

Forgiveness: Ritual and Efficacy

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A comprehensively revised version
based on the transcript of the talk in
<https://on.soundcloud.com/7gc3K>

Introduction

The topic of today's talk is "Forgiveness". I was prompted to research this subject after receiving a very thoughtful comment from a lady who attended one of my retreats.

As you know, one of the rituals during retreats is to ask for forgiveness. This forgiveness ceremony has become a standard ritual during retreats in all traditions. The thoughtful lady found this ritual of asking for forgiveness to be contradictory to the teachings of anatta.

This is what she wrote to me:

"My doubt on asking for forgiveness arose because of my understanding of the Buddhist teachings on non-self. When you forgive, or ask for forgiveness, it implies that there is a self that is hurt or offended. But, if you understand the teachings of non-self, you will never be hurt or offended, right?"

Hence, the practice of forgiveness does not lead to wisdom. In fact, it perpetuates wrong view. The practice is neither skilful nor wholesome. It merely appears to be so. The offeree feels good if he or she is able to forgive. The offender also feels good if his or her request for forgiveness is accepted. The good feeling experience is an impediment to our practice towards liberation. It serves to perpetuate wrong understanding at best and increases or reinforces our delusion of an egoistic self at worst.

The asking for forgiveness ceremony, though it is a standard ritual for almost all retreats, is ironically very much at odds with the teachings received at retreats, especially teachings on anatta or non-self in vipassanā retreats.

We learn about non-self and this is an important practice point in vipassanā. Yet we conclude each retreat with the asking of forgiveness

for offending or hurting yourself or another retreatant's self. It is such a contradiction.”

Her arguments are very logical, right? If you agree that asking for forgiveness is to make you feel good, and forgiving is to make the person who is offended feel good, then it seems we should stop this practice during our retreats as it serves to reinforce the delusion of an egoistic self.

To answer her question, I decided to look deeper into the purpose and efficacy of the ritual of asking for forgiveness and whether it conflicts with the Buddha's teachings on anatta.

Realising An Offence and Seeking Forgiveness

Let us first take a look at some examples of seeking forgiveness that can be found in the Pāḷi Canon. This usually happens when someone has transgressed a rule or committed an offence. The person realises it, makes a confession, and asks for forgiveness.

Case Study 1: King Ajātasattu

The first example is the case of King Ajātasattu. In the Sāmaññaphala Sutta (DN 2) King Ajātasattu approaches the Buddha and makes the following confession:

“A transgression overcame me, Lord, in that I was so foolish, so muddled-headed and so unskilled as to kill my father, a righteous man, a righteous king, for the sake of sovereign rulership. May the Blessed One please accept this confession of my transgression as such, so that I may restrain myself in future.”

This is, in fact, the standard formula used in the Vinaya, as well as in other cases where lay people may have committed an offence against a monk. For example, if someone spoke rudely to a monk or insulted him, then he should make a confession in this way:

“A transgression overcame me, Bhante, in that I was so foolish, so muddled-headed and so unskilled as to insult you in public. May Bhante please accept this confession of my transgression as such, so that I may restrain myself in future.”

As you can see, the standard formula can be adapted according to the context; in this case changing from King Ajātasattu's confession that he killed his father, a righteous man, a righteous king for the sake of sovereign rulership, to someone's confession that he insulted a monk in public.

When a confession was made in this way, the Buddha would say:

“Surely, great king, a transgression overcame you in that you were so foolish, so muddled-headed and so unskilled as to kill your father, a righteous man, a righteous king, for the sake of sovereign rulership. But because you see your transgression as such and make amends in accordance with the Dhamma, we accept your confession.”

This formula can be adapted as a response to the person who confessed to being rude. Confession and recognition of one’s offence is a cause for growth in the Dhamma and in the discipline of the noble ones, when seeing a transgression as such, one makes amends in accordance with the Dhamma and exercises restraint in the future. It is when you realise your transgression and you confess, that you have a chance to make amends for it and to restrain yourself in future.

A Monk’s Confession

In the Vinaya, when a monk wants to make a confession to another monk, he must approach the other monk and say: “I committed such an offence.” Then the other monk will ask him: “Do you see that offence?” And the first monk will answer: “Yes I do.” The second monk will then say: “In future, please restrain yourself.” This is the standard way of making a confession.

If a monk did not commit any offence but goes to another monk to confess, what is he going to say when he is asked: “Do you see your offence?” If he says, Yes, but actually did not know or realise it, then it will be *musāvāda* or false speech. And *that* will be a real offence. This is why the Buddha said, “If you do not have any offence, you cannot confess.” Confessing without any offence is an offence in itself.

The important point to note is that you make the confession only when you realise that you did something wrong. You realise it, then you confess. It is not a blanket confession as if you were to say: “Bhante, if I have offended you in any way, whether by thought, speech or action, whether intentionally or unintentionally, please forgive me.” This kind of blanket confession does not count as we cannot confess for something that we are not aware of having done. In any case, if you make a blanket confession for whatever was done, intentionally or unintentionally, you don’t know what happened and you’re likely to repeat it in future. That does not make sense, right?

Confession and Forgiveness

So far, the discussion is about a confession on the part of the offender rather than about forgiveness on the part of the receiver, who may not necessarily be offended. In the case of King Ajātasattu who killed his father, realised his

mistake, and made the confession in front of the Buddha, the Buddha forgave him or rather accepted King Ajātasattu's confession. In this case, it was not the Buddha who was offended as the confession was about a transgression against someone else, i.e. King Ajātasattu's father.

Perhaps his transgression had been plaguing King Ajātasattu for a long time but there was no one that he could confess to. Then, perhaps while he was listening to the Buddha's Dhamma talk, his mind became composed. That is one of the advantages of listening to a Dhamma talk. If you listen to a Dhamma talk intently, then the five hindrances are abandoned, and your mind is ready for spiritual enlightenment. King Ajātasattu could not get enlightened because his past transgression was blocking him. But when his mind was clear enough, he realised his transgression was really a grievous mistake. So he made the confession in front of the Buddha, who forgave him.

This case obviously involves selves—there is one self who killed another self and is confessing to a third self. The third self accepts the confession and extends forgiveness. In the conventional world that we live in, this kind of forgiving process is not unusual. When it happens, the selves involved may feel good. But this kind of feeling good is not unwholesome or an impediment to spiritual progress. It helps us to lay down a burden, and may help us to let go and move on.

The above example is not a case of an offender being forgiven by the person he directly offended. But there are other examples of a direct request by the offende to the offender and vice versa.

Case Study 2: Āyasmā Sāriputta

One such example can be found in the Sīhanāda Sutta (AN 9.11), in which a bhikkhu, for some reason such as perhaps jealousy or some malevolent intent, made a false accusation against Āyasmā Sāriputta. He went to the Buddha and informed that Āyasmā Sāriputta brushed against his robe as he was passing him. He took offence to this and was thus complaining to the Buddha. The Buddha called Āyasmā Sāriputta to come up and to verify whether the accusation was true or not.

At the end of the cross-examination, the bhikkhu who had made the accusation realised that he had committed an offence. He rose from his seat, arranged his upper robe over one shoulder, prostrated himself with his head at the Buddha's feet and said to the Blessed One:

“Bhante, I have committed a transgression in that I so foolishly, stupidly, and unskilfully slandered the Venerable Sāriputta on grounds that are

untrue, baseless, and false. Bhante, may the Blessed One accept my transgression, seen as a transgression, for the sake of future restraint.”

Then the Buddha answered:

“Surely, Bhikkhu, you have committed a transgression in that you so foolishly, stupidly, and unskillfully slandered the Venerable Sāriputta on grounds that are untrue, baseless, and false. But since you see your transgression as a transgression and make amends for it in accordance with the Dhamma, we accept it. It is growth in a noble one’s discipline that one sees one’s transgression as a transgression, makes amends for it in accordance with the Dhamma and undertakes future restraint.”

The Blessed One then addressed the Venerable Sāriputta:

“Sāriputta, pardon this hollow man before his head splits into seven pieces right here.”

And Āyasmā Sāriputta answered:

“I will pardon this venerable one, Bhante, if this venerable one says to me, “Let the venerable one pardon me.”

The sutta ended with this statement by Āyasmā Sāriputta. So, we don’t know whether the other bhikkhu actually went to ask for forgiveness from Āyasmā Sāriputta or not. He had asked for forgiveness from the Buddha but the sutta does not tell us whether he did ask Āyasmā Sāriputta directly. In this case, being an Arahant, Āyasmā Sāriputta would not have taken offence. An Arahant’s mind is unshakable. Whatever you say, if he didn’t do it, he will just say, “I didn’t do it. If you insist, that’s your problem, not mine.” But it is significant that the Buddha asked Sāriputta to pardon or forgive the offending monk.

Case Study 3: Āyasmā Ānanda

There is another sutta in which Āyasmā Ānanda was asked for forgiveness but he did not respond. At least in Āyasmā Sāriputta’s case, he said that he would pardon the offender if he were to ask for forgiveness. But in the Kokanuda Sutta (AN 10.96), Āyasmā Ānanda did not respond. Kokanuda asked Āyasmā Ānanda many questions about the Dhamma. At the end of the conversation, Kokanuda realised who he had been talking to and said:

“What? Have I been talking with a great teacher without realising that he was Venerable Ānanda? Had I recognised that he was Venerable Ānanda, I would not have cross-examined him so much. May Venerable Ānanda, please forgive me.”

In the sutta, Āyasmā Ānanda did not respond; he did not say “I forgive you.”

Case Study 4: Ambaṭṭha the Young Brahmin

A third example can be found in the Ambaṭṭha Sutta (DN 3) in which the Buddha responded explicitly to Pokkharasāti, the teacher of Ambaṭṭha the young arrogant Brahmin who had engaged in a debate with the Buddha. Pokkharasāti said to the Buddha:

“Foolish, Master Gotama, is the young man Ambaṭṭha. Let Master Gotama forgive Ambaṭṭha, the young man.”

The Buddha said, in response, “Sukhi hotu, ambaṭṭho māṇavo.” The Buddha’s response by saying; “May Ambaṭṭha the young man be happy”, was his way of forgiving the young Brahmin.

Not Asking for Forgiveness Can Be an Offence

Many other examples of asking for forgiveness can be found in the Vinaya Piṭaka, relating specifically to the conduct of monks. For example, if a pupil does not conduct himself deferentially or properly towards his preceptor or teacher, the latter are permitted to dismiss him by either saying or gesturing, or both:

“I dismiss you. Do not come back. Take away your bowl and robes. I am not to be attended to by you.”

Initially, the dismissed pupils did not ask for forgiveness. The Buddha then ruled that it would be an offence of wrongdoing if the pupils did not ask for forgiveness. So, if a pupil has been dismissed by his teacher due to misbehaviour or misconduct of various kinds, the pupil should ask for forgiveness from the teacher. Not asking for forgiveness is an offence in itself.

Not Forgiving When Requested is an Offence

Initially, some preceptors or teachers did not forgive their pupils even when the latter asked to be forgiven. Because they were not forgiven by their teachers, the pupils left. Some went to other monasteries, some disrobed, some went to join other non-Buddhist renunciants.

Then the Buddha ruled that it would be an offence of wrongdoing on the part of the preceptor or teacher if he did not forgive when asked to do so. So forgiveness is something which is required by the Buddha, provided that the person who asks for forgiveness realises that he has done something wrong and is genuine in wanting to make amends for it.

Asking for Forgiveness: Review of Main Points

First, asking for forgiveness is only meaningful when an offence is realised and acknowledged by the offender. The offender should ask forgiveness only when he has realised and acknowledged his offence. If you are not aware that you committed an offence, then it is not meaningful to ask for forgiveness.

Second, there can be psychological relief for the offender when pardoned by the offeree. If you are overwhelmed by remorse for an offence that you committed towards somebody, the best thing is to approach that person and to ask for forgiveness directly from that person. But, if that is not possible, then you should do it through a third party as this can help to relieve you of your remorse. For example, if the person that you offended has passed away or is not within your reach at the moment, you can ask for forgiveness from somebody else. This is what King Ajātasattu did; he made his confession in the Buddha's presence and when the Buddha accepted his confession, that gave him some psychological relief.

Third, if the person you offended is badly affected by your offence and is still bearing a grudge, then if you ask for forgiveness and that person is able to forgive you, it will help to relieve him of his grudges against you, or at least lessen the grudges. Some people find it difficult to let go of their grudges. Being asked for forgiveness may help them not to continue holding on to their grudges for an even longer time.

You may ask: "But what if they choose not to forgive?" We saw above that the Buddha's answer to that was: Not to forgive is an offence. But that was in the Vinaya for monks. If the person is not a monk and chooses not to forgive, then it is just your bad luck. What you need to do is work harder. Continue to forgive the person and do more mettā to that person. Doing mettā actually can be very, very powerful. After some time, if you ask again, maybe he will forgive you.

Finally, there can be reinstatement of a broken or damaged relationship when asking for forgiveness is properly done.

So these are the benefits of forgiveness. Let me just emphasise again that it is only meaningful if you actually realise what you did. Seeking blanket forgiveness, for everything you may have done whether intentionally or unintentionally through thought, speech or action does not make sense.

Blanket Confession During Retreats

If that is the case, why then do I start my retreats, after the taking of the precepts, with a general forgiveness ritual for all actions, intentional and unintentional, whether through body, speech, or mind?

This ritual refers mainly to offences that we may have committed in our past lives that we may no longer be aware of. In the course of meditation, some people are sometimes disturbed by certain inexplicable supernatural forces. The experience of many meditation teachers has shown that some of these come from past life links.

People whom you may have offended in the past, whom you have absolutely no knowledge of right now, may have taken offence and borne a grudge in their hearts. These people may have been born into the spirit realm. They may be hounding you, waiting for the right time to take revenge. One of the best times is when you are meditating. This is prone to happen when people are meditating. If they are not meditating, it may not happen because their minds are so busy with other things, these spirits cannot get near them. But when their minds are clear, then it is the time that the mind can receive all these finer vibrations. Asking for blanket forgiveness can be very helpful because it works in many cases.

In my retreats we only do this once, formally, and together. But I always tell my retreatants that if they feel the need, they can do it personally again by themselves. If you find that you have a history of this kind of disturbance and it becomes a chronic problem for you, then when you meditate, you should do this more often. Hopefully it will help you to progress with less obstructions.

However, sometimes such disturbances could be hallucinations due to a psychiatric disorder; if so a qualified psychiatrist should be consulted.

Application of Forgiveness During Bereavement Service

Another important time or context for the ritual of asking for forgiveness is during bereavement services. We, monks of SBS, are very selective in doing bereavement services because we don't want to be on call all the time, leaving us with too little time for other activities.

A lot of the chanting that is usually done during wakes is actually not that relevant to what is happening to the dead. This is why when SBS monks conduct bereavement services, we do not do much chanting. We just chant the basic *Mettā* and *Tirokuṭṭa Suttas*. What we focus on more is talking to the living as well as to the deceased. The main point we emphasise in these talks is to tell them to forgive one another.

The deceased has passed on but may still be in the spirit realm, perhaps hanging around close by, so the deceased will be able to understand what we are talking about. This forgiveness is very important because, even if you have died, if you don't forgive and you hold on to your grudges, they can bind you

down, follow you to the spirit world, and prevent you from moving on to a better destination.

In my talk “A Meaningful Bereavement Ceremony” that is available on SoundCloud, you can find many stories about how forgiveness has helped the deceased, especially those who are caught in the spirit realm. I have also recorded, in that talk, several cases of deceased people moving on after their relatives or friends advised them to forgive, to let go, and not cling on to their attachments, so that they can move on to their next destination.

In conclusion, we can see that the Buddha himself explicitly taught the practice of asking for forgiveness because it can bring many benefits to both parties. And from our discussion of the different contexts of asking for forgiveness, we can come to the clear conclusion that this practice does not serve to perpetuate wrong understanding: one of the issues that bothered the retreatant who doubted whether the forgiveness ritual is a good practice to observe.

Conventional Reality vs Ultimate Reality

Let us now look into the second issue that she raised—whether the ritual of asking for forgiveness contradicts the Buddha’s teachings on anatta or non-self.

As the retreatant who raised this problem pointed out, when you go to a vipassanā retreat, the teacher will be teaching you about anicca, dukkha, and anatta; and emphasising that you should think in terms of not mine, not me, not my self. You learn that, ultimately, there is no self because everything is a product of causes and conditions, and changing all the time. The problem is that after the retreat, when you go back to the “real” world, you have to take care of yourself, your family, your job, your responsibilities. And, you have to interact with other selves to survive. There is no way to escape from the self.

Clearly, asking for forgiveness does presume the existence of selves—selves who ask for forgiveness and selves who forgive. In this sense, practising forgiveness is not different from the practice of mettā or any of the other brahmavihāras such as compassion and sympathetic joy. When you radiate loving kindness, it is also directed to beings—to your self as well as other selves. If there are no selves, then who are you radiating mettā to? If asking for forgiveness is in line with self-improvement as by developing or practising the 4 brahmavihāras, then it cannot be an impediment to developing wisdom.

The Buddha obviously did not deny the existence of the self. On the contrary, his teachings emphasise the importance of recognising and developing the self, both in the conventional as well as ultimate sense.

When the Buddha talked about forgiveness, he was clearly talking about *atta* in a conventional sense. There are other contexts in which the Buddha talked about the self also in the conventional sense. For example, in this famous passage from the Dhammapada:

“Self is self’s protector, for who else can be a protector?

With the self well-tamed, one gets a protector difficult to get.”

And I am sure all of you will recognise or know this famous saying by the Buddha:

“Monks, dwell with *atta* as your lamp, with *atta* as refuge, with no other refuge, with Dhamma as your lamp, with Dhamma as your refuge, with no other refuge.”

Unfortunately, some people have taken this short passage in isolation and claimed that the Buddha said we only need to take refuge in the self and the Dhamma, and the Dhamma means only the suttas. So we don’t need to take refuge in the Buddha or the Saṅgha.

These people are obviously misinterpreting or misconstruing what the Buddha meant. The Buddha, obviously, did not mean to say that we do not need to take refuge in the Buddha or the Saṅgha.

In fact, the Buddha went on to ask:

“And, how, monks, does a monk dwell with self as an island, with self as refuge, with no other refuge; with Dhamma as a lamp, with Dhamma as refuge, with no other refuge? Here, monks, a monk dwells contemplating the body in the body, ardent, clearly aware, mindful, having subdued worldly likes and dislikes ...”

Starting from the self in the conventional sense, the Buddha is here extending it to the process by which the self can reach out toward ultimate reality. It is by practising the four establishments of mindfulness, that the self subdues worldly preoccupations of the mundane world and mindfully, with clear awareness, moves towards ultimate reality.

In the *Loṇakapalla Sutta* (AN 3.100), an Arahant is referred to as one who is *mahatta*, which literally means “great self”. If an Arahant is someone who has completely realised not-self, then why is he called *mahatta*? When we refer to the famous historical person Mahatma Gandhi, *mahatma* or *mahatta* is being used as an epithet, in a figurative sense, to refer to a great being in the conventional world. He is not a great being in that he has a big sense of self but great in his ability to go beyond or transcend the selfish concerns of ordinary people. In the case of the Arahant, *mahatta* is also used in a figurative sense to

mean he has transcended the conventional self and attained the higher level of “great self”.

There is another Pāḷi term in the sutta about the self, i.e. *attamana*. *atta* means self and *mana* means mind. So literally it means ‘self-minded’. When a person is pleased or satisfied with something, *attamana* is used. The use of the term *attamana* implies that there is a self that is happy or pleased. This too can be taken to mean both in the conventional as well as the ultimate sense.

Therefore, to understand the Buddha’s teachings on anatta in relation to the self or *atta*, we must understand that he used the word *atta* in different ways according to the context. Sometimes, he would use *atta* in a conventional sense and at other times in an ultimate sense, depending on the context and whom he was speaking to.

On the other hand, anatta can only be understood in the ultimate sense or at the ultimate level. And through the practice of *vipassanā*, we can come to realise or understand that there is no abiding self, that all things are due to causes and conditions.

One of the Buddha’s most well-known sayings is “*Sabbe dhammā anattā*” or “All things are not-self”. All things here mean all conditioned phenomena as well as unconditioned phenomena; they are all not self, meaning they don’t have an abiding self behind them.

The Buddha had to use conventional language to express and communicate his ideas about ultimate reality. He was very comfortable straddling conventional reality and ultimate reality. He would toggle between one and the other depending on the context or circumstances.

However, the terms “conventional reality” and “ultimate reality” are not found in the suttas because the Buddha did not make this distinction explicitly. They were introduced by the commentaries, particularly the *Ābhidhammikas*.

The Buddha could easily straddle the two worlds but many of us cannot. Many people have difficulty understanding and managing this distinction. When they go to a *vipassanā* retreat, especially if it is based on the *Ābhidhammikas*’ view of ultimate reality, they have difficulty when they come back to the conventional world. After their spiritual practice of understanding “not mine, not me, not my self”, they cannot cope when they return to the conventional world with all its conventional issues and problems pertaining to the self.

The Object of Vipassanā is Conditioned Phenomena

Many years ago, I was told that Jack Kornfield, a very famous psychotherapist and spiritual teacher posed this question: “How come we Western *vipassanā*

teachers have to seek psychotherapeutic help from psychotherapists? Aren't we supposed to be masters of our minds?" Somebody asked me this question.

I have no difficulty answering the question. The vipassanā teachers whom Kornfield was talking about were trained to comprehend ultimate reality, especially in terms of the three characteristics of anicca, dukkha and anatta. Their mode of vipassanā practice is such that they focus purely on understanding ultimate reality because in their view, conventional reality does not show these three characteristics. According to the Abhidhamma, ultimate realities are to be directly experienced without any concepts. For example, the objects of the 5 senses are just colours, sounds, smells, tastes and sensations, NOT people, trees, thunder, dogs barking, fragrance of jasmine, taste of chocolate, cushion, floor, etc. Mental activities are to be observed as mere processes that arise and pass away but NOT their contents (e.g. who or what made you angry, why you are sad, why you are making a story) because the latter are concepts belonging to conventional reality.

So, the vipassanā teachers find themselves split between two worlds—when they do vipassanā they don't live in conventional reality. When they are in the world of conventional reality, they cannot do vipassanā.

This is something that I have been trying to deconstruct and clarify. I have been trying to tell people that the Buddha did not make this kind of distinction and the object of vipassanā is not ultimate realities. The object of vipassanā is conditioned phenomena. Conditioned phenomena encompass anything and everything that arises because of causes and conditions. This includes concepts, ideas, beliefs, expectations—all of these, including the sense of self, are products arising from causes and conditions.

Causes and Conditions

When you do vipassanā practice and you bring conventional and ultimate reality together instead of dividing them into two completely separate worlds, you focus on understanding conditioned phenomena. It does not matter whether they are ultimate or conventional as long as they arise from causes and conditions.

When the mind is calm enough, then you can incline the mind to look at the causes and conditions. Where did this thought come from? How did it arise? Where did this idea come from? How did it arise? What is the immediate cause for it? What are the causes and past conditions behind such a thought?

For example, you walk along the street and suddenly somebody walking past catches your attention. Then you glance at that person again and immediately that person reminds you of somebody else. When this happens, your mind will

run to the past experience with that somebody. It could be that guy who cheated you 20 years ago. And immediately a very unpleasant feeling will arise. Did that thought arise because you intentionally wanted it? No, right?

You could say that's anatta in action. There is no self at work. The thought arose because the eye came into contact with the person—that is the present circumstances. And the person reminded you of somebody in the past. That is the past condition. And because you had not forgiven that person for cheating you 20 years ago, that is the cause and condition for this unpleasant feeling arising in your mind.

If you are able to do this again and again, as continuously as you can throughout your daily life, you will see that all your thoughts, ideas, views, assumptions—in fact everything—are the results of causes and conditions. And when you see this more and more often, then you understand everybody is also like that, not just you. We are all products of past conditioning, but living in present circumstances. If you become a very good practitioner, after you see this constantly and continuously, then you will be able to recognise that it is not beneficial to hang on to all this old past conditioning.

Dealing with Unpleasant Feelings and Unmet Expectations

When you see often enough that your unpleasant feelings arise because of past experiences which still hang over you, one day you will say to yourself:

“Why am I still harbouring that grudge against this person? It is 20 years ago. He's already dead but here I am still hanging on to that grudge and feeling unpleasant because of that.”

When you realise that what is causing you unpleasant feelings is your own hanging on to the grudge, to the idea that he should not have cheated you, the process of letting go can begin. You can free yourself from this past cause and its conditioning effect on you.

In a similar way, very often when we get angry or upset with people it is because our expectations are not met. When you expect somebody to behave in a certain way and he or she does not, then you get upset because you keep thinking “she should have done it that way” or “she should not have said that”. All these “should do this” or “should not do this”, can even go back to the past so that you are thinking “should have done this” or “should not have done this”. I call them all ‘snipers’ because they are always shooting people with their ‘shoulds’ and ‘should nots’.

When you have all these things going on in your mind, who is suffering? You are the sniper, but you are the one who is suffering because you are the one

who cannot stop thinking and commenting on what people should or should not do. This does not happen to you alone. Many of us are like that.

But if you can remind yourself and understand that when people misbehave in any way, it's the same as when I tell myself, "Oh, it's not mine, not me, not my self." Similarly, it's not theirs, not them, not their selves; it's due to past conditioning. Once you can see that, you can let go.

Therefore we can say that the concept of not-self is also very important in the conventional world. When you realise that everything is due to cause and conditions, and there is no abiding self that is responsible for all these things, then it is easier to forgive. Easier to forgive yourself, easier to forgive others.

Liberation from Being Slaves of Past Conditioning

I think in the late 20th century, when psychology and psychotherapy were getting very popular, there was this very popular view that a lot of idiosyncrasies of people are rooted in their childhood traumas, in the way they were brought up by their parents. So if something is wrong with you, or you have some dysfunctional behaviour, you can always blame it on the way your parents or your family brought you up.

But when you see and understand conditioning and the concept of not-self, then you begin to realise your parents are not to blame because they too are the products of past conditioning. They have not broken the link. Now, can YOU break the link? If you can, then perhaps you will not be a slave of past conditioning and continue the process of enslaving your children. Instead you could even teach them to free themselves.

If you want to achieve liberation, free yourself from being a slave of past conditioning, you have to practise hard to experientially verify not-self in your daily life, not just looking at ultimate realities in vipassanā retreats. This is what I always stress—the most important thing is looking at how your mind reacts to what's happening to the senses, especially to your own thoughts, and to understand how these thoughts are formed by causes and conditions. This awareness is the path to liberation.

I shall stop here and open to the floor for questions.