



## Prosperous Meditation: On Forgiveness

### On Forgiveness

A client who I will call "Richard" related a painful childhood memory. Bullied, derided for his weight and objectified by other kids the thirty-year old memory still haunted him. Startled when I asked if he had considered, "forgiveness", Richard shook his head, "Why would I?" He then paused and asked insightfully, "Who and what would I be forgiving?"

Many couples I work with are entrenched and at "war" with each other. Needing to "win" every point and remembering every wrong they are ambivalent about forgiveness. Countries cannot or will not heal seeking retribution and revenge for the evil and wrongs seen ("projective identification") in the other. Such is the thorny issue of forgiveness. Long wrapped in religion, only in the last twenty years has forgiveness become seriously researched. It has been tied to lower blood pressure, less depression, improved immune system and even longer life, yet as a technique and philosophy forgiveness has been given short shrift. Perhaps the complexities involving self and other, perception, judgment, anger, vengeance and guilt along with the religious connotation has made therapists and researchers reluctant to study forgiveness as a phenomena. Forgiveness can be extremely powerful for individuals, couples and families who wish to let go of pain from the past in order to move on and grow in the present and future.

### Forgiving Self First

I asked Richard to try and answer his own question, "Who and what should I forgive?", and he correctly responded that he needed to forgive himself first for not "being able to stand up to them". The need to forgive self before one is able to forgive others (if they so choose to forgive others) is not generally understood or written about but is true. The common phenomena of the abused child blaming her/himself for the abuse is but one example of the complex way we experience self and other. Look back at any painful event (I suggest you try it now) and there is most often some aspect of self involved; "I wasn't strong enough.", "I couldn't handle it.", "Why me?", "I wasn't lovable enough.", "I must be *bad*.", are common refrains of thought reflecting a problem with self. If one begins to question these thoughts and beliefs and uses forgiveness of self, one very powerfully begins to untie the knots that bind.



### Guilt

Guilt is a good place to start when examining what to forgive self for. If you examine what you feel "bad" or guilty about you'll find more than enough material requiring forgiveness. Guilt is another emotional phenomena misused and not well understood. Many use guilt as a whip to punish themselves often for years; many, including parents induce guilt as a means to emotionally control "loved ones". Guilt or "natural guilt" if used in the proper way is good. If there were no guilt most would be sociopaths, a most undesirable turn of events. Like fear or "signal anxiety" which should act as a warning system, guilt allows one to understand within the context of their own morale value and belief systems that they have made a mistake. Unfortunately many do not treat guilt as information to use instead it becomes an unremitting feeling tone of "I feel guilt therefore I am bad" played over and over again.



### Anger

Anger at others can become even stickier than guilt. Anger that is not used as information i.e. "You have wronged me or mistreated me in some way. Do I need to understand your perspective? Do I need to communicate to you or respond to you in some appropriate way." often instead lends itself to acting

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out, "getting even" or revenge. We are often reduced to the argument "Well you started it!", giving us that much more to forgive and be forgiven for. We often refuse to recognize our part in things or how others perceive our actions. When anger hardens we do ourselves the disservice of hanging on to that anger. When people become too entrenched in a victim position it becomes increasingly difficult to see why in the world would we need to forgive self, yet it is we who are in pain. It is with forgiveness we can ease this pain, move along and grow.



### "Forgiveness Work" or Ways to Begin to Forgive

There are many ways to begin to forgive but again, you must start with self. Review the events in question, reflect on them. Meditation can be very effective in this regard. Recognize guilty feelings, bad feelings, angry feelings. What are they connected to? Notice what you judge and how you judge it. Do you treat a mistake as just that a mistake? Sometimes it is helpful when dealing with forgiveness to journal or write things down. Talking to a trusted friend can be helpful or working with a therapist. When trying to forgive self or others it is helpful to be heart centered which simply means opening and listening to your heart. You will know that your work has been effective if you feel a letting go or a lightening of feeling or perhaps simply a lack of interest in this event.

### Using Meditation to Forgive

The following are a few of the many ideas for combining meditative technique with forgiveness work. During meditation attempt to observe the offending event in a detached nonjudgmental manner. What information comes to you? During meditation observe and follow guilt or angry feelings, again what information comes up? The "White Light Meditation" is very helpful as it helps clear the body and mind and can be used before or after forgiveness work. Last month I wrote about a technique know as "The Question", one can meditate or before sleep ask a question involving forgiveness or moving on with what ever the issue or idea is connected to or behind the need for forgiveness (see below). There are meditations involving sending "loving-kindness" or the use of imagery of forgiving others. I do not recommend these for beginners not steeped in Buddhist philosophy or meditation practice. Be aware that forgiveness is an allowing, an untying of a knot. Forgiveness is a process, it should not be forced.

### Moving On

When my client Richard began the process of forgiving self for being picked on as a child he began to work on the ideas and issues behind or connected to the event not just the event itself. He now could look at issues involving his self-image his use of weight and food. He did not need to forgive his youthful culprits because he did not really care about them. He began to move on. Forgiveness along with meditation helps loosen the ties of guilt, anger, envy, remorse and pain enabling us to sail into a new day.

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