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*part one*

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## Understanding the Self



# 1 The Tao of Self-Forgiveness

WHETHER WE ARE TALKING ABOUT self-forgiveness or the forgiveness of others, the idea that forgiveness is extremely difficult and that only special people can do it applies in both cases. In the one case, we perceive ourselves as the perpetrator of some crime or misdemeanor, which leads to a feeling of guilt, while in the other, we perceive ourselves as having been victimized by someone or something, which leads us to feel angry and resentful.

Even though most of us would say we know what forgiveness means, the definition of forgiveness as applied to others is anything but clear, and any meaningful definition of self-forgiveness is virtually impossible to find. That being the case, we are forced to try to understand self-forgiveness in reference to the forgiveness of others.

Webster's Dictionary says that forgiveness is *letting go* of resentment against someone or giving up the

desire to punish. Presumably, by that definition, self-forgiveness is letting go of the guilt and shame and giving up the need to dwell on what happened that made you feel that way. But exactly how do you let go? By what method do you *let bygones be bygones*, that being a common colloquial version of the same idea? No one tells you how. And how on earth do we apply that to ourselves?

Webster's also gives the word *pardon* as a synonym for forgiveness. But how can one pardon a wrong? It is not in our power to pardon. To imagine that we have the power to pardon is to presume that we can play God. And if we pardon ourselves, we have to ask who is pardoning whom? Others say "forgive and forget," but how can we forget something that happened that remains burned into our memory? In any case, we need to forgive and remember, not forget. That way we learn not to repeat the error.

Robert Enright and the Human Development Study Group defined forgiveness as "Not only a *decision* or a *choice* to abandon one's right to resentment (*guilt and shame* [my italics]) and negative judgments, but an imperative to replace those with compassion, generosity and (self) love." Well, it's one thing to make a decision at the intellectual level to give up these feelings and replace them with

compassion, but it's quite another to actually make that happen. Compassion arises from the heart, not the mind.

Paul T. P. Wong, PhD, says, "Forgiveness also involves a compassionate embrace of our enemies in spite of our natural feelings of bitterness, animosity, and fear. It is a voluntary and deliberate act to overlook their flaws and wrongdoings, cancel all their debts, and start a new chapter. And it is nothing less than a very demanding task." For self-forgiveness, we could translate that paragraph to read: "Self-forgiveness involves a compassionate embrace of ourselves as wrongdoers in spite of our natural feelings of guilt and shame. It is a voluntary and deliberate act to overlook our own flaws and wrongdoings, cancel our need to punish ourselves, and start a new chapter." But again, how do we do this?

Charles Griswold, professor of philosophy at Boston University and the author of a book entitled *Forgiveness*, goes even further. He insists there has to be *reciprocity* between the injured and the injurer. In other words, forgiveness has to be two-way. "For it to be true forgiveness," he says, "the perpetrator must offer an apology which has to be accepted. Without some kind of restitution or amends from the perpetrator it does not count as forgiveness."

I cannot agree. Forgiveness is essentially something we do for ourselves, irrespective of whether the perpetrator shows contrition of any kind. As a matter of fact, I think it is counterproductive to tell someone that you are forgiving them. They may not even be aware that they have upset you. I see it as nothing more than a form of manipulation, which is very likely to create a backlash such as a feeling of resentment in that person.

To make reciprocity a condition of forgiveness gives all the power to the perpetrator and compounds victim consciousness. In effect, it puts one in the position of having to say, "If it wasn't for you, I could forgive!" or, "Because you won't apologize, I can never be free of this pain." And if the person is dead, what then? Is forgiveness then out of the question? Of course not.

The confusion arises when people mix up the meaning of two words: forgiveness and reconciliation. With forgiveness, the only one involved is the forgiver, but with reconciliation, a certain reciprocity is indeed required. The injured and the injurer must have an intention to reconcile, which means that the victim agrees to give up his or her anger and need for revenge, while the perpetrator is relieved of his or her guilt by offering some sort of apology or amends.

Both parties need to recognize that an injury occurred to one or both of them, and they should both have a desire to heal the wound and repair the relationship. The agreement to reconcile might include some sort of restitution or reparations.

When an estranged couple try to come back together in order to save their marriage, the work they do is more likely to be in the form of reconciliation than of forgiveness—even if one party has done something for which forgiveness is necessary in that instance. For the relationship to truly come back to a meaningful partnership, it usually requires the give and take that characterizes reconciliation rather than forgiveness.

However, Griswold may well have a point when it comes to conventional self-forgiveness. While it remains in our power to forgive someone for victimizing us, no matter whether the victimizer apologizes or not, when it comes to forgiving ourselves for doing something bad to someone else, for which we are definitely entitled to feel guilt and shame, the attitude of the injured party remains a crucial factor.

Can we even begin to feel self-forgiveness when the other person is not willing to forgive us? Is not the other person's forgiveness some kind of a prerequisite for our self-forgiveness? Should effort be



made toward making some form of restitution and amends first? Should we at least apologize before attempting self-forgiveness? Wouldn't it signify that we were bereft of compassion or empathy and without much sense of social justice if we disregarded the other person's condition and feelings and simply went ahead in forgiving ourselves unilaterally, simply in order to feel better?

It would appear then that conventional self-forgiveness has more in common with the concept of reconciliation than does regular forgiveness. In the final analysis, self-forgiveness can occur without true reconciliation having taken place, but without doubt one can only get close to achieving it having exhausted all effort to balance the energy with the injured party. That makes it a doubly difficult proposition.

The arguments go on and on about the nature of forgiveness, but the one thing upon which nearly everyone agrees is that traditional or conventional forgiveness is extremely difficult, and very few people ever manage to achieve it. Self-forgiveness is even more difficult. As if we need more proof of the difficulty of forgiveness, when people actually do genuinely forgive others for some serious crime against them, they appear on TV shows like *Oprah*.

I saw Oprah once listen open-mouthed and speechless when a woman whose son had been murdered claimed that she had forgiven the murderer and had not only visited him for years on death row, but had at some time entertained him for dinner in her own home. Oprah just couldn't imagine how that could be possible and said as much. Neither could 99.9 percent of her audience, I would imagine. I have a name for this kind of forgiveness—I call it *extraordinary forgiveness*. It also seemed to me that the man she befriended, who clearly was guilty of murder, had been able to express his remorse, forgive himself, and hold his head up because she had forgiven him.

I believe the reason conventional forgiveness takes so long and is so difficult to achieve is that in conventional forgiveness we are trying to balance two quite opposite and contradictory energies—the desire to forgive and the need to condemn. This is due to the fact that, with traditional forgiveness, both feet remain planted in victim consciousness. This is true for both ordinary forgiveness and self-forgiveness.

With traditional forgiveness, we take for granted that the perpetrator did something “bad” to the victim and that the victim has suffered as a

consequence. The need to blame the other person and to hold him or her responsible remains very strong, notwithstanding the desire to forgive. With self-forgiveness, the assumption is that we did something wrong for which we deserve condemnation, and yet in spite of our having done the crime, we also desire to bestow forgiveness on ourselves.

As long as one feels victimized by what happened, and for most of us it remains self-evident that we were, then in reality forgiveness will remain all but impossible, especially self-forgiveness. It seems clear to me that those two energies cannot be resolved, and this accounts for why Oprah was so incredulous about how that woman had apparently overcome that difficulty. I was, too. The need to condemn will win out 99.9 percent of the time.

We have already established that self-forgiveness is much more complicated than the forgiveness of others in that at least some reciprocity is called for with self-forgiveness. However, there is another level of difficulty with self-forgiveness that needs to be addressed.

## WHO IS FORGIVING WHOM?

The term *forgiveness* implies that there has to be one who forgives as well as the one being forgiven.