

Good morning.

Welcome. This morning I want to talk about things, a few things. Well, one, actually...one that doesn't make any sense. One of the things that attracted me to the teachings of the Buddha Way was that paradox is highly regarded and respected, and we are full of it. This is from the Nirvana Sutra:

The Buddha spoke of sickness and suffering as effective medicines; times of difficulties and accidents as times of freedom and realization; obstacles as liberation; the army of evil as guardians of the Dharma; difficulties as required for success; the person who mistreats us as one's good friend; one's enemies as an orchard or garden; the abandonment of material possessions as wealth; and being wrongly accused as the source of strength to work for justice.

Isn't that great? Love that stuff.

It has echoes in Christianity, I know. I don't know much about Islam, of the major western religions...and, so, we usually don't think of enemies or people that mistreat us as good friends, do we? What do we want to do with them? We want to kill them. Or take their voice from them. Or put them in special places, all together. We don't often think of sickness and suffering as effective medicines either. Or times of difficulty or accidents as times of freedom and realization. That really piques my interest.

When thinking back -- well, think of one or two of the most horrible events in your life. Like, really awful. There's been some thing that shouldn't have happened to me. Things were going so well -- or were they? And then all of a sudden something steps in and turns our world upside down. I've had a few, and at the time, bad, bad, bad. Anger. You know how we are when we are given something that we don't like or that scares us.

We do everything we can to make it go away, usually trying to think it to death, which doesn't usually work, ever.

What I have found over many years is that these were in fact the best things that ever happened to me. I hope you can say the same. Maybe not.

So I wanted to talk about forgiveness some. I did a class on forgiveness a few months ago, and our Dharma teacher Glenn Noblin alluded to some of the strange things about forgiveness.

Usually, we are quite mistaken about forgiveness. We've been taught that it is one thing, but actually, the practice of the Buddha is quite a different way of seeing forgiveness. Just the word: -- think about it -- when someone says you should forgive someone who has insulted you -- or worse -- you should forgive

them. Yeah, right!

What usually comes up is anger and resentment -- but resentment in the technical sense -- which is to bring the same feeling back again. Over and over again. But that only gives more power to the offense and the offender.

So something's wrong there.

Or in terms of like a betrayal. Who here hasn't been betrayed by someone? It's usually someone close. Who hasn't betrayed anyone? Usually very close. We are all in this together, and it is a tango -- it takes two.

So what I wanted to share with you were Jack Kornfield's words. He was one of the first westerners to go to the far East and train as a Buddhist monk. The ones who wear something like this color here: brown or reddish brown. And they are quite serious about it.

He came back and found that the robe thing wasn't quite going to work for what he had in mind for sharing the Dharma, so he stopped doing that, and went on to be a wonderful teacher and still is.

And he talks about forgiveness with four points:

He calls it "Remember these Truths":

1) Forgiveness is not naive or weak. Forgiveness is not naive or weak.

That kind of goes against our training, don't you think? What kind of people forgive horrible offenses? Weak people. Victims. How good is that, and is it something I want to emulate?

But Buddhism says look again, you might have missed something. As it turns out, forgiveness is one of our greatest strengths.

Forgiveness: who is it for?

We usually think that we are giving something to the other person, but it's not about the other person at all, actually. We don't have to take care of, or meet the needs of, the offender, by giving them our grandly generous forgiveness. Well, it's not really for them. It's for oneself.

If you've ever offended somebody who absolutely refused to accept the apology, that is pretty awful. Has anyone ever experienced that? No matter what your best intentions of apologizing, it just wasn't going to go anywhere with the other person. Being in that trap, in that circle, can go on for years and years and years. The Hatfields and the McCoys forever.

So forgiveness has to be something a little bit more in order to be effective.

Kornfield says that forgiveness requires courage and clarity -- it is not naive. Mistakenly, people believe that to forgive is to simply, "forgive and forget" once and for all. But this is not the wisdom of forgiveness.

Has anyone ever tried this "forgiving and forgetting"? The forgetting part certainly isn't ever the case -- we're not wired to forget danger, or the things that hurt us. We are hard wired to spot it quickly and to ENSURE that we never walk into the same situation or fall into the same hole again.

It can be an imaginary hole, as well, and those are just as good.

2) Forgiveness does not happen quickly.

That's kind of a relief, too. We are trained to think that if we forgive, we're done. Now get on with your life, so as to get rid of this awful feeling or these awful memories. But it doesn't really take too many years of being alive to see that that's not actually the way that it is. Forgiveness can be a really long process. Of what? Of coming to peace within oneself with what is happening, or what has happened. Coming to peace, within oneself. Not so much about the other person -- they have their own mind, and their own practice. But for us, the Buddha wanted peace and liberation, and that can only come from inside us.

Kornfield again:

"For great injustice, coming to forgiveness may include a long process of grief, rage, sadness, and pain. Are those problems? No."

Part of the healing process itself, these things are.

Grief, deep sadness, is not a mistake in the healing process, it IS the healing process. When someone dies, for example, we feel grief. Someone will say 'don't feel that way' or 'look at the bright side'. I'm not so sure that fits here, but the sense is that grief is the problem. It's one of the symptoms of healing if we truly allow ourselves to feel it. Try to squash it, bury it, it festers, and just gets worse until it comes out in seemingly ugly ways.

Have you noticed that when we are the victims of insult, for example, we feel wanting revenge? "Revenge is best served cold." Ugh!

Why do you suppose that is? What is this thing we have with revenge? Is it a character defect? Well, apparently not. With some of the latest neuroscience -- the thought of revenge produces dopamine. Revenge = happy! Or at least the

promise of satisfaction -- enough of it for revenge to actually be quite sweet. A sweet feeling. So it's not that there's something wrong with us; at our most primitive, if someone is a danger, the desire to get rid of the danger is sweetened by the feeling of revenge so that we can annihilate the danger. To keep ourselves safe, and to survive. So in one way, it's a skill -- but it's also a big trap in the sense of how it keeps the "story" going on.

We try to think things to death by going over and over and over and over it. I should have said this, I could have done this, then this person would have done this, instead of that, and then I wouldn't be miserable anymore. But it's just a story -- often like memories -- and often, rarely accurate with respect to what actually happened.

Have you noticed about memories, when we share them with somebody, they have changed over time, completely. When I tried, we had Way-seeking mind talks where we talk for 20 minutes about what brought us to practice. I've done it more than 10 times, and every time it was a different story, like it came from a different person. Why? Because we ARE different people from moment to moment, but we remember earlier versions and try to make them manifest in the present.

I was told, and I'm suspicious of it, that people change. Really.

Some of the labels we stick on people, they are forever. Of course that has nothing to do with that person but only with my own mind. And that label gives me great suffering, actually. Because it's delusion.

He goes on to say:

True forgiveness does not paper over what has happened in a superficial way. It is not a misguided effort to suppress or ignore. It cannot be hurried. It is a deep process repeated over and over again in our heart which honors the grief and betrayal and in its own time opens the freedom to truly forgive.

This expression he uses: about a deep process repeated over and over again in our heart. That's a little different than merely cogitating. Cogitating mind is discriminative. It is also a judgment. It's where the judge lives, on the bench, high up. A hanging judge, often. This doesn't quite help so much. But the heart, it's different. There's room there -- it's okay for you to be yourself, and it's okay for them to be themselves.

But who cares about that when the specter of revenge raises its head? That's why it takes time.

Then he says: honoring grief and betrayal. What's wrong with that. Honoring the betrayal? Must have been a typo.

Honoring the betrayal? What is that? What is there to be honored? Who would do that, I wonder?

What happens when we don't honor something? We try to get rid of it, suppress or repress it, which lets us pretend that it has disappeared for a while. But it's there, lurking. The Buddha is asking us not to try to run away from what we want to run away from the most.

I don't like that -- does anybody else? We try everything else, don't we, in terms of running. We have lots of strategies. Yes. It's called an "avoidant attachment style" -- if there is a threat, run. Leave town. Or shoot it.

So, to honor the betrayal and the grief brings them into the light of awareness, and enables us to bring them into our hearts. Our hearts actually have very good sight -- if 20/20 is perfect vision, our discriminating mind is maybe 10/10. Does that happen? Can you have 10/10? Well, you get the point. Maybe 20/10. Oh, I see. No, I don't. (laughter)

What I am trying to say is that everything we take into our sense, all these wonderful things, is first measured, regarded, as either painful or pleasant or we don't even notice it (neutral). After that comes an interpretation depending on how we've been conditioned by what our memories are. "Once burned..." -- like putting your hand on a candle flame. Where I lived we had kerosene lamps so you would light them and then when you want to blow them off, the first impulse is to grab the top of the chimney and lift it off. You only do that once.

One of my few successes in not doing the same stupid thing over and over again is that lamp. (laughter)

To honor the pain means to wake up. Try to see what is actually happening.

The perception of our hearts is much bigger -- it doesn't interpret so much, it's just open and accepting. There's room for everything, actually, in the true heart.

3) Forgiveness does not forget, nor does it condone the past.

Thank God. Isn't that great, if that were true? It doesn't forget, and it doesn't condone. That's good, because neither do I. So I'm okay, I'm normal, I'm natural in how I feel. We are afraid of condoning the past -- if I forgive you, does that mean I approve or encourage you to do this thing you have done?

Don't we think this way? We are very wary of doing anything that might give the other the impression that it was okay, and that it can be done again. "Feel free to hurt me or others" -- we are afraid of saying this.

You know, one of the neat things about this kind of understanding of forgiveness is not about judgment at all. True forgiveness is not about judgment, of condemning the other person while judging myself innocent and righteous.

Those are thoughts from our heads, but in truth what helps is forgiving from the heart, which actually doesn't judge at all.

Which I think presents itself as a problem, as I think of it at this moment. How do we get to know, or come from, the place (which is not a place) of the heart? Where do we usually jump to when we encounter something we don't like? The head. Strategies.

If we like it, the head says let's figure out how to get more of it.
If we don't like it, the head says let's avoid it forever.

But this is based on something that isn't really true.

When he says that it does not forget -- it means that one of the things we can train ourselves to do is to accept. Just practice acceptance. Not too much, because it goes against the grain, but like doing zazen to be able to let things come and go as they do. As they do. Pleasant memory comes, let it be there, notice it, go back to breathing, and it goes its way. Same thing with negative things too. To be able to accept what is actually happening instead of fighting against it or making sure it stays around forever in a static fashion.

When we practice letting things be as they are, the heart begins to open. When you are sitting there either loving or hating the experience, breathing into it -- aware of your breath, in the body instead of the head -- what we are actually doing is training ourselves to be more in touch with the heart.

Kornfield says about this, forgiveness sees wisely as opposed to stupidly. Wisely means wisdom -- but wisdom is just seeing as much as we can what is really happening. The nature of how things actually are.

The simplest thing is that everything changes. When we see that we are experiencing wisdom. Do we think that everything changes? No. Some things don't seem to go away, so I judge that as permanent and unchanging. Like people.

That's one of the great things about being older and older and older, is that something that doesn't seem to stop. But I'm glad because I'm enjoying it -- you get to look back and say "wow, how have things changed." Like time, for example. When we are kids, time is forever. But when we reach a certain age it's like...where did the time go? There used to be so much. Now, there is very little. But this adds such a poignancy to being alive -- no desire to waste time so much.

It willingly acknowledges what is unjust, harmful, and wrong. Not white-washing the offense in order to forgive it. The eye of wisdom sees, "Yes, it was unjust." Not in an absolute sense, of course, but just like how the most horrible thing that happens to us seems awful forever. But then we discover that there was more to it than we thought at the time.

There is no absolute wrong, no absolute right -- but also what's right is right and what's wrong is wrong. Paradox.

Forgiveness bravely recognizes the conditions of the past that brought about suffering. That's wisdom. It understands that there's more to this than what first appears. In fact, nothing is as it appears.

And to recognize the suffering of the past is to remember.

There is a strength to forgiveness. When we forgive, we can also say "Never again will I allow these things to happen."

Isn't that encouraging? That's true acceptance, actually. Never again will I allow this to happen. Not sure how to say it without thinking.

It doesn't mean that we are victims. We have to amend it to be of use to others, to see what really is harmful and wrong. And, depending on who we are, truly and deeply, we will respond. Naturally, normally, in our own way, in our own time.

We may resolve to never again allow harm to come to us in the same way. That's acceptance, that's wisdom.

4) Forgiveness does not mean that we have to continue to relate to those who have done us harm.

This is not what we have been told.

Isn't that kind of a breath of fresh air? What I knew before I read that, in this little book he has called forgiveness, all I knew is that if you forgive someone you have to be pals.

You have to try to recapture what was before the break of trust, and make amends. You should, you know. You "should." That's the crux.

That doesn't make forgiveness very attractive at all, because we want to get as far away as we can from the source of the pain. If we cannot eradicate the pain we never want to see them again, and this is often called "bad." You're "bad" if you think that.

But the teaching says no, you don't have to continue to relate at all! There's a line in the Avatamsaka Sutra -- it means flower ornament Sutra -- and it was spoken by the Bodhisattva Never Disparaging. Whenever we have someone from a Zen

center out West that brings a guitar, they end up playing this song about "I will never despise you or disparage you in any way / I can see you'll be a Buddha someday."

One of the things that this Bodhisattva said is that this kind of relationship we have with other people -- if something terrible happens -- and we need distance, his motto is still "I will never abandon you." I think, deeply, that's where we actually come from, especially those of us who were actually abandoned. Or who experienced abandonment by our parents or whatever. We long

for intimacy and connection with each other, so that's always there. He says that if you have something against someone, to get away from them as far as you need to, but then still face them. Don't turn one's back.

This is really hard sometimes. But it allows the distance that we need, without disparaging the other.

This can happen in abusive relationships. This is the point where someone always says that -- it boils down to you not being able to get out of the situation, or you should be a better person and respond better. A good Buddhist. A good Christian. A good person. You should stick it out.

But that's crazy if you really think about it. What he says is that:

In some cases the best practice may be to end our connection to never speak with or be with the harmful person again sometimes in the process of forgiveness, they may wish to make amends, but this does not require us to put us in the way of further harm, even if that's what they want.

It does not mean we have to keep going back to a situation where the causes invariably involve someone hurting the other person.

What would it look like to actually live life that way?

I'm familiar with the geographic cure. Common sense is geographic cures don't work. But they so do. Three thousand miles between two people can really help. Really. You may have to do it a couple of times, because there's always a draw back. I only did this three times going from East coast to West coast, West coast to East coast, and East coast to West coast. And finally this works, you know, you just have to persevere. (laughter)

In the end, what this boils down to is that forgiveness simply means never putting another person out of your heart. I can think of people for whom I would find forgiveness very difficult. Or I've been with people who have found forgiving me very difficult -- that's odd, I don't understand that at all. But what matters is what is in our heart -- not in our murderous, strategic, discriminating mind.

That's all I want to say about that. I'm sure there are no questions or comments about any of this so I'll just run. (laughter)

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Student: Not putting someone out of your heart -- my experience is that that's it's more like in-and-out-of my heart. I can feel like they are in my heart sometimes, and then a storyline arises, and there's the murderous part again. So it's like a process where I completely settle on the person being in my heart, but instead a practice of continually trying to bring them into it from the outside. It's easier said than done.

Kosho: Yeah, the process of "in-hearting" someone can be really slow. Luckily, the wisdom of China is that the character for heart and mind are the same. It's the same character. They are the same -- but different. A paradox again.

Actually, someone is really truly never out of our heart-mind, but we experience them as separate places often.

Q: Oftentimes when I practice with forgiving other people I find that I am also learning how to forgive myself. Does Jack talk about that process at all?

Kosho: Not really, but that's very important. And what do we have to forgive ourselves for?

Student: For letting it happen. We like to think we should have known better. That we shouldn't have been innocent or naive.

Kosho: In order to forgive someone else we have to forgive ourselves, but that doesn't seem right. I'm the victim, I'm the person that got hurt -- but actually when you look deeply there will be a thought of "How was I so stupid?" How was I so unskillful or deluded? How did I allow this to happen? I am such a failure, and so on and so forth. I have failed at maintaining my dignity or safety.

What's true about this? We have to go back to this place and say, what could I have done? Usually we realize that we would have had to be inhuman or in charge of the universe to really have had a different outcome.

Student: Forgiving myself for not forgiving is also an issue, especially as a part of a long process.

Kosho: Yes, the superego, "So-and-so the Good" has failed. Let's start there.

Q: I'm just really curious what you would have to say about the situation of having unpleasant encounters with people who are highly volatile and who can go between different facets of a personality very quickly, but who we are also close with? Because...I raise this because of this final point that you have to continue to relate to those people. What does it mean to you that there are people where there is no such thing as an option not to relate to them, because they are too close or too personal to us.

Kosho: Ahh, relationships.

Student: Yes, close personal relationships. We are worried that they could end up harming us in some way because of the volatility.

Kosho: Boy, this is a huge one, we could probably come up with tons of examples. Chronic depression, what's it like for the person who lives with you? It's REALLY hard. Or if they are. Or, you know, a million other examples. What's important is a transformation of perception. A technical term, but Zen has been called -- Zen is the transformation of perception. So when the Buddha is able to forgive it is because the Buddha sees the truth, or has some new insight or understanding that is going on. Does that mean you want the other person to be different? Sure. But you can also bear it because it looks different. If I see myself as the victim forever I am of no help to another person, much less myself. Have I been victimized? Yes. But am I a victim? I decide.

What is important it to cultivate the practice of the heart, because it changes how we see things. Sometimes you cannot do anything with other's state at all. It's not the other "person" that is the problem but what is happening to them.

So it's just seeing, being able to see with a bigger, more open mind, and a more open heart, what might really be going on with the other person. With an open heart.

I hope that was ... confusing. These things are really hard.

Q: Seems like in regards to what he was asking, even in very important relationships, I think we have the right to distance from people. We can choose to stay in relationship, and that it's own thing but we have the right to even distance ourselves from very important relationships.

Kosho: Sorry if that wasn't clear -- yes, that's very important. Emotional

distance is a life-saver sometimes. We kind also kind of get addicted to it, though.

Q: This could never bear on any real situation -- none of this is there with us. It has nothing to do with this kind of conversation at all.

Kosho: I think when we're in the middle of it, who knows? So what do you do? It's after that matters. It's the next step that matters. What do you do if you're really angry with somebody? Our reason does not seem to be of any help, because it comes from the frontal cortex but what's triggered when we feel danger is at the base of our brain, and it's instantaneous. The thinking part all comes later, so you're right, good luck when we're amidst the dramatic scenario.

But over time, that begins to soften up a bit. It's brain wiring actually, where we're less likely to follow the dictates of this one part that says "kill it". Reptilian, mammalian, and then everything else. The latter parts click in after we would like to have them, sometimes. That's another aspect that makes this so difficult. The teachings like this show up after the fact, for a long time, but we get stronger every time we try to apply it. The teaching says that there can be a time where that's actually where we come from, and where we live, in the heart.

Q: It's self righteous, but I find that I'm constantly in the process of forgiving humanity. I mean, I watch the news and it's like: what have we done, again? Okay, we're just delusional, this is psychopathology, etc., but is this normal? It's like I'm always in a constant process of forgiving humanity -- which includes me too.

Kosho: Is that helpful?

Student: I'd like to just accept humanity and not have to go through this process of forgiving. Why am I always feeling disappointed?

Kosho: Yeah, the magic word, disappointed. Disappointment is really crushing, apparently. Actually disappointment is there only when we have expectations that things ought to be different, and some of us want things to be different with a vengeance and when they're not we get really upset. Self-righteous, you said? I don't think that's a helpful assessment of the situation.

Student: Maybe it's just for a sense of control.

Kosho: So you're hoping something will change if you are forgiving towards humanity?

Student: Yes.

Kosho: Cool. But just get to know that -- it's a good strategy. It's a more gentle way to kill everyone.

Student: Yeah, I just don't have the time for that. (laughter)

Q: Dealing with forgiveness amidst drama, I've found that it's usually that the act itself is usually not as damaging as how you deal with it. The snake bite that gets worse by you getting up and running after the snake in anger instead of sitting down and letting the body relax and do its thing.

Kosho: Yes, avoidant feelings can make that very hard. That's the thing about practice, you see things are they are, because there's nowhere to go. You become accustomed to stimuli that were once perceived as being awful. And this changes drastically the way that we can interact with others in those sorts of tense situations.

What I've found over time is that you have to practice this stuff. Finding stability in chaos. This changes everything. Well, it changes nothing. It just changes how I perceive. But that's also everything. And nothing. Another paradox.

So you don't run when there's a snake bite? There were rattlesnakes everywhere and you learn not to be too curious when you hear that rattle. Just let it be.

Q: I think I have the urge or maybe someone else has had the thought of wanting to go back and come to a resolution with a particular person in the past, like make amends with your father or friend or whatever, and I've seen this with my brother who has this desire and gets sorely, sorely disappointed at the lack of reciprocity or receptiveness from the person you're trying to right the wrong with. So what about discernment in trying to make amends vs. just letting things be.

K: If you've been really hurt by people, when they come after you to make it right, what that's like? Is that good? Is that a pleasant thing?

Student: Well it depends.

K: Well if it's not the right time, it's 'get away from me!' With my father, it took me 65 years to be able to approach it. And of course he'd already been dead for a couple of years. So I don't think ...if I do something that really hurts you that is unbearable for me, I know it. I want to make it go away so we can be who we were or better. Is that forgiveness? No, I'm trying to make my pain go away, and I'm not paying attention to yours. I don't want to look at how I've hurt you. So when you ride in on your white horse of self righteousness and say I'm here to forgive you, people might want to go away.

Student: If you are the offender, what can your role be in forgiveness?
Assuming you are sorry for what happened, how can you help?

Kosho: If you don't notice you're sorry then there's no hope for anybody. If you're the offender, what do you want to do?

Student: How do you help the other person feel forgiveness?

Kosho: Recognize your offense, feel the sorrow about it (if it's there -- if it's not, you need more time), confess it, could be with somebody else or maybe another person, but just do your own work. Come to peace with you being human. I say that with a tone -- we think that being human is the problem. But if it is then we're just sitting in this universe as a problem, and that's not how it is. You have to sweep your own house. I find it very very difficult when I hurt someone, but it is bearable, like everything else.

Thank you.

I wanted to say one more thing about the apologizing business.

For some offenses it is the best thing to go right to them real quickly.

For others it needs time, because I find that the offended one, if the offender comes too quickly, I will feel that my pain is disrespected.

Thank you.