

Choosing To Forgive

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Last year I forgave four people who were responsible for causing pain and frustration in my life. Actually I didn't forgive them of my own accord; I was asked to forgive them. And I was asked to forgive them for my own benefit. First I focused on the ways these people hurt me. Then I was asked to look at them in a different light, to consider that they were just doing the best they could in the situation they were in. Next, I was asked if I would be willing to forgive them, not with the hope that they would ever change or that we would have a better relationship, but in order to free myself from the negative effects this resentment was having on me. I went along with it because I realized there was no point in holding onto these bad feelings. The moment I let go of those feelings, I felt cleansed, uplifted and energized.

Three of these people were former gurus who fell down and left Iskcon. I had dedicated tremendous amounts of my youthful blood, sweat and tears building up temples they reigned over. When they left those temples were severely affected. On three different occasions (in three different temples) I stood by and watched my hard work crumble because one person did not have the self control, dignity, perseverance, and humility- the very qualities they demanded of others - to save themselves and remain faithful to their vows and service to Srila Prabhupada.

And there was one other devotee I forgave who did not fall down. He is a wonderful devotee, highly respected, very dear to Srila Prabhupada, sincere and very Krsna conscious. But unknown to him he made my life difficult at times by undermining my management, albeit not maliciously, in a way that created problems in the temple I was managing. Sometimes these problems even resulted in devotees turning against one another and turning against me.

All these experiences took their toll on me. I had built up such resentment that I had become reluctant to give myself to Iskcon in the same way I had in the past. I no longer had the energy and enthusiasm for service that I used to have. I was now more cautious. I was becoming more concerned about my well being than the well being of Iskcon. As a result, I moved more to the

sidelines. I was being held back by a lot of pain, hurt, frustration and anger. I was afraid to step too far forward again.

Yet when I forgave those devotees my enthusiasm miraculously came back. I immediately realized that I allowed the hurt to control me. I allowed the behavior of these devotees to hold me down. I allowed these past experiences to determine my future. I had played the victim and not taken responsibility for my own situation.

As my enthusiasm increased, it became more obvious to me that many devotees are still in the same position I was in i.e. blaming Iskcon, blaming leaders, holding grudges, etc. Or they have been hurt or betrayed by another devotee and can't get over it. I used my resentment to justify why I was not as Krsna consciousness as I could be. Yet deep down I knew that at the time of death if I had to convince the Yamadutas that the reason I am not Krsna conscious is that so and so swami fell down or that Iskcon mistreated me, the Yamadutas were not going to buy it. Certainly they weren't going to say something like, "Oh, I am so sorry to hear that Mahatma, you poor thing. We totally understand what you went through." Rather they would say "Tough luck dude. Now come with us. Your next body is waiting."

The sastras are full of stories of forgiveness: Ambarisa Maharaja forgiving Durvasa, Pariksit Maharaja forgiving Sringi, Narada Muni forgiving Daksa, Pahlada Maharaja forgiving Hiranyakasipu, Haridas Thakura forgiving the guards who beat him, Nityananada forgiving Jagai and Madhai, Parasarama forgiving those who stole his family's kamadhenu cow. And of course Krsna forgives all of us no matter what we've done.

Sastra implores us to forgive. The Srimad Bhagavatam lists forgiveness as one of the qualities of civilized human beings. And Srila Prabhupada asks us to be forgiving so we can cooperate to spread the movement. Yet despite the examples of devotees demonstrating incredible acts of forgiveness, despite the sastra telling us to accept our suffering as a token reaction of our karma, despite Prabhupada's appeals for us to forgive, and despite the cleansing it can do to our hearts, forgiving is still a challenge for many of us. Devotees often say, "I was so deeply hurt that I just don't know how I can forgive."

My realization now is that saying "I can't forgive" ultimately means "I am choosing to not forgive." That might sound insensitive or unrealistic, but the reality is that even ordinary people have forgiven others for the worst

offences and abuses imaginable. **The bottom line is that forgiveness is a choice.**

Often all we need is the right motivation to bring about forgiveness. And sometimes the only thing that will motivate us to forgive is a self centered attitude - to do it to relieve our own suffering. This is what I did. Yet this propelled my devotional service. The technique was not transcendental, but the results were. So even if you don't really want to forgive others, you just have to want to let go of the resentment, the hurt, the pain from your heart. Forget about them and do it for your own sake. Think of it as one lady expresses it, "After practicing forgiveness I realized that unforgiveness was like going into labor and refusing to let the baby out."

If you are willing to let your resentment go - for your own sake - Krsna will help you move to forgiveness without any further effort.

But watch out for you false ego; it is fighting this battle. It is saying that you should stay offended and hurt and you should continue to fight. The ego wants to be right. But the reality is that we are only hurting ourselves. Remaining offended is a weed in the heart - and it keeps us bitter.

It can help to write a letter of forgiveness. And the letter need not be sent (if the offenders don't feel they offended us – and most don't - sending the letter will make things worse). Don't forgive expecting the person to change or to have a better relationship with you. This may never be possible. The letter is simply written to cleanse your own heart.

As I mentioned, I was helped to learn that the people who hurt me were just trying their best. One devotee relates that her daughter was so seriously hurt by another person that it not only impacted her daughter's life, but her life as well. When she found it impossible to forgive, her husband asked her to consider if she could have possibly acted in a similar way had she been in the same situation as the offender. As she considered this she realized it was possible that she would have reacted the same way. And this enabled her to forgive. Understanding the situation a person was in when they made the offense or committed the abuse, as well understanding what that person has gone through in life that may have contributed to their actions, is an essential element in coming to complete forgiveness. "Hate the sin, not the sinner." Or if you want to take it up a notch, "Hate the sin and love the sinner."

Srila Bhaktisiddhanta Sarasvati Thakura had a wonderful method to release resentment. Whenever a disciple would come to him to complain about another devotee, he would say, “Does that devotee have any good qualities?” When the disciple would point out their good qualities, he would say, “So focus on those qualities.” This is an amazingly powerful tool because resentment will not reside in a heart full of appreciation. This is because what we focus on expands. When we focus on the good, the good expands in our minds, and this purifies our heart. When we focus on the resentment, it just gets worse. If we can bring ourselves to see the good in those who hurt us – and certainly there must be some good in them – this acts miraculously to dissipate resentment.

Although hard to appreciate - especially when going through difficulty - Srila Prabhupada says that either benefit or loss is God sent and thus it is God’s grace. If we see things this way and try to learn from every experience, we can gain much even from the most painful experiences. A devotee counselor related to me the story of one of her clients. Her client told her that, “I was able to forgive my attacker because if it hadn’t been for him I would have been on a collision course to hell. He gave me a giant wake up call. This experience really opened my eyes. I could see that this man was truly desperate and sad. I began to have compassion for him; not for what he did to me, but for him, the person. I pray that he can get the help now.”

This is amazing. Who would have thought that a person could become more compassionate after being attacked? Somehow she learned so much from this experience. I have spoken to many others who had similar experiences. Normally, at first they only saw the negative side and remained hurt and angry. But when they opened up they were later able to see something good in what happened – or at least acknowledge that although what happened wasn’t right, they were dealing with their own karma as well.

In relationships we often get instant karma (reactions) for something we do or say. When I was in charge of one temple, there were two devotees that lived there that couldn’t stand me. I thought they had their own issues to deal with (this is what everyone said about them) and it really had nothing to do with me. After all, other devotees didn’t hate me. So I built up a lot of resentment towards them.

Twelve years later I was asked to take responsibility for their feelings towards me and look at what I might have done to make them feel the way

they did. Doing this helped me realize that I said many things that naturally caused them to resent me. Once I understood this, twelve years of resentment immediately vanished.

How often are we ready to blame others and hold ill feelings towards them when they are only reacting to things we said or did to them? As it is said, “Communication is the result you get.”

Had I not taken responsibility for my actions, I believe I would have carried my resentment towards those two devotees my entire life. They were never going to apologize to me; why should they when they were the ones who were offended? Yet twelve years later I was still waiting for an apology. Why? It was because the resentment I had towards them was poison in my heart and I desperately wanted to rid myself of it. Unfortunately, I thought the only way this would happen was for them to apologize. What a fool I was. **For twelve years I thought I had no control of the situation - that they held the key to my resentment.**

So if you are waiting for someone to apologize before you can forgive them, the reality is that you don't have to wait a moment longer. But if you plan to wait, there's a good chance you will be carrying that resentment with you the rest of your life.

But what if an actual offence is made against us. We see in the example of Ambarisa Maharaja that he did not take offence when Durvasa Muni mistreated him. Durvasa was told by Lord Visnu that he committed an offence against Ambarisa Maharaja and would have to ask his forgiveness to be relieved. Ambarisa Maharaja forgave him even though he considered that he actually offended Durvasa. He forgave Durvasa for Durvasa's benefit. Without forgiving him, Durvasa would have been killed by the *sudarsana chakra*. This shows how a devotee does not want to see the offenders suffer for their offences.

In addition, Prabhupada writes that if we don't forgive we are as guilty as the offender, guilty of the sin of unforgiveness.

Forgiveness reaches its highest level when we wish to bless or help the offender. Prahlada Maharaja not only forgave his father but prayed to the Lord for his liberation. Haridas Thakura prayed for the guards that were trying to kill him. Nityananda Prabhu desperately wanted to save Jagai and

Madhai, even after they tried to kill him. If we give mercy, we get mercy. Great souls never stop giving mercy.

But don't think that great acts of forgiveness are only reserved for the great souls. We can perform them as well. Here's a wonderful story. Once a girl got so angry at a boy who was making passes at her that she ended up stabbing him to death. As a result, the girl went into a state of deep depression and remorse. She needed help and the most unlikely person decided to dedicate her life to helping this girl – the mother of the boy she killed. Great acts of forgiveness cannot only be done by *great* souls; *average* souls like you and me can do them as well. Of course, doing this is the way we become *great* souls.

When devotees tell me that so and so hurt me so deeply that they just can't forgive them, at least not completely, I say, "Okay, how about forgiving them totally just for one day and see how you feel – see how that helps you. And if the resentment is so deep that you don't even think you can do that, then how about forgiving them totally for an hour, or even for one minute - just to get some relief from this pain. That will hopefully inspire you to continue with forgiveness. **Remember, no thought lives in your mind rent free.**

Sadhana means practice. We practice the activities and behavior of pure vaisnavas. Practice means we do things which we may not feel like doing, and by doing them we develop an attraction for them. Once Prabhupada said that if we don't feel like dancing we should dance anyway; then we will feel like dancing. Similarly, we need to practice forgiveness even if we don't feel like it. As we practice forgiveness, it becomes easier to forgive and enables us to forgive on a higher level, perhaps even coming to the point that we can bless or help the offenders.

I encourage you to honestly examine the resentment you may still be harboring in your heart. Who has hurt you that you have not forgiven and how is that playing out in your life (when devotees feel hurt by Iskcon, it boils down to being hurt by someone)? Or maybe you don't feel resentment for anyone, but there is one thing that someone did that you just can't forgive? Ask yourself, "Could I somehow or other let it go? If Nityananda Prabhu, Prahlada Maharaja, and Thakur Haridas could forgive those who attempted to take their lives, could I not forgive those who hurt me?" It is a

liberating and purifying experience that will unleash increased enthusiasm and happiness in your life.

Or do you wish to hold onto your resentment and carry it with you, say another five years, when you think you might be ready to forgive? How will it feel to you to carry that in your heart for five more years? And how will it help you? What about carrying it ten more years? What about another twenty years? Is this how you want to live your life? Of course not. You can let this go in a second or carry it with you the rest of your life. You decide.

Are you ready to practice forgiving those who have hurt you? Are you ready to follow in the footsteps of the pure devotees and forgive right now, to simply let it go, to just chant and be happy? Ask yourself, “Would I be willing to let go of my resentment for so and so? Could I do it? Would I be willing to do it right now?”

It’s important that you understand that letting go doesn’t mean you are making a wrong a right. It doesn’t necessarily mean that you are letting a criminal off the hook. It means you are letting yourself off the hook.

If you are not willing to let it go now, ask yourself these same questions tomorrow, next week, next month - until you can let it go. You are not the hurt or resentment. These are your feelings and you are different from your feelings. Because you are not your feelings, you can drop them. You can renounce them. You can become detached from them. You can control them.

So let me ask you again, “Would you be willing to let your resentment go right now? Would you do it for your peace of mind? Would you do it for your own spiritual life? Would you do it for the benefit of Iskcon? Would you do it for Prabhupada? Would you do it for Krsna?”

If you say “I can’t,” what do you think it is about you that will not allow you to forgive? And how does that play out in your other relationships, even in your relationship with guru and Krsna?

And what is that “I can’t” costing you?