

# FORGIVENESS IN RELIGIOUS TRADITIONS

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## 1. CONCEPT OF FORGIVENESS

The word 'forgive' would mean 'not having hard feelings towards the offender' or 'not holding resentment against the offender'. It also denotes 'not having the wish to punish someone for an offence' or 'refraining from imposing penalty on an offender'.

In other words, forgiveness signifies 'not demanding satisfaction for an offense' or 'releasing someone from the liability for fine entailed by an offense'. It also indicates 'ceasing to blame someone for wrong-doing'. Concisely, to forgive is to 'pass over a mistake' or 'overlook an offense'. Pardon, excuse, condone, relieve, etc are a few synonyms for 'forgive'.

Forgiveness is not casual. It is a conscious and deliberate decision. It entails unleashing of vengeance against a person or a group, who has caused harm. Mostly, forgiveness doesn't consider whether the culprit deserves forgiveness or not. Forgiveness is a generous gift to the offender.

Experts argue that forgiveness does not rule out the seriousness of the offense. It need not necessarily mean excusing offenses. Releasing the offender from legal accountability or reconciling with him or her is not obligatory for the forgiver, either. Forgiveness need not always mean forgetting, too.

Forgiveness accords the forgiver peace of mind and frees him or her from biting anger. It involves a 'letting go of deeply held negative feelings'. It empowers the forgiver to recognize the pain suffered, without letting that pain define him or her. It enables the forgiver to heal oneself and move on with his or her life.

Forgiveness involves 'granting free pardon' or 'giving up all claims as a result of an offence or debt'. On the whole, forgiveness is given irrespective of any restoration. All the same, an offender may ask for forgiveness or offer some form of apology or acknowledgment, as a causative occasion for the wronged person to forgive.

Religious traditions advocate various teachings on the nature of forgiveness. Some religious philosophies emphasize the need for seeking divine forgiveness for human failings. Certain teachings promote the practice of forgiveness among the humans. Some traditions combine these directions as a condition for each other. Yet others make hardly any distinction between the two directions of forgiveness.

## 2. FORGIVENESS – THE BENCHMARK OF LIFE

Reinhold Niebuhr understands forgiveness as the culmination of love, as he states 'forgiveness is the final form of love'<sup>1</sup>. Bryant H. McGill establishes the co-relation between love and forgiveness by saying 'there is no love without forgiveness and there is no forgiveness without love'<sup>2</sup>.

Alexander Pope accords forgiveness a divine status in his words, 'to err is human; to forgive is divine'<sup>3</sup>. Mahatma Gandhi sees forgiveness as strength when he says 'the weak can never forgive; forgiveness is the attribute of the strong'<sup>4</sup>.

Oscar Wilde suggests a retort measure for the enemies, 'always forgive your enemies; nothing annoys them so much'<sup>5</sup>. Hannah More considers forgiveness from an economic angle, 'forgiveness is the

economy of the heart... forgiveness saves the expense of anger, the cost of hatred, the waste of spirits'<sup>6</sup>.

### **3. BAHÁ'Í FAITH**

The divine dynamics of extending forgiveness to others is described in the Bahá'í Writings -- 'Love the creatures for the sake of God and not for themselves. You will never become angry or impatient if you love them for the sake of God. Humanity is not perfect. There are imperfections in every human being and you will always become unhappy if you look toward the people themselves. But if you look toward God, you will love them and be kind to them, for the world of God is the world of perfection and complete mercy. Therefore, do not look at the shortcomings of anybody; see with the sight of forgiveness'<sup>7</sup>.

### **4. BUDDHISM**

Buddhism focuses on mental wellbeing and advocates forgiveness as a measure to prevent damage to it. Realizing the negative effect ill feelings can have on the mind, it encourages cultivating wholesome thoughts. The suffering in the world, both our own and that of others, is the context of the discussion. Meditation and receiving insight into the nature of reality is the way out from delusion and suffering.

Resentment in the mind instigates one to take revenge on the victimizer and this is the most unfortunate of all the situations. The Buddhist method is to calmly proceed to release it by going back to its roots. Therefore, in order to avoid resentments, the law of karma proposes values like *Mettā* (loving kindness)<sup>8</sup>, *karuna* (compassion)<sup>9</sup>, *mudita* (sympathetic joy)<sup>10</sup>, and *upekkhā* (equanimity)<sup>11</sup>.

Buddhism questions the reality of the passions that make forgiveness necessary as well as the reality of the objects of those passions. The logic is 'if we do not forgive, we are bound to create an identity around our pain; that takes birth again and that is what suffers'<sup>12</sup>. Therefore, Dhammapada affirms, 'he abused me, he struck me, he overcame me, he robbed me' -- in those, who do not harbour such thoughts, hatred will cease'<sup>13</sup>.

### **5. CHRISTIANITY**

Christianity is known as the religion of love and forgiveness emerges from the finest sentiments of love. Forgiveness is not an option for a Christian, but rather, it is the basic requirement for being a Christian. Given the tight spot of human limitations here on earth, forgiveness lays the lasting foundation for reconciliation and universal peace.

Jesus in his life and teachings gives a new definition to the idea of forgiveness that touches utmost spiritual altitudes. His is perhaps the best known example in the world for insights on forgiveness. The Christian idea of forgiveness is 'unconditional' and total. It is above all in relation to 'human beings', as well.

The Christian idea of God as 'Father' is a relational title and not a proper name. The title refers to the 'fatherly' heart of God in unbeatable degrees. Abounding love, overflowing generosity and magnanimous way of overlooking the failings is inbuilt in the character of the father, that too, in the divine milieu.

The story of the 'Prodigal Son'<sup>14</sup> is an impressive case in point. The divine father doesn't seem to remember that the son had frittered away his entire share of heritage. Instead, he showers upon him more love than ever, as he returns home, and celebrates a grand feast in his honour. Could the divine

father be more forgiving than this? The ‘perfection’ of the Father in heaven is characteristically reflected in giving sunshine and rains to both the righteous and the unrighteous in an equal measure<sup>15</sup>.

Jesus articulated the diverse implications of forgiveness in his Sermon on the Mount. He exclaimed, ‘Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful’<sup>16</sup>. He instructed his disciples in the prayer he taught them (The Lord’s Prayer), ‘if you forgive men when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive men their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins’<sup>17</sup>. Forgiveness from God is necessarily dependent on forgiving other human beings.

Clarifying the futility of prayer and other attempts to get related to God, when one is not reconciled with others, he declared, ‘If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift’<sup>18</sup>. ‘When you stand praying, if you hold anything against anyone, forgive him, so that your Father in heaven may forgive you your sins’<sup>19</sup>.

Jesus laid down the ethical nuances of forgiveness in day-to-day life thus -- ‘Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy’<sup>20</sup>. ‘Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you; if someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also’<sup>21</sup>. ‘Do not judge and you will not be judged. Do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven’<sup>22</sup>.

When Peter, one of the disciples, asked Jesus, ‘Lord, how often shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Up to seven times?’ Jesus said to him, ‘I do not say to you, up to seven times, but up to seventy times seven’<sup>23</sup>. Forgiveness is the divine mindset of the human heart and that admits no limits in numbers and degrees.

The most clear-cut and telling reply to the question of forgiveness Jesus gave was towards the last moments of life Jesus lived in this world. Having received the worst from the world for having given the best he had with him, even amidst the piercing pain of crucifixion, he prayed to His Father in Heaven ‘Father, forgive them, for they know not what they are doing’<sup>24</sup>. I don’t think, the world has ever seen or will see a higher and more divine benchmark for forgiveness.

Christian tradition has it that Christians are bound by conscience to live this paradigm at the best of his or her capacity the above spirit of forgiveness even in the bothersome routine of life. By way of visible and institutional enactment, there is a practice of time-to-time ‘confession’ to a priest all the failings and sins one has committed. These practices are complimented both at internal and external circles as a flushing out and easing of one’s conscience that grants enormous psychological relief, as well.

## **6. HINDUISM**

Hinduism proposes ‘Prayaschitha’ (penance)<sup>25</sup> as a means of asking for forgiveness of atonement for wrongdoing. Prayaschitha is related to the law of Karma. Karma is the sum of all that an individual has done, is currently doing and will be doing. The effects of the deeds create the present and the future, and that makes one responsible for one’s life.

Krishna champions the idea ‘forgiveness is one of the characteristics of the one born for a divine state’<sup>26</sup>. Forgiveness is the virtue of the weak, but an ornament of the strong. An unforgiving individual defiles himself and forgiveness is the one supreme peace<sup>27</sup>.

Village priests often open their temple ceremonies with the following invocation, ‘O Lord, forgive three sins that are due to my human limitations -- you are everywhere, but I worship you here;

you are without form, but I worship you in these forms; you need no praise, yet I offer you these prayers and salutations'<sup>28</sup>.

## 7. ISLAM

Islam holds 'al-ghafir' as one of the titles of God, meaning 'the forgiver'. God is the original source of forgiveness and human beings, the secondary sources.

Forgiveness can come either directly from Allah or from one's fellow men who were wronged, depending on the type of wrong committed. Divine forgiveness requires asking for forgiveness by means of repentance. Human forgiveness entails both forgiving and being forgiven.

But, as per Qur'an<sup>29</sup>, God denies forgiveness to those who are under the grip of idol worship (shirk), that too, for life, because idolizing God is a clear straying way from the path of God.

The Qur'an<sup>30</sup> makes it clear that God does not love the unjust, but appreciate those who pardon the wronged and maintain righteousness, who will be rewarded. Further, it is better to forgive than attack another when angered, whenever possible<sup>31</sup>.

The Qur'an makes allowances for defending one's religion, life and property and disapproves violent behaviour. However, over the history Muslims considered it a licence for 'defensive violence' often in an overly aggressive manner. The line of clearness in the Muslim community is yet to be drawn with regard to when to defend and when to forgive.

Islamic Hadith presents an instance where Prophet Muhammad is a forgiving person. When he was at Ta'if to preach the message of Islam, he was maltreated. But, he seems to have prayed to Allah to forgive the people of Ta'if for their ignorance.

Three conditions apply to receiving forgiveness from God – admitting the offense, committing not to repeat the offense and asking for forgiveness.

If the offense is committed against another human being or against society, a fourth condition becomes obligatory -- recognizing the offense before those against whom offense was committed, committing oneself not to repeat the offense before God, restoring the offense and asking pardon of the offended party, along with asking forgiveness from God.

There is no particular formula for asking forgiveness. All the same, Muslims are taught many phrases that they repeat daily imploring the forgiveness of God. Those phrases are mostly re-affirming the one and only place of Allah and confessing one's obedience to him.

## 8. JAINISM

Forgiveness is one of the main virtues in Jainism. 'Kṣamāpanā'<sup>32</sup> or supreme forgiveness forms part of one of the ten characteristics of dharma.

The Jain 'mantra' of forgiveness in Prakrit 'Micchāmi Dukkaḍaṃ'<sup>33</sup> or 'Khamau Sa', which means 'may all the evil that has been done be fruitless'. Jains personally greet their friends and relatives saying 'micchāmi dukkaḍaṃ', for seeking their forgiveness. Even letters and telephone calls are made to outstation friends and relatives asking their forgiveness.

Samvatsari is the last day of Jain festival ‘paryushana’<sup>34</sup> (coming together or abiding). Jains perform this ritual on that day, after the Jain prayer ‘pratikramana’<sup>35</sup>. The Jain stipulation is that no private quarrel or dispute may be carried beyond samvatsari.

The Jain yearly retreat ‘pratikramana’ contains also a repeated seeking of forgiveness from various creatures, even from ekindriyas or single-sensed beings like plants and micro-organisms, which may have been harmed while eating and doing routine activities.

‘Pratikramana’ contains the following prayer ‘I ask pardon of all creatures, may all creatures pardon me. May I have friendship with all beings and enmity with none’<sup>36</sup>. Jains recite Iryavahi sutra seeking forgiveness from all creatures while involved in routine activities also in the daily prayers ‘samayika’<sup>37</sup>.

‘Samayika’ stands for ‘being in the moment of continuous real-time’. It also means an act of being conscious of the continual renewal of the universe in general and one’s own renewal of the individual living being ‘Jiva’ in particular. It is an attitude of harmony and respect towards other humans and Nature.

The samayika prayer contains some of the finest and noblest sentiments of life. ‘I seek your permission to absolve myself of the sinful acts by confessing the torture I have given the living beings while walking, coming and going, treading on living organism, seeds, green grass, dew drops, ant hills, moss, live water, live earth, spider web and others. I seek forgiveness from all these living beings, be they one-sensed, two-sensed, three-sensed, four-sensed or five-sensed.’

Practising prāyaścitta (repentance) opens the road of life and the prize of the road, which is the reward for good conduct. Forgiveness awards happiness of mind, a kind disposition towards all kinds of living beings and purity of character and freedom from fear<sup>38</sup>.

The code of conduct for the monks and nuns requires asking forgiveness for wrongdoing. In case of a quarrel or a dispute, the monks or nuns, irrespective of their age and position, have to seek and give forgiveness. To appease and to be appeased is the road to success. To mollify and to be mollified is the sure way to peace, which is the essence of monasticism<sup>39</sup>.

## **9. JUDAISM**

Judaic tenets on forgiveness are categorical. There are stipulations that impose duties both on the side of the offender and the offended.

The offended has to grant forgiveness willingly and sincerely, when requested by the offender. When the offender apologizes or rectifies the wrong, the wronged person is not allowed to be obstinate<sup>40</sup>.

It is the duty of the offender to seek forgiveness from the offended. He or she has to go to the one he or she has harmed, in order to obtain forgiveness. Fulfilling the obligation to seek forgiveness requires apologizing sincerely thrice for the wrong committed against the other<sup>41</sup>.

The Judaic dictum goes thus -- ‘God forgives sins against God and human beings forgive sins against human beings’<sup>42</sup>. This is not interchangeable. Besides, reward for forgiving others is not God’s forgiveness for wrongs done to others, but rather help in obtaining forgiveness from the other person. Repentance is a prerequisite for forgiveness in either case.

Judaism does not give sanction to obtain forgiveness from God for wrongs done to other people. Accordingly, a murder remains unforgivable, if the victim has not forgiven the perpetrator before he died. The family and friends of the victim can forgive the murderer for the grief they caused them.

The Tefila Zaka<sup>43</sup> meditation clearly articulates the human predicament and the spirit of forgiveness that is innate to the dynamics of human life. There is no one too righteous to wrong another, in word or deed. Peace of heart comes from appeasing the wronged by observing Yom Kippur.

‘Yom Kippur’<sup>44</sup> is the yearly Day of Atonement or repentance observed by the Jews. It is believed that on this day God makes decisions regarding what would happen during the coming year. Therefore, prior to Yom Kippur, Jews ask forgiveness from those they have wronged during the previous year, if they have not already done so. On this day Jews fast and pray for God's forgiveness for the lapses against God in the preceding year, as well.

The spirit of Yom Kippur is that one has to forgive from the innermost recesses of the heart those who have injured one in any manner. One has to grant full and final forgiveness to one and all. One has to wish that no one may be punished because of one. God's grace is sought so that others may forgive one absolutely. This is the only source of grace.

## **10. SIKHISM**

Sikhism is not in favour of conceiving God in terms of human beings. Therefore, the question of asking forgiveness almost does not occur to it, may it be from God or from human beings. Secondly, ‘love all, serve all’ is its motto. But, it could be stated that Sikh religion considers forgiveness in an applied manner.

Forgiveness is an act of imagination. It challenges one to give up one's destructive thoughts about a situation and to believe in the possibility of a better future. In instances when promises are not fulfilled or broken, forgive yourself and move on with a tougher will power. In fact, forgiveness is a gift you give to yourself.

Forgiveness has little or nothing to do with another person because forgiveness is an internal matter. You cannot undo anything you have already done, but you can face up to it and tell the truth and seek forgiveness and then let God do the rest. Besides, when the other person has apologized, no more expectations ought to be entertained. You only love them and result comes in its own time.

The Sikhs offer a striking evidence for practical forgiveness. When the Golden Temple was re-opened after the massacre in 1984, the sewaadaars were instructed to extend the same welcoming spirit to all those who would visit the place.

Forgiveness is one of the qualities of God. Guru Granth Sahib 866 describes the mind of God ‘God is kind and compassionate. He forgives all beings and creatures. I seek your sanctuary, O God. It is your nature to purify the sinners’<sup>45</sup>. Another quote supports this notion, ‘Kabir...where there is forgiveness, there is God Himself’<sup>46</sup>.

Forgiveness is a voluntary decision not to harm or punish oneself, or not to diminish God's overflowing love and joy. Misconduct by others, real or imagined, can weaken the vitality in oneself. Forgiveness can set one free.

Forgiveness is a moral response to another's injustice. It often leads to reconciliation between the two parties in a spirit of mutual respect. It fosters love.

Non-forgiveness keeps you in the struggle. Being willing to forgive can bring a sense of peace and wellbeing. It lifts anxiety and delivers you from depression. It can enhance your self-esteem and give you hope.

Forgiveness is a creative act that saves one from being a victim of the past. It assists one in liberating oneself to be at peace with our memories. It is the art of living in the present, open to a more exciting future. Besides, peace of mind is the fruit of forgiveness. The conscious decision not to harbour bitterness facilitates the management of one's energy in the most economic and constructive manner.

Forgiveness is the key to one's happiness. It transforms misery into happiness instantly. 'Choosing to let go' is like a mental bath that refreshes morally and spiritually. It contributes to emotional healing, as well.

It is easier to forgive an enemy than a friend. Forgiveness helps one to free oneself from the clutches of the offender and move on in life. It nourishes the forgiver with a new strength. It helps one to become a more loving person. Anger makes one smaller, while forgiveness helps one grow beyond. It leaves the forgiver humble, as well.

## **11. ZOROASTRIANISM**

Zoroastrianism does not recognize the need for divine forgiveness. God cannot be harmed by men and therefore asking for forgiveness from God does not make sense to it, either.

The Zoroastrian religion holds morals and ethics in the first place. Making a conscious effort always to reject all forms of evil and to walk on the path of 'Asha', in thought, word, deed and endeavour is the primary duty of a Zoroastrian. Walking on the path of Asha is the way to attain union with one's maker. 'There is but one path, that of Asha, all other paths are false paths'.

According to Zoroastrianism, the sum total of a man's thoughts, words and deeds determines the fate of his soul in the other world. His thoughts, words and deeds, good or bad, will lead his soul either to the gates of heaven or to the pathway of hell.

Asha is the Law Immutable, the Law Eternal, the Cosmic Law of Order and Harmony on which the entire Universe is based. It is through Asha that Ahura Mazda created the universe and it is through Asha that mankind will attain perfection and be one with Ahura Mazda. In the Hoshbam prayer we aspire, 'Through the best Asha, through the highest Asha, may we catch sight of Thee (Ahura Mazda), may we approach Thee and may we be in perfect union with Thee!'

Forgiveness, mercy and tolerance are values of Zoroastrianism. A good Zoroastrian must strive to make enemies his friends, purify the sinful and make the ignorant well-informed and sincerely atone for ones sins committed knowingly or unknowingly.

'The law of Mazda indeed, O Spitama Zarathustra! takes away from him who confesses it the bonds of his sin; it takes away the sin of breach of trust; it takes away the sin of murdering one of the faithful; it takes away the sin of burying a corpse; it takes away the sin of deeds for which there is no atonement; it takes away the heaviest penalties of sin; it takes away any sin that may be sinned'<sup>47</sup>.

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