

Excerpts from *Loosening The Knots of Anger*
by Thich Nhat Hahn

In our consciousness there are blocks of pain, anger and frustration called internal formations. They are also called knots because they tie us up and obstruct our freedom.

When someone insults us or does something unkind to us, an internal formation is created in our consciousness. If you don't know how to undo the internal knot and transform it, the knot will stay there for a long time. And the next time someone says something or does something to you of the same nature, that internal formation will grow stronger. As knots or blocks of pain in us, our internal formations have the power to push us, to dictate our behavior.

After a while, it becomes very difficult for us to transform, to undo the knots, and we cannot ease the constriction of this crystallized formation. Every one of us has internal formations that we need to take care of.

Every time you give your internal formations a bath of mindfulness, the blocks of pain in you become lighter and less dangerous. So give your anger, your despair, your sorrow a bath of mindfulness every day—that is your practice. If mindfulness is not there, it is very unpleasant to have these seeds come up. But if you know how to generate the energy of mindfulness, it is very healing to invite them up every day and embrace them. And after several days or weeks of bringing them up daily and helping them go back down again, you create good circulation in your psyche, and the symptoms of illness will begin to disappear.

Mindfulness does the work of massaging your internal formations, your blocks of suffering. You have to allow them to circulate, and this is possible only if you are not afraid of them. If you learn not to fear your knots of suffering, you can learn how to embrace them with the energy of mindfulness, and transform them."

Good morning. Welcome to The Power of Forgiveness Part II. For those here today who were not able to attend Part I of the series, I will review some of the concepts discussed in that presentation. Both presentations will also be posted on the website for those who wish to read or review the full content. Part I's Reading and Meditation selection, entitled *Loosening the Knots of Anger* by Thich Nhat Hanh can be found on the insert in the order of service. This is one of the foundational writings that has helped me pursue active forgiveness in my life. Thich Nhat Hahn's discussion of internal formations manifesting as knots of anger was integral in my understanding of how damaging unforgiveness can be. It helped me understand that forgetting is not the same as forgiving, because the dormant knots of anger tighten when triggered and affect us at many levels.

In Part One, I described how unforgiveness is a stagnant quagmire that sucks us into our own personal hell. And that active forgiveness

can help us release our self-imposed bonds, freeing us to realize our full potential.

Active forgiveness involves analyzing the actions of people who have insulted or injured us in some way. I have developed a simple system of questions that helps me with this process. Every individual will of course develop the system that speaks to his or her own preferences. My series of questions begins by putting the offense in perspective. Is this offense (whether it happened yesterday or ten years ago) first on my list of concerns? Probably not. Have I ever done anything similar to this offense? Probably so, in some form. How have I symbolically done this to myself? For example if I was cut off in traffic, how have I symbolically cut myself off from my Source? Finally, I use the symbol as an expression of universal forgiveness. I surrender the symbol and ask for Divine Penetrating Illumination to permeate my being to release all patterns that this event symbolizes in my life, in all dimensions, at all levels, past present and future.

We also touched on the idea that anchoring in our self-worth is a highly effective method when forgiving past offenses, as well as avoiding engaging in action-reaction cycles. We need not depend on anyone to define us or to grant us approval. Anchoring in our own self-worth, we can avoid creating knots of anger in the first place.

I extended an invitation to share your experiences with forgiveness, and Del Smith responded, and I will read her narrative today.

Finally, I shared my belief that our purpose in this existence is for all beings to join with each other in mind and spirit; To experience the Oneness of the Source. The major impediment to achieving this mission of Joining... is various formations of unforgiveness.

This morning, we will build on these concepts and explore some related issues. I am going to touch on several tangents briefly, just to offer angles of interest for your own perusal at your leisure. Those subjects include dealing with criticism and judgment, understanding coping mechanisms, forgiving yet maintaining boundaries, experiments with visioning apologies, and exploring self-forgiveness. Then I will conclude with some additional forgiveness techniques that I find particularly effective and deeply healing. I want to mention that as some of you explore issues, you may feel overwhelmed with memories and emotions. If that is the case, you might consider seeking professional help in working through these issues with an experienced, supportive counselor.

It seems to me that criticism and judgment is one of the primary causes of damage to people. Who has the right to judge anyone else? We can only truly judge our own issues. I agree with the familiar biblical saying that we should examine the log in our own eye before we try to remove the splinter in someone else's eye. We may even discover that there was no splinter in their eye, that the log in our own eye so distorted our vision, there only appeared to be a splinter in their eye as a replica of our own. Perhaps it is wiser to critique our own behaviors, and leave the rest to take care of itself. There will always be infinite things to criticize, and fix and correct on the exterior. The focus of productive correction is best applied to our own inner being. Another interpretation of the log analogy is that any incongruity we observe in the world, is a reflection of something within that is incongruent with our true nature. Fearing and hating the external issues, other people, events, or threats is as futile as trying to do battle with the shadow cast from our own body. We tend to wish to annihilate the dark scary shadow we sense is lurking everywhere, that we find in people around us. How does one accomplish that? Criticism, judgment, anger, threats? Poison? Machine guns? Bombs? Which of these will kill the shadow? Maybe a better question is, where is the shadow coming from? Could it be our own blocked perception that is blocking the light is around us? Rather than violent attempts at eradication, maybe there is a better way. What if we illuminated a light of compassion from within ourselves, where would our shadow go? There can be no shadow if our light shines from within in all directions.

Choosing the light of compassion is another way of describing connecting with essence. In a related biblical reference, Jesus advised not to hate the person, even if we dislike the mistakes they have made. Underneath the damaged exterior of every person is an amazing spirit. Coping in the world has scarred and disfigured the surface, but deep inside there is a light, a shining spirit. Underneath all the layers of ugliness, all the knots of hurt, which formed from a vicious cycle of emotional action-reaction, is the loving essence of the person.

You might imagine this as I read Del Smith's narrative of her forgiveness journey.

Del writes: "Sometimes the act of forgiveness comes after the death of the person who has been the object of resentment and distrust. In

this case the act of forgiveness came some years after the *acceptance* of the act, and thus the *understanding* that was necessary to forgive.

My mother and I were never estranged, but I never felt close to her, even as a child. I was born to Kansas farmers in 1932 and thus an "inconvenient child." For whatever reason the family stories about my childhood were of my being in the wrong place at the wrong time -- getting kicked by a horse, bitten by a dog, playing in the driveway while my mother backed the car out of the driveway, drinking fly poison, causing a commotion in general, all before the age of 4 or 5.

I wrote a poem once about the relationship I had with my mother which began "I am a clever imitation of what you will accept in me" the poem ended "...continuing our truce-like time together." I graduated from high school at the age of 16 and moved away from home as soon as possible - trips home to visit were few and far between.

In her later years my mother lived in Presbyterian Manor and had been diagnosed as Clinically Depressed. About ten years ago, the psychologist she saw had requested a session with me involved. This is how it went....

Dr. Shapiro asked: "Mary, tell me about your daughter."

Mary: "We kicked her out when she was 16."

And despite probing by the psychologist, that was her description of me. I ended up by assuring her that I grew up just fine and that we shared many of the same values, that I was a regular church-goer, my son was doing fine and she could be proud of him as her grandson, etc., etc. She then changed the subject to my brother's grandsons and nothing the psychologist or I said ever got her back on the original request..... "tell me about your daughter."

Needless to say, I didn't feel particularly forgiving of the woman when I drove back to Wichita that day. In fact, in some ways I had to dig really deep and long in order to get *back* to "becoming a clever imitation of what she would accept in me." I managed that. But the resentment continued to haunt me on occasion, even after she died, about 6 years ago.

The Buddhists have a wonderful practice called metta where one can ask for compassion, equanimity, comfort, happiness, forgiveness,

etc. One begins with asking for oneself, then for a loved one, then for a neutral person, then for a person about whom one has negative feelings, and then to the universe/world.

My metta practice for a period of time was to achieve *accepting, then understanding* of harmful actions, beginning with myself, and so on, with my mother being the person about whom I had negative feelings. And finally I accepted and thus understood – That my mother did not have a CLUE as to how to be a mother.

The metta practice asking for *forgiveness* was next, and the "click" that comes with forgiveness came quite rapidly as I recall. I forgave myself for not having listened to my aunts and my mother talk about how my 12-year-old mother had to shoulder the burdens of the family, caring for 4 or 5 younger siblings, when their mother died. Recognizing her difficult background, led to an understanding of many of our difficulties. Forgiveness of my mother for the mistakes she made, came easily.

And since that time I have a truer memory of my childhood, including some happy times.

In a typical Del conclusion she writes "PS: One doesn't have to wait until after someone dies to apply metta practice!!! As if you didn't know that!!!"

Thank you Del for sharing your touching narrative.

Something that would be wise to bear in mind in all forgiveness processes, especially those that are highly emotional, and deeply painful, is that every person employs coping skills to survive in this world. Some coping skills are healthier than others which are more damaging. Some people feel compelled to exert control to feel in control in this world that seems out of control and backwards in many ways. Some try to bring us down in an attempt to make themselves feel better about their deep insecurities. Some people cope by being very self-absorbed, being closed and unable to empathize, because if they allowed the pain of the world in, it might crush them. So they close off with self-protective barriers. We may not agree with various destructive coping mechanisms, but it can be helpful to acknowledge them, which can help bring understanding to damaging behaviors; as in Del's case with her mother. In addition, it could be productive to examine our own coping mechanisms that can become hurtful to

others. The book *Dance of Anger* by Harriet Lerner, can be a helpful resource for understanding these dynamics in our relationships.

There are instances where forgiveness is called for, but maintaining a relationship with that person is not feasible. Perhaps they have qualities that are unhealthy to live with. They tend to manipulate or drain our energy. We can forgive these people for things they have done, but we cannot tolerate their hurtful behaviors and we may need to minimize contact with that person. It can be heartbreaking to make that change, but it is sometimes necessary to protect ourselves from a cycle of damaging behaviors. We can forgive the person, but need not tolerate the unhealthy pattern of abuse. We can love the person, forgive their mistakes, and maintain appropriate physical boundaries, while still joining in mind and spirit.

Here's an ironic thought. Wouldn't it be a lot easier to forgive someone if they approached us, listed the things they had done that were hurtful, and then asked us for forgiveness? I can only recall a few instances in my life where someone has directly apologized to me for something significant and asked for forgiveness. How about you? Imagine how easily we might forgive most offenses if we receive a sincere apology. Since that so rarely happens, and we still carry bucket-load of tangled knots and grievances against various people, what if we created their apology in our imagination? What would that consist of? What would we like to hear from them that would facilitate our forgiveness for them? Even if we never hear it from them, maybe visioning their apology would help us reach a point of release.

Now we arrive at one the ugliest, most daunting trenches of the unforgiveness morass. Can you guess it? Self-forgiveness. Self-forgiveness is one of the most difficult challenges we face. Why is it so difficult? Guilt. Self-imposed ties that bind. Maybe it is difficult to forgive ourselves because we don't often utilize the active self-forgiveness process on our guilt complexes. If the memory surfaces in our consciousness, we just seem to repeat the same scenario over and over without processing and releasing, like a hamster in a squirrel cage going round and round and getting nowhere. We put it away for a while, when it comes back out and we go round and round again. We bemoan, "that was such a dumb thing to do. I really hurt them. I wasn't thinking. If only I could go back and change it, but I can't undo it" so we find ourselves in guilt limbo, a purgatory of self-tormenting self-flagellation and regret. Our own backyard of our own personal hell.

Our regret, our impotence to change the past locks our memory of the person and who they were at that time. They have changed, they have grown. They are not the same person we have locked in our memory. Whether we hurt them or they hurt us or both, it is a disservice to hang on to them, drag them down into the quagmire of unforgiveness. If we truly want to make it up to them, to make it right, our greatest act of redemption is to loosen the knots, learn from our mistakes, release the memories, surrender the guilt, and move forward in joy and joining in spirit.

Loosening the Knots of Anger mentions bringing up the issues daily and sending them back down again creating circulation in the psyche. As we are able to nurture the hurts and the guilt, at first they may be raw and tender. We may have forgotten about them for years but they still hurt when they surface. We can use the simple forgiveness system of questions. Working with the memories for a time one day, analyzing, gleaning insights, learning from mistakes, then sending them back down again. Then the next day when they come back up, the sting is often not as intense. We can exercise more analysis and nurturing. After a few days or weeks we have integrated the lessons learned and perhaps taken the perspective of the offending party to try to understand their coping mechanism. At this point we take it to the level of symbolism in our lives. Here is a clue about translating into symbolic terms; all injuries represent some form of perceived separation from Source. As we recognize this symbol of perceived separation as a cyclical pattern of futility, we can take the process to the level of universal forgiveness.

In some instances, however, we may get stuck. After analysis and processing—there may come a point where we flounder in the quagmire. We return to the same conclusion and can't get past it. "It was wrong, they shouldn't have done it. Or, I hurt someone and there is no excuse." If after a time of sending the issue up and down the psyche we may still find ourselves ensnared in a tangle of knots that will not loosen, then it is time to rise above the quagmire. We can't really make sense of the muck and the mud. That is the definition of a hopeless morass. We can't expect *not* to get sucked in and dragged down. We can't expect to *not* be smothered by the tar of resentment and guilt when we wallow in it. At some point, we will realize that we need not engage in this futile exercise. We will know it is time for a better way.

I want to share the most simple yet the most effective forgiveness technique. It involves making a conscious choice to rise above the pit

of despair. It is the following statement: "I choose peace." Let's do an exercise to demonstrate the concept. If you are willing and able to, bring to mind an event that has proven difficult to forgive. Let the primary emotion or thought association with the event come to mind. Maybe you have tried to forgive this event, but you can't get to that point, there is a block, a part of you that refuses to forgive because it was so wrong or so hurtful. Try letting this idea come to mind: "I choose peace. I choose peace instead of this. I choose peace." This is a powerful universal technique that can be used in especially difficult instances. In addition, 'I choose peace' will work in virtually every single instance of conflict. Imagine the implications—I choose not to engage in the dance of anger. I choose not to wallow in the quagmire. I choose to step out of the cycle of action-reaction, I choose peace. This may be your form of forgiveness or it may be a step toward forgiveness. In most cases when I find it difficult to forgive, I find it is easy to choose peace.

Think about the issue I asked you to apply this to. If you just chose peace in your mind, how does that issue feel now? Has the tension level decreased? Does it feel less prickly? Do you feel more peaceful? Think about how choosing inner peace circumvents so many unhealthy struggles. As we choose peace within, it doesn't matter what storms rage on the exterior. Things may settle down, or they may become more volatile as the confused other party tries to engage us in the dance of anger, tries to push our buttons to get the reaction they seek. The storm may pick up for a time, but anchoring to deep inner peace, the storm will blow over. We may be pleasantly surprised how the whole dynamic changes when we simply choose peace. We may realize how much we contributed to the turbulent storm.

Memories can be dealt with even more easily with this technique. We may be holding on to a bitter memory. Choosing peace is not saying its okay that they hurt us. It is simply saying we choose to withdraw from the ugly cycle of resentment. "I choose peace."

Another beautiful variation is "I choose compassion." When someone has a spiritual experience, they often say 'it was so amazing, words cannot describe the feeling I had' I feel that words cannot describe the amazing power of divine penetrating illumination. But the simple word "compassion" is as close as I can come to conveying it. Compassion means unconditional love, connection to essence, heartfelt empathy, and the power of forgiveness. Compassion. I choose compassion.

The final exercise I invite you to participate in, might be hard to do in 100 degree heat, but I'd like for you to imagine a time when you were freezing cold, shivering and miserable, chilled to the bone. What did you do to warm up? Did you wrap up in a warm blanket, maybe even an electric blanket. Maybe you drank hot tea to warm up from the inside. After a time, the soothing warmth helps your temperature equalize. Now bring to mind a person with whom you have had continuing conflict. First, imagine wrapping a soft comfortable blanket of compassion around yourself. Let it permeate your being. Drink it in like a comforting cup of tea. When you have absorbed compassion to a point of saturation, think of the person you have been in conflict with, huddled and shivering, miserable from some manifestation of fear and lack of love; look deeply into their eyes and wrap a tender blanket of compassion around them. Offer them the healing elixir of compassion. Feel how they respond? They grasp the blanket and pull it closer around themselves, calming the frigid fear, soothing their pain; they needed the comfortable blanket of compassion. They sip the healing elixir, letting it absorb deeply. Their behaviors look different when we see their true need. This person may continue to act out in hurtful ways, however, when something in ourselves shifts to connect with their essence, we no longer feel the need to engage in the conflict. We choose peace; we choose compassion. We are empowered by the Power of Forgiveness.

I close with Mahatma Gandhi's words on the forgiveness process:

I offer you peace. I offer you love. I offer you friendship. I see your beauty. I hear your need. I feel your feelings. My wisdom flows from the Highest Source. I salute that Source in you. Let us work together for unity and love.

Thank you for your time today. I appreciate your interest and participation. It has been a fascinating journey to explore these ideas and share them with you.

Lara Pollock