

Opening Hearts: Forgiveness

A talk offered by Philip L. Jones to the Silent Mind-Open Heart Sangha on 05/06/2014.

Last week while fixing dinner I was listening to "To the Best of Our Knowledge" on public radio. There was an interview with Josh Ruxin, the author of *A Thousand Hills to Heaven: Love, Hope and a Restaurant in Rwanda*. Ruxin, and his wife, moved to Rwanda about ten years ago as aid workers. Then they ended up staying and started a small business, a restaurant they called "Heaven." His book is the story of their time in Rwanda and what they encountered.

At one point, the interviewer on the radio show asked him about a story from the book. He described that some women visited them at the house they had just moved into. One woman's brother had been murdered in the neighborhood during the genocide. She knew that he was buried in their backyard. And she asked if she could recover his bones so that she could give them a proper burial.

Ruxin said that what he found most shocking wasn't that there were human bones in their backyard, because human bones still showed up everywhere in his neighborhood when it rained. What was so shocking to him was that these people were happy. And when they did recover the bones, it was a celebration, because they felt lucky that they knew where this family member had been buried.

What came next in the interview is why I'm telling this story.

The Interviewer said:

"I just find that astonishing. How do people arrive at that level of forgiveness and how are they able to move past the anger?"

Ruxin replied:

"Living in Rwanda after all these years, it's something that we still don't understand. We have friends who miraculously have absolutely forgiven those who killed their family members. And the way they describe it to us, and it is a very similar experience across our friends, is that the hatred weighed so heavily on their hearts that they felt freed when they were able to meet the killers of their parents or their siblings and forgive them."¹

This is one of the challenges in living this human life. It's not just a challenge for people who have experienced the unfathomable horror of something like what happened in Rwanda, or Cambodia, or Germany. Or for people who lived through the Rape of Nanking, or Sri Lanka during their recent war, or now in Syria and the South Sudan, among other places. It's a challenge for people who have individually experienced the violation and loss of any kind of crime: murder, rape, incest, muggings, burglary, you name it. It is a challenge for people who have been treated in any kind of a mean or cruel way. In other words, it is the challenge for all of us. How do we forgive when someone has hurt us in some way?

What came up for me when I heard the interviewer's question, even before I heard Ruxin's answer, was that we forgive when we can see for ourselves the damage that we are doing to ourselves by clinging to our hate, by clinging to our sense of injury, to our sense of having been victimized. One of the key things that allows us to forgive is being brave enough, and desperate enough, to look into the heart of our own suffering and to see for ourselves that by holding onto it we are hurting, agitating, tormenting ourselves.

This is one of the benefits we get from our practice. We train ourselves to look, to open to what is happening in the present moment. And when it is difficult, our practice is to still look — to the extent that we're capable of, at any particular time. This is practicing with the First Noble Truth which not only reminds us that there is unsatisfactoriness and suffering in life, but also tells us "This Noble Truth of Suffering is to be fully understood."²

When we do look in this way, with compassion for ourselves, but also with bravery and a deep love for what is true in our lives, we learn that when we resist the truth of our pain, we suffer more. We learn that when we cling to our anger whether out of a sense of justice or in hopes of avoiding our pain, we are actually tormenting ourselves. As Josh Ruxin's friends discovered "the hatred weighed so heavily on their hearts that they felt freed when they were able to meet the killers of their parents or their siblings and forgive them."

Being willing to look in this way carries us a long ways toward forgiveness and release. It doesn't mean that we stop feeling the pain of our loss. And it doesn't mean that we forget what was done. Forgiving may actually free us from our hatred enough so that we can more effectively insist on justice. But as Sharon Salzberg has so eloquently put it in her classic book *Loving-kindness*:

"When we are held prisoner by our own past actions, or the actions of others, our present life cannot be fully lived. The resentment, the partially experienced pain, the unwelcome inheritance we carry from the past, all function to close our hearts and thereby narrow our worlds."³

There is a formal forgiveness practice that supports us in this process of opening, seeing and releasing. And I want to emphasize that it is a process. It may take us weeks, months, years, maybe even lifetimes, to fully forgive. But each step along the way opens us back up to our lives as they are now, in all their humanity.

As one does the forgiveness practice, mindfulness and compassion are key components. What is important is that we meet whatever arises in our minds and hearts with mindfulness rather than with judgment.

One begins the forgiveness recollection with one's own actions. Even if the major issue is the pain another has caused. Beginning with ourselves helps to remind us that we have also hurt others at some point in our lives. The traditional phrase that we begin with is:

"If I have hurt or harmed anyone, knowingly or unknowingly, I ask their forgiveness."⁴
 And then, whenever a person or incident comes to mind, with mindfulness we can experience the guilt and shame we feel and then let it go. Then we express the wish:

"I ask your forgiveness."⁴

After some time with that practice, when we are ready, we turn to the next part of the recollection with the phrase:

"If anyone has hurt or harmed me, knowingly or unknowingly, I forgive them."⁴

And then as a person or incident comes to mind, we meet it with mindfulness and let it go, while expressing the intention:

"I forgive you."⁴

I want to stress that this isn't about feeling any particular kind of feeling, it is about strengthening the intention to forgive this particular person and to free our own hearts.

And after some time of working with this, we move to the final part of the recollection, forgiving ourselves. The traditional phrase is:

"For all of the ways I have hurt or harmed myself, knowingly or unknowingly, I offer forgiveness."⁴

This is about being compassionate towards ourselves, about recognizing our own humanity, our own imperfection. It is easy to get caught in some ideal of being all loving or of behaving perfectly, but all we're really asked to do is to bring awareness and compassion to our own humanity and that of others and to recognize that we're all in this together.

I'd like to close with this quote from the Zen Buddhist teacher James Ishmael Ford:

"I've lived too long and have seen too much.

What I do know. Our hearts will be broken.

And in that moment we get to decide what to do with the wound. Resent and hate and fear the next hurt? Or, not turn away, and instead allow the light to shine through the wound?"⁵

Notes

1. "On Our Minds: Josh Ruxin", *To the Best of Our Knowledge*, broadcast 4.27.2014, <http://www.ttbook.org/book/our-minds-josh-ruxin>, downloaded 5/3/2014.
2. SN V.56.11, Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans. *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha*, Somerville, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2000, p. 1844.
3. Sharon Salzberg, *Loving-Kindness*, Boston: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 1995, p. 75
4. Sharon Salzberg, *Loving-Kindness*, pp. 76-77
5. James Ishmael Ford, "Reforming the Heart," Monkey Mind blog, May 6, 2014, downloaded 05/06/2014, 8:30 a.m., <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/monkeymind/2014/05/reforming-the-heart.html>