



The Sacred Art of Forgiveness by Rabbi Rami
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Audio Script Lesson 1: What Is Forgiveness?

The dictionary tells us that forgiveness “is the process of forgiving or being forgiven.” I can’t imagine a more useless definition. Basically the dictionary is saying that forgiveness is about forgiveness. To help us out of this circular nonsense the dictionary offers synonyms for forgiveness: pardon, absolution, exoneration, remission, dispensation, indulgence, clemency...the list goes on. But are any of these really the same as forgiveness? If you forgive someone for something they have done are you exonerating them?

Forgiveness is one of those words that is hard to define, yet you know it when you see it. Or, let me suggest, you know it when you feel it. And what you feel is release. When you forgive and when you are forgiven there is a sense of liberation, you feel unbound by the past, you are a bit more free. So, if we are to build our own definition of forgiveness, we might say that forgiveness is an action that brings liberation. Not absolute or total liberation, but liberation with regard to the thing which forgiveness addresses.

This is true for both the person doing the forgiving and the person receiving the forgiveness. Both are set free from the chains of the hurt that necessitated forgiveness in the first place. If I hurt your feelings and ask for and receive forgiveness from you, I am released from the guilt I carry over what I did to hurt your feelings, and you are released from the grudge you carry over the fact that I did it.



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There is much more to forgiveness than this, but this is a good place to begin our exploration of forgiveness. Forgiveness is an act of liberation.

Now let's take up the question of why we should forgive another. It is commonplace to say that we forgive not so much to let the other off the hook, but to unhook ourselves. The freedom we seek when forgiving others is not theirs but ours. We can move on when we are no longer tied to the past. This makes sense to me, but it doesn't go far enough. We are not tied to past in just one incident or another, we are tied to the past at the very root of our being. We are a product of our past. In fact we only exist in our past.

Think about this for a moment. The you you take yourself to be is a product of the you you understand yourself to be based on the actions you have taken in the past and the things you have learned about you in the past. Who you imagine you are is a compilation of who imagine you were. In fact, there is no you at all in the immediacy of the present moment.

In the *Dhammapada*, a third century B.C.E. compilation of teachings ascribed to Siddhartha Gotama, the historical Buddha, we are told, and I am summarizing: we are what we think. And what you think is always linked to the past. There is no conscious thought in the present moment. You only know what you've thought after you've thought it. Thought is in the past. A sense of self created by thought is also in the past. There is no you in the present, let alone the future.

The past is always conditioned, and your understanding of the past—what you glean from the past to make meaning for your life—is also of the past. If forgiveness is a kind of liberation,



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it is liberation from the conditioning of your past. And because each moment of self-knowing is created from the past, if you are to be free, forgiveness must be on-going. It isn't enough to forgive this or that person for this or that action; we must forgive all beings for all actions. Only in this way is liberation possible.

But maybe liberation isn't possible at all. If the self you know is of the past, and if the past is always conditioned, then there can be no liberation of the self you know. Such liberation is impossible. But what if there is another self, a self you don't know, a self that needs no liberation because it is not of the past? Could we say then, that forgiveness is not simply a liberation from the past, but an invitation into this other self?

I think we can say this, and I think we would be right to say this.

You are of two minds, two selves. In Judaism we call these two minds *mochin d'katnut*, the narrow mind created and conditioned by the past, and *mochin d'gadlut* the spacious unborn uncreated mind that transcends time and conditioning. You are not one or the other, you are both. You don't achieve spacious mind, you already are spacious mind. You can't open narrow mind to become spacious mind, narrow mind is necessary just as it is. All you can do is realize both.

Well, not quite. You cannot realize spacious mind because spacious mind cannot become an object of knowing, it is always the pure subjective knower. Just as you cannot bite your own teeth or smell your own nose or touch the tip of your right pointer finger with the tip of your right pointer finger you cannot know spacious mind. You can only be spacious mind. And since you are already are spacious mind there is nothing you need do to be spacious mind.



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This sounds silly, and it is a paradox. But it is only paradoxical when we try to put the matter into words. At the heart of this course is the notion that the you you take yourself to be, and the self you others to be are conditioned beings who do what they do mostly because they are conditioned to do it. I'm saying you lack free-will, but I am saying that will is rarely free. What is free is *mochin d'gadlut*, spacious mind, the you you are but cannot know. Forgiveness is liberating because for a moment it gives narrow mind a glimpse of the great reality in which it dwells.

While you cannot know spacious mind the way you an object, you can get a felt-sense of it, and that is what we are going to do now. The exercise is called a Pointing Out exercise. It isn't meditation. It doesn't ask you to give up narrow mind even for a moment. It simply points out what is true for narrow mind but rarely noticed by narrow mind.

Let's begin. If you prefer to close your eyes, you may do so. If you'd rather leave them open do that instead. If you are sitting uncomfortably, shift into a more comfortable sitting position. If you don't mind the position you are in, stay with that. And just notice.

Notice how the chair feels on your back and butt. Notice if it is comfortable or uncomfortable. Shift your body in the chair. Experiment with different ways of sitting. Notice how they feel. Now notice that the you who is noticing all this isn't sitting in the chair or effected by the chair at all.

Notice the thoughts streaming through your mind. Don't change them or judge them or alter them in any way. Just notice them. Notice the emotions these thoughts trigger. Notice the



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thoughts that these emotions trigger. Just notice. And then notice that the you who is noticing isn't the you who is thinking these thoughts or feeling these feelings at all. There is a you that is witnessing all this, but is not impacted upon by any of it.

As you notice the you noticing the you sitting, thinking, and feeling, notice that the you who is noticing this you that is noticing the you sitting, thinking, and feeling is not the you you are noticing at all. Notice there is always a noticer behind all noticing. Notice that this noticer cannot in itself be noticed. Notice there is a subject that knows and that cannot be made into an object of knowing. This unknowner knower is *mochin d'gadlut*, spacious mind, the witness, the greater you in which the lesser you, *mochin d'katnut*, narrow mind, ego, rests.

Ramana Maharshi, the great 20th century Indian sage, taught a practice he called Self-Inquiry. Throughout the day, ask yourself: who is thinking these thoughts, who is feeling these feelings? And you ask notice that the one asking isn't the one thinking or feeling. The one asking is the truest you unconditioned by thoughts, feelings, genetics, and narratives of gender, race, ethnicity, religion, politics, and the rest. This I behind the I of ego is free and has no need of forgiveness. It is the lesser I of ego that we will focus on in the this course, for it is always in need of forgiveness. But beneath the surface of all we will explore in this course is the greater of I, and while we cannot work with it directly, forgiveness itself allows the narrow I to tap into the spacious I know, even for a moment, what it is to be free.