

# Forgiveness: An Expression of the Inner Strength

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All of us regularly encounter situations that seem offensive to us and cause distress. The distress may occur only for a short time while in the moment, or it could linger for a long time, emerging every time the memory of the unpleasant incident comes alive. Similarly, we often cause hurt to others – including those who are close to us – with words and/or actions. Such acts, caused by excessive anger, result in agony for everyone – the perpetrators as well as those who are victimized. In such instances, for the preservation of personal well-being and mental health, forgiveness is considered to be the best option.

Forgiveness has been studied in great depths by psychology and psychiatric practitioners, researchers, medical professionals, lifestyle counselors, and healthcare providers, and they all recommend forgiveness as a vital practice to abate anger for one's overall welfare. Similarly, in all spiritual and religious faiths, forgiveness is considered to be an important aspect of personal conduct for one's spiritual and physical well-being. All faiths provide extensive treatise on forgiveness.

In the Jain tradition, forgiveness (*kṣamā*) is placed at the highest level of altruism. The value of forgiveness is considered so vital to one's ability to traverse the path of spiritual progression that it is positioned as the first of the ten essential virtues or principles that a righteous individual must develop to make any progress on that path. In fact, the most eminent Jain festival, *paryuṣaṇā*, is entirely dedicated to the practice of forgiveness.

Before diving into the Jain perspective on forgiveness, it may be beneficial to present a brief overview of some of the prevailing perspectives regarding this important virtue.

Forgiveness is one of the numerous possible responses of a person who is victimized by a wrongful act. It is described in many different, but somewhat related, ways by professionals in the fields of psychology, mental health, and experts in general areas that deal with well-being and lifestyle practices. The common thought on forgiveness is that it is one of the most effective ways to bring inner peace to someone who experienced a wrongful act from another person. It is centered around an undertaking to free oneself (the victim) from the emotional burden caused by the actions of the wrongdoer, which the wrongdoer might have committed knowingly or unknowingly, by mistake, by ignorance, or due to the wrongdoer's own distress of some kind. Forgiveness starts with a decision by the victim to regulate and ultimately relinquish the feelings of anger, resentment, revenge, etc. According to Dr. Robert Enright, a highly respected psychologist and forgiveness expert<sup>1,2</sup> the process of forgiveness recommended for the victim can be split into the following four steps:

1. Uncover the anger, which many times may not be obvious to others, but is harbored internally by the victim.
2. Decide to forgive the perpetrator in order to relieve oneself from the distress caused by the anger.
3. Work on (a) internalizing the offense and the hurt caused by that offense, (b) developing an understanding of the perpetrator and the reasons behind the offensive actions, (c) developing empathy with courage and compassion towards the perpetrator with the primary purpose of relieving one's (the victim's) own pain, and (d) granting forgiveness to the perpetrator as a self-driven moral gift.
4. Work to surmount one's own negative emotions of anger, bitterness, resentment, vengeance, etc., to release the pain and suffering being felt. This helps the sufferer (the victim) to regain peace and to revert back to viewing the life in positive ways. This step is especially helpful when the perpetrator is not remorseful either by not realizing the anguish caused to the victim, or by being unable to or unwilling to be regretful.

Enright's four-step process of forgiveness has become the basis on which many modern-day professionals have developed their own customized processes for forgiveness training and mentorship<sup>3,4,5,6,7</sup>.

It is important to note that the act of forgiveness applies to the wrongdoer as well – one may discover a need to seek forgiveness after offending someone. The process of seeking forgiveness could be as hard as the one of granting it. But it is immensely important for one's own healing and well-being – for example, to ease the feelings of guilt one would be carrying after hurting someone. The process of seeking forgiveness involves (1) first realizing and admitting the mistake, (2) analyzing the root cause(s) of the offensive action(s) and agreeing with the analysis, (3) planning the corrective actions, and (4) asking for forgiveness from the victim, and at the same time, sharing and assuring the victim of the planned corrective action(s).

Some additional points related to forgiveness from the Western perspective are as follows:

- **Reconciliation:** Forgiveness does not necessarily require reconciliation, although in some cases reconciliation can follow an act of forgiveness. Reconciliation is considered a new form of relationship to be negotiated between the two parties after the granting of forgiveness. Although reconciliation happens in many cases of forgiveness, one may choose not to reconcile even after forgiving a perpetrator.
- **Conduct:** Forgiveness does not entail the justification of immoral or inappropriate conduct. When a particular conduct is justified, it implies that it was not morally wrong. But when someone is forgiven, there is a negative moral assessment on the quality of the act as perceived by the victim.
- **Excusing:** When one is forgiven, it does not entail that that person was not to be blamed for the wrong act or was not morally liable for it, or that the action is not to be perceived as wrong after the act of forgiveness. On the other hand, when one is excused for one's actions, it may imply that that person does not carry the burden of guilt or morality anymore, but this is not what is implied by forgiveness.
- **Pardon or Mercy:** One could see similarities between forgiveness, pardon and mercy, but a subtle difference is that forgiveness is generally an introverted act on the part of the victim, whereas mercy and pardon are extroverted actions generally rendered by a third party. Moreover, mercy is commonly considered to be an act of pity and pardon. Forgiveness, on the other hand, is an act to bring peace to oneself (the victim) and that is why it is an internalized process.

Western academic, professional, and faith-based concepts rightfully position forgiveness as a practice to free the victim from hurtful emotions of anger, bitterness, vengeance, resentment, etc., after that person has been subjected to wrongful action(s) by a perpetrator who may or may not be remorseful. Forgiveness, in general, is considered to be a virtue and an act of magnanimity, albeit not easy to put in practice – it takes some serious efforts to apply. Not being forgiving, on the other hand, is considered a failing.



The Jain perspective of forgiveness concurs with these Western views in terms of the virtuous nature of this trait, and its importance for the victim's own peace of mind. The two views start deviating somewhat when it comes to the relationship between forgiveness and anger. Jains believe anger to be a condition that results from a deficiency of the nature of forgiveness,

whereas, as discussed above, the Western perspective considers forgiveness to be a mode of remedy to calm down anger. In other words, Jains believe anger to be a symptom of the erosion of forgiveness, and for a long-lasting solution, one needs to work on cultivating forgiveness as the core forte, and not merely use it to treat the symptoms (anger). This differentiation is significant. It goes to the foundation of the Jain philosophy. For Jains, anger (*krodha*), as

discussed below, is the worst of all the vices. To mitigate it, one needs to work on the root causes of its occurrence and not try to merely suppress it temporarily. The attenuation of the root causes of anger strengthens the nature of forgiveness, and then anger starts dissipating concurrently.

According to the Jain tradition, forgiveness comes naturally to us as human beings. It is a critical element of honorable living because it nurtures nonviolence (*ahimsā*), the inherent longing of all living beings<sup>8</sup>. Then, one may ask, if forgiveness is natural to us, why does it start eroding?

For an answer to that, one needs to understand the Jain concept of “self” – as the distinction between the soul and the body. The “real me” is my soul (*jīva*) which has taken a temporary refuge in a body for the duration of the current life, and the same holds true for every other living being around us. Every soul is inherently pure and is qualitatively instilled with characteristics of limitless consciousness (*caitanya*), bliss (*sukha*), and vigor (*vīrya*). With these innate characteristics as the foundation, every living being by nature loves nonviolence, is compassionate, and shares friendship and empathy with all other living beings. With such innate characteristics, forgiveness becomes an inborn virtue that all of us possess.

However, we have continued from time immemorial to inhibit our soul’s pure qualities with harmful deeds in thought, speech, and physical actions that we commonly indulge in as we go through the cycles of death-and-birth<sup>9</sup>. And, when the inherent characteristics of our soul are hindered, our virtues such as friendship, compassion and forgiveness are eroded correspondingly. We start hindering our virtuous qualities, including forgiveness, that we are endowed with.

So, how do we reverse this trend of eroding virtues, and instead learn to cultivate forgiveness?

The cultivation of forgiveness is not an isolated exercise<sup>10</sup>. It is closely linked to the overall ethos of one’s conduct. The main culprits of unethical behavior are the four vices of anger (*krodha*), egoism (*māna*), deception (*māyā*), and greed (*lobha*), collectively known as the four destructive passions (*kaṣāya*-s). These destructive passions result in two inclinations towards attachment (*rāga*) and malice or aversion (*dveṣa*)<sup>11</sup>. Out of these, anger is the most destructive vice because it could result in mental and physical harm, and it is a behavioral nuisance – a detriment in interpersonal relationships. Generally, one gets angry when one’s ego is hurt, or when one loses something one desires or is attached to (e.g., tangible material possessions like a favorite car, or intangible achievements like a leadership position in society), or when one is envious of somebody else, or a range of many other things. But anger cannot be abated by itself. One has to work on regulating and mitigating all the vices simultaneously by adopting and leading an honorable, and continuously improving, lifestyle.

Jain thinkers have very thoughtfully prescribed the means to build a righteous lifestyle. It starts with leading a life based on the following principles:

1. Nonviolence (*ahimsā*) – not becoming an aggressor and hurting any living being, or the environment and ecology, by actions in the mind (thoughts or planning), speech, or by physical action.
2. Truthfulness (*satya*) – the correct representation of known facts in all aspects of life.

3. Non-stealing (*acaurya or asteya*) – not accepting anything that is not offered voluntarily, for instance, not taking something when the owner is away or unaware.
4. Non-possessiveness (*aparigraha*) – minimizing possessions, acquiring just enough to lead a comfortable life, not hoarding any materials excessively, and not getting attached to any of one's possessions.
5. Carnal restraint (*brahmacarya*) – refraining from illicit relations and leading an honorable and restrained life.

Recognizing that it is not easy to fully embrace these principles, a number of supporting guidelines and instructions – for example, guidelines for lifestyle, meditation, mindfulness, etc. – were formulated by the Jain thinkers to help build a lifestyle based on the above principles. Once one starts adopting these principles as a regular routine, one starts experiencing peace and tranquility, and over time, these principles become self-motivating. With this kind of honorable lifestyle, the abovementioned vices start diminishing. As a result, forgiveness starts fortifying and anger starts subsiding.

Forgiving helps us develop a strong sense of self-evaluation. Many times, when we feel wronged and are angry, especially when there was no apparent fault of ours, upon critical analysis of the event, we might discover an element of our own wrongdoing. In such circumstances, for the victim to admit the fault and rectify it is an important step towards relieving the pain caused by the internal anger. The purpose here is not to make the victim feel guilty, but to make the process of healing a little easier through self-evaluation.



Forgiveness can be seen from two perspectives – behavioral forgiveness (*vyavhāric kṣamā*) and internalized forgiveness (*nishcaye kṣamā*). It is best explained through an example: assume that Tom is hurt by Henry causing Tom to become angry. Tom may be able to control his anger from an outward standpoint and forgive Henry, but his anger continues to simmer internally – this would be a form of behavioral forgiveness. The act takes the form of internalized, truly all-encompassing forgiveness when Tom forsakes all internally brewing anger and vengeful thoughts against Henry, and gains an everlasting internal peace.

We discussed earlier the Western views on reconciliation – that it is not necessarily linked to forgiveness, and neither party is required to reconcile. In the Jain tradition, reconciliation – the restoration of friendly and harmonious relations – is a natural follow-up after forgiveness. Forgiveness entails the elimination of all negative thoughts and ill-wills that the forgiving individual might have held towards the person being forgiven. With the elimination of such thoughts, the relationship reverts to normalcy, the condition under which honorable individuals do not harbor any ill-will towards each other.

The trait of forgiveness, developed through the fostering of an honorable lifestyle, works equally elegantly when we have committed a wrongful act against another person. It is not unthinkable



for someone who is genuinely toiling for self-improvement and ethical living, to commit, intentionally or unintentionally, an offensive act against another person. However, the aforementioned spiritual training makes the offending person readily realize the mistake and then take appropriate corrective actions. Asking for forgiveness, in its truest genuine form, accompanies a sincere effort of repentance, a personal commitment of self-improvement, and an implied unspoken assurance of not repeating the same or similar acts of offending others.



In some ways, asking for forgiveness is somewhat easier than granting the same because after granting forgiveness, one has to overcome and transform vindictive feelings into neutral or spiritually positive feelings towards the individual who may or may not be remorseful – which is not easy. Forgiving is an act of inner strength – to quote Mahatma Gandhi “*The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong.*” Nonetheless, in both its granting and

seeking forms, forgiveness brings immense internal calmness and helps tremendously in alleviating the anxiety caused by the unpleasant act of hostility. It is therapeutic for the body, while at the same time, it is a spiritually healing exercise for the soul.

Both seeking and granting of forgiveness are conducted in a spirit of complete giving, that is, without any concern at all about what benefit one might derive for oneself from the act of forgiveness. Forgiveness, in both seeking and granting forms, becomes possible only when the individual who is undertaking the step has a deep sense of humility. It is only through the strength of humility that one can gather the courage to perform the act of true forgiveness. To fortify humility, one needs to restraint the feelings of ego, and for that, one needs to apply sincere and concerted spiritual efforts. It is important to note that forgiveness and humility feed into each other, and both virtues improve simultaneously when appropriate efforts are applied. In the Jain tradition, considering the importance of humility (*mārdva*) in grooming the other virtuous characteristics for honorable living, forgiveness and humility are the first and the second of the ten essential virtues or principles (called *daśa-vidhi-dharma*<sup>12</sup>) for making progress in the spiritual journey pursued by an aspiring righteous individual.

Clearly, for Jain householders, forgiveness is a highly venerated virtue and it is supposed to be integrated with the Jain way of life. A phrase that is frequently heard from the Jain followers throughout the year, and especially during Paryuṣaṇā, the most auspicious Jain festival, is:

*micchāmi dukkaḍam,*

It means “*I pray that all the grief that I have caused (to you) goes in vain, and I ask for an unconditional absolution of my unpleasant deeds.*” These words are not supposed to be taken lightly or expressed casually, because they were thoughtfully crafted centuries ago by the Jain religious leaders to instill, in their followers, the characteristics of modesty, humility and the sense of acknowledgement and ownership of our misdeeds. The expression is supposed to be

followed by diligent efforts to correct, and never repeat, the same personal mistakes we routinely make during our day-to-day life.

The Jain festival of Paryuṣaṇā is celebrated with a fervor of self-restraint, penance and austerities. The words celebration and penance may appear contrary, but for Jains, pleasure of the soul is more important than that of the body, and penance is for the soul's pleasure. The Paryuṣaṇā festival is centered around pleading for forgiveness from others and granting others the same. During this festival, all Jains – mendicants, householders, men, women, and children do this pleading. Everyone humbly asks for forgiveness from all living beings whether or not they are known, for all of his or her misdeeds and sins. A special Jain prayer of forgiveness, which is recited regularly throughout the year, takes a prominent place during the Paryuṣaṇā days – eight days for some Jains (Śvetāmbara Jains<sup>13</sup>) and ten for the others (Digambara Jains<sup>12</sup>). The prayer:

<i>khāmemi savva jīvā</i>	I forgive all the living beings
<i>savve jīvā khamantu me</i>	I plead for forgiveness from all the living beings
<i>mittī me savva bhūesu</i>	I am in friendship with all the living beings on this earth
<i>veram majjham na kenai</i>	I have animosity towards no one

The prayer entails asking for forgiveness from all living beings – human or non-human –who have or might have been wronged by one's actions in mind-body-speech, and similarly, granting forgiveness to all those who could have done wrong to the praying individual. It is an all-encompassing seeking and granting of forgiveness irrespective of whether the offensive acts were deliberate or inadvertent. The prayer recognizes forgiveness as the foundation of nonviolence, and acknowledges the fact that we commit violence against countless living beings in every moment of our existence and similarly many living beings continuously commit violence against us. One's effort for seeking and granting forgiveness is not dependent on its acceptance by the intended person – it is pretty much a one-sided internalized effort. It amounts to a deep reflection of all the offensive acts and asks for forgiveness and grants forgiveness to everybody. The plea goes beyond just the friends and family, and especially addresses those who committed offense(s) against or were offended by the pleader, whether or not they are on friendly terms. It creates intense spiritual feelings when done with true humility. For these reasons, this prayer represents the essence of the Jain perspective on forgiveness, and therefore, it is accorded a corresponding status of eminence in the Jain tradition.

Forgiveness, in its uninhibited and purest form, is prefaced with the word “supreme,” as “supreme forgiveness (*uttama kṣamā*).” Supreme forgiveness is the venerated state when one does not experience any form of anger – either inwardly or outwardly – after complete annihilation of the vices of anger, egoism, deception, and greed, and complete elimination of the sinister inclinations of attachment and malice. This is the state of supreme living beings who have acquired clairvoyance and omniscience – the ultimate spiritual state attained after extreme penance and austerities.

In summary, forgiveness is one of the most honorable traits an individual can cultivate. It is an effective remedy for many personal mental and physical maladies. In addition, forgiveness brings everlasting feelings of love, peace and tranquility. Forgiveness is instrumental in subduing anger, the vilest human vice, and in eliminating other spiritually hurtful emotions of enmity, malice, revenge, etc. It is blissful in both forms – granting forgiveness and seeking forgiveness.

For Jains, forgiveness is the basis of nonviolence – the foundation upon which the entire edifice of a meaningful, spiritual life is erected. Both seeking and granting forgiveness are highly insightful and effective steps towards cultivating nonviolence and other virtuous qualities. That is why the tradition of pleading for and granting forgiveness has continued uninterrupted among Jains for centuries, not only for the ascetics, but for the householders as well.

## Notes and References

- Article title inspired by Mahatma Gandhi’s quote on forgiveness: “*The weak can never forgive. Forgiveness is the attribute of the strong.*”
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  - 9 Parveen Jain, *An Introduction to Jain Philosophy*, chap. 8, 11, 12, December 2019, DKPrintworld, New Delhi, India
  - 10 Dr. Hukamchand Bharilla, *Dharma Ke Dshalakshana*, January 1981, Shri Kund-Kund-Kahan Digambar Jain Tirths Suraksha Trust, Mumbai, India
  - 11 Parveen Jain, *An Introduction to Jain Philosophy*, chap. 8, December 2019, DKPrintworld, New Delhi, India.
  - 12 *Ibid*, chap. 13
  - 13 Today’s Jain community is divided into four mainstream sectarian traditions. Originally, there were two major traditions, both worshipping jinas in iconic (image or idol) form – Digambaras, who are unclothed or “sky-clad” monks, and Śvetāmbaras, who are “white-clad” monks and nuns. Their



differences are primarily related to the practice and ritualistic procedures. In fifteenth century, some Śvetāmbara followers left the tradition to start Sthānakavāsī tradition, which does not believe in iconic worship. The Sthānakavāsī tradition was further divided in seventeenth century when a new non-iconic tradition called Terāpantha was formed based on thirteen (terā) core tenets (pantha). The remaining Śvetāmbaras, not belonging to Sthānakavāsī or Terāpantha traditions, are known as Mūrtipūjakas, and are the largest of the three Śvetāmbara groups.