

To forgive, to forget?

What should we do when a moral wrong is done?

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We are sometimes advised to “forgive and forget” some wrong done, especially to us or to someone near and dear to us. The fact that such an advice needs to be given and taken, shows the twin burden or double jeopardy that the advice entails. Who is doing the forgiving and the forgetting? Who is affected most when this advice is followed? What is the moral significance of giving and taking such advice? These are a few key questions we can ask in this connection.

Those of us who have suffered in this connection may also ask: Is forgiving and forgetting like realising or accepting that the past is past; that we can't change it? And to recognise that our anger comes from the wrong others did to us or our children? And that we should move on through this? Does moving forward means that we accept the suffering and so be done with it?

The first grave mistake to make here is to select or quote some convenient religious teachings we are familiar with but do not understand in depth to summarily cancel out, as it were, the significance of all that had happened. We may have done this simply because we are either **afraid** to face the ensuing pains, whether it is our own or those of significant others. It is like pressing a button and switching it all off. It is not that simple. As many might retort: We may forgive; but it is difficult, even impossible, to forget. Such an advice, then, can only be given out of an unwillingness (a personal convenience) or an inability to heal (a moral weakness); hence, a moral irresponsibility.

Secondly, who forgives, who has the power to forgive? If we are the **victim**, and we can forgive the mistake, it is truly noble of us. Only the victim who has suffered, who has learned from that suffering, who has understood that suffering—that there is only the suffering but **none** who suffers—then, that victim is empowered to forgive. More importantly, he is no more a victim, since he has risen above that victim state (Dh 3-4) [below].

This point entails a corollary: other than the victim himself, only someone with the ability to heal him, is morally empowered to forgive the Violator and also the Victim. For, often enough the victim feels that he is at fault or has become less worthy. This role of the moral Forgiver is, of course, the Buddha, or someone who is willing and able to heal the Victim.

Thirdly, should we **forget** the crime or wrong? Suppose a monastic who has had sex, who has misused his study funds loaned to him to buy expensive properties, who continues to live a luxurious and licentious life declares that he will no more address any accusations against him. Hence, he declares, no one should henceforth mention any of his misdeeds. In other words: Forget about his crimes. A wise person would at once understand the moral implications of such a statement without further elaboration.

However, it is different to be unfairly and unnecessarily troubled by the **memory** of such wrong-doings. It is well known in the suttas that the Buddha never let a monastic's wrong-doing rest. He takes the trouble to define what went wrong, why it is wrong, the effects of

such wrong on the good and others; finally, he gives a teaching related to this, or introduces a rule to prevent a recurrence of the wrong. We can only wholesomely **forget** a wrong-doing when we have executed this moral process, or understand its moral significance so that it will not recur.

Fourthly, even as **vicars**, we have no moral right to speak for the **victims**. I use the term “vicar” to refer to parents, guardians, teachers, elders, religious spokesmen or those who represent the Victim. As Vicars, we have not undergone the pains and sufferings of the Victims. Hence, only the Victims can speak for themselves; even then, speak only when they are truly healed and ready to forgive and to forget.

“He abused me! He beat me!
He defeated me! He stole from me!”
those who harbour such thoughts
their anger does not subside. (Dh 3)

“He abused me! He beat me!
He defeated me! He stole from me!”
those who harbour *not* such thoughts
their anger as such subsides. (Dh 4)¹

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¹ On the psychological import of these verses, see “Self & selves,” SD 26.9 (4.1).