

The Four Noble Truths of Forgiveness



“Whatever our religion, we know that if we really want to love, we must first learn to forgive before anything else.” -Mother Teresa.

In the Buddhist tradition the four noble truths refer to suffering, the cause of suffering, the end of suffering and the path that ends suffering. Suffering and forgiveness lie on a continuum. This article will provide four forgiveness concepts from numerous wisdom traditions and my clinical experience. The picture above offers a traditional Eastern yin and yang perspective over tranquil waters. A crisis initiates a forgiveness challenge, and the following noble truths provide our opportunity.

The First Noble Truth of Forgiveness: Acceptance.

Illusion provides opportunities for humanity to explore what love is not. Pain is a precious tool, which prys hearts open and points us toward our destiny. On this topic, Buddha said, “Pain is certain, suffering is optional. The root of suffering is attachment.” Additionally, Maaria Mahmood and Hadil Nour of the Muslim Youth Helpline refer to this first noble truth as taking responsibility, accepting what happened and showing oneself compassion. Acceptance allows us to let go of the blame/shame game after we suffer from our mistakes, the actions of others or fate itself.

Duality is a paradox, suspended in the tension created by its opposition; its true nature is fluid and complex. Suffering creates desire and inspired actions create love. Trauma and/or the absence of love foster illusions of separateness, abandonment and/or isolation, and are quite difficult to overcome. Suffering can either cause us to recycle our illusions or speed up our emotional maturation process.



Punishment, fighting back and/or demanding retribution are unsustainable solutions because punitive acts create polarity and an *us versus them* circle of trauma. To punish an antagonist, our self, or an adversary we must become a judge and executioner, which may keep us in the mindset of victim and/or perpetrator merely recycling pain.

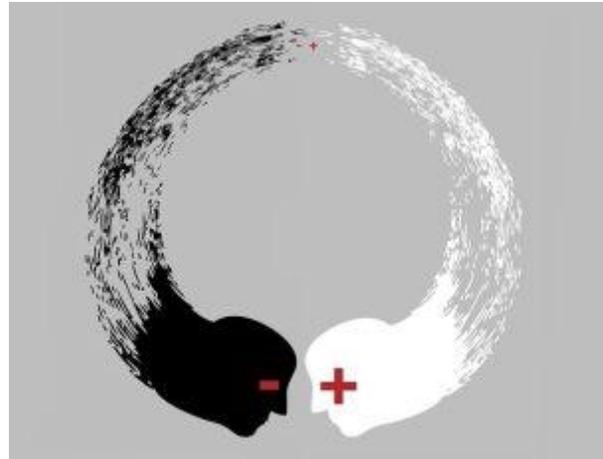
Victimization heals with love and compassion. When retaliation and revenge become our primary motivation, a victim/perpetrator paradigm[1] can develop. In this reciprocal relationship victims can be compared to a catcher behind the plate in baseball, while perpetrators are pitchers. Each is convinced he or she is engaging in a solitary activity, but the catcher fails to realize how he/she throws the ball back to the pitcher to continue the game. This timeless dynamic allows the tragic drama of pitch and catch to endlessly recycle. Self-soothing pity-parties of helplessness, finger-pointing hopelessness, and rage-filled retaliatory fantasies are the types of things keeping the ball in play. Victims tend to believe compensation is due for the pain endured. Society trains many of us to want retribution, feel it is our privilege to retaliate and believe we are entitled to do so because we have endured so much suffering. The seduction deepens when people take comfort in the pain and sympathy their story garners. Trouble occurs when we embrace our suffering to soothe our internal wounds. This gives us permission to disassociate from violent urges to retaliate without examining our self-sabotaging behavior. These are the reasons why acceptance, self-responsibility, and compassion are vital steps to forgiveness.

The Second Noble Truth of Forgiveness: Self-forgiveness.

“The more you know yourself, the more you forgive yourself.” -Confucius

Perfectionism is a popular problem. When we do not perform at our ideal, self-criticism and rumination can rule the day. Remorse and regret are misguided mental habits intended to train ourselves to avoid future missteps and mistakes. When we punish ourselves, we choke off our life force. Volunteering to separate ourselves from friends, possible support and the divine to correct the problem, just makes things worse.

The challenge within the first and second noble truths of forgiveness requires acceptance without judgement, which Buddha calls attachment. Do not stew and fret over lost opportunities and misguided mistakes. All behavior has a positive intention, but our implementation strategy can be riddled with problems. Focusing on the positive intention underneath the behavior we need to forgive will help you let self-judgment go. Criticizing your inner child for coming up with the initial idea will shut him or her down. Learn from the mistake, then choose the path you would do differently and go on from there.



The Third Noble Truth of Forgiveness: Turn the Other Cheek.

In his groundbreaking book, *Engaging the Powers*, the Biblical scholar, and theologian Walter Wink (1935-2012) provided a definitive explanation about what Jesus recommended as an enlightened response to Roman oppression in his Sermon on the Mount, which denies the oppressor the opportunity to continue to humiliate and bully his or her victims.

Jesus said:

You have heard that it was said, “An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.” But do not resist an evildoer. But if someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also; and if anyone wants to sue you and take your coat, give your cloak (undergarments) as well; and if anyone forces you to go one mile, go also the second mile. (Matt.5:38-41; see also Luke 6:29)

Water Wink elaborated on the historical context and what Jesus really meant with all three of his suggestions, and the following explanation based upon ancient etiquette covers his *turn the other cheek* quote, which follows:

Superiors in the ancient would backhand an inferior with the right hand, striking the victim’s right cheek, since the left hand was reserved for unseemly personal hygienic uses. Equals in the Roman Empire fought with both hands, so a superior would never strike an inferior with his left hand.



Turning the other cheek would prohibit the superior from striking a second blow, since using their left hand elevated the inferior to an equal status. Romans would loathe treating an inferior as an equal. Thus, turning the other cheek was an act of sovereignty, resistance, and salvaged dignity.[2]

Most scholars and theologians have misinterpreted this quote as an instruction to forgive, forget and embrace meekness. Fortunately, Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. actually understood what Jesus had meant almost two thousand years earlier. Similarly oppressed by Imperial British rule, Mahatma Gandhi employed a novel alternative to war using a nonviolent strategy in India of civil disobedience, which worked—this strategy enabled his nation to regain its sovereignty without armed insurrection. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., credited both Mahatma Gandhi and Jesus Christ for inspiring his method of nonviolent resistance in the following quote, “Christ gave us the goals and Mahatma Gandhi the tactics.”[3]

Many of my spiritual clients have tried meekness and the passive acceptance approach without without doing their deeper work. They would feel drained and tire quickly as they ignored their wounds while trying to forgive and turn their other cheek. From my clinical experience, people forgive others and become empowered when they heal their wounds themselves and take corrective actions much like Walter Wink believed Jesus taught. Once we are strong enough to heal our inner wounds with wisdom, love, and compassion, victimization thinking ends, forgiveness flows naturally, and empowerment returns.

We heal ourselves by accepting, transforming, and taking control of our suffering. Then forgiveness becomes an enlightened and empowering choice, like turning the other cheek. Regarding the other two suggestions Jesus mentioned, a summary of Walter Wink’s interpretations follow. Rome taxed the conquered heavily, and a debt collector was allowed to take a delinquent debtor’s outer garment each morning and return it each night until the debt was satisfied. Citizens only wore two garments at that time, so debtors would effectively live in their underwear until their debt was paid.

However, whoever demanded nudity in the Roman empire was considered the one at fault, so offering your undergarments to a debt collector would create shame and judgment towards the perpetrator...thus causing any Roman to backpedal. Additionally, Roman law allowed a soldier to force anyone to carry his backpack, which weighted almost sixty-five pounds for only one mile. Offering to carry a Roman’s pack for two miles would put the soldier in jeopardy with his superiors and turn the tables for a citizen in an empowering fashion. These are important concepts to consider when someone else, others or fate harms us. We came to earth to experience both darkness and light. Incorruptible people are fierce and powerful...undeterred by darkness. Illusion is transformed and transcended because their heart accesses love and its unlimited potential. When our body, heart and mind align with a soulful purpose to heal our illusions and wounds, mountains move, and forgiveness becomes a pleasure. When circumstances are unmovable, the freedom to choose always remains.

According to Viktor Frankl, Dostoevsky once said, “There is only one thing I dread; not to be worthy of my sufferings.” Frankl went on to say, “Those words frequently came to my mind after I became acquainted with those martyrs whose behavior in the concentration camp (Auschwitz–Birkenau), whose suffering and death, bore witness to the fact that freedom cannot be lost. It can be said that they were worthy of their sufferings—the way they bore their suffering was a genuine inner achievement. It is this spiritual freedom—which cannot be taken away—that makes life meaningful and purposeful.”^[4] The choices made in the aftermath of a tragedy, the meaning of our existence and the principles we use to guide our life are what matter the most. The freedom to choose how we respond or forgive victimization and terrorism always rests within.



The Fourth Noble Truth of Forgiveness: Forgive, Forget and Move On.

“Those who cannot forgive others break the bridge over which they themselves must pass.” -Confucius

This last noble truth of forgiveness suggests we focus our disappointment into positive energy and move onto the next adventure. We need to learn from mistakes, choose a different path and go on from there. Since we are all divine beings and don't like our creation, we just need to create something different. There is so much more to life than regret, chastisement, and punishment. Many people do this as a misguided attempt to honor the divine thinking more pain is needed to make sure we change our ways. Unfortunately, many of us get lost in the labyrinth of punishment, retribution, and righteous indignation. Some people have a convoluted concept that this honors the punitive god some religions created. And if our god is punitive and doesn't forgive, then why should we forgive or believe in forgiveness.

“To be wronged is nothing unless you continue to remember it.” -Confucius

Consider this motto, “Dream it. Live it. Then do it.” Live it means knowing it will happen because we are creators and dreamt it. Trust the divine will provide and begin looking for its manifestation. Focus on your positive dreams and the world will open like a flower. Do it the old way and the world closes in on you just as you dreamt it would. Negative outcomes are just us realizing our dream. Dream grand thoughts, play to your heart’s content, and let the joy in your heart create your world. Seed your dreams with joy, passion, and compassion. Let forgiveness be the order of your life. Move on to the next adventure based upon the knowledge you are divine, and you can do anything you want until you don’t want to anymore.

[1] Eric Ehrke, *The Promise of Wholeness*, (Rowman and Littlefield Press, 2019), pp38-42.

[2] Walter Wink, *Engaging the Powers* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 175–184.

[3] Shelley Tougas, *Birmingham 1963: How a Photograph Rallied Civil Rights Support* (North Mankato, Minnesota: Compass Point Books, 2010)

[4] Viktor E. Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1959) page 87.

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