

Insight Meditation Community of Washington

The Power of Forgiveness: Living in the Garden

By Tara Brach

If we could really forgive ourselves for all the things we think are wrong with us, we would be free.

Forgiving is the spiritual practice of letting go. We can let go of all the ways we judge ourselves and resist our experience. We can release our guilt and shame about our relationships with our children, our bodies, our mistakes, our addictions. When we feel betrayed by physical illness, we can let go of our resentment toward pain. When we forgive ourselves, we reconnect with the essential goodness of our being.

The greatest obstacle to self-forgiveness is a deeply conditioned belief that something is fundamentally wrong with us. The story of Adam and Eve is the classic example of what happens when human beings don't forgive themselves. It teaches that we were expelled from the Garden of Eden because of our innate sinfulness, that we are outcasts whose earthly task is to redeem ourselves—just like the primordial couple. But imagine how different our lives might be if, after breaking the rules, Adam and Eve had reflected, “Ah well, humans will be humans!” or “Seeking knowledge is normal,” or “Eve was in one of her moods.”

If only they'd forgiven themselves, they could have returned to paradise. Instead, believing they were unworthy and shamed before God, they thought their only choice was exile.

This message of inherent unworthiness continues to thrive in our contemporary psyche. We need only randomly check in and inquire, “Am I good enough right now? Can I accept myself just as I am?” The conditioned reflex is to answer, “No.”

We all do it. Just as Adam blamed Eve for being seduced by the serpent and getting them thrown out of paradise, we blame ourselves for being weak and deficient. We believe we don't deserve to be happy or dwell in the garden. The implication of “original sin” is that we must become different than who we are.

By contrast, the Buddha taught that our essence is inherently good and that our natural state of being is one of open, loving awareness. And, just as the moon and wind create waves in the ocean, our emotions and sensations such as pleasure, pain, desire and fear cause ripples (and sometimes, tsunamis!) in our awareness. One moment we may feel angry, the next lustful, the next anxious—with envy right on its heels.

But the presence of these energies does not define us. When we remember we are the ocean, these waves arise and pass away naturally.

We suffer when we judge the waves. Then, not only are there a succession of emotions and sensations to register, we get caught up in feeling bad about ourselves. We become our own worst enemy. A way of understanding the myth of Eden is that Adam and Eve were originally one, and the arising of desire, (expressed as Eve) was part of their being. Stephen Mitchell in *The Gospel According To Jesus* writes, “Actually, the moment when Adam blames Eve is the moment when he is expelled.” The problem, then, is not the

experience of desire, but Adam's unforgiving judgment of Eve. We suffer when we don't forgive desire. We suffer when we don't accept and relate wisely to all the tender and vulnerable aspects of our being.

What drove Adam to blame Eve? If he hadn't rejected her, what uncomfortable emotions would he have had to experience himself? Fear? The grief of loss? Feelings of inadequacy? By blaming Eve, Adam attempted to fend off pain, but he only succeeded in creating separation and locking the gates to Eden.

Just as the act of blaming deepens our suffering, becoming aware of our blaming is a step toward freedom. As we let down our unforgiving armor, we come face to face with the pain we've been defending against. We can forgive our anger when we feel the hurt and fear that anger masks. We can forgive an eating binge when we sense our underlying loneliness, emptiness and shame.

We each live with painful wounds, fears and desires just waiting to be brought into caring awareness. As one writer said, "Be kind. Everyone you meet is struggling hard." Self-hatred starts to dissolve when we experience the suffering that underlies the rejected parts of ourselves. When we see what really drives us, compassion naturally arises. We may fear that if we forgive ourselves, we'll be even more likely to be "bad." Garrison Keillor writes, "My ancestors were puritans from England. They arrived here in 1648 in the hope of finding greater restrictions than were permissible under English law at that time." Like Keillor's anxious forbears, we fear that our passions and aggressions will become uncontrollable if we don't restrain ourselves. But, in fact, it is our own judgments that perpetuate our dis-ease.

We can't beat or blame ourselves into "goodness." We can, instead, dissolve self-aversion and awaken our hearts. And we discover that when we are not bound in aversion and fear, we are able to respond more wisely to difficulties. Forgiving is the pathway back to our inherently good and loving nature.

At one of the first vipassana retreats I attended, I became painfully ensnared in selfjudgment.

When I felt entirely miserable, I started a forgiving practice. "I forgive this obsessive thinking, this awful self-pity, this ache and this sleepiness." Whatever caught my attention I forgave, including my judgments about others. "I forgive this person who is sneezing, this teacher whose talk is going on too long, this person who is moving too slowly in the lunch line." In addition to lifting my mood, I realized that even a slight reduction in my resistance to what was happening deepened my awareness and softened my heart. I found myself relaxing into a more wakeful and natural sense of being.

Because we are hardwired to avoid our vulnerabilities, we need an intentional, ongoing practice of forgiving ourselves. This means recognizing self-aversion, feeling the places where we are vulnerable and offering forgiveness: "I forgive this," or "forgiven, forgiven." The use of words is optional. What matters is relaxing the body, heart and mind, and experiencing with tenderness what is real. We learn to compassionately let go and let be.

Now, when I notice I feel stuck, numb or uneasy, I inquire, "What is unforgiven? What am I not accepting?" Sometimes I'll end the day by checking in to see if my heart is in some way bound. As soon as I realize I'm armored against some facet of my life, I can begin to soften. When we relax deeply into the letting go, there is no longer a sense of a self offering forgiveness, or someone to be forgiven. Rather, there is simply open and

kind awareness—an experience of true grace.

We have never left the garden. Our practice helps us recognize this. As the great Indian master Poonja-ji said, “Before the beginning you are pure consciousness, you are the fullness of love in love. And the emptiness of awareness. You are existence and the peace beyond peace.” This is who we are. Forgiving is remembering.

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