With or Without Repentance: A Buddhist Take on Forgiveness

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Abstract. Forgiveness is mostly seen as a virtuous human response to wrongful conduct. But what happens when there is no acknowledgement of wrongdoing on the part of the wrongdoer? Does the forgiveness of the unrepentant still count as forgiveness? The Fourteenth Dalai Lama, for instance, is a figure who highly promotes the value of forgiveness. His homeland has been occupied by China since 1950, yet he maintains that he forgives and feels no enmity towards the Chinese government. The Chinese authorities, for their part, have never admitted to wrongful invasion of the 'roof of the world', hence there has been no acceptance of the Dalai Lama's forgiveness. Can the Dalai Lama's forgiving under these circumstances, however, still be seen as forgiveness? In the present contribution, I shed light on the Buddhist view on forgiveness in the hope of inspiring ideas that might contribute to the pursuit of peace. Firstly, I explore certain matters surrounding the general idea of forgiveness and subsequently introduce Buddhist perspectives. Secondly, I respond to the key question of this paper by highlighting the Dalai Lama's views as a means to elaborate on the Buddhist stance. I conclude by comparing Buddhist points of view with some contemporary philosophical perspectives and illustrating some distinguishing features of the Buddhist notion of forgiveness. From the above, I endeavour to establish that the Buddhist take on forgiveness is ultimately unconditional.[1]

Keywords. Buddhism, the 14th Dalai Lama, forgiveness, wrongdoing, repentance

I. Introduction

As we witness the persistence of irreconcilable conflicts between various countries in the world today, the topic of forgiveness is becoming ever more pertinent to our hopes of achieving global peace. Contemporary reflections on forgiveness largely unravel its relations with concepts such as love, faith, virtue, morality, justice, punishment, and reconciliation.[2]

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Some fascinating topics include the possibility of third-party forgiveness or state forgiveness,[3] the religious relevance of forgiveness as interpreted by the Judaic, Christian and Muslim traditions,[4] as well as various ways in which forgiveness is explained through certain historical events.[5] Views on the scope and application of forgiveness are indeed diverse,[6] and the broader interpretation of forgiveness is often applied in research areas from ethics, morality and politics to sociology, psychology and physiology.[7] Another approach that holds particular appeal is the philosophical dimension of forgiveness.[8] Although the discussions are multi-faceted, the general consensus seems to be that forgiveness is a positive human response to the wrongful actions of a fellow human. But is forgiveness reasonable without acknowledgement of wrongdoing on the part of the transgressor? Put differently, is repentance, or at the very least some degree of *mea culpa* from the side of the wrongdoer, necessary to make forgiveness feasible?[9]

One of the most concrete present-day examples of forgiveness is perhaps the approach of the fourteenth Dalai Lama towards China. His homeland was invaded by the Chinese government in the middle of the twentieth century, effectively placing the culture and religious traditions of his people under threat, yet the Dalai Lama maintains that he forgives China's leaders for their actions and harbours no resentment.[10] Although the Dalai Lama chooses to forgive, it is a known fact that China's leaders have consistently refrained from publicly admitting to the wrongful occupation of Tibet. This means that there has been no indication of acceptance from China with respect to the Dalai Lama's kindness. On the contrary, the Chinese consider Tibet to be a part of ancient China and believe that Chinese governance is essential to the future development and benefit of the Tibetan region.

Starting from 1950, the Chinese government branded their occupation of all territories, including Tibet, a movement of 'liberation' (*jie fang* 解放). Among other things, occupation was seen as a necessary step towards eradicating inequalities that separated rich and poor, imperials and civilians, vested interests and disadvantaged minorities. From the government's

atheistic perspective, the occupation of Tibet was further required to liberate the local population from the long-term domination of the age-old religious belief system. The Tibetan people, on the other hand, regard Buddhism as their most precious cultural and spiritual asset. Moreover, their religious leaders have historically also served as political leaders.[11] So disagreement between the spiritual worldview of the Tibetans and the materialist ideology of the Chinese Communist government was going to be unavoidable.[12] From a Marxist point of view, religious practice is more of a superstition than a real solution to human problems. Rather than being seen as an infringement of human rights, the systematic transformation of Tibetan culture, therefore, is viewed as facilitating the future growth of Tibet.[13]

Just as ideological differences have contributed to strained relations between different religious groups, so tensions have continued to mar cooperative efforts between the Chinese Communists and the *T*ibetans. The often heated confrontations bear testimony to more than mere disagreements over territory and economic benefit. It could also be seen as a case of the materialistic approach of a communist government being pitted against the idealist worldview of an age-old spiritual tradition. While the Dalai Lama has forgiven the Chinese for the damage brought about by the invasion of Tibet, the Chinese have never seemed to consider their harsh stance untenable. In fact, from the Chinese government's standpoint, the Dalai Lama ought to be grateful for their efforts to assist Tibet in moving forward.

And so we arrive at the question: is forgiveness still forgiveness in the absence of repentance? There is no doubt that Buddhism advocates forgiveness, but is repentance on the part of the transgressor a necessary condition for a Buddhist to rightfully forgive? Specifically, is the Dalai Lama's forgiveness of the Chinese government justifiable? In this article, I try to illustrate that, above and beyond the usual moral and social dimensions of forgiveness, the Buddhist practice of forgiveness also has spiritual and transcendent aspects; and that because of these aspects, forgiveness is unconditional and repentance is not compulsory for a victim to forgive the wrongdoer.

II. Does the Buddhist Notion of Forgiveness Presuppose Repentance?

The Latin root of the word 'forgive' is '*perdonare*', which means 'to give completely, without reservation'. Forgiving may therefore involve an act completely abolishing any feelings of resentment or retribution. Forgiveness is a dyadic interaction involving a wrongdoer and a wronged party, and the act of forgiving is generally considered a way in which victims of wrongdoing cease to harbour negative emotions towards the wrongdoer and endeavour to restore their relationship with the wrongdoer (Hughes and Warmke 2017). As such, it is seen as an appropriate virtuous response to wrongful or unfair treatment.

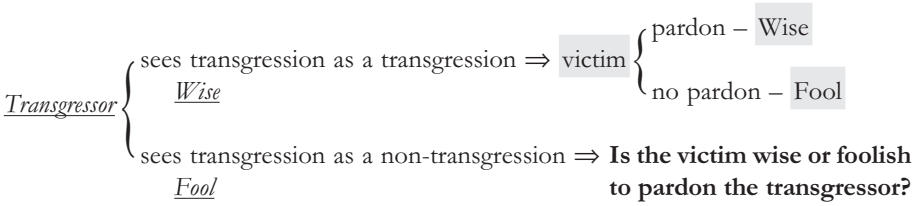
Forgiveness forms an integral part of the daily practice of both Buddhist clergy and lay practitioners.[14] Verses 3 and 4 of the *Dhammapada* (1986) record the following words of the Buddha:

> "He abused me, he ill-treated me, he got the better of me, he stole my belongings" […] the enmity of those harboring such thoughts cannot be appeased. "He abused me, he ill-treated me, he got the better of me, he stole my belongings;" […] the enmity of those not harboring such thoughts can be appeased.

We can see from the above that the Buddha discourages thoughts that would engender enmity. Hatred is never appeased by hatred, but is appeased by loving-kindness alone. Although forgiveness may not correspond precisely with the fourth perfection or *pāramitā* of forbearance (Pāli: *khanti*/ Sanskrit: *kṣānti*) as put forth in both Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhism, both represent a virtuous response to harm brought upon oneself by the conduct of another.[15] Such conduct may include anything from lies to verbal offense or even physical assault. A crucial aspect of *khanti* is foregoing thoughts of retaliation, something which may in itself be seen as forgiving and thus necessary to maintain an attitude of forbearance. For our present purposes, I will therefore treat forgiveness as a quality inherent in forbearance and provisionally define forgiveness as acknowledging the harm of others leniently without thoughts of further revenge.

The spirit of forgiveness is an emphasized characteristic often stressed in Buddhist scriptures. In the *Dhammapada* (1986), for example, verses 184, 197, 202, illustrate a similar spirit. The *Saṃyutta Nikāya* (SN) 11.4 further advises that repaying an angry person with anger makes things worse not only for others but for oneself as well. It is also said that not repaying an angry person with anger, is the cause for winning a battle that is hard to win.[16] The *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (AN) 2.21 and the SN 11.24 explain that there are two types of fools: the first being a person who does not see his or her transgression as a transgression, and the second, one who does not rightfully pardon (in accordance with the Dhamma) another who has confessed his or her transgression. There are also two types of wise people: the first being one who sees his or her transgression as a transgression, and second, one who rightfully pardons another who has confessed his or her transgression (Bodhi 2012, 150-151; Thanissaro 2010; Bodhi 2000, 339).

While relief and recovery may easily occur during forgiveness, the Buddhist view on forgiveness of wrongdoing appears to be straightforward: forgiving brings happiness, and harbouring hostility brings suffering. But how is forgiveness viewed in cases where the transgressor has not confessed his or her transgression? Is confession or repentance a necessary precondition to the Buddhist practice of pardoning or forgiving? This dilemma could perhaps be presented as follows:



The key question I wish to address in this article is whether this victim is wise or foolish to pardon the transgressor. That is, if a transgressor does not acknowledge his/her transgression as such and fails to confess, is the victim still expected to forgive? In the absence of repentance, is a

Buddhist practitioner's act of forgiving still a 'rightful pardon', one that accords with the Dhamma? If so, what are the reasons for this being so? In the following section, I argue that forgiveness is a crucial Buddhist spiritual practice, which does not presuppose repentance as a necessary prerequisite.

III. Unconditional Forgiveness in Buddhism

Having defeated his opponent in philosophical debate, Āryadeva, a scholar from the Mādhyamika tradition and student of the famed master Nāgārjuna, was killed by his opponent. During his dying moments, however, Āryadeva forgave his attacker and displayed deep compassion towards him, giving him daily supplies and advising him on a viable escape route while imparting the Buddhadharma to him.[17] Although we do not know whether his attacker showed repentance, both Āryadeva and the fourteenth Dalai Lama's attitude towards their transgressors could be summarized as follows: all wrongdoing is rooted in ignorance and suffering; forgiveness is both an act of compassion towards another and a means to achieve self-transformation; and, we should be grateful to those who hurt us as they give us an opportunity to advance spiritually.

All Wrongdoing is Rooted in Ignorance and Suffering

In Buddhist teachings, the first contributing factor to any wrongful act is considered to be an ignorant state of mind. The Buddhist practice of loving-kindness helps to engender a sense of sympathy for the transgressor. Just as it is not the bite of a snake that kills us, but rather the poison; it is the presence of ignorance in the mind of the transgressor that is at fault, rather than the transgressor him or herself. When we reflect on our enemies in this way, a sense of forgiveness naturally arises in our mind. This same approach to forgiveness is illustrated in Jesus' appeal: "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing" (Luke 23,34 NIV).

In the Buddhist framework, there would be two compelling reasons to forgive the transgressions of another: firstly, those who harm us do so because they are in a state of ignorance which causes them to experience pain and suffering;[18] and secondly, even though the transgressor may not currently be experiencing any pain or suffering and may not be aware of his or her state of ignorance, the negative karma created by a wrongful deed will eventually ripen in future suffering. The realization that our adversaries will have to suffer in future engenders a sense of real concern for their wellbeing, and negates the impulse to feel anger or hatred towards them (Dalai Lama *et al.* 2016, 33).

Forgiveness as An Act of Compassion

The Buddhist view that suffering is an inescapable part of cyclic existence helps to generate compassion (Pali: *mettā-karuṇa*/Sanskrit: *maitrī-karuṇa*) towards others. In the teachings of the Mahayana tradition in particular, a Bodhisattva is a Buddha-to-be who works tirelessly for the benefit of sentient beings, even to the point of being willing to sacrifice his or her own life in order to serve others.[19] Bodhisattvas are in fact encouraged to cultivate a level of compassion which allows for unlimited and universal forgiveness, such that there is nobody and nothing that cannot be forgiven. Since compassion is seen as an antidote to suffering, the practice of forgiveness is invariably recommended for the benefit of the Buddhist practitioner – irrespective of whether there is repentance from the transgressor.

The Dalai Lama often points out that the main aim of living is to achieve ultimate happiness, and that a crucial way to realize this aim is by cultivating compassion and altruism. Compassion is rooted in the Buddhist teaching of dependent origination (Pali: *paṭicca-samuppāda*/ Sanskrit: *pratītya-samutpāda*) which aims to reveal the interrelatedness of all things and help a practitioner realize the true nature of existence. All beings have at some time in the past (i.e. previous lives) been our relatives, just as we

have at some time been theirs. In this present life, our friends and our enemies have the same right as we do to experience happiness and avoid suffering. 'Exchanging-self-for-other' is a Buddhist practice in which the practitioner visualizes him or herself as another sentient being who is experiencing suffering, thus allowing them to stand in the shoes of a transgressor and take on the suffering of another. Other Buddhist meditation methods allow a practitioner to visualize transgressors as their brothers or sisters in order to generate compassion for them. We are all equal in that we all transgress out of ignorance. With this interconnected empathy, compassion and forgiveness flows naturally (Dalai Lama *et al.* 2004, 109-112; 117-123; 134; 169; 177).[20]

Forgiveness as A Matter of Self-Interest

The Buddhist idea of interrelatedness implies that if good things happen to others, we too derive advantage, whether in the short or long run. By contrast, if other people suffer, we suffer too. Hence, the practice of forgiveness benefits both others and ourselves. That is, forgiveness helps to achieve not only external harmony with others, but also internal harmony with ourselves. Since hatred is an undesirable internal state of mind and a form of self-punishment, a victim has a duty to cultivate a forgiving attitude for his own sake.

Forgiveness is not only a form of self-interest, but indeed the best form of self-interest (Dalai Lama *et al.* 2004, 69). Only victims with hatred in their hearts can truly be considered victims. By recognizing our own anger as the real enemy, the Dalai Lama (2001, 104-105) singles out forbearance as the mental quality which enables us to prevent negative thoughts and emotions from taking hold – forbearance safeguards our peace of mind in the face of adversity. If we harbour animosity and refuse to practice forgiveness, we disturb our own equanimity and give rise to unwholesome thoughts which can be detrimental to both our mental and physical health. Viewed in this light, hostility is a form of fearful weakness;

and by allowing it to arise in our minds, we will be consolidating egoistic-safety in a deluded way. Forgiving others is thus a way of setting ourselves free from the prison of our own inner torments and a powerful remedy that aids our spiritual growth.

Being Grateful to Those Who Indirectly Uplift Us

It can be said that a life well-lived is one in which the inner virtues are cultivated. Forgiveness is one such virtue that is closely linked to other wholesome mental states. Besides being a precursor to compassion and protecting us from the harmful mental state of hatred, forgiveness helps to develop tolerance, comity, forbearance, endurance, mercy, softness, kindness and magnanimity. Thus one indirect consequence of choosing to forgive is that we become a better person. As the Dalai Lama (1999, 77-78; 2004, 111; 234-235) explains: we ought to regard the enemy as a precious teacher because our adversaries provide an opportunity to practice patience and tolerance, and to cultivate forgiveness and compassion.

By reflecting on the opportunity that adversity presents in so much as it creates the very environment which allows us to learn the value of patient forbearance and practice disciplined behaviour (Dalai Lama 2001, 107), we can generate a sense of gratitude towards those who bring harm upon us. But if we choose to retaliate, we simply perpetuate the cycle of affliction by creating more negative karma. Practicing forgiveness also helps us deal with adversity in a more mature manner, hence we should feel grateful whenever challenging life experiences arise, despite the discomfort they may bring. Some great religious traditions exhort the cultivation of a similar attitude towards our adversaries. Jesus for example, taught that we ought to love our enemies (Matthew 5,44-45 NIV); and instead of retaliating, we should accept insults and willingly give to those who ask anything of us (Luke 6,29 NIV). Such practices may appear somewhat foolish at first, yet forgiving with a thankful heart not only strengthens the transformative and therapeutic effects of the act of

forgiving, but is moreover beneficial for developing a moral character and actualizing noble states of mentality.

Irrespective of whether the transgressor has repented or not, forgiveness is indispensable to the Buddhist training of compassion and mental stabilization. The value of this practice lies primarily in the betterment of oneself, not so much for anyone else. This especially holds true when a person intentionally chooses to develop morally and spiritually. From an egocentric point of view, forgiveness is necessary to maintain mental calmness; but from an altruistic point of view, forgiveness is essential to the cultivation of compassion. Forgiveness is a vital Buddhist practice in both the bodhisattva and the arahant or liberation traditions – irrespective of whether or not there is repentance by the transgressor.

IV. Contemporary Views on Forgiveness: Comparison with Buddihist Viewpoints

The Buddhist practice of forgiving is basically a spiritual concern which is not founded on the premise of repentance. It is therefore not surprising that the Dalai Lama opts to forgive the Chinese occupation of Tibet, even in the absence of acknowledgement of wrongdoing from the Chinese government. In what follows, I will not only point out the possible resonances with some contemporary philosophical views on forgiveness, but also highlight some distinguishing features of the Buddhist practice of forgiveness.

Within contemporary academic circles, some consider forgiveness as a virtue, while others see it as a norm. Proponents of forgiveness of the unrepentant emphasize the sentimental aspects of personal virtues, while those opposed to it adopt a more rational approach to establishing certain objective norms. Forgiveness as a norm suggests that forgiveness itself is contingent on certain criteria being satisfied by the offender. In his book *Forgiveness: A Philosophical Exploration,* Charles Griswold identifies several

conditions that make an offender worthy of forgiveness (Griswold 2007, 49-51):

i. accepting responsibility for the wrongdoing
ii. repudiating the wrongdoing (by acknowledging wrongness)
iii. experiencing and expressing regret
iv. committing to becoming better in future
v. 'sympathy' with the injured person
vi. a *narrative* account for the harm caused and how he or she is becoming worthy of approbation

Being governed by intersubjective or objective norms, conditional forgiveness implies that the act of forgiving is anything but subjective – it is not given or received merely because one assumes that it has been. Furthermore, because conditional forgiveness is a relational event, it ought to be understood as an interpersonal moral relationship between two parties. This relationship not only presupposes reciprocity between the offended and offending parties but also demands a legitimate context for the use of the term forgiveness – the offended party is not obligated to forgive the offending party, and the offender's remorse does not imply that he or she is always deserving of forgiveness.[21] Seen in this light, forgiveness takes on an almost 'gift-like nature' for both the offended and offending parties.

Now although the offended party may refuse to forgive the offender, he or she could still have a duty to treat themselves with benevolence. In her book *Forgiveness and Retribution: Responding to Wrongdoing* (2012), Margaret Holmgren argues that it is imperative that we forgive those who have ill-treated us. Forgiveness, she explains, is always the appropriate response to wrongdoing – but only after working through a process of addressing the wrong. She believes that the offender may not deserve the merit of forgiveness, yet the offended party very much does. Glen Pettigrove (2012a) similarly argues for the necessity of forgiveness without restricting conditions, while pointing to the fact that our tendency to link forgiveness to conditions of deservedness ends up excluding an important dimension of forgiveness – its connection with grace. This implies that morally

admirable forgiving is something that has to be done for moral intents alone. That is, for the sake of grace, one might opt to forgive for moral reasons that bear no relation to whether or not the offender is deserving of forgiveness.

We can therefore consider the two different inclinations to forgiveness as follows: one takes forgiveness as an objective norm, while the other sees it as a moral virtue. From the discussion so far, it is obvious that the Buddhist sense of forgiveness leans more towards the second by virtue of being regarded as an act of compassion and beneficence, and moreover because it is seen as an inescapable part of moral and spiritual practice. Since forgiveness contributes towards the Buddhist aim of achieving cessation of suffering, it is not merely a matter of moral concern, but also a spiritual activity that encourages spiritual growth. Hence 'intrapersonal' forgiveness, contrary to interpersonal or person-to-person forgiveness, is not only possible but also plausible. Apart from its moral and social dimensions, forgiveness in Buddhism thus has a clear transcendent or soteriological objective. While forgiveness is mainly an internal exercise and is beneficial to the end of suffering, not merely serving the function of wholesomeness or psychotherapy, but representing the virtuous character of a person, repentance is not absolutely necessary for the Buddhist practice of forgiveness. The Buddhist perspective is therefore that forgiveness should be unconditional. No prior qualification is needed to render an offender worthy of forgiveness, and no acknowledgement of wrongdoing is required on his or her part. In cases where the offender and the offended do not know each other, or in cases of mistaken identity, or even when an unrepentant offender has perished,[22] forgiveness is still needed in order to help the victim achieve inner peace, or even actuate sublimation. And the restoration of a broken relationship does not necessarily presuppose repentance, especially when claims of who is in the wrong diverge, or when the harm between both sides is serious and complicated.

In some ways, forgiving with a kind heart is similar to expressions of 'thankfulness' or an 'apology'. It is possible, for example, to feel immense

gratitude towards somebody and express it wholeheartedly, even if the person we are thanking believes he or she had no intention to benefit us, did nothing special and is not deserving of our gratitude. In such cases, our sincere thankfulness toward the benefactor can still be regarded as thankfulness despite a lack of acknowledgement. When viewed in this light, gratitude and forgiveness are both manifestations of personal virtue that do not postulate reciprocity from those we show kindness towards. In the same way, a sincere apology is not necessarily subject to hurtful experience on the part of the one who receives our apology. When we are aware of a wrongful act and apologize to the one we hurt, the apology will be meaningful even if the one we believed we had hurt never experienced any feelings of being hurt. Also, when we express our apology to someone who did experience feelings of being hurt, even if he or she does not accept our apology, the apology will still be valuable as long as it was expressed sincerely. This is partially the reason why the Buddhist perspective on forgiveness emphasizes the volition of the subject: as long as the mind that expresses it is pure and truthful, the mental sublimation associated with the virtue will be generated in the subject.[23]

V. Unique Characteristics of the Buddhist Perspective on Forgiveness

Forgiveness as a Buddhist spiritual practice has at least four unique characteristics: it is intention-based, it is devoid of self-attachment, it is considered a practical competency, and it is an indication of prudence and mental strength.

Intention-Based Forgiveness

As previously noted, the Buddhist perspective on forgiveness emphasizes volition precisely because the accumulation of karma is closely linked to the quality of our mental state. All mental activities such as intentions,

thoughts, perceptions, imagination and so forth directly impact the process of karmic accumulation. To quote the Buddha: "It is volition (*cetanā*), bhikkhus, that I call kamma. For having willed, one acts by body, speech, or mind" (AN III, 415; Bodhi 2012, 963). Since the subject's mentality is like a field on which the seeds of karma are continuously sown, any intent of kindness towards another can be likened to the planting of a seed that could potentially ripen into a positive result for the subject. What is indeed paramount to determining the karmic potential generated through the act of forgiving, is the mental volition of the forgiver. For this reason, provided that the subject is able to maintain a sincere thought of forgiveness and forsake harmful thought, the mental quality generated in his or her mind will not be influenced in any way by the presence or absence of the offender's repentance.[24]

Due to the importance of intention, forgiveness comes into existence, not from an objective recognition, but from subjective validation. When we are intentionally, and also thoughtfully, willing to forgive, the so-called forgiveness is generally established. To illustrate this point, the Dalai Lama (1999, 78) cites Shantideva's view on intention: it is through the intention of harm that we classify a person as an enemy, and it is also through the intention of forgiveness that we will be released from the vicious cycle of suffering. Since our intentions determine our relationship with others and the outside world, it does not make sense to define the enemy as an external agent – our inner negative thoughts and emotions remain the major enemy (Dalai Lama 2002, 84-85).

Detached Forgiveness

Since Buddhist theory holds that all things are impermanent and devoid of a 'self-essence', today's enemy could possibly become tomorrow's friend. This means that forgiveness is not only possible, but also a plausible course of action (Dalai Lama *et al.* 2004, 112). And according to the Buddhist theory of emptiness (*śūnyatā*), the 'three wheels' are empty

during an act of giving (*dāna*): there is no agent that gives, no receiver, and no gift. Similarly, during an act of forgiving, ultimately there is no agent who forgives, no one who is being forgiven and there is no wrong-doing to be forgiven. When we try to hold a superior kind of view and not lower ourselves to the same level as the one who hurt us, forgiveness represents one's noble quality and spiritual status. But paradoxically, if it is really a spiritual practice, forgiveness should not imply the forgiver must be superior to those he has forgiven. Strictly speaking, it should be different from pardon or absolving, which considers remission from top to bottom or from the higher levels to the lower ones. Since a truly moral deed should be selfless, true forgiveness is also without any egoistic concern.

Attachment to an absolutely existent 'self' diminishes the beneficial value of virtuous acts. The soteriological aim of achieving the cessation of suffering is a salient feature of both the Theravada and Mahayana paths, and without the realization of the truth of 'non-self' (Pali: *anattā*/ Sanskrit: *anātman*), a practitioner is unable to cut the mental afflictions and achieve individual liberation. A Bodhisattva who is on the path of the Mahayana aims to achieve full enlightenment, and therefore needs to go a step further in not only realizing the emptiness of 'self,' but also the emptiness of all things. So while different Buddhist traditions may have varying degrees of understanding with regards to the ultimate nature of reality, the purest form of forgiveness is seen to be one that conforms to the theory of selflessness and emptiness.

Forgiveness as a Competency

It is not hard to imagine a scenario where someone outwardly chooses to forgive his or her adversaries while nonetheless harbouring some sense of anger and resentment within. We know that we *ought* to forgive others unconditionally, yet this does not mean we are always *able* to do so. As a Buddhist spiritual practice, forgiveness is not merely a conceptual

understanding or idealistic imperative, but also a matter of pragmatic competence. The more a practitioner is able to forgive, the suppler the mind becomes and the easier it becomes to forgive again in future.

The mental strength that comes with practicing forgiveness is moreover not dependent on a person's educational background or the amount of knowledge previously acquired – an illiterate person could well have a stronger capacity to forgive than the most erudite of scholars. The previous quote from the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* (SN) 11.24 which makes the distinction between the 'wise' person and the 'fool' does not make reference to varying levels of knowledge, but rather varying levels of personal cultivation. A good character and a benevolent disposition are both products of sustained mental training and refinement. The various methods recorded in the Buddhist classics for practicing forgiveness are thus all aimed at increasing our concrete capacity to forgive. When we train in insightful awareness and compassion and cultivate mental stability, our ability to forgive becomes progressively firmer and stronger.

Forgiveness as an Indication of Prudence and Strength

Forgiveness does not necessarily mean blind acceptance of others' faults. On the contrary, we can be compassionate towards our adversaries yet still be intolerant of their misconduct. By standing firm against wrongdoing, we not only protect those who are being harmed, but also the person who is harming others since he or she will eventually suffer too. Punishing wrongdoing, therefore, is not merely for the sake of justice, but also out of a sense of concern for the long-term wellbeing of the transgressor (Dalai Lama 2016, 234). So a willingness to forgive does not preclude punishment. Punishment can be meted out with the intent to allow a transgressor the opportunity to recognize a wrongful deed as a transgression, and afford him or her the chance to make amends with just behaviour. In this sense, punishment is given out of loving-kindness. Rather than a form of retaliation, it is a skilful form of rehabilitation.[25]

The Dalai Lama (2001, 106; 2004, 111-112; 2012, 68-69) emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between the agent who is engaged in wrongdoing, and the act of wrongdoing. When we forgive, we forgive the agent but not the action.[26] In this way, the Dalai Lama can be disapproving of the actions of the Chinese government while not allowing anger and negative feelings to develop in his mind. To quote the Dalai Lama own words:

> Where the wrong action is concerned, it may be necessary to take appropriate counteraction to stop it. Toward the actor, or the person, you can choose not to develop anger and hatred. This is where the power of forgiveness lies – not losing sight of the humanity of the person while responding to the wrong with clarity and firmness (2016, 34).

So when a Buddhist practitioner is forgiving towards others, there is no incongruity in simultaneously condemning wrongful conduct: inappropriate behaviour need not be tolerated at the expense of justice. Forgiveness therefore, should not be equated with 'mere passivity' (Dalai Lama 2001, 104). Adopting countermeasures to a wrongful conduct is not incompatible with forgiveness towards the person. On the contrary, being able to truly forgive the agent, yet maintain a strong stance against the act of wrongdoing is indicative of a practitioner's prudence and inner strength.

VI. Conclusion

In Western philosophy and mainstream monotheistic traditions, repentance is a prerequisite for forgiveness – no apology means no forgiveness. In the Christianity, for example, confession or repentance would be compulsory for God to forgive one's sins. God forgives those who turn to Jesus to confess their sins. Although God's forgiveness seems conditional, in order to receive God's forgiveness, those who wish to attain salvation would forgive their adversaries unconditionally, because the

forgiveness that a Christian receives from God is intimately tied to the forgiveness he or she has for others. That seems to imply that we as human beings should forgive each other as God forgives us.[27]

According to the Buddhist teachings, forgiveness does not take repentance as a necessary precondition – it is unconditional. Even when there is no repentance from the wrongdoer, a Buddhist practitioner will continuously train his or her mind to be supple and practice forgiving. As a spiritual practice, forgiveness not only benefits the one being forgiven but also the one who forgives. Forgiveness in the absence of repentance can perhaps be likened to gratefulness without a particular favour being identified. In the same way as it is possible to feel gratitude without the benefactor admitting to their beneficence, so too it is possible to forgive without any acknowledgement of wrongdoing from an adversary. And just as we are able to generate unconditional gratitude towards everyone for everything, Buddhist wisdom and compassion allows for unconditional forgiveness.

In showing that forgiveness is unconditional in Buddhism, I firstly pointed out that a Buddhist practitioner views ignorance as the main cause of wrongdoing. Secondly, since those who hurt us out of ignorance are in a state of suffering themselves, a Buddhist ideally chooses to generate compassion towards his adversaries instead of anger or hatred. Thirdly, since this process of forgiving transforms the one who forgives, the Buddhist practice of forgiving is not merely intended to benefit others, it serves the practitioner's own interests as well. And finally, because adversity gives us the opportunity to practice virtue and sublimate ourselves, a Buddhist practitioner shall feel a sense of gratitude towards his or her adversaries.

The Buddhist view on forgiveness agrees with certain contemporary philosophical views which hold that it is a gracious response to human wrongdoing, and an act of virtue. The Buddhist practice of forgiveness, however, also has certain features that distinguish it from the ordinary sense of forgiving: it is based on intention, it is devoid of attachment to

'self', it is a practical competency, and it is a sign of a practitioner's prudence and inner strength. Hence, apart from the mundane moral and social dimensions of forgiveness, the Buddhist practice of forgiveness has spiritual and transcendent aspects which enable unconditional forgiveness of wrongdoing in the absence of repentance.[28]

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Notes

1 Many thanks to the anonymous reviewers whose comments and suggestions were indeed helpful. Also many thanks to Ciska Joubert for correcting and rephrasing my English text.

2 Various attitudes toward the virtue of forgiveness over time have been explored by Anthony Bash (2013), while Daniel Philpott (2013) makes compelling arguments on why forgiveness is not necessarily contrary to justice, but indeed a pursuit of the deep justice of restored right relationships. Anas Malik's (2013) views draw on reconciliation to imply that forgiveness is not prior to reconciliation.

3 Margaret Walker (2013) has argued that the justice of forgiveness is not static and although the victim alone can forgive, third parties still play significant roles in making forgiveness more possible, reasonable, or valuable and just. See Walker (2013) for more on third-party forgiveness, and Wolterstorff (2013) for more on state forgiveness.

4 Glen Pettigrove (2012b) suggests that forgiveness is possible without faith in God by pointing out that one might glean moral insights from the Christian tradition even if one no longer endorses its theological commitments.

5 See Mohammed Abu-Nimer and Ilham Nasser (2013) for more.

6 Couenhoven (2013) correctly suggests that forgiveness is such a rich and broad concept and may invite lots of discussions such as what it means to forgive, when to forgive, how to forgive, and how important it is to forgive and so on.

7 Toussaint *et al.* (2015) attempt to establish the positive impact forgiveness may hold for psychological and physical health.

8 See Hughes and Warmke (2017) for an elaborate exposition on the various philosophical accounts of forgiveness. Christel Fricke (2011, 1-5) investigates various ethical theories on forgiveness while paying special attention to philosophical aspects of forgiveness.

9 Acknowledgement of wrongdoing and repentance are separate concepts – repentance always presumes acknowledgement of wrongdoing, while acknowledgement of wrongdoing doesn't necessarily imply repentance. Except in certain special cases where personality disorders or psychic abnormalities come into play, it is usually a reasonable expectation that repentance follows acceptance or acknowledgement of wrongdoing. In this article therefore, I do not draw a sharp distinction between the two.

10 When asked if he harbours feelings of animosity towards the Chinese, the Dalai Lama (2004, 47) responded by saying: "Almost never." He then explained that he carries no resentment and practices meditation to learn to forgive.

11 For nearly four hundred years since the time of the fifth Dalai Lama, the role of the Dalai Lama has been both religious and political. The present Dalai Lama however says that he prefers to be more of a religious leader than a political one. He therefore stepped down in 2011 to allow the Tibetan government-in-exile to serve as a democratic body.

12 The Chinese Communists remain sceptical about the credibility of rebirth and deny the divine authority of reincarnated child-lamas. In one instance, Jiang Zemin (江澤民), who served as the President of the People's Republic of China from 1993 to 2003, took issue at a journalists' conference with the matter of large numbers of adults worshipping a two or three year old boy who had supposedly been identified as their previous master. For anyone lacking the appropriate religious background, it is hard to comprehend the level of reverence often exhibited towards these young monks by their Tibetan followers.

13 Stephen Batchelor was a Buddhist monk trained under the system of the Gelugpa school for eight years, and although he greatly admires the teachings of Tibetan Buddhism, he thinks that there may be some elements of indoctrination present in the teachings. See Batchelor (2011; 2015) for more on his views on the culture of the Tibetan faith. Lopez (1998, 9) also believes that the institution of reincarnated lamas presents some serious inequalities in terms of distribution of worldly power, property and resources, which could potentially lead to various vices.

14 Kornfield (2008) presents a good case in point.

15 For this reason, '*khanti*' is also sometimes translated as 'forgiveness.' See the online version of *The Pali Text Society's Pali-English Dictionary*.

16 *Vepacitti Sutta* (*Scripture on Patience*), see Bodhi (2000, 321-323).

17 See *The Biography of Bodhisattva Āryadeva* in Chinese literature (CBETA, T50, no. 2048, 187, b27-c29). Actually forgiveness is a recurring theme in Buddhist teaching. One such example is the story of Puṇṇa, one of the ten foremost disciples of the Buddha. Once the Buddha asked Puṇṇa what he would think if he was scolded, assaulted or even killed for introducing the Buddhadharma to the savages, and Puṇṇa replied that he would be fortunate to be badly treated under such circumstances. The Buddha then praised Puṇṇa for his forbearance. See the *Sajyukta-āgama sutra* (311) for more.

18 This is similar to one of the Socratic paradoxes that no one desires evil and that all who do evil do not willingly or knowingly do so. In other word, vice is merely the result of ignorance.

19 As Shantideva's *A Guide to Bodhisattva's Way of Life* (*Bodhicaryāvatāra*) teaches that a Bodhisattva should commit himself to all sentient beings without reservation. The *Metta Sutta* also says that we should cherish all living beings with a boundless heart.

20 The Dalai Lama's view on forgiveness and forbearance is highly influenced by Śāntideva's *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, 'exchanging-self-for-other' is a case in point. This practice is inherited from the Buddha, for example in the *Dhammapada* the verses from 129 to 132 clearly reflect the significance of analogical feeling. It would be common to some religious traditions, as the New Testament notes in a similar spirit: "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her" (John 8,7 NIV).

21 Nicholas Wolterstorff (2011, 55) also argues that forgiveness is only possible when there is repentance from the offender, since the act of forgiving someone is simply not possible in the absence of concepts such as right and wrong, justice and injustice. In his view, a victim enacting a resolution to forgive someone who continues to stand behind the deed, essentially fails to treat the deed or its doer with the moral seriousness required for forgiveness. Forgiving an unrepentant wrongdoer not only insults the wrongdoer but also demeans the victim, thereby wronging both parties. Wolterstorff thus highlights the moral and social dimensions of forgiveness by pointing out that forgiveness is normally a response by the victim to indications of repentance on the part of the wrongdoer. While forgiveness is a moral issue, repentance is an invitation to forgiveness, and forgiveness is an act of supererogation. That is, even with repentance from the wrongdoer, the victim has no moral obligation to forgive, though this will be the best thing for him to do. If the victim chooses not to forgive, the victim has no need to feel guilty but feel regret if he finds it impossible to forgive (Wolterstorff 2011, 173-175; 2013, 424).

22 For more of the role of forgiveness with respect to identification of the offender, see Scarre (2016, 1021-1028).

23 It seems we can tentatively conclude that the Buddhist view is that goodwill shown towards others, such as forgiveness, gratitude, apology, etc., holds despite lack of acceptance or acknowledgment. On the other hand, ill-will and unfair treatment, such as punishment, scolding, humiliation, etc., does not hold if others choose to disregard it. As the *Saṃyukta-āgama sutra* (1152) states: "If anyone denounces us in cruel, unwholesome language, we will not be the receivers if we do not accept it. By contrast, if we also respond negatively, we are the truly recipients of the negativity."

24 But the fact that the Buddhist practice of forgiveness does not presuppose repentance on the part of the transgressor does not mean that there is never a need to address the wrong or

affirm that a wrongful act was committed. Even in 'self-forgiveness' a certain level of reflection is required in order to avoid lapsing into 'self-complacency' or the state of being 'overly forgiving,' which would lead to failure of rightful pardon.

25 The Dalai Lama (1999, 108) once noted that the greater the force of our compassion, the greater our resilience in confronting hardships and our ability to transform them into more positive conditions. He also believes (2012, 70) that no conflict exists between the principle of justice and the practices of compassion and forgiveness. To him, the concept of justice is very much based on compassion. So even while choosing forgiveness, he may still speak out against the Chinese occupation of Tibet as a means to point out what he believes to be transgressions against the freedom and dignity of the people of Tibet.

26 Nicholas Wolterstorff (2013, 420) also makes a similar suggestion in saying that forgiveness requires the letting go of negative feelings toward *the wrongdoer* but not the letting go of negative feelings toward the deed. That is, one can fully forgive the wrongdoer while continuing to resent what he did. Interestingly, Wolterstorff (2013, 421-422) also argues that the deed done by the wrongdoer is only a wrong-inflicting component of his personal history, not a negative component of his moral history.

27 To quote a few examples from the New Testament: "Forgive as the Lord forgave you" (Colossians 3,13 NIV); "Forgive, and you will be forgiven" (Luke 6, 37 NIV); "For if you forgive other people when they sin against you, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others their sins, your Father will not forgive your sins" (Matthew 6,14-15 NIV). It is perhaps worthy of note that the modern concept of reciprocal forgiveness did not exist in ancient Greece and Rome, as David Konstan (2010) argues. Forgiveness as a human trait, with its accompanying ideas of apology, remorse, and a change of heart on the part of the wrongdoer, emerged only in the 18th and 19th centuries, as the Christian concept of divine forgiveness was secularized. Forgiveness was God's province, and it took a revolution in thought to bring it to earth and make it a human trait.

28 Admittedly, the discussions presented in this article offer a general overview of the Buddhist perspective on forgiveness, and as such they pertain mainly to the realm of spiritual practice and advancement. A more realistic concern with worldly morality and politics could possibly challenge the Buddhist position on forgiveness. Certain situations might for example require that the Dalai Lama place national justice and national interest before his own spiritual ideals. He might have different stances on forgiveness when acting as a national leader rather than a spiritual guide, since an outward process such as seeking reconciliation between the two sides would precede the inner discipline of forgiveness.