

The Art of Forgiveness

By Swami Nikhilananda

Before we learn about the art of forgiveness there must be clarity about the vision of the world and its functions. A broad picture of life as a whole is necessary because based on our philosophy of the world, we interact with it. If our philosophy is defective, incomplete or limited our reactions to the world are similarly affected. So firstly we should try to understand our philosophy of life, coming to grips with questions such as: Who am I? What is my relationship with the world? What is my personality made up of? How does the world function? What are its different aspects? The answers to all these are based on the scriptures and the experiences of great *mahatmas*. Secondly we must try and find out the meaning of non-forgiveness. What are the various indicators or signs of non-forgiveness? What are the negative emotions that arise from this? How are these related to the various experiences of our life? What are the demerits of non-forgiveness and how we can overcome them?

After having accepted that we all have a philosophy of life encompassing its various aspects, we need to know how to change the defects or plug the loopholes in our vision. The scriptures in every religion give us the philosophy of life which we need to understand and follow. The scriptures speak of the one Reality which is of the nature of *sat-chit-ananda* (existence-consciousness-bliss). Very simple stated, *satyam ekam vipra bahuda vadanti* (the Truth is one but the wise speak of it differently). This Reality has certain innate, inherent powers, which can be broadly termed as *shakti*. It has the power to project, sustain and withdraw the world. The Upanishads explain this with the example of the spider's web. The spider has the ability to project or create its own web out of itself, stay in it or sustain it and in the end take it back into itself or swallow it. The Sanskrit word *srishti* is normally understood as creation. But strictly speaking the world is not created; it is projected, like the dance of the dancer. The dance though not separate from the dancer remains with her in an unmanifest form, when she is not dancing. She has the ability to project the dance at will, very much like the spider weaves its web. Similarly the world is created through Siva's dance of creation. Siva or the supreme Reality has the power to project, sustain and withdraw the dance of creation. We say dance because dance conveys movement, fluidity and change. Like the dance, the world is constantly changing. The dancer goes through various movements, while she herself remains unchanged. So too, the Lord remains unchanged through the whole process of creation.

The Lord or the supreme Reality has two other major powers. It has the power to delude itself and also the power to remove the delusion. Despite perfect vision, the blindfolded person is not able to see when the scarf is round his eyes. In a similar fashion, the Reality deludes itself or plays with itself, by projecting itself as the little beings of the world. We beings are deluded by our own power and do not know ourselves. We have this power even though we may live in ignorance of it. We have all the powers of God because we are cast in His mould. Through the process of *sadhana* we shower grace on ourselves and come out of this self inflicted delusion. The supreme Consciousness is the very core of our personality. Like the sun or light it is self-luminous, conscious by itself and not dependent on anything for support. It is surrounded by a layer of ignorance or *vasanas* which can be termed as unconsciousness. It is a state in which we are not conscious of anything. Sleep is a part of this layer. This layer is surrounded by the layer of sub consciousness in which all our thoughts and emotions exist. This is the layer that projects the dream world and holds as it were all our ideas, philosophies and visions about ourselves as well as the world. The conscious mind exists in the outermost layer of our personality.

We have four levels to our personality - supreme Consciousness, the unconscious mind, subconscious mind and conscious mind. This cross section of layers is true for the totality and for each and every being from Brahmaji to an amoeba. The layer of unconsciousness is variously termed as *maya*, *prakriti*, *avidya*, *vasanas* etc. The subconscious is also known as *mana* (mind), *buddhi* (intellect), *chitta* (memory) and *ahamkara* (ego). We carry this layer of unconsciousness with all our impressions of the past through various births. All our negative *vasanas* lie at this level. We try and remove our fear, pride, jealousy and non-forgiveness at the conscious level through logic and rational thinking. We also try and change our gross habits through a similar process. But logical analysis does not affect the sadness and fears. Logically if you tell a sad person to give up sadness it will not have the required result because sadness rests at the level of the subconscious and not the conscious mind. Unless we are able to reach the subconscious level of our mind the desired result will elude us and the negative emotions will remain unaltered. The subconscious level can be reached through faith; deep convictions can transform the negativities stored at this level. But even faith cannot reach the unconscious level. Only grace can touch this layer - God's grace or the grace of the Guru.

Most of the time when we try and remove our sadness, fears or anger we concentrate on our conscious mind. All the thinking and decision making happens in the conscious state, when the individual is awake. We respond to the world at the conscious level and try to remove these negativities by using the tools of analysis, logic and rational thinking. But rationalizing does not touch our fears and sadness. At the conscious level telling a person to give up sadness will not have the desired effect because the conscious mind is not sad. It is the subconscious mind that is sad. Unless something touches the sub-conscious there will be no change in the sadness. Some of our behavioral patterns or personality traits can be transformed at the conscious level through logical thinking. People make cosmetic changes to their mannerisms. They learn to be polite, sometimes effusively grateful and apologetic or seemingly humble. These changes are only superficial and there is no intrinsic change in the personality. The deeper levels remain untouched and the problem persists.

Logical thinking produces temporary change at the conscious level. Faith brings about permanent changes at the subconscious level and grace eliminates or annihilates ignorance at the unconscious level and we understand ourselves. Through logical thinking we take the first step and cleanse ourselves through *karma yoga*. The second stage is arrived at through faith in the scriptures and the words of the teacher. This is *jnana yoga*. Finally by the grace of the teacher and God we come to know ourselves completely, and that is *bhakti yoga*.

If we want to do something positive about forgiveness we have to address the subconscious mind and understand that at this level logical thinking is not required. The subconscious mind needs to be told what to do because it accepts everything as it is. If it is told to forgive, it forgives. Hypnotists use this faculty of the mind and help their patients to give up old hurts and heal deep scars through suggestions made to the subconscious mind. Auto suggestion can help cure physical and mental illnesses and even change the personality completely.

The words of the Guru affect the personality of the student at all levels. The benefits to the student depend on the sincerity and the degree of faith he/she has or the importance given to the words of the teacher. We can either listen to the words of the teacher at the conscious level, or the subconscious level or allow His grace to function at a deeper level. The Guru like the hypnotist makes suggestions and it is up to the student to accept them. Listening to the teacher with faith is the fulcrum on which change takes place instantly. For example the teacher orders the student, "Remove the anger from your heart". Commensurate to the degree to which the student has faith, the anger will be removed.

If the student has complete faith it will be instantly and completely removed. The Guru speaks from the level of the supreme Consciousness. If we listen with faith it cleans us instantly. If we listen with total surrender then Grace flows through us and the ignorance is removed. If we listen with the conscious mind analyzing the words and thoughts of the teacher some change may take place but it will only be at the superficial level. All the negative emotions we have within us are as a result of our delusory powers. Through our interaction in the world we come to possess or harbor the negative tendencies of greed, jealousy or anger as the case may be.

All of us go to the level of the subconscious. This is a state where we are alert yet the attention is withdrawn from the world. What is the technique of going to this level? This state is experienced just before we sleep and just before we are fully awake. It is a dream like state, but different from dream because in this state we are conscious of our thoughts. In meditation we go to our subconscious level. We are withdrawn from the world and yet conscious of it. In this state instructions given to our mind with faith and conviction go deep within. Even when we come out of this state the thoughts in seed form continue to grow.

Our philosophy of life conditions or regulates our responses to the world. A holistic philosophy which sees the world as one integral whole ensures responses which include every aspect of any given situation. A limited view will only give a limited response - one which excludes certain aspects of the whole. We have all God's powers of creation, sustenance, destruction, delusion and grace or the power to give up delusion. We find that the moment we decide to give up our negative tendencies *Bhagavan's* grace begins to work. The grace is also in us. We do not have to look outside for help. All the virtues mentioned in the scriptures are a part of our personality at a deeper level. Love twisted becomes hatred, humility denied becomes pride, and forgiveness suppressed becomes non-forgiveness.

What are forgiveness and its opposite non-forgiveness? All our experiences negative or positive in this world are the fruits of our actions governed by the infallible law of *karma* which works at both the individual and collective levels. The law of *karma* is very subtle and sometimes difficult to comprehend. For example, if a group or nation has performed a wrong action then the result will accrue to those people or that nation. Even if one expresses happiness on hearing of someone's misfortune, one is deemed to have partaken of the wrong. Each one is a part of the action, overtly or covertly. If there is violence, sadness or pride then one is supporting all these negativities of the world by empowering them. The law of *karma* very beautifully and carefully metes out justice. We only get what is due to us not more or less. Laws governing action in the physical world are specific and can be measured. They conform to set patterns, like the swinging of the pendulum. It follows a particular set of values. The laws governing the subconscious, subtle world also follow a certain pattern. But these are a little more complex since there is an element of free will which also has to be accounted for. Different laws govern the totality of the subconscious world and the individual's part of the subconscious world.

Individuals have free will which is used to entertain positive or negative thoughts. Sometimes angry thoughts are allowed or encouraged to flow. At other times they are discouraged. So we are even responsible for the actions of our subconscious world and must take responsibility for all the results that come to us. Sometimes it may be below our dignity, but we must do it. If we do not accept responsibility for our actions, then we pin the blame on someone else when sorrow comes. Though other people are part of the sorrow giving process, they are only instruments. If sorrow has to come then it will, but it could be routed via some other medium or instrument. The cause is with me and the result must come to me. We have the right to act and must be ready to accept the results when they come. If we place an order out of a mail order catalogue then inevitably we will get the object that has been ordered. When we perform an experiment

in the chemistry laboratory we accept the result as it is. Do we blame the substances we are using in the experiment when the result comes? In our world we blame someone or the other for being the cause of our sorrow. The corollary of blame pinning leads to anger or dislike for the individual. When there is anger there is a need to respond to that anger. The response to anger is what is called revenge. The mind plans ways and means of giving pain to the person responsible for the sorrow. If we feel that some person is the cause of irritation in our lives then we should respond to the situation following the laws of *dharma*. Sometimes one may have to keep away from the person. As a boss one may have to take steps to discipline the workers but this must be done with understanding devoid of anger. Duryodhana was following the path of *adharma* and he had to be stopped from causing further misery. *Bhagavan* encouraged Arjuna to take action against him but after removing the anger simmering in his heart. He advised Arjuna to become an instrument and act.

For anger to be eliminated, it must be resolved, otherwise it remains in the subconscious in a dormant form. Anger does not remain in the conscious mind all the time. We notice that incidents producing angry reactions against someone, with time are lost in memory. The memory becomes weaker and we even forget the incident, but unless the anger is resolved it remains. It is somewhat similar to the toxins of our body. The toxins come out in the form of disease - a rash on the body, white heads, constipation, sore throat. Unresolved issues create constipation in the body. When we are not ready to give up old habits and emotions, it causes constipation. Mental constipation leads to physical constipation. The feeling of revenge leads to other emotions as well. Jealousy is also a form of anger or non-forgiveness. Jealousy also expresses as anger and we have a need to pull down the other person. We can be angry by the results accruing to the other person. We are angry with the laws governing the lives of others. Sometimes we are angry with the system. For example, of the ten people applying for a job only one can get selected. But in certain cases this is enough cause to make us angry with the system.

Pride is also a type of non-forgiveness. Pride means that we consider ourselves better than others or to put it another way we think of others as lower than ourselves. We are not forgiving enough to think of the other as having made progress. If we delve deeper we find that non-forgiveness expresses as other negative emotions. At a deeper level we will find non-forgiveness of ourselves, our parents, God, society, the system of the world or the result of our actions. All our negative emotions are derivatives of this non-forgiveness. Greed is also a form of non-forgiveness. When we want something other than what we have we show our unhappiness with the world as it is presenting itself to us at the moment. Many people say they do not like their lives; they hate the way they are. This means that we are not comfortable with our lives at the present moment or we are non-forgiving to what is. Indirectly we do not forgive God or the system. This non-forgiveness expresses itself in various ways in life and all our negative emotions are its relatives.

If we are able to imbibe this value of forgiveness, we will gain release from our negative emotions and also instantly become peaceful and tranquil. When we are non-forgiving we blame someone, but at the same time hurt ourselves. Non-forgiveness leads to self hurt. When we are angry or jealous we can neither eat nor sleep properly. So whom are we hurting? Only ourselves. The person towards whom our anger or pride is directed may not be affected. He or she may be sleeping happily. When we want to punish others, this negative emotion causes us instant sorrow. Looked at from another angle, when we think we should hurt someone we are taking on God's job or taking the law into our hands. We are prone to forget the basis of the law of *karma*, wherein no action positive or negative goes without a result. We cannot get anything free nor can we escape the result of even the minutest negative action in this world. The world works on very stringent laws. So we do not really have to worry about punishing others. Our job is to convince ourselves that

we do not have to punish the other person. God's law of *karma* will take care of the punishment.

If we retaliate with anger for anger we give it a fresh lease of life. It changes bodies but continues to live. When we respond to anger with thinking, the cycle is broken and the anger returns or goes back to its source. The good thing about this reversal is that ultimately it leaves the source as well. This is in the interest of everyone concerned. Once Gautam Buddha was abused by someone and he responded by staying quiet. One of his disciples listening to the abuse was horrified and asked Buddha's permission to retaliate. Gautam Buddha was unperturbed and said you can only give back something that you may have taken. It is the other person's prerogative to give but its acceptance depends on us. People give both nectar and poison. We are at liberty to accept the nectar and refuse the poison. So do not **react**, instead **respond** to the world. Punishment, anger and revenge are reactions. Through reaction we maintain the negativities in ourselves, the other person and in the world. Response may sometimes need to be assertive. This is perfectly in order but there should be no revenge in the heart even while asserting oneself. The heart should be free of emotions like wanting to punish or to hurt or to bring sorrow to the other persons. This can only happen if we have a firm and deep understanding of the law of *karma*. So in forgiveness one is really being kind to oneself and saving oneself the torture of anger.

The first step towards forgiveness is to understand the negativities that are created by non-forgiveness and become aware of the futility and irrationality of nursing grudges. We need to understand the law of *karma* and know that the non-forgiveness is against God, and then sincerely decide to forgive. Merely understanding the need to forgive is not enough. It is crucial to take a decision to forgive, because it is only then that the whole process of unraveling begins. Forgiveness is not an action or emotion, it is something deeper. It is the state of my being. When forgiveness happens there is no need to say anything. It is a state where there is no hatred or sense of revenge that remains. Established in the state of forgiveness you respond. It could be working in any capacity - as a manager or head of an organization or a worker, but with forgiveness in the heart. When the mother disciplines her child there is no anger, hatred or revenge, she does it for the child's benefit. Sometimes she punishes her child but it is not with the intention of inflicting pain.

We should locate the areas of non-forgiveness and then decide to forgive by giving directions to our subconscious mind to forgive. Like Jesus Christ said, "Oh Lord! Forgive them for they know not what they do!" Understand the importance of His words. He does not say, I forgive. He asks the Lord to forgive. He had already forgiven. He was afraid that *Bhagavan* through his law of *karma* may punish them. This great state of forgiveness runs through the lives of all great *mahatamas*.

It is easier to forgive people who are emotionally and physically at a distance but we find it difficult to forgive our near and dear ones. Often we are very vehement and declare our intentions of non-forgiveness. It is almost like taking a vow of revenge, which is so negative. If we have to take a vow then at least let it be something positive. But some people not only vow revenge, but keep thinking about it, mulling over it and speaking about the hurt. This keeps the memory of the hurt or pain alive. We are prone to non-acceptance at various levels, which is really the flip side of non-forgiveness. Some of us are unable to accept our bodies, thoughts, *samsara* or the family in which we are born. We may not have forgiven some of the incidents in our life which caused us regret and pain. Often we try to fight the world and do not accept it as it is. Acceptance signifies understanding of the whole situation as it is. Action based on understanding is acceptance. Acceptance does not mean submissiveness or tolerance. Suppose we fall in the gutter we must accept that we have fallen because only then can we get up and act. Unfortunately most people do not even accept that they have fallen in the gutter. They

feel that they are standing on the road. Accept the way you are, your economic condition or the strata of society to which you belong and then act.

Non-forgiveness will obstruct your innermost potential and creativity. Continuous criticism of a talented person will ensure that he/she becomes useless. Karna was infinitely more talented than Arjuna but he had a charioteer who constantly ran him down or demoralized him. Instead of praising Karna, he would praise Arjuna. Criticism creates feelings of guilt and this blocks or stunts growth. We then become incapable of performing even simple actions and begin to doubt our own abilities. On the spiritual path also, people block their growth with their own negative thinking. Some people say, "In this life I will not get liberation", while others condemn their *vasanas*. With such an attitude even if God wants to give liberation He will take it back.

What we are depends on our convictions. If we are positively charged we can gain the highest. Self realization is nothing but the positive conviction that, I am Brahman or *Aham Brahmasmi!* Only wrong convictions hamper the realization of Truth and these wrong convictions are of our own creation. We cannot blame *maya* or *vasanas* for these self created obstructions. So we should decide to let go and forgive. Think about the main issues in your life that need to be forgiven. Maybe you have not forgiven yourself, your parents, spouse or some others for real or imagined reasons. While walking carelessly, we may be hurt by a chair and we carry anger against it. Cursing the chair is an expression of anger. If we do not like the shape of the chair we are at liberty not to use it. We need to discuss and understand the need for forgiveness. Sometimes there is a lot of resistance to forgiveness. At all costs we want to hang onto old, forgotten issues. Hence there is a need to understand the stupidity and futility of non-forgiveness. Knowing the harm it causes there is a need to respond and move on.

QUESTION ANSWER SESSION:

Q What do you do if you have to live with someone who refuses to understand and constantly does the opposite of what you want?

There are some incidents which cause us to feel intense anger and hatred, but if we understand that everything that happens to us is because of a divine law we will find it easier to accept the situation and respond to it accordingly. If the response requires that we have to stay away from the person, or it requires that we have to take other measures, we must only respond. Whatever the circumstances, forgiveness is a prerequisite. Forgiveness does not mean tolerance of injustice, nonsense or bad behavior. It is different from submission. If we learn to forgive the small things in life then we will be able to forgive the bigger issues that disturb us.

Q In order to improve my husband, I have been hard on my son. How do I forgive myself?

Forgive the past, the other person and yourself and from this moment begin to respond. Every action we perform has some defects because we are not perfect. In the *Gita* also *Bhagavan* says that every action has some defect. So let us not try to be perfectionists. Decide the course of each action according to the present situation. If the situation later demands a different response, then change the response. At each step transform yourself and continue.

Q We must not punish the other person we must only respond. What is this response if the other person does not realize his/her mistake?

Reaction is the action that comes out of our body without judging or assessing the situation, but whatever comes through proper thinking is response. In reaction the other person is acting through us. So the other person's anger continues in us as well, but if we understand, analyze and judge the situation, we are equipped to respond in the best possible way. Even if we have to correct the person, so long as it is a response and not a

reaction it is permitted. For example, if we want to improve our children, then we must learn the art of skilful communication.

Q Response without hatred is forgiveness, but Arjuna was asked to fight and kill?

Arjuna was fighting a war of righteousness and from the standpoint of that era it was correct. Neither the *Bhagavad Gita* nor Mahabharata advocate violence. Sometimes to combat injustice one may have to resort to force but in such a situation it has moral sanction. For example, if the country's border is threatened the armed forces have to defend the nation. It is their duty to do so and if in the course of their duty they have to kill, it is justified. With forgiveness in the heart even if one has to be assertive to defend oneself it is acceptable.

Q What are the criteria that we should presently employ to decide what is right and what is wrong?

We are at times not able to decide what is right and what is wrong. For these circumstances the scriptures have given a five point check list. Is the action:

1. Considered right in the eyes of the scriptures?
2. Considered right in the eyes of people of the past, who lived according to the scriptures?
3. Considered correct in the eyes of people living according to the scriptures in the present?
4. Considered right according to your intellect?
5. In agreement with your conscience?

If according to all these five criteria it is correct, then the action is acceptable.

Q How do we reach a stage of not reacting but responding without hatred or anger?

Most people live only at the conscious level without understanding anything about faith, love and compassion, because these do not sometimes fit into the frame of rational thinking. Most of us are not connected to our innermost personality or to the level of the unconscious mind or subconscious mind. If we want to respond all the time then we must be connected to the inner core of our personality at all times. If that is difficult then get connected to the grace. See *Bhagavan's* grace in everything that happens in your life. Failing this, get connected to the higher values of life. Find out what is propelling a particular action; is it humanity, anger, compassion or pride? Sometimes even though the outward action may seem to be good, at a subtle level the motive prompting the action may not be totally selfless. It may be propelled by jealousy or pride. So let us try to find the emotion behind the action, and then try and respond in a rational way. Most of our problems arise due to irrational thinking. Even a simple thing like getting a cold pizza can become a calamity. We become judgmental and view even small things as horrible. The intellect labels it as horrible and the mind responds accordingly. We are habituated to irrational judgments regarding events and people. Living rationally with faith and getting connected with our inner self or God will lead us to responding to situations rather than reacting to them.

Q Why did the *rishis* of the past give *shrapas* (curses)?

Rishis are *mantra drishta*. They can see the future. Take the case of Jay and Vijay. They insulted the *rishis*, who in turn cursed them to become *rakshasas* and the curse became a reality. When we go to the doctor, he examines and assesses the situation, based on this he predicts the future of the patient. For example he may advise someone a change of his food habits, failing which he may envisage a heart attack. This is in the nature of a *shrapa*. Now, if the patient changes his habits, he reverses the trend and avoids the heart attack. *Rishis* have the power of *sadhana* and *tapas* to back their words. But if we study

the stories of the *Puranas* we find that even the curses of the *rishis* were ultimately a blessing for the people affected.

Q How should one respond to someone living with you, who always has the opposite view?

The problem is that all of us find it difficult to forgive. Forgiveness is a quality which comes to the subconscious. It is a quality which does not seek revenge. There is no desire to inflict pain and it is free from anger or hatred. Most problems of relationship are caused mostly by lack of communication. Here you have to try and communicate with the person without judging. Try and convey your repressed feelings, without embellishments. There are two aspects of our mind - the level of purity and wisdom. Our responses depend not only on our levels of purity but on our wisdom as well. Krishna was pure and very wise. He knew how to respond to both Arjuna and Duryodhana. Some of us know how to respond to Arjuna but do not know how to tackle Duryodhana. Wisdom is the key to response in a relationship.

Q In the event of a mishap in my life I would want to know what caused it. Which is the court of law that pronounces judgment?

This is a logical question coming from a conscious mind. In the outside world if we are found guilty of a crime then the law of the land metes out the appropriate punishment but in the case of *karma*, there is no other person. *Karma* itself gives the result, or in other words you give yourself the reward. It is the maturity of the *karma* that fructifies in the result. It is like the planting of a seed which given the conducive environment grows into a tree. Similarly whatever comes to us, is a result of the *karma* itself. Wrong thinking itself gives sorrow. If my mind is filled with jealousy, the feeling itself will give me pain. No one else needs to act as judge and pronounce judgments decreeing sorrow in the mind. It happens automatically. So negative thoughts and actions, over a period of time inally culminate as a particular fruit. We get the result of some *karmas* in this life, while some others may be deferred. We cannot say that this *karma* is directly related to that action. From the result the cause can only be roughly inferred. There are some *yogis* who have the power of pinpointing the cause exactly. We are all capable of gaining these powers should we so desire.

Q How to know whether what we are fighting for is correct, since everyone is fighting for their own ideologies?

According to the scriptures that which benefits the majority or from the view point of totality is beneficial is the correct action. If to preserve the body a limb has to be amputated it is good but if we do it for some other reason it is not correct. Take the case of the nation; whatever brings maximum good to the greatest number of people is the best. In India there are many religions but what is common and of significance to every Indian is the Indian-ness in each one. This being of prime importance our laws should be based, not on the dictates of the various religions, but for the benefit of the country.

Q How many times should we forgive the same mistake despite trying very hard to explain to the other person?

Forgiveness happens only once. There is no need to keep forgiving. Once we are in the state of forgiveness, nothing further needs to be done. This mistake occurs because our faulty responses are not rooted in wisdom. If they were, then the other person would not commit the same mistake again. Forgiveness is the state of our being. It is our philosophy of life and is based on our convictions. From a civic stand point, sometimes we may even have to punish another. A terrorist would have to be caught and punished for his crimes. We cannot say that he should be pardoned and allowed to be free. Forgiveness means responding correctly. Sri Rama responded to the evil Ravana and even killed him because it was for his good. But there was no anger, hatred or sense of revenge in his heart. Merely do your duty, without the feeling of taking responsibility for punishing the offender. There is no option to forgiveness. In its absence the hatred

permeates generations. This is how family feuds are kept alive with hate being passed on from one generation to the next. Take the classic example of India and Pakistan. Each fresh generation is taught how to dislike the other nation and the fires of hatred continue to be nurtured. This is happening outside and inside as well. The *Kauravas* and *Pandavas* inside us are constantly warring and the cycle of ups and downs continues. It is not possible for one party to be constantly winning. One has to break the vicious circle of hatred. If we are able to respond to anger or violence with love, the anger retreats and only love and compassion remain.

The *Bhagavad Gita* is not a justification for war. It teaches us how to do our duty without shirking the unpleasant aspects. Our scriptures give extreme examples in order to help clarify our thinking. The Emperor Ashoka was a great king but he gave up his *kshatriya dharma* and became a Buddhist monk. When he did this his followers did the same because the subjects of the king are attuned to following the leader. This resulted in chaos. It was only due to these wrong notions of compassion and forgiveness that the country's borders were opened to outside invasion and aggression.

There is a very thin line between revenge, punishment and teaching a lesson. Try to find out whether the responses in our heart are rising from anger or not. If they are arising from anger then regardless of the name we choose to give it, it is revenge only. Go deep within yourself and see what is responding to the world. Is it greed, ambition, passion or love which forms the basis? We have to be sincere, alert and sensitive.

Q Not forgiving is also a power. Can this be used to our advantage?

Non-forgiveness always remains a negative emotion. In every response there is an element of purity of heart and wisdom. If the responder has only purity of heart and no wisdom he/she is taken advantage of. Alternatively where there is wisdom and no purity of heart then the person takes advantage. Neither of these situations is good. It is like the mother punishing her child. She does it without anger or hatred. Even if she has to be harsh it is done without any anger. Anger comes when the ego is hurt. Our earth is the ultimate symbol of forgiveness. Another word for the earth is *kshama*. Nature provides the best example for forgiveness. Practically the virtue of forgiveness can be cultivated by everyday asking forgiveness from Mother Earth. Sincerely bow down and ask for the strength to forgive and you will get it. Another way is by hugging a tree. Ask the tree for the strength to forgive. Gangaji is very forgiving and has been purifying the sins of her devout devotees. Take a dip in running water and feel yourself becoming pure and good. The main thing is to deeply understand the need to forgive and then work towards it.