

The Power of the Mind to Heal



Renewing Body, Mind, and Spirit

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FORGIVENESS AND COMPASSION

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My mother, martyr though she may have been, was one of the funniest people I've ever known. Sometimes I fantasize seeing her in a nightclub like the intergalactic bar in the movie *Star Wars*, smoking a cigarette and tossing off one-liners about highly amusing earthlings she has known. The morning before she died, the doctor sent her down to the nuclear medicine department in the hospital so that they could pinpoint the location of internal bleeding that marked the last stage of her long illness, what Miron called *apetrolonemia*, or running out of gas.

Most of the family was gathered in her seventh-floor room that windy March day, waiting to say their final goodbyes. Hours passed, and she was still missing somewhere in the bowels of the hospital basement where the big machinery was housed. Since I'd worked in that same hospital for many years, the family sent me down to retrieve her. We were really concerned that she might die on a stretcher in some lonely corridor and that we wouldn't be there when she needed us most. I marched resolutely down to nuclear medicine in the hopes that they would unhand her, but I also knew how hard it is to buck hospital policy.

I gathered my courage and barged into the room where she was being held, yet to be tested. I confronted the doctor, explaining that six hours was a long wait under these circumstances. He explained impatiently that she had to stay for the test because it was essential to have a diagnosis for the bleeding. My mother, who had been lying on her stretcher literally at death's door, piped up, "Diagnosis? All you want is a diagnosis? I'm dying. That's your



diagnosis." And you know, he couldn't argue with her logic, so soon we were on our way back to her room.

During that short elevator ride, we accomplished the work of a lifetime. Mom, who was not a woman to discuss emotions, looked up at me with the innocent eyes of a child, and said simply, "I've made a lot of mistakes. Will you forgive me?" My heart just melted, and all the difficulties we'd had over a lifetime vanished in the magic of that moment. Then I thought about all the times I'd been angry with her, impatient, judgmental, or just plain absent. I so wished it had been different. I wished we could have been friends. With my heart in my throat, I asked her to forgive me. We sealed the deal with a touch of the fingers and a look in the eyes. How very precious those few moments were.

There is a saying in *A Course in Miracles* that "the holiest ground is where an ancient hatred has become a present love." Difficult circumstances and negative emotions are meant to be the raw materials for soul growth. Our most problematic relationships represent holy ground being tilled. When I tell the story of that moment of forgiveness that mother and I shared, people's eyes often get teary. For some, the tears are a deep recognition of the sacred. For others they are an expression of grief for forgiveness not yet realized.

If we're willing to do the work of emotional healing, those very people and circumstances that injured us can turn out to be the transformers through which we find the richness of our humanity. Our own philosophy is very resonant with that of *A Course in Miracles*, which simplifies healing: *Make peace of mind your only goal and forgiveness your only function.* Forgiveness, indeed, is the way to peace of mind.

The very word *forgiveness*, though, lends itself to weighty misunderstandings. For some of us it conjures up the notion of coping out by turning the other cheek and allowing another person to get away with something. That's not forgiveness at all. In the words of Bob Hoffman, the founder of a remarkable psychospiritual healing program called The Hoffman Quadrinity Process, that's "putting whipped cream on top of garbage." In *Guilt Is the Teacher; Love Is the Lesson*, I outline a process of forgiveness that

consists of several steps. First comes a period of grieving for what has been lost. Second comes anger about the loss. The eventual acceptance of one's loss is the third step. What is done is done. We might as well make lemonade out of lemons by learning something that will strengthen us. Lemonade is the fourth step, a paradigm shift in which we are able to find some good, some meaning, in our difficulty.

You might have noticed that nowhere in the previous paragraph did I actually mention changing your feelings toward the person who hurt you. When steps one through four are completed, feelings about the other person naturally and organically change. Without making a particular point of it, you may come to understand the circumstances that led to their actions and feel compassion, as Miron did for his father. But as compassionate as we may feel, forgiveness has no behavioral strings attached—ours or theirs. We may forgive a person and still call the police. We may forgive a person and choose never to see them again because their hurtful behavior is unlikely to change. Forgiveness is our own responsibility and has nothing to do with apologies or amends on the part of the other, as nice as these might be.

A woman we know who was the survivor of a brutal rape by her uncle defined forgiveness as "freedomness." Her uncle had been dead for years, but she was still bound to him by her hatred. Forgiveness finally set her free. Prior to forgiveness, we are indeed bound to the object of our hate. Resentment occupies our thoughts and poisons our body/mind. It is a powerful adversary that keeps us from being fully present in the moment. As long as we are shackled by hatred or judgment, we cannot claim the true power of our mind to heal. We are prisoners of the past.

***Stop and reflect for a minute.*** Are you currently holding a grudge against anyone? If so, ask yourself what good that grudge does for you. Is it making you stronger, wiser, more peaceful, or more powerful? How are you feeling right now when you think of your resentment? Is this how you really want to feel? Is it a conscious choice?



When we have been victimized, we sometimes mistake anger for power. This emotional misunderstanding escalates the cycle of violence when victims of crime grow up to be perpetrators. Most of the men and women in our prison system were abused as children. Until they learn how to forgive both their abusers and themselves, our jails will remain houses of detention rather than places of healing. Our good friend and colleague Robin Casarjian, author of *Forgiveness: A Bold Choice for a Peaceful Heart*, has been working in the Massachusetts prison system for many years. She is writing a book called *Houses of Healing*, drawing on the first-hand transformations she has witnessed in men and women who have committed themselves to the healing programs she facilitates.

Robin created the Lionheart Foundation, a nonprofit agency, to distribute *Houses of Healing*, with accompanying audiotapes and videotapes, free to every prison in the United States. (You can find information about how to support this important project in the Resources section of the Appendix.) Many of the prisoners Robin has worked with have finally been able to take responsibility for their crimes after healing the wounds of their own childhood. We can't open our hearts to others unless they are first open to ourselves. Her program of healing childhood wounds, understanding the emotions, and practicing forgiveness toward self and others is the only thing we can imagine that truly has the power to stop the escalating cycle of violence in our country.

Once we, like the men and women Robin works with, realize that anger is a prison and not a power, we are on the road to a new way of living. The Buddha compared anger to a hot coal that we pick up, intending to throw at someone else, only to be burned ourselves. When you can get an hour or two to yourself, sit down with a pad of paper or your journal and think back through your life to each person who hurt you. Make a list of them. Then ask yourself whether you're still hurt and angry or whether you've healed. Ask yourself what you learned from each person, and write that information down next to their name. Even the most egregious injury produces a pearl of wisdom.

However, if you find that there are some people whom you can't even begin to forgive, perhaps you would be willing to tell

the story of what happened to someone you trust—not as an advertisement for your hurt, but as a way to get insight on step four—what you can learn from the situation. If you still feel hurt and anger, you may want to seek professional help. Letting go of regrets and resentments is the cornerstone of achieving peace of mind. An interviewer once asked who had taught me most about life. I mentally ran down the list of people who had sustained me as a child: teachers, friends, spiritual mentors, and loved ones. Remarkably, the “enemies” who had wounded me most were my greatest teachers and healers.

When the Dalai Lama is asked about his feelings toward the Chinese, who carried out a hideous holocaust in Tibet during the 1950s, he always teaches forgiveness. In one interview, he commented on the compassion he felt for people who exhibited such pain and ignorance—qualities that would allow them to act so unconsciously toward others. As he spoke, the video flashed back to scenes of the Chinese raping Tibetan nuns, burning down monasteries, and decimating the land. I could feel anger rising within me at the same time the Dalai Lama smiled and radiated his uniquely peaceful presence. He continued his teachings on forgiveness by mentioning that he practiced a form of meditation in which he took on the pain of the Chinese and returned his peace and happiness to them. I don't know whether I would be capable of such altruism in the same circumstance, but this philosophy has certainly helped me release lesser hurts. The name of this ancient forgiveness meditation is *tonglen*, the meditation of giving and receiving.

Unbeknownst to either of us, my mother unconsciously practiced *tonglen* with me. When I was sick, either as a child or as an adult, she would sincerely wish that she could take on my sickness and give me her health. This is another way to look at *for give ness*. Love is *for giving* away. When we do that, giving the best in ourselves to another, we feel the love and receive healing ourselves. Old legend actually credits *tonglen* with the power to heal the practitioner of leprosy and even cancer.

The basic exchange in *tonglen* is energetic, accomplished by an exercise of creative imagination. You bring another person to



mind and imagine their pain, illness, or ignorance as a black smoke around their heart. Inhaling their smoke into your own heart, you imagine that it neutralizes your own smokescreen, revealing the sun in your heart. You then exhale the sun—the light, love, and peace of your own true nature—into the other person's heart. You continue this practice for several breaths until it feels complete.

Even though I'm an ex-smoker, breathing in the smoke of other people's pain feels fine to me. Every so often in a workshop, however, someone is too bothered by the image of the smoke to practice tonglen. If this is true for you, just imagine the smoke as dark clouds surrounding the other person's heart, and breathe in the clouds. Somehow I don't think that the ancient Tibetan lamas would mind. One's intention is far more powerful than specific details.

The practice of tonglen is reminiscent of the lovingkindness meditation we learned in Chapter 15. We do it first for ourselves, then for loved ones, next for "enemies," and finally for all beings. Jesus taught forgiveness in much the same way when he said, "Love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, with all thy soul and with all thy mind, and love thy neighbor as thyself." The first stage in the practice of compassion and forgiveness is to feel it for ourselves. If there is no room in our heart for us, how can we have anything of value to give anyone else?

Once you have learned tonglen, which we will teach at the end of this chapter, you can use it in real-life situations to practice a forgiving attitude—one of nonjudgment. It is also an excellent way to transform negative emotions into love.

Let me give you an example. Walking around bookstores can sometimes be hard for me. The book you have in your hand is my sixth. I've poured my whole heart and mind into each book, and I believe that every one is uniquely helpful. So, naturally, it hurts when bookstores don't carry them.

When I first enter a bookstore, I often browse nonchalantly, then I gradually progress to checking the health, psychology, and spirituality shelves where my books might be. When I don't find them, I sometimes feel dejected. All that work for nothing. Then I might look around and see a tall stack of the latest self-help book

and mumble something like, "Ugh. What a superficial, stupid book. She tells people what they want to hear, not what they need to heal. Who buys all this junk?!" Soon I'm depressed, envious, greedy, and angry.

A few letting-go breaths later, I usually remember that I have a choice. I can stew in my misery or I can let go of it. But with tonglen, I can do something even better. I can transform the emotional misery and use its inherent energy for spiritual growth. Once you are used to doing tonglen with your eyes closed, it is easy to do a short form with your eyes open. Pretending that I'm thumbing through a book, I imagine that I can see myself as if looking into a mirror. I inhale the black smoke of envy, depression, greed, and anger, feel it parting the clouds around my heart, and exhale love back at myself. After four or five breaths, not only have I regained sanity, I actually feel much better than before.

Tonglen also works well when you catch yourself judging some other person. Years ago I attended a lecture by Ram Dass in which he pointed out that our judgments about others are projections about what we don't like in ourselves. Whenever we catch ourselves in the midst of such a projection, he recommends saying, "And I am that, too." While I have found this method very helpful in making me aware of such projections, tonglen can actually transform them. Whether I'm talking to someone, thinking about someone, or walking down the street judging a complete stranger, tonglen works wonders. I breathe in the smoke from around their heart (really from around my own) and breathe back the respect and love of my own Higher Self. Excellent instructions for tonglen can be found in Sogyal Rinpoche's *Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*.

Tonglen is also very useful when watching the news or hearing of a disaster anywhere in the world. Rather than feeling overwhelmed by sadness, or hardening our hearts and numbing out, tonglen is a way of saying an immediate prayer for transformation. For example, I was watching a newsclip from Bosnia in late 1993. A distraught mother was bending over the dead body of her only son, keening with sorrow. The dead boy looked even younger than our own sons, and my heart just broke. While continuing to watch the



clip, I breathed in the pain of this mother and breathed back the love and peace in my own heart both to her and to her child. Sogyal Rinpoche recommends that if you have cancer or AIDS or any illness, you might do tonglen for all the other people with the same problem. Health-care professionals can do tonglen for their patients, and we can all do it for one another. When Sogyal Rinpoche was asked whether you could hurt yourself by breathing in another person's illness, he laughed and replied, "The only thing you can hurt is your ego!" Nonetheless, if doing tonglen for someone feels wrong for you, don't do it. A recovering codependent asked me a somewhat similar question. Isn't tonglen just another way of sponging up other people's pain, she wondered—a habit she was trying to get out of? In fact, tonglen is just the opposite. Instead of taking on someone else's pain, you are using their pain to transform your own suffering.

### TONGLEN: The Meditation of Forgiveness and Compassion

*Close your eyes and take a stretch and a few letting-go breaths....Begin to notice the flow of your breathing, allowing your body to relax and your mind to come to rest....*

*Imagine a Great Star of Light above your head, and feel it washing over you like a waterfall and running through you like a river runs through the sand at its bottom....Allow it to carry away any fatigue, pain, illness, or ignorance....See these wash through the bottom of your feet into the earth for transformation. As you are washed clean, notice that the light within your heart begins to shine very brightly....*

*Now imagine yourself as a child, choosing whatever age seems most relevant to you at this time....You, better than anyone, know the pain in your heart at that time. Breathe it in as a black smoke (or dark clouds), and breathe out the light in your heart to yourself....*

*Imagine yourself as you are right now, as if you could see yourself in a mirror. See whatever pain or illness you have as a black smoke around your heart. Inhale the smoke and exhale the light of your Higher Self....Fill your heart with light....*

*Bring to mind a person that you love....Think about the pain or illness that might be in their heart....Inhale that pain as a black smoke, and exhale the light of your own true nature back into their heart.*

*Bring to mind someone whom you are ready to forgive. Imagine them in as much detail as you can. Imagine their pain, illness, or illusion as a black smoke around their heart....Breathe in the smoke, and breathe back the light of your own true nature into their heart.*

*Think of someplace in the world where there is suffering. If possible, bring a specific example of that suffering to mind—a starving child, a griev-*

ing parent....Breathe in the pain of that suffering as a black smoke, and let it part the clouds of darkness around your own heart. Breathe out the light of your Higher Self.

*End* with a prayer or a short period of mindful meditation. You may also want to dedicate the fruits of this meditation to alleviate the suffering of all beings:

*May all beings be happy.  
May all be free from suffering.  
May all know the beauty of  
their own true nature.  
May all beings be healed.*

