

Release from Resentment

An unwillingness to forgive others for the real or imaginary wrongs they have done us is a poison that affects our health –physical, emotional and spiritual – sometimes very deeply. You commonly hear people say, “*I can forgive, but I cannot forget,*” or “*I want to forgive but cannot.*”

What they really mean is they do not want to forgive. They want to hold on to the satisfaction they receive from nurturing the resentment. They simply do not want to let it go. They demand that the other person recognise their guilt, that they apologise, that they make amends, that they be punished..., as a condition for letting their resentment go and releasing themselves from this poison that is eating into their system.

Or, they may genuinely desire to let the resentment go, but it continues to rankle within them because they have not had the occasion to express it and *get it out of their system*. Often a genuine desire is no substitute for this need to spit out all the anger and resentment at least in fantasy. There is no need for me to insist that it is essential that our heart be entirely free from every trace of resentment if we wish to progress in the art of contemplation. Here is a simple way of ridding yourself of resentments that you are nursing:

It generally helps, first of all, to get the resentment out of your system. For this, imagine that you see the person you resent there in front of you. Tell the person of your resentment; express all your anger as forcefully as you can. Do not baulk at your choice of words! It might also help to get the resentment out through some physical exertion like pounding a mattress or pillow. People frequently collect resentments simply because they are too fearful to be strong. They therefore turn in upon themselves the firmness that they rightly needed to show to others. Forgiveness and meekness, when practised by people who are too fearful to speak out and stand up for what they know is true, are not virtues but a cover for cowardice.

After expressing all your resentment, but only *after*, look at the whole incident that caused the resentment from the other person’s point of view. Take their place and explain the whole thing: how does the incident look when seen through their eyes? Realise also that there is hardly any instance when someone slights or attacks or hurts you as a result of malice. In most instances, even supposing there was an intention to hurt; this was a result of some deep-rooted unhappiness in the other person. Genuinely happy people are not wicked. Moreover, in the vast majority of instances, you personally are not the target of the other’s attack. The person is seeking something (or someone else) in you that they have projected there. See if all of these considerations lead you to feel compassion for the person rather than anger and resentment.

If all of these efforts fail, it is quite likely either that you are experiencing the effects of deep trauma or that you are the type of person that unconsciously but actively works at collecting hurt feelings and resentments. It is strange but true that people actually set up situations where they will be slighted or offended and, having received what they set out to get, they give themselves the bad feeling they wanted all along! You will get over this tendency of yours if you neutralise your expectations of other people. In other words, keep your expectations, even express them to the other person if you wish, but leave them entirely free –realise that the other person is under absolutely no obligation whatsoever to live up to your expectations inasmuch as they are yours; and that will prevent you from giving yourself a bad feeling when the expectation is not met. Many people carry a chip on their shoulder when they go through life and relate with people with the implicit assumption, “*If you truly loved me, you would. ...*(not criticise me, speak gently to me, remember my birthday, do the favour I am asking of you etc. etc. etc.)” It is very difficult for them to see that all of these expectations of theirs have nothing to do with genuine love on the part of the other person.

Finally, to strengthen your decision to give up your resentment (that is the secret: do you really *want* to give it up and get on with life or with the relationship? Are you one of those who hug the resentment to themselves and complain that they *cannot* get rid of it?) do the following:

Imagine you see Jesus on the Cross... Take all the time you need to picture him in vivid detail...

Now go to the scene of your resentment... Stay with it for a while..

Return to Jesus Crucified and gaze at him again... Keep alternating between the event that caused your resentment and the scene of Jesus on the Cross... until you notice the resentment slipping away from you and feel the freedom and joy and light-heartedness that follows.

Do not be surprised if the resentful feelings return after a while. Keep dealing with them patiently. The sacrifice involved in renouncing negative feelings and becoming happy is too great for most people to make at one shot.

Adapted from Sadhana by Anthony de Mello SJ

