings. Though I knew there was nothing wrong with the method itself, I was no longer receptive. Each inhalation connected me to the breath of my teacher, someone I no lon-



ger trusted. Anger arose, offering poor refuge. I knew my practice was in trouble, but I was too much on the rebound to seek another teacher or community. Deep inside, I was pushing away.

I stopped sitting. At the time I felt like a failure—but now I see a certain skillfulness. This was the only way I knew to cut the negativity I was cultivating on the cushion, and I profoundly wished to cease from harm. With sickening clarity, I had come to see that my own untrained mind could poison me in ways far worse than anyone else could. That clarity, disturbing as it was, eventually rekindled my motivation. If indeed “there are 84,000 doors to practice,” then surely I could find another. One night I dreamt that a Tibetan woman was beckoning to me. I began to visit the Asian Art Museum, mesmerized by the peaceful and terrifying deities of the thangkas. Though I didn’t understand the symbols yet, I sensed that these were maps of transformation, and I felt impelled to learn more. How could the energy of my grief and anger be converted to wisdom and compassion?

One day I opened a newspaper and saw an ad for thangka classes given by a former Tibetan monk. I sought him out and set to work. Over and over, I drew Buddha’s feet, hands, and face as instructed, internalizing the proportions, cultivating the attention required for a steady hand. When I began to paint, mountains, ocean, earth, and clouds seemed to rise into color atom by atom, each dot symbolizing my inner request to dissolve anger and discouragement in the light of awareness. With each brushstroke, more ease and joy filled me. Repetition, such a bane in the form of obsession, became my balm, a soft steady rain swelling the seeds of renewal without force or flooding.

Gradually, I became able to sit again and to expand my practice, adding mantra, prayer, visualization, analytic meditation, and the study of sacred texts. The matter of trust remained, however. I still couldn’t

approach a teacher face-to-face.

When my thangka teacher invited me on a pilgrimage to Kathmandu, I leapt at the chance to break out of my isolation and visit a larger Buddhist world. There I was infused with unexpected enthusiasm. The lovingkindness, humor, and equanimity of Tibetans who could so easily have been embittered by exile was stunning. It wasn't Shangri-la, of course: there were stories about wayward monks and a rinpoche's suspicious death.

Yet even in these stories, there was something matter-of-fact that I found inspiring and that helped me to seek out teachers again. The Tibetans I met seemed to understand that teacherstudent relationships were conditioned by the same impermanence and attachment that afflict other human relationships. "Don't live in the same valley as your teacher," one monk told me. "Scrutinize a teacher for three years before becoming a student," another said. This down-to-earth counsel encouraged me.

Returning home, I remembered the story of the grieving mother who appealed to the Buddha to bring back her dead son. "Go from door to door," he told her. "Bring back a mustard seed from a family that has never suffered a death." She traveled far and wide, returning empty-handed. But her anguish was gone, transformed by compassion for her fellow sufferers.

Suddenly I could see that my story was the oldest story in the world. Innana, Job, Abraham, Jesus, Milarepa: each had to reconcile devotion to a spiritual authority with an experience of that authority's inexplicably harsh or demanding behavior. When Jesus cries out to his Father, *Why have you forsaken me?* He has come to an edge. Is he going to curse or embrace? At a certain point the question becomes not: *Why did this happen?* but: *How do I work with it?*

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When I first sketched my little temple, I would have cringed to read a phrase like this from the *Eight Verses of Thought Transformation*:

*When someone... in whom I have placed great trust  
Hurts me very badly  
I will practice seeing that person as my supreme teacher.*

Today, I feel an upwelling of enormous gratitude. I cannot and will not excise what has been of such value to me. I pick up my brush and paint.

The most ideal landscape is the one that is.

**Lynn Crawford** is a writer and psychotherapist who lives in San Francisco. She has trained in both Zen and Tibetan traditions for over 20 years.

## TO LIVE YOUR OWN LIFE BY ISAN SACCO

When I entered the monastery, I was only 21. For virtually all the years that I was there, I had a basic faith that the teacher had my best interests at heart, that she knew what was best for me. Whenever there was a disagreement between us, I deferred. But as I matured, I began to realize that she, too, was an imperfect human being—and toward the end I felt she was simply wrong about what I really needed. She had become increasingly demanding over the years, requiring that we practice under relentless psychological and physical pressures that were more than some could handle. One person in particular experienced what I believe was a psychotic break. His inner conflict escalated to the point where he couldn't contain it any longer, and he became the extreme example

of a deep fragility within our community. Under threat of being judged and shunned, we couldn't assert our needs. We didn't feel safe expressing our doubt and pain to the teacher, and we had been admonished not to confide in each other. Under these circumstances, many just soldiered on, descending into deep misery. Eventually my own conflict became unbearable, and I knew I had to take responsibility for myself. If I tried to carry on much longer, I was going to have a breakdown. Realizing the extreme danger I was in, I finally cast off my fear of judgment and found the courage to leave.

Fortunately, several years previously, I'd experienced a significant opening in my meditation practice. For three intense weeks, as I moved through cycles of blissful insight and painful review of the past, I had very little physical energy, and I meditated while lying on my back. After I recovered, I still preferred this posture. For me, the traditional cross-legged posture is a way of gathering power and focus, while lying down expresses surrendering, allowing things to move through me. This meditative journey personalized my practice, taking me beyond the forms and rituals. Now, looking back, I feel that I was being taught to rely on myself in preparation for what was coming.

Still, my decision to leave the monastery was excruciating. I felt very alone and full of dread at the prospect of saying "No" to my teacher. Even for years after I left, I had nightmares that I was back in the monastery. An unseen observer at first, soon I would feel dangerously close to being discovered. Desperately needing to escape, I would find myself trapped, paralyzed. These were the feelings I'd had for years before I left, and they continued to echo in my dreams.

Now I still have dreams where I return to the monastery, but they're no longer nightmares. It's just that I return and reconnect with my community. These dreams remind me that all these people are still part of

my life. The healing is not about *excluding* them, but *including* them in a new way.

For me there was a major turning point about five years after I left, when I realized that I was still operating under the taboo of silence. I needed to speak plainly to my teacher about my decision, and so I wrote her a long letter. I didn't expect a response—and I didn't receive one. But writing the letter and sending it were enough. Afterward, a significant shift occurred, and I was finally able to let go of the anger and feelings of being stuck that had persisted since leaving.

Gradually I realized that I'd been asking my teacher for exactly what she'd asked of me: to be open, willing to listen and learn from others. I was ready for a more equal relationship between us, but she'd become like the controlling parent I had to escape in order to become an autonomous adult. Now it seems to me that the gradual equalizing within the teacher-student relationship is both natural and necessary. After all, it's the students who must take the teaching forward and transmit it to the next generation.

As Shakyamuni Buddha said, “Be a lamp unto yourself” and “Personally examine and verify by experience anything that a guru may tell you.” The task is to make the tradition personal through continuous questioning and testing. It is to wholeheartedly live your own unique life.

**Isan Sacco** *is a computer support specialist who lives near Santa Barbara. He was a monk in a Zen monastery in northern California for 14 years.*

## WALK ON THROUGH

BY JANE KINGSTON

When I left my Buddhist community 13 years ago, I was filled with con-

flicking emotions: sadness, anger, confusion, and doubt consumed my waking and sleeping energy. Everyday life was tinted with the loss of connection to dharma friends, to the teacher, to something precious that had awakened in me.

When I think about those years, I see the dimly lit zendo, hear the whoosh of an old heater, the clang of an iron bell, the clack of wood blocks marking time. I remember the smell of incense, the call of the first bird outside, the cold hands clasped in laps. I remember nodding off, then jolting upright to breathe my koan over and over again. I remember waiting, in those early morning hours, for the sound of footsteps on the landing, the swish of black robes as our teacher paused before each cushion, like a passing grace, a benediction.

These images rise with a dark clarity. I can taste them in a way that I can no longer taste koan study. When I walked away from my community, I walked away from a practice that still feels exquisite to me. A practice that, more than any other, opened my heart and deepened my understanding. Not long after my father died, I had this experience while working on my first koan: *Standing outside with my teacher, we look at the hills opening to first light. Together we see my father everywhere.*

This particular practice and teacher melded within me, and they remain inextricably linked. Letting go of my practice, like letting go of my teacher and my community, I experienced a disconnection from the tradition itself, and a profound sense of spiritual dislocation. For many years I was not ready to trust another path or teacher—but more importantly, I was not ready to trust myself, the deepest part of my being. For a time I wanted nothing to do with any formal tradition. I could only bear to put my toe into the water for the briefest immersion. I learned to pay attention to a wound that needed to heal in darkness, not ready for the light.

Was I stupid to confuse the teacher—a gifted but profoundly wounded and hence unstable man—with the teachings? Undoubtedly. I had fused the gold of my practice with the persona of my teacher and subsequently relinquished much more than I'd bargained for. During this period, a well-known Vipassana teacher warned me not to short-circuit the process, either by climbing too quickly into the bed of forgiveness or batting away the ferocity of feeling. Through his words, I understood that I wouldn't be able to heal until I entered deeply into the fire of emotion. In the transformative heat of loss, something had to die—and this was my attachment to loss itself.

Blindly, I continued to practice. I attended retreats outside my tradition, feeling lost, disconnected, confused. Still, I continued to sit. At one point I found myself sitting in another teacher's zendo, listening to a talk. Squirming and feeling restless, I felt profound aversion to the incense, the robes, the ritual. On top of aversion, I felt ashamed and betrayed by myself. Six years had gone by, and there was still all this *stuff*! Suddenly I looked up at the light, a lantern above the speaker's head, and the words came to me: *It is precisely because the path is so precious that you feel this way.* I felt myself relax as though a friend's hand lay upon my shoulder.

Over time I began to notice a subtle shift: where once I had experienced edginess, ease appeared. As the familiar free fall into "the story" diminished, a blessed amnesia replaced a kind of neural vigilance. I began to let go.

What prompted this shift? Time, certainly. And also grace as it appeared spontaneously in the mystery of encounter, in the guidance of dreams, and in the pure lived moment.

Of the encounters, one of the most memorable occurred shortly after I left the community. I remember with vivid clarity the hot summer

day and the sudden appearance of a stranger. Walking down a dirt road on the way to my house, I watch my feet kick up dust. Red-shouldered hawks call out from the eucalyptus trees. I do not look up. I am holding a few thin envelopes from the mailbox, but I am trudging as though carrying a heavy sack. I have adjusted to life without a spiritual community; my life is full with family, work, and friends. Yet sometimes the weight of longing overwhelms me.

This is one such moment. I cannot hear the hawks, or the wind through the trees. I can only hear the sound of my own loss. Will I ever find another group of dharma friends? A teacher? A path? My thoughts are tangled, my feet move through the dust. Then I look up and see her.

An old woman stands by the side of the road. “Hello dear! How are you?” She greets me like an old friend. I am leery. Does she think that I’m her long-lost daughter? I decide to humor her. “Hello, how are you today?” I say. She moves forward, takes my hand, and beams at me. “Fine, dear, fine.” I edge away. “Wait, wait!” She walks toward a gate at the entrance of her home. “Won’t you come in?” I demur. She is watching me intently. “You don’t understand, do you?” She opens the gate. “All you have to do is walk on through.” She beckons me and repeats, “Just walk on through.”

I have never seen this woman again—but she is never far from me. Like the old woman selling tea beside the road in many Zen stories, she woke me up from a thick sleep. When I find myself lost in obsessive stories or filled with doubt, I see her, standing at the gate and smiling to me, beckoning me to just drop it all and *walk on through*.

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4

F O R G I V E N E S S

What's the point of being angry?

MATTHEW FLICKSTEIN

The antidote to anger and resentment is forgiveness. Most of us find it very difficult to forgive individuals who have hurt us deeply. Why should we forgive them? Although we sometimes make others feel uncomfortable when we express our anger toward them, we are the ones who wind up suffering the most when we do so. Maintaining anger is similar to picking up a red-hot piece of coal to throw at someone—whether we hit our target or not, we are the ones who get burned. Since we cannot give our anger away (nobody really wants it anyway!), the feelings linger and scorch our own minds.

Forgiving does not mean forgetting. When we forgive we still remember the lessons we learned, but without the emotional pain that keeps us anchored to those memories. Forgiving does not indicate that we are condoning an inappropriate or harmful action that someone committed; nor does it mean that we give up our right to justice or to receive better treatment in the future.

You may ask, “Who am I to forgive another person (or myself) for wrongs committed in the past? What gives me that right?” The right to forgive is merely the flip side of the right you have to be angry. One can just as easily ask, “What right do I have to be angry?” It's your choice!

## TRICYCLE TEACHINGS: FORGIVENESS

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5

## RISING TO THE CHALLENGE

Rather than let anger fuel our response to those we oppose, Robert Thurman suggests a more effective way to cultivate energy for the good fight.

ROBERT THURMAN

To deal with feelings of anger and fear and frustration, we can start by finding relationality. As the Lakota Indians say, *Mitakuye oyasin*: “All beings are my relatives.” When I’m particularly mad at George Bush and company for warmongering, I remember that in another lifetime he was my mother, and that even the most evil people were at some point my errant siblings. That immediately takes a certain edge off the anger.

The second step is to realize that we, too, have the potential to be demonic. Given certain conditions and confusions and insecurities and fears, any of us could do bad things. It might start with an imperceptible change; we wouldn’t think we were being bad—just a little naughty here and there. Pretty soon we would take it too far and be really bad. People can become deluded like that.

Third, we develop real sympathy for the people who are doing harm, because if they bomb people, if they pollute, if they poison the food chain, they will have the bad karma of having harmed so many people.

By taking these three steps—finding one’s relation to all beings, acknowledging the evil potential in oneself, feeling sympathy for the evil person—one gets the strength and energy to be an activist and to try, by voting and organizing, to stop harm caused by others. This is cool heroism: developing a tolerant, deliberate, and wise energy.

People are afraid that if they let go of their anger and righteousness and wrath, and look at their own feelings—and even see the good in a bad person—they’re going to lose the energy they need to do something about the problem. But actually you get more strength and energy by operating from a place of love and concern. You can be just as tough, but more effectively tough. It’s like a martial art.

My wife once met Morihei Ueshiba, the man who founded aikido. After he did a demonstration where he left about seventeen big bruisers on the ground, she asked what his secret was for disarming his attackers without harming them. He giggled and told her, “A long time ago, I realized that every person was just my sister, my brother, my cousin. All those guys lying on the floor are my brothers; *you* are my little sister! Everybody is just one family.” That’s cool heroism.

To conquer hate, you have to find unshakeable tolerance. The seventh-century Buddhist saint Shantideva was the great master of that. The sixth chapter of his *Guide to the Bodhisattva’s Way of Life* (*Bodhicharyavatara*) is considered to be a special magical precept from Manjushri, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom, for replacing anger with tolerance. The essence is: Why get upset if you can do something about something? And if you can’t do anything about it, then why get upset? Anger, the text says, comes from feeling uncomfortable because something you don’t want to happen is happening, or something you want to happen is not happening. Then you lose your good cheer—your joyousness in just being—and start operating from a place of misery and anger.

When you understand interconnectedness, it makes you more afraid of hating than of dying. But people will not be more afraid of hating than dying as long as they hold the worldview that death is the final conclusion of the self, of all chains of causation and consequence that they could be connected to. That's the problem for spiritual nihilists, or materialists. You don't have to believe in future lives to be a Buddhist since Buddhism isn't merely a belief system. But in the mind—reform practice, if you're going to deal with your own explosive and obsessive impulses at a really deep level, then the sense of being locked into a potentially endless continuity of consequence—what I call “infinite consequentiality” gives you the power in the moment to find a deeper resource to use against those seemingly uncontrollable impulses. If you take the view that you're an infinite prisoner of those forces—that if you don't deal with them now, you'll have to in future lifetimes—then you will not make the excuse “I can't do it.” You're going to have to do it. It's what Milarepa said: He was grateful he had the awareness of hell—of infinite negativity. He had killed many people with black magic in his youth, before he turned to the dharma, but understanding the dangers of hell gave him the power to become a buddha and escape those consequences. .

We all have the potential to be killers; realizing that is the key. Years ago, some academics and I did a study of religious violence. We found that the people who are the most violent are those who are incapable of embracing their own potential for evil. By projecting their shadow, their evil, onto the other, they justify their violence. They think they're emphasizing their purity, or restoring their purity, by destroying someone else.

If there were a really bad person who was about to launch nuclear weapons or engage in germ warfare, the most compassionate thing would be to have somebody take him out without hurting innocent peo-

ple. In the Theravada ethic, you say, “We don’t know the real story here. I don’t know whose karma is what, so I can’t get involved.” But in the bodhisattva ethic, if you see someone about to kill a bunch of people, you have to stop him or you’re an accomplice. If you don’t stop him, not only are you letting others lose their lives, but you’re also harming the killer because he’s going to have very bad karmic effects. You try to stop him without killing, but if you have to kill, you do. You get bad karma, too, but because you’re acting out of compassion, not hatred, the good karma will outweigh the bad.

Surgical violence—killing the one to save the many—is part of the bodhisattva ethic. The problem with American-style warfare since World War II is that we’ve relied on carpet bombing—civilian bombing. Civilian bombing is a kind of terrorism in itself, and there’s nothing surgical about it. It’s just blanket annihilative violence. And that produces this terrible blowback of terrorism and people filled with revenge and hatred. It incites more violence, whereas surgical violence had better be *surgical*—aiming to heal.

So our outer work is to resist and protest and try to maintain clarity and speak out forcefully against the kind of violence that kills so many innocent people. Our speaking out forcefully will be more effective because we won’t really be angry, we’ll be fierce. We’ll realize that we can get greater energy out of love and joy than out of hatred. Hatred is so off balance. You blow your adrenals in one minute, then you’re shaky and weak. But if you’re joyful, you’ll get an endless source of energy.

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6

B E Y O N D   B L A M E

Can you forgive your parents? You can, when you realize that your happiness does not depend on external circumstances.

M A R K   E P S T E I N

I was driving in the car one morning after dropping my kids off at school, flipping impatiently through the stations programmed into the radio's memory, when I suddenly heard a familiar voice speaking in what seemed to be an unfamiliar context. It was a deep male voice that I recognized but could not place: a workingman's gruff but casual cadence tackling a subject that seemed so sensitive as to be almost obscene. He was talking about how hard it is to raise children when one's own childhood was less than perfect. "We take what is good from our parents and leave the rest. That's how we honor them," the voice was saying. I quickly turned up the volume, trying to figure out who he was. Parenting is a common subject, but the speaker did not sound like the usual authority to be heard on Public Radio. He sounded more like a soldier talking about fallen comrades, and his subject was as much mourning as childrearing. It did not take much longer for me to identify the voice as that of Bruce Springsteen and to realize that he was giving the interview in anticipation of the release of an album. But the subject matter—hav-

ing children in middle age and reflecting on how one's own difficulties growing up affected one's ability to raise children—was not the usual material of a star's publicity machine.

I was struck by the wisdom of Springsteen's comment that we honor our parents by taking what is good and leaving the rest. There was a Buddhist flavor to it, although I would be hard pressed to identify what it was exactly that sounded Buddhist. In meditation, we are trained to not push away the unpleasant and to not cling to the pleasant—this was a little different. This was talking about not rejecting one's parents because they were imperfect, not trying to force them to acknowledge their shortcomings, not rejecting becoming a parent because of what was done to us, not dwelling on the scars one's parents created, not forcing oneself to pretend that one's parents were fine when they were not, but simply being able to take what was good while leaving behind what was not. There was no blame in Springsteen's words or in his tone—that was what caught my attention. After years of listening to Springsteen's music, with its claustrophobic evocation of growing up in a small mill town in New Jersey, I found his comments now to be all the more poignant. Here was a man who was able to honor his parents by refusing to replicate what they had messed up, a man who understood that in his very rejection of them was an appreciation of their efforts. In trying to do a better job, he was nevertheless able to keep his heart open to them, imperfections and all.

Where had this wisdom come from? There was little in the interview to indicate its source. When forgiveness is taught in most spiritual contexts, the emphasis is usually on sending loving feelings even to those who have hurt us most deeply. While many people find this approach helpful, it struck me that Springsteen was pointing to a different way. The forgiveness he was modeling continued to recognize the hurt



that he felt. In taking what was good and leaving the rest, he was clearly implying that all had not gone well. Rather than cultivating a mind of compassion that could then forgive the most egregious abuse, he seemed to be finding forgiveness in the recognition of having simply survived. Emerging from his stark early years, undoubtedly aided by devotion to his music, he discovered that he was not destroyed. His own generative capacity, his own desire for a family, and his own ability to love were all reasonably intact. It seems to me that this recognition of his own intactness must have relieved him of the need to blame and permitted him to forgive in a natural rather than a contrived way.

The source of forgiveness, Springsteen seemed to imply, lies in the realization that we are not solely products of what was done to us, the realization that there is something essential within us that is not necessarily tarnished by calamitous experience. While this contradicts many of the assumptions that a hundred years of psychotherapy have helped create in our culture, it is a notion that finds much support in the spiritual traditions of the East. In Buddhist cultures, there is a more willing acceptance of a capacity for joy or love that is not dependent on external circumstances, not compromised by trauma or mistreatment, and capable of surviving destruction. While the classic Eastern route to accessing this inherent joy is meditation, Springsteen's comments suggest that, at least for him, the making of music may have been just as redemptive.

The discovery that one's capacity for joy is inherent and not dependent on external events is the antidote to the all too common predicament of the abused child who assumes too much responsibility for that which he or she had no control over. Springsteen's ability to leave behind what he did not respect of his parents' behavior flies in the face of how most people respond to such trauma. More commonly, those who are trespassed against in childhood have a terrible time seeing the truth

clearly. They are much more likely, for instance, to feel as if they are somehow to blame for whatever damage was done to them. Or they may so demonize the perpetrators that they lose sight of the perpetrators' essential humanity. In one scenario, they cleave too tightly to the abuse; in the other, they reject the abuser totally, but never escape from their identification as a victim. A vignette provided by one of my patients may shine some light on this.

Joe, a forty-year-old married man, remembered himself at age ten, answering the door when his estranged mother unexpectedly paid his family a visit. She had left when he was five, abandoning her husband and four children and precipitating an unrelenting depression in Joe's father. Upon seeing his mother in the doorway, Joe ran immediately to find his father, shouting, "Daddy, Daddy, this is what you've been waiting for!" Rousing him from his study and taking him by the hand back to the vestibule, Joe discovered that his mother had left as suddenly as she had arrived. "I felt so guilty," he told me, as if it had somehow been his fault that his mother had disappeared again.

Years later, Joe had a major revelation when he realized that his wife's drinking was *her problem* and not his fault. Until that revelation, he had been in the all too familiar habit of trying to get her to stop so that he would feel better. He had made his well-being completely dependent on how his wife behaved. Her drinking blighted their love, made it impossible for him to take refuge in the closeness and comfort of their relationship, and made him furious and unhappy. He took his wife's drinking personally, as if it were directed at him, as if it were a reflection of her lack of love for him or his own unworthiness. The same overresponsibility that led him to feel guilty over his mother's departure when he was ten also colored his relationship to his wife. Only after attending a series of Alcoholics Anonymous meetings did he begin to accept that

her drinking had little to do with him. This left him in a new predicament. Taking what was good and leaving the rest, not rushing to the assumption that it was all his fault, and separating his own capacity for well-being from the circumstances that surrounded him permitted Joe to begin a process of separation that extended back to his mother and into the present to his wife. Joe made new boundaries that eventually caused his wife to seek help. He found a capacity for forgiveness that was not a whitewash of how he had been, or was being, mistreated: it emerged when Joe could acknowledge the hurt he was subjected to while not entwining himself more than was necessary with the trauma.

Joe's example points to a new and unusual way of thinking, one that the psychoanalyst Jessica Benjamin has called "beyond doer and done to." To Benjamin, the most common reaction to the powerlessness of trauma or abuse is to simply reverse the scenario: to try to assume some power by becoming a perpetrator oneself, by blaming or hurting the other person or by blaming or hurting oneself. She has called this a "seesaw" mentality: one person is up while the other is down. The primary way out of trauma in this mentality is to seek vengeance or revenge, to lower the other while raising up one's self. In the mode of "beyond doer and done to," something shifts. People, even those who have hurt us, are no longer experienced one-dimensionally, as either all good or all bad. Self-esteem is no longer dependent on being the winner, or on being right. Up and down are no longer the only criteria by which life is measured. The seesaw gives way to a merry-go-round, known in Buddhist culture as the wheel of life. In this model, it is clear that we cycle through all the manifestations of what it means to be human. We move from state to state, sometimes causing each other pain and sometimes bringing each other joy. As the seesaw gives way to the merry-go-round, an appreciation is gained of the difficulties and complexities involved

in being human. Not only are we all completely capable of hurting one another but we are also capable of a profound empathy, even for those who have hurt us or for those we disdain.

In Springsteen's few short comments on the radio that morning, I heard a voice of wisdom calling out across the generations, one that seemed to be reaching for a new way of relating. A master of the adolescent love song, Springsteen has a catchy tune that I found myself humming that day, one of those simple songs with an infectious hook that I often repeat like an unconscious mantra: *All I'm Thinkin' About Is You*. As much as I love that song, his words that morning went even deeper. We honor our parents by taking what was good and leaving the rest, he said. I could feel that old seesaw implode.

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## A CHANGE OF HEART

An interview with Jack Kornfield, coleader of the  
New York Peace Walk

For many years we've heard the same slogan called out again and again, a cry for reconciliation between Israel and Palestine: "Peace in the Middle East!" In October, this call will be heard once again, but this time it will not be shouted out or scrawled on posters. It will be cried out another way: by the silent presence of peace walkers.

Led by the Buddhist teacher Jack Kornfield, the Israeli peace walk organizer Dr. Stephen Fulder, and the Palestinian peace negotiator Professor Sami Al-Kilani, the silent walk around New York's Central Park will echo a decade of similar walks in Israel and Palestine. In fact, the New York walk will occur simultaneously with one along the Green Line, the border between Israel and Palestine. Without flags, placards, or posters of any kind, the silent walkers hope to embody a spirit of calmness, confidence, and mindful empathy, acknowledging the suffering that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has caused and hoping for genuine peace in the future.

Although part of the New York Peace Walk's purpose is to serve as an example of how Palestinians and Israelis can live together in harmony together in the same city, the walk is open to people of all faiths,

including Buddhists. But what part exactly can Buddhism play in a dialogue between Abrahamic faiths? What can a Buddhist practitioner offer to expressions of peace? Emma Varvaloucas of *Tricycle* spoke with Jack Kornfield, cofounder of the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, Massachusetts, and founding teacher of Spirit Rock Center, in Woodacre, California, to discuss his own participation as a leader in the peace walk. Kornfield and his colleagues draw inspiration from Buddhism's longstanding tradition of peace work, which dates from the Buddha's own (unsuccessful) attempts to stop war between two ancient Indian kingdoms.

—*Emma Varvaloucas*

**Why did you decide to get involved in the New York Peace Walk?** In Zen they say there are only two things: you sit, and you sweep the garden. And so my sense of dharma practice, which informs and inspires my life, is to sit and quiet my mind, open my heart, and then get up and sweep the garden of the world.

There are half a million Muslims, two million Jews, and so many others who all live together in harmony in New York. We want to show the world that this is possible. Not with big signs and banners and protesting against something, but to demonstrate that we as human beings can live together in a harmonious way. Because of the great suffering that's happened in the Middle East, at this time it feels very important to tend to this garden.

**The Peace Walk has a special focus on Islam and Judaism. What do you think that Buddhism's commitment to nonviolence can bring to this dialogue between these Abrahamic religions?** The powerful practices of inner transformation. Buddhism offers more than an ideal vision of mercy or compassion. It offers systematic inner trainings of

lovingkindness, of compassion, and of forgiveness that practitioners can use to open and transform their hearts and to learn how to enter situations of conflict and difficulty with a loving perspective.

Thesetrainingsarepairedwiththecommunaltraditionofnonviolence that offers ways to solve conflicts based on compassion and understanding and deep listening to one another, giving us a better response than war.

**You've been talking about the necessity of inner change. On the New York Peace Walk website it says, "Peace requires a change of heart." What is that change and how can we implement it?** A change of heart requires a great deal of courage and a great deal of compassion. The courage is to not avert our gaze, but instead to turn to the various sufferings in our own life or in the world around us and see them with the concern and compassionate eyes of the Buddha.

Then we must realize that we can respond wisely from the heart rather than react out of fear and anger and confusion. With our practice, we can turn our gaze and our heart toward the very dilemmas of our time and enter as activists who cool and soothe the situation.

**What about the role of forgiveness—and the difficulty of forgiveness—in the face of suffering?** Forgiveness is absolutely critical. Without forgiveness, the Northern Irish Catholics and Protestants, the Bosnians and Serbs and Croats, the Hutus and the Tutsis, the Palestinians and the Israelis, can say, "Your people did that to my people 50 years ago or 100 years ago or 500 years ago, and we will not stand for it," and continue the cycle of retribution and suffering. Forgiveness is the radical act that says: It stops with me.

But forgiveness does not mean that we forgive and forget. It means that we see the suffering that everyone has participated in and realize

## TRICYCLE TEACHINGS: FORGIVENESS

that rather than meeting the suffering and aggression with more suffering and aggression, it works better to look deeper, to see our common humanity, and to acknowledge that we have been caught in a cycle of hurt and delusion. True forgiveness does not deny the suffering of the past but has a tremendous dignity and courage and power of love in it that says we will, and can, start again.

When I was in Israel and Palestine, I went to a beautiful gathering of the Sulkita, which had sponsored groups of Israeli and Palestinian youth to meet together over several years to get to know one another. At this particular gathering they had brought their parents together for the first time. Many of the Palestinian parents and families who had come in for this gathering had not been in Israel ever, or for many years. And in the circle that I was in, there was so much love and connection between the teenagers and the Palestinian parents who were sitting next to me. One of the mothers turned to me with tears in her eyes after she met the other parents and children in the circle and said, “Oh, I forgot they had mothers. I’ve only seen Israeli soldiers for the last 25 years.” And you could feel her heart soften, as well as the hearts of everyone in that circle.



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THE FINGER BONE PATH  
OF ANGULIMALA

Shakyamuni Buddha, a life retold

THICH NHAT HANH

In this episode of the life of the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni encounters the treacherous murderer, Angulimala, who subsequently transforms into a monk more gentle than "a handful of earth." Excerpted from *Old Path White Clouds*, Thich Nhat Hanh's biography of the Buddha, this story occurs after the Buddha has already acquired many followers among the laity and the ordained, or *bhikkhus*, and it reflects the interweaving of social and spiritual dimensions of his teaching. Angulimala's change of heart proves that the present is not imprisoned by the past, that karma is not an immutable sentence, and that the forces of ignorance, even when they create the dementia of murder, can be subdued by compassion. In another radical departure from the prevailing ethos of the India of his day, the Buddha expressed unconditional love in the concrete terms of democratic social ideals, as demonstrated by his embrace of Angulimala.

One morning when the Buddha entered Savatthi, all doors were

bolted shut. No one was on the streets. The Buddha stood in front of a home where he normally received food offerings. The door opened a crack, and the owner hastily ran out and invited him to enter. Once inside, the owner latched the door and suggested that the Buddha remain to eat his meal inside the house. He said, "Lord, it is very dangerous to go outdoors today. The murderer Angulimala has been seen in these parts. They say he has killed many people in other cities. Every time he kills someone, he cuts off one of their fingers and adds it to a string he wears around his neck. They say that once he has killed a hundred people and has a talisman of a hundred fingers hanging around his neck, he will gain even more terrible, evil powers. It is strange he never steals anything from the people he murders. King Pasenadi has organized a brigade of soldiers and police to hunt him down." The Buddha asked, "Why must the king enlist the aid of an entire brigade of soldiers to hunt down just one man?"

"Respected Gautama, Angulimala is very dangerous. He possesses phenomenal fighting skills. Once he overcame forty men who surrounded him on the street. Not long ago, twenty armed police entered the forest to try to capture him. Only two came out alive. Now that Angulimala has been spotted in the city, no one dares go out to work or shop."

The Buddha thanked the man for telling him about Angulimala and then stood up to take his leave. The man implored the Buddha to remain safely inside, but the Buddha refused. He said that he could only preserve the trust of the people by continuing to do his begging as usual.

As the Buddha walked slowly and mindfully down the street, he suddenly heard the sound of steps running behind him in the distance. He knew it was Angulimala, but he felt no fear. He continued to take slow steps, aware of everything taking place within and outside of himself.

Angulimala shouted, “Stop, monk! Stop!”

The Buddha continued taking slow, stable steps. He knew from the sound of Angulimala’s footsteps that he was not far behind. Although the Buddha was now fifty-six years old, his sight and hearing were keener than ever. He held nothing but his begging bowl.

When Angulimala caught up to the Buddha, he walked alongside him and said, “I told you to stop, monk. Why don’t you stop?”

The Buddha continued to walk as he said, “Angulimala, I stopped a long time ago. It is you who have not stopped.”

Angulimala was startled by the Buddha’s unusual reply. He blocked the Buddha’s path, forcing the Buddha to stop. The Buddha looked into Angulimala’s eyes. Again, Angulimala was startled. The Buddha’s eyes shone like two stars. Angulimala had never encountered someone who radiated such serenity and ease. Everyone else always ran away from him in terror. Why didn’t this monk show any fear? The Buddha was looking at him as if he were a friend or brother. Suddenly Angulimala could no longer bear the Buddha’s kind and gentle gaze. He said, “Monk, you said you stopped a long time ago. But you were still walking. You said I was the one who has not stopped. What did you mean by that?”

The Buddha replied, “Angulimala, I stopped committing acts that cause suffering to other living beings a long time ago. I have learned to protect life, the lives of all beings, not just humans. Angulimala, all living beings want to live. All fear death. We must nurture a heart of compassion and protect the lives of all beings.”

“Human beings do not love each other. Why should I love other people? Humans are cruel and deceptive. I will not rest until I have killed them all.”

The Buddha spoke gently, “Angulimala, I know you have suffered deeply at the hands of other humans. Sometimes humans can be most

cruel. Such cruelty is the result of ignorance, hatred, desire, and jealousy. But humans can also be understanding and compassionate. My path can transform cruelty into kindness. Hatred is the path you are on now. You should stop. Choose the path of forgiveness, understanding, and love instead.”

Angulimala was moved by the monk’s words. Yet his mind was thrown into confusion. The monk looked at Angulimala as if he considered him a whole person worthy of respect. Angulimala asked, “Are you the monk Gautama?”

The Buddha nodded.

Angulimala said, “It is a great pity I did not meet you sooner. I have gone too far already on my path of destruction. It is no longer possible to turn back.”

The Buddha said, “No, Angulimala, it is never too late to do a good act.”

“What good act could I possibly do?”

“Stop traveling the road of hatred and violence. That would be the greatest act of all. Angulimala, though the sea of suffering is immense, look back and you will see the shore.”

“Gautama, even if I wanted to, I could not turn back now. No one would let me live in peace after all I have done.”

The Buddha grasped Angulimala’s hand and said, “Angulimala, I will protect you if you vow to abandon your mind of hatred and devote yourself to the study and practice of the Way. Take the vow to begin anew and serve others. It is easy to see you are a man of intelligence. I have no doubt you could succeed on the path of realization.”

Angulimala knelt before the Buddha. He removed the sword strapped to his back, placed it on the earth, and prostrated himself at the Buddha’s feet. He covered his face in his hands and began to sob. After

a long time, he looked up and said, “I vow to abandon my evil ways. I will follow you and learn compassion from you. I beg you to accept me as your disciple.”

Over the next ten days, Angulimala was taught about the practice of the precepts, the practice of meditation, and the way of begging. Angulimala made a greater effort than any other *bhikkhu* before him. Even the Buddha was astonished at his transformation when he visited Angulimala two weeks after his ordination. Angulimala radiated serenity and stability, and so rare a gentleness that the other *bhikkhus* called him “Ahimsaka,” which means “Nonviolent One.” It had, in fact, been his name at birth, a most fitting name for him, for outside of the Buddha, there was no other *bhikkhu* whose gaze was more filled with kindness.

One morning, the Buddha entered Savatthi to beg, accompanied by fifty other *bhikkhus*, including *bhikkhu* Ahimsaka. As they reached the city gates, they met King Pasenadi mounted on a steed leading a battalion of soldiers. The king and his generals were dressed in full fighting gear. When the king saw the Buddha, he dismounted and bowed.

The Buddha asked, “Majesty, has another kingdom invaded your borders?” The king replied, “Lord, the murderer Angulimala is a dan-

ger to every man, woman, and child. I cannot rest until he is found and killed.” The Buddha asked, “If Angulimala repented his ways and vowed never to kill again, if he took the vows of a *bhikkhu* and respected all living beings, would you still need to capture and kill him?”

“Lord, if Angulimala became your disciple and followed the precept against killing, if he lived the pure and harmless life of a *bhikkhu*, my happiness would know no bounds!”

The Buddha pointed to Ahimsaka and said, “Your majesty, this monk is none other than Angulimala. He has taken the precepts of a *bhikkhu*. He has become a new man in these past two weeks.”

King Pasenadi was horrified when he realized he was standing so close to the notorious killer.

The Buddha said, “There is no need to fear him, your majesty. *Bhikkhu* Angulimala is gentler than a handful of earth. We call him Ahimsaka now.”

The king bowed to the new *bhikkhu* and then turned to the Buddha. “Enlightened Master, your virtue is truly wondrous! You bring peace and well-being to situations no one else can. What others fail to resolve by force and violence, you resolve by your great virtue. Let me express my profound gratitude.”

Then the king departed after informing his generals they could disband the troops and everyone could return to their regular duties.

*Adapted from Old Path White Clouds: Walking in the Footsteps of the Buddha* (Parallax Press, 1991). **Thich Nhat Hanh**, a Vietnamese Buddhist monk, was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize by Martin Luther King, Jr., and has continued to advocate peaceful action for social change.

9

THE POWER OF  
FORGIVENESS

Our ability to forgive allows us to meet suffering—our suffering as well as the suffering of others—with a kind heart.

GINA SHARPE

Forgiveness is not simple. When we have been harmed, hurt, betrayed, abandoned, or abused, forgiveness can often seem to be out of the question. And yet, unless we find some way to forgive, we will hold that hatred and fear in our hearts forever. Imagine what the world would be like without forgiveness. Imagine what it would be like if every one of us carried every single hurt, every single resentment, all the anger that came up, when we felt betrayed. If we just kept that in our hearts and never let it go, it would be unbearable. Without forgiveness, we're forced to carry the sufferings of the past. As Jack Kornfield says, "Forgiveness is giving up all hope of a better past." In that sense, forgiveness is really not about someone's harmful behavior; it's about our own relationship with our past. When we begin the work of forgiveness, it is primarily a practice for ourselves.

Maha Ghosananda, a Theravada monk who was known as "the Gandhi of Cambodia," used to lead *dhammayietra* ("pilgrimage of

truth”) walks in the early 1990s, after peace accords ending the civil war between the Khmer Rouge and the new Cambodian government had been signed. When Maha Ghosananda died in 2007 at the age of 78, an obituary in *The Economist* detailed his experiences walking through Cambodia after the war: He often found war still raging. Shells screamed over the walkers, and firefights broke out round them. Some were killed. The more timid ran home, but Ghosananda had chosen his routes deliberately to pass through areas of conflict. Sometimes the walkers found themselves caught up in long lines of refugees, footsore like them, trudging alongside oxcarts and bicycles piled high with mattresses and pans and live chickens. “We must find the courage to leave our temples,” Ghosananda insisted, “and enter the suffering-filled temples of human experience.”

Now, though the Khmer Rouge had outlawed nostalgia, had razed the monasteries and thrown the mutilated Buddha statues into the rivers, old habits stirred. As they caught Ghosanada’s chant, “Hate can never be appeased by hate; hate can only be appeased by love,” soldiers laid down their arms and knelt by the side of the road. Villagers brought water to be blessed and plunged glowing incense sticks into it to signal the end of war. . . . He could not stay out of the world. Rather than devoting himself to monastic scholarship, he built hut-temples in the refugee camps.

Maha Ghosananda built those temples even though he was told by the remnants of the Khmer Rouge that if he dared to open these temples he would be killed. As thousands of refugees arrived at the temples, Maha Ghosanada handed out dog-eared photocopies of the Buddha’s *Metta Sutta*:

With a boundless heart  
Should one cherish all living beings:



## TRICYCLE TEACHINGS: FORGIVENESS

Radiating kindness over the entire world,  
Spreading upwards to the skies,  
And downwards to the depth.

This story is a powerful reminder of what forgiveness can do. Maha Ghosananda's family was wiped out by the Khmer Rouge, and during their reign Buddhist monks were labeled as social parasites. They were defrocked, forced into labor fields, or murdered: out of 60,000 monks, only 3,000 remained in Cambodia after the war. But despite all that he had suffered during the Khmer Rouge regime, Maha Ghosananda was able to find forgiveness in his heart.

Forgiveness releases us from the power of fear and allows us to see kindly with a wise heart. First, we need to understand forgiveness: then we learn how it is practiced, and then how we may forgive ourselves and others. The Buddha said, "If it were not possible to free the heart from entanglement and greed, hate, fear, and delusion, I would not teach you or ask you to do so." The power of forgiveness releases us from the power of fear. Our practice of lovingkindness can be enhanced by our practice of forgiveness, because it allows us to see with kind eyes and to rest in a wise and peaceful heart. In any moment, we can learn to let go of hatred and fear and rest in peace and forgiveness—it's never, ever too late. But in order to cultivate a truly loving and kind heart, we need to develop the practices that cultivate and strengthen forgiveness and the natural compassion within us. Our ability to forgive allows us to make space for our ability to meet suffering—our suffering as well as the suffering of others—with a kind heart.

Forgiveness does not gloss over what has happened in a superficial way. The practice is not about planting a smile on our face and saying, "It's okay. I don't mind." It's not a misguided effort to suppress our pain

or to ignore it. If you've suffered a great injustice, coming to forgiveness may include a long process of grief and outrage and sadness and loss and pain. Forgiveness is a deep process, which is repeated over and over and over again in our hearts. It honors the grief and it honors the betrayal. And in its own time, it ripens into the freedom to truly forgive. And if we look honestly at our own lives, we can see the sorrows and pain that have led to our own wrongdoing. We're not just victims; sometimes we also need to be forgiven. And in this way we can finally extend forgiveness to ourselves and hold the pain that we have caused in the heart of compassion. Without such mercy we would live in isolation or in exile.

As you do the following forgiveness practices, let yourself feel whatever small or large release there is in your heart. Or if there is no release, notice that too. And if you are not ready to forgive, that's all right. Sometimes the process of forgiveness takes a lifetime, and that's perfectly fine. You can unfold in your own time and in your own way. We're not trying to manufacture some kind of feeling, so if all you can muster is the understanding that harm was done, that's perfectly okay. Emotions will come not because we force them to but because they're there, because they're an expression of some deep feeling inside. So if as a result of the harm, there were ways in which your heart closed or your feelings closed, you can acknowledge that too as part of the harm. Whatever you feel, you feel. And whatever you don't feel, you don't feel. Forgiveness is an attitude of welcoming and inviting and spaciousness rather than some emotion that we pump up in our bodies and minds and hearts.

We practice with the faith that as we do the repetitions, the body, mind, and heart learn. That's the beauty of these practices, we learn that we're not in control of the fruits of our practice, but we are in control of how we do the practice—whether we do it with patience and diligence and determination and wisdom and effort and energy. We're not in con-

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trol of how it then manifests in our life. We're not trying to make anything happen, because in the trying to make something happen, we will miss the beauty and the delight of what does happen.

### FORGIVENESS PRACTICE

This practice of forgiveness comes in three parts: forgiveness from others, forgiveness for ourselves, and forgiveness for those who have hurt or harmed us. This is not a coercive practice, so if we feel that we don't want to ask for forgiveness, then we don't have to. If we think we can't forgive ourselves, we can sit quietly and see if there's any small, even tiny little opening in our hearts that can allow just the smallest amount of light to come in. And if we feel that we can't extend forgiveness to others because we think that something is completely unforgivable, then we can know that too. During this practice we reflect on whatever resentment or bitterness we're holding onto and how that is working in our own hearts. And if you think that there is just a tiny little amount that you can forgive, then that's fine too. This is a deep, unfolding process that can take a lifetime to work through.

You may not want to take on the largest thing that you've not been willing to forgive up to now, but maybe you can address some small offenses. Let your heart get some exercise in forgiveness. You want to start with something that isn't quite so overwhelming and allow the heart to begin to exercise. It's like exercising a muscle in our bodies. We don't start with the 500-pound weight. We start maybe with a couple of small barbells, and we work with those to get the muscle going. And then eventually it may be strong enough to take up heavier and heavier weights. In the same way, with forgiveness practice, you may want to start small.

Sit comfortably and allow the eyes to close and the breath to be

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natural and easy. Let the body and the mind relax. Feel your connection to the earth. Breathe gently into your whole body, especially into your heart.

As you're breathing, feel all the barriers that you've erected and the emotions you've carried because you haven't forgiven yourself or others. Let yourself feel the pain of keeping your heart closed.

### FORGIVENESS FROM OTHERS

As you are breathing into your heart and feeling any hardness there, repeat silently to yourself, "There are many ways that I have hurt or harmed others. And I remember them now. Ways that I have betrayed, abandoned, or caused suffering, knowingly or unknowingly, out of my pain, fear, anger, or confusion." Let yourself remember and visualize the ways you have hurt others. See pain that you may have caused with your own fear and confusion. Sense that you can finally release this burden and ask for forgiveness. Take as much time as you need to picture the memory that burdens your heart. And as each person comes to mind, just gently say, "I ask for your forgiveness. I ask for your forgiveness."

### FORGIVENESS FOR OURSELVES

To ask forgiveness for yourself, repeat silently, "Just as I have caused suffering to others, there are many ways that I have hurt and harmed myself. I have betrayed or abandoned myself many times in thought, word, or deed, knowingly or unknowingly." Let yourself remember the ways that you have harmed yourself. And extend forgiveness for each act of harm, one by one. "For the ways that I have hurt myself through action or inaction, out of fear, pain, and confusion, I now extend a full and

heartfelt forgiveness. I forgive myself. I forgive myself. I forgive myself.”

FORGIVENESS FOR THOSE WHO HAVE  
HURT OR HARMED US

To extend forgiveness to those who have hurt or harmed you, repeat, “There are many ways I have been harmed by others, abused or abandoned, knowingly or unknowingly, by thought, word, or deed.” Picture the ways you have felt harmed. Remember them. We’ve each been betrayed. Let yourself remember the ways that this may have been true for you, and feel the sorrow you have carried from the past. And now, sense that it’s possible to release this burden by extending forgiveness gradually as your heart is ready. Don’t force it; every harm does not have to be forgiven in one sitting. The point is to exercise in a very small way something that you think you are ready to forgive right now. Gently repeat to yourself, “I remember the many ways that I have been hurt, wounded, or harmed. And I know that it was out of another’s pain, confusion, fear, anger. I have carried this pain in my heart long enough. To the extent that I am ready, I offer you forgiveness. You who have caused me harm, I offer my heartfelt forgiveness. I forgive you.”

These three practices for forgiveness may be gently repeated until you feel a release in your heart. For some great pain you may not feel a release. Instead, you may experience again the burden or the anger that you’re holding onto. If that is the case, then you can just touch this softly. Be forgiving of yourself for not being ready to let it go, and move on.

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