

## 65 – Forgiveness as an essential practice

### **Fearlessness – laying our ghosts to rest**

*“There are those who do not realise that one day we all must die. But those who do realise this settle their quarrels.” ~ Gotama (The Buddha)*

*“How do we love our enemies? First, we must develop and maintain the capacity to forgive. He who is devoid of the power to forgive is devoid of the power to love.” ~ Martin Luther King, Jr.*

### **The rock of fearlessness**

In this Training stage of our journey, we have learned to build and steady our raft through the three great trainings of Gotama’s Middle Way Programme. Ethics forms the sound timber of the vessel: the planks, bindings, and careful craftsmanship that keep it from leaking or breaking apart (Chapters 59–61). Collectedness steadies the raft on the water: the balanced deck, the trimmed sail, and the quiet hand on the oar that help it move without being thrown about by every wave (Chapters 62–64). Wisdom is the compass and clear seeing that shows us how to read the currents, avoid hidden rocks, and keep the far shore in view (Chapters 57–58).

With these three in place, our raft begins to run true. And yet, even a well-built raft can struggle to cross the ocean if its cargo hold is filled with the heavy ballast of the past. This burden appears as resentment, guilt, and the haunting memory of old wounds. To travel onward, we must learn what to carry, what to repair, and what to release into the sea.

Our wisdom, mental stability, and ethical outlook reveal what remains. When the mind is no longer scattered, we can feel what we have been carrying. To lighten the vessel for the final crossing, we engage the practice of Forgiveness. In the context of the RAFT to Freedom Programme, forgiveness is not a separate, gritty duty. It is the natural outcome of cultivating the four Heart Practices (Appropriate Responses) that hold our raft together.

If we truly cultivate friendliness (Chapter 06), we cannot continue to cling to hatred. If we truly cultivate compassion (Chapter 26), we begin to understand the suffering of those who hurt us. If we truly cultivate appreciative joy (Chapter 35),

envy and bitterness loosen their grip. If we truly cultivate equanimity (Chapter 52), we learn to meet what cannot now be altered without adding further struggle.

When these qualities are steady within us, forgiveness is not something we force ourselves to perform. It becomes a natural expression of maturity. It is the wisdom of non-ill-will – the refusal to keep feeding hostility in the heart. It is the lightening of the cargo so the crossing can continue.

### **Linking harmlessness and fearlessness**

At the very start of this journey, we committed to the ‘Five Gifts’ of harmlessness (Chapter 04). We committed to not harming living beings in any way – including ourselves. Forgiveness is the mature expression of that commitment. It completes what harmlessness began.

When we forgive, something subtle but powerful shifts. We become safe for others to be around because we have put down our weapons of retaliation. We are no longer carrying the quiet readiness to strike back, withdraw, punish, or prove. We can look at the world and say, ‘You have nothing to fear from me.’

But fearlessness is not only outward. It is inward as well. When resentment and guilt loosen, we are no longer bracing against our own memories. We are not flinching from the past or defending ourselves against it. We become safe inside our own mind. There is less inner argument, less rehearsed grievance, less guardedness. The nervous system softens because it is no longer preparing for battle.

This is fearlessness – not bravado, not denial, but the steadiness that comes from having nothing to defend and no revenge to pursue. It is the confidence of a heart that has chosen not to harm. That safety, both for ourselves and for others, is the reliable rock upon which our raft can moor.

### **Forgiveness is not reconciliation**

Forgiveness does not mean excusing harm. It does not mean denying what happened. It does not mean returning to unsafe situations or abandoning healthy boundaries. It is not forgetting, minimising, or pretending that injury did not occur.

Reconciliation is relational. It requires trust, accountability, and changed behaviour. Forgiveness is internal: an inner release, a decision not to let hostility organise the heart. We may forgive someone and still choose distance. We may

release resentment and still say *no*. We may let go of vengeance and still insist on justice.

Fearlessness does not mean becoming naive. It means we are no longer organised around retaliation. We are not governed by revenge, bitterness, or the need to prove our innocence. We act from clarity rather than from injury.

In this way, forgiveness strengthens healthy boundaries rather than dissolving them. When we are not reacting from hurt, we can choose wiser limits. When we are not driven by anger, we can respond firmly without hatred. Forgiveness clears the water; it does not remove the hazards. It allows us to steer with discernment instead of steering from pain.

### **Preparing for the final crossing**

Why is this important? As Navigators, we hope to meet the later stages of life with as much peace, honesty, and freedom as possible. This does not mean having resolved every sorrow or repaired every relationship. Some situations call for clear distance, firm boundaries, or practical protection. These are not failures of forgiveness; they can be the ground from which genuine release begins. From there, we can slowly loosen resentment's grip without denying what happened or exposing ourselves to further injury.

Forgiveness is the practice of settling our quarrels with the world while we are still here. It is choosing to resolve what can be resolved, to release what cannot be changed, and to stop carrying unfinished battles forward. It is the decision to put down the hot coal of resentment, recognising that holding it burns only our own hands.

This does not mean pretending we were never hurt. It means refusing to let old injury define the present. It means acknowledging wrongdoing clearly – in ourselves and in others – and responding with honesty rather than denial or revenge.

As Gotama taught:

*“These two are fools. Which two?*

*The one who does not see their transgression as a transgression,  
and the one who does not rightfully pardon another who has confessed their  
transgression.*

*These two are fools.*

*These two are wise. Which two?*

*The one who sees their transgression as a transgression,  
and the one who rightfully pardons another who has confessed their  
transgression.*

*These two are wise.”*

Forgiveness, then, is not weakness. It is wisdom in action. It requires the courage to admit harm and the strength to release it. It is how we prepare our raft for its final crossing: lighter, less burdened, and more at ease. When the heart is still at war, it can be harder to meet the end of our days peacefully.

### **The heaviest cargo – forgiving ourselves**

For many of us, the deepest resentment is not toward others. It is toward ourselves. We replay mistakes. We rehearse old conversations. We carry the quiet sentence: ‘I should have known better.’ Guilt becomes identity. Shame becomes a story about who we are.

Self-forgiveness is not self-excusing. It is not pretending harm did not occur. It begins with honesty. We acknowledge clearly: ‘Yes, that caused pain.’ We take responsibility where it is ours. We repair what can be repaired. We apologise where apology is due. Accountability is part of the crossing. But once responsibility has been taken, punishment does not purify the past. Endless self-attack does not undo harm. It only adds more suffering to what has already happened.

Self-forgiveness means releasing the identity built around the mistake. It means recognising that harmful actions arose from conditions – confusion, fear, craving, immaturity, pain – not from a fixed, irredeemable core. We are responsible for our actions, but we are not identical to our worst moment.

In this way, self-forgiveness is aligned with Skilful Perspective. It remembers that everything changes. It remembers that we are processes shaped by causes and conditions. It refuses to turn a moment into a permanent verdict. On our raft, this is like removing hidden ballast. We may not even realise we have been weighed down by it. But once unburdened, our vessel moves more freely.

Self-forgiveness does not erase consequences. It allows growth to replace self-condemnation. It allows remorse to mature into wisdom rather than harden into shame. And just as with forgiving others, it does not require forgetting. It

requires learning – and then choosing not to keep harming ourselves in the name of the past.

### **Guilt and remorse**

As we clear the hold of our raft, we must distinguish carefully between guilt and remorse. They feel similar at first, but they move the heart in very different directions.

Guilt says, ‘I was bad. I am bad. I will always be bad.’ It turns an action into a permanent identity. It is heavy and static – a weight that sinks the raft and keeps us circling the same waters.

Remorse is different. Remorse says, ‘I caused harm.’ It recognises the action clearly, feels its impact, and resolves not to repeat it. Remorse is honest but not self-destructive. It is dynamic. It moves toward repair. It strengthens conscience rather than crushing the spirit.

Guilt paralyzes. Remorse mobilises. Guilt keeps us staring backward. Remorse turns us toward wiser action.

Self-forgiveness is the alchemy that transforms toxic guilt into functional remorse. It does not deny responsibility. It refines it. It allows us to acknowledge harm, make amends where possible, learn from it, and then step forward without dragging a permanent verdict behind us. In this way, forgiveness does not weaken accountability. It makes growth possible.

### **How to practise – the three directions**

Forgiveness has three directions: a gradual practice of laying ghosts to rest. We begin with what is most accessible and turn, in time, toward what is more difficult.

**Asking for forgiveness – Cleaning our side of the street:** We acknowledge that, driven by confusion, fear, or unskilful habits, we have harmed others. We visualise those we have hurt and quietly say to ourselves:

*‘For any harm I have caused you through my thoughts, words, or actions, I ask for your forgiveness. You have nothing to fear from me.’*

This is not about demanding their forgiveness or reopening unwanted contact. It is about clearing our own conscience. We take responsibility where it is ours. We

acknowledge sincerely. We commit to harmlessness going forward. In doing so, we travel more lightly.

**Offering forgiveness to ourselves – understanding the confusion:** We turn compassion inward. We recognise that many of our past actions were clumsy attempts to cope with pain, fear, or unmet needs we did not yet know how to handle wisely. We say to ourselves:

*‘For the harm I have caused myself, and for not understanding at the time, I offer myself forgiveness.’*

This is not about denying what happened. It is about meeting the past with honesty, learning, and care. As ex-Buddhist monastic and teacher Jeff Oliver puts it:

*“That was who I was then; it is not who I am now. It is not who I will be in the future.”*

**Offering forgiveness to others – the most difficult current:** This direction is often the hardest. Many of us carry deep wounds from betrayal, neglect, abuse, or abandonment. We remember that others, driven by their own ignorance, fear, hurt, or pain, have harmed us. We visualise them – if and when we feel ready – and quietly say to ourselves:

*‘For the harm you have caused me, knowingly or unknowingly, I offer you my forgiveness, as best I am able right now. You have nothing to fear from me.’*

This does not require reconciliation or remove boundaries. It simply releases the grip of retaliation within our own heart. And it is important to add: forgiveness can be gradual. ‘As best I am able right now’ may be very small. That is enough. The direction matters more than the speed.

### **Wise boundaries and the kindness of turning away**

Forgiveness does not make us available to harm. We need not invite the person who scuttled our raft back on board. Releasing ill-will is not reconciliation: we can forgive from a distance, stand against injustice without hatred, and let a firm no arise from safety rather than punishment. Boundaries are not acts of aggression; they are acts of clarity.

Turning away from what is unwholesome is a form of befriending ourselves. We release what is harmful because it is dangerous – not because the heart is at war.

This distinction protects the raft. It prevents secondary suffering from being added to primary pain. Forgiveness softens the heart; healthy boundaries steady the helm. Both are necessary for the crossing.

### **The ‘As best I am able’ clause**

Forgiveness is not a switch. It is a thawing.

If the heart is not ready to forgive a deep wound, we do not force it. We do not shame ourselves for hesitation. We simply acknowledge where we are. Sometimes the first step is forgiving ourselves for not being ready yet.

We practise *fore-giving* – giving up the demand that the past should have been different. We stop negotiating with history. We allow what happened to belong to the past without continuing to relive it.

Some ghosts dissolve slowly. That is not failure. It is human. We leave what we cannot yet resolve on the far shore and continue the crossing.

### **The deeper current – perspective and not-self**

Forgiveness is not separate from the earlier stages of our training. It rests directly on ‘Skilful Perspective’ (Chapter 57). When we understand that actions arise from causes and conditions – confusion, fear, unmet needs, inherited patterns – we stop turning harm into eternal identity. We see that wrongdoing has causes. We see that pain has causes. We see that both can change. This does not excuse harm; it explains it. And understanding can soften the reflex to retaliate.

Forgiveness also grows naturally from our investigation of the self. When we examined the ‘Five components of selfing’ (Chapter 54), we saw that what we call me is a changing process, not a fixed core. The same is true of others. The person who hurt us was not a solid villain at the centre of reality; they were a conditioned being acting from ignorance, hurt, or pain. And we too were once driven by conditions we did not yet understand.

When we see this clearly, resentment loosens. The rigid story – ‘They are *always* this,’ ‘I am *always* this’ – begins to soften. The past remains real, but it is no longer frozen. It becomes part of a moving stream rather than a permanent verdict. Forgiveness, then, is not sentimental. It is aligned with reality. It is the heart’s response to understanding impermanence, causation, and the absence of a fixed self.

As perspective clears, we may begin to see that neither we nor those who harmed us are fixed, unchanging identities. We are more than the worst thing we have done, and they are more than the harm they caused – though that harm still matters and may still require clear boundaries.

This understanding does not ask us to abandon our safety. It can, however, soften the rigid stories of victim, offender, failure, or enemy that keep grievance locked in place. As these identities become less fixed, forgiveness may become more possible: not as denial, reconciliation, or release from accountability, but as a gradual easing of the burden we have been carrying. Our raft becomes lighter, and the ongoing crossing more possible.

### **Self reflections**

1. If I was reaching the end of my life, which resentment or regret would weigh most heavily on my heart, and what would it take to begin laying it down now?
2. Where might my difficulty in forgiving reveal a blockage in my friendliness or compassion, and what does that tell me about the state of my heart?
3. Can I trace a clear line between a specific childhood wound and my present patterns of craving, avoidance, or reactivity, and what changes when I see that connection?
4. When I reflect on my past, do I feel the crushing identity of ‘I am a failure,’ or the clarifying energy of ‘I did harm and want to do better,’ and how does each perspective shape my next step?
5. Can I distinguish clearly between releasing ill-will toward someone and re-inviting them into my life, and what does that distinction protect?
6. What boundary would reduce the risk of further harm while remaining rooted in steadiness rather than anger?
7. When I look at the younger version of myself who acted from confusion or pain, can I recognise the conditions they were under and offer forgiveness for not yet understanding?

### **Journaling prompts**

1. The unsent letter: If it feels manageable, begin with a smaller hurt, disappointment, or unresolved tension rather than the experience that feels most overwhelming. Write a private unsent letter that names what happened and how it affected you. You might include what you wish had

- been understood, acknowledged, or done differently.
2. The 'That was then, this is now' list: If it feels manageable, choose a past action, choice, or moment that you still judge yourself for. Write down a few words about it. Underneath, write: *'That was then. This is now. It is part of my story, but it is not who I am today, or who I will be tomorrow.'* You might then add: What have I learned, changed, or begun to understand since then?
  3. Navigation note: Write a brief note on the next wise step regarding a difficult relationship. Is it a boundary? A repair? A pause? Write one step only.
  4. The 'As best I am able' log: Identify a person you are *not* ready to forgive. Write: *'I am not ready to forgive [Name] yet, and I can still practise self-care and boundaries today.'* How does that feel?
  5. Arriving more lightly: Imagine reaching the Safe Shore no longer weighed down by resentment or ill will. What might it feel like in your body, heart, and mind to have more space, ease, and freedom?
  6. A sentence of release: If it feels right, write the phrases: *'I forgive myself for the mistakes of the past – I forgive myself for not understanding'*. Pause after writing it once or twice. Notice gently what, if anything, arises in your body, heart, or mind. There is no need to make yourself feel forgiveness; simply allow the words to be there.
  7. Guilt transformation: List three things you feel guilty about. Rewrite them as 'Remorse Statements' – focusing on the action and the repair, rather than your worth as a person.

### **Supporting material: scientific and philosophical perspectives**

For those interested in the scientific and philosophical underpinnings of 'Forgiveness' the following overview highlights some key connections.

★ **Neuroscience:** Neuroscience now shows that memory is not a fixed recording. When a memory is reactivated, it briefly becomes malleable before being stored again – a process known as reconsolidation. If a painful memory is repeatedly recalled in a state of threat, it strengthens its emotional charge. The brain continues to simulate danger, keeping stress circuits active as though the event were still unfolding.

However, if that same memory is brought into awareness while the body is regulated – breathing steadily, feeling supported, anchored in safety – the emotional intensity can be updated. Over time, the nervous system learns

that the event is no longer happening. The body stops bracing. Forgiveness practices, when done gradually and safely, may support this updating process. We are not erasing memory. We are changing our relationship to it. The neural trace softens because the present is no longer confused with the past. In RAFT language, this is not forcing calm. It is re-teaching the body that the crossing is happening now, not then.

★ **Psychology:** Modern trauma psychology shows that many patterns we later regret began as adaptive responses. The large-scale Adverse Childhood Experiences studies demonstrated strong links between early trauma and later mental and physical health outcomes. When a child grows up in unpredictability, neglect, violence, or emotional insecurity, the nervous system learns strategies for survival – hypervigilance, emotional numbing, appeasing, controlling, withdrawing. What once protected can later harden into reactive habits.

Seen this way, harmful behaviour is often less a sign of a broken character and more a nervous system that learned quickly in order to survive. This does not excuse harm, but it reframes it. Understanding the origins of our reactions helps shift us from shame to responsibility with compassion. Forgiveness, in this context, is not denial of injury. It is the gradual uncoupling of present life from past threat. When we stop organising around old dangers, the body begins to settle. The raft is no longer steered by storms that have already passed.

★ **Philosophy:** Ancient philosophy offers a parallel insight. Socrates and later the Stoics argued that people do not willingly choose what they truly understand to be harmful. Harmful actions arise from ignorance – from a distorted view of what is good, necessary, or justified. When someone injures others, they are acting from a mistaken map of reality. This perspective does not deny responsibility. It reframes wrongdoing as misperception rather than pure evil. If actions arise from confusion, fear, or false belief, then understanding becomes the antidote. Seeing harm as rooted in ignorance allows us to respond without hatred. We can condemn the action while recognising the confusion that produced it.

In RAFT terms, someone may have been steering with a damaged compass. Recognising that does not mean we let them steer our vessel. It means we no longer need to carry resentments as ballast. Forgiveness becomes less

an emotional surrender and more a rational response to the tragic fact that human beings often act from distorted maps.

### **Remember to remember**

Forgiveness is the act of laying our ghosts to rest. Resilient Equanimity (Chapter 52) reminds us that we cannot rewrite the past, but we can change our relationship to it. The nervous system may still echo with old memories, but we are not required to keep reliving them. We can meet what happened with steadiness rather than reactivity. We can allow the story to soften without denying its reality. Forgiveness is not erasing history; it is loosening the grip of yesterday on today. It is how the heart aligns with Skilful Perspective – recognising impermanence, causation, and the possibility of change.

Forgiveness is often gradual and partial – another crossing made in stages. It may begin with a modest truth: ‘Not today. I am not ready.’ That honesty is not failure; it is wisdom. We practise first with the smaller hurts, allowing the capacity to grow safely over time. As Friendliness, Compassion, and Appreciative Joy are cultivated, resentment loses its fuel. The heart becomes less organised around injury and more organised around care. This is how we travel lightly. And most importantly, remember this: much of what shaped us was not our fault. We are responsible for what we choose now – but we are not to blame for the conditions we were given.

*“Forgiveness is the fragrance that the violet sheds on the heel that has crushed it.” ~ Mark Twain*

*“Without forgiveness, the grudge you’re holding is actually holding you.” ~ Oprah Winfrey*

### **Sutta references**

#### **★ Aghāta Sutta (AN 5.162) – Removing Resentment**

- *Summary:* The Buddha offers five practical methods for removing annoyance/resentment: cultivating loving-kindness, compassion, or equanimity toward the person; forgetting/ignoring the thought; or reflecting on the ownership of deeds (karma).

#### **★ Vatthupama Sutta (MN 7) – The Simile of the Cloth**

- *Summary:* The Buddha compares the mind to a cloth that needs to be

washed before it can be dyed. He lists ‘hostility, resentment, and denigration’ as defilements that must be washed away. Once the mind is clean (forgiven/forgiving), it can absorb the dye of bliss and wisdom.

★ **Abhaya Sutta (AN 4.184) – Fearlessness**

- *Summary:* The principle of *Abhaya* (fearlessness) is central to forgiveness. To be ‘safe’ for others (harmless) and to feel ‘safe’ from one’s own past (forgiven) is the essence of the fearless heart.

★ **Kakacupama Sutta (MN 21) – The Simile of the Saw**

- *Summary:* A radical training instruction on non-ill-will. The Buddha teaches that even under extreme provocation (symbolized by bandits sawing off one’s limbs), the disciple trains the mind to remain free of hatred and filled with compassion. This illustrates that our internal state of non-ill-will is independent of the external harm.

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