

THIRTEEN

Exercises for Healing Emotional Wounds and Forgiveness*



by Zalman Schachter-Shalomi

HEALING A PAINFUL MEMORY

Life review sometimes involves reaching back into the past to repair events and relationships that caused us pain or disappointment. We can mend our personal history because time is stretchable and therefore subject to reshaping through the use of contemplative techniques. To heal the part of ourselves that is still imprisoned in the past, we can return to the scene of a questionable decision or a bruised relationship and apply the balm of our more mature consciousness. In this way, we can forgive ourselves for actions undertaken without the benefit of the more enlightened awareness we now have. By recontextualizing the past, we can release the defenses that obstruct the expression of our natural love and spontaneity and recover a sensitivity and sense of innocence that we may have lost in becoming our mature self.

**These exercises and practices by Zalman Schachter-Shalomi are adapted from those used in his Spiritual Eldering seminars.*

1. Sit in a comfortable chair or posture, close your eyes, and begin breathing in a slow, rhythmic manner. With each breath, feel yourself reaching further and further into the past until you return to a time of emotional turmoil and pain. Do not resist the memory; with all your strength and awareness, make contact with your younger self who felt alone, misunderstood, unconsolated, or hurt.
2. Now let your elder self reach back with reassurance from the present and hold your anxious younger self in its arms. Visualize this embrace in your mind's eye as your mature self blesses the younger self that is smarting with pain and self-doubt about its present course of action.
3. Reaching through the fog of anxiety, the elder self says, "I come with assurance from the future. You are going to make it. You lived through this difficulty, healed from it, and learned important lessons that matured into wisdom. You acted courageously, you grew in strength and character, and in the end everything worked out well. Be at peace: even though it seems impossible now, unforeseen blessings will result from your present course of action."
4. Still feeling the embrace of your elder self, let go of the cramp around the pain. Reach into the pain, hugging, consoling, and finally sanctifying it by offering it as a sacrifice for the good of all humanity.

In this way, you elevate and ennoble that which you took to be worthless and ignoble.

5. As you let go of the burden of the past, focus your attention on your breathing and become aware of the increased energy, the buoyancy of feeling, and the sense of courage that are now available to you. Breathe in a sense of well-being and give thanks for having rescued and harvested a holy spark of your life.
6. Sit quietly for a few moments and then record your observations in your journal. Instead of writing, you may prefer to paint a picture, write a poem, play some music, or go for a meditative walk in nature.

GIVING OURSELVES THE GIFT OF FORGIVENESS

Because all of us have unhealed scar tissue from past relationships, practicing forgiveness plays a major role in our “living-fully” work. When we heal our major woundings, along with the minor bruises that accompany intimate relationships, we release feelings of anger and resentment that armor our heart with defensiveness, drain our energy, and reduce the level of our vitality. Forgiveness work has two dimensions. First, we need to take responsibility for initiating acts of forgiveness. This means overcoming our passive attitude that makes forgiveness dependent on the other person’s apology. Second, we need to forgive ourselves for our contribution to the misunderstanding.

Because this kind of enlightened behavior does not come easily to us, we need to train ourselves in this noble and beneficial

practice. By gaining proficiency in the art of forgiveness, we can learn how to transmute our sorrows into the capacity to love, enabling us to reach out to others with a spontaneity and openness that will add emotional richness and enjoyment to our life. As you practice the following, you will discover through firsthand experience why forgiveness is one of the greatest gifts that we can give ourselves.

1. Sit quietly and take a few deep breaths to center yourself.
2. In your mind's eye, visualize being in the presence of someone toward whom you have unresolved anger or resentment, someone who has wronged you and toward whom you harbor a grudge. As you contemplate this person's actions, consider how your lack of forgiveness keeps you chained to this relationship, drains your energy, and disturbs your emotional equilibrium.
3. Place yourself in your adversary's shoes for a moment and investigate whether your own unacknowledged needs and expectations or a misunderstanding in communication contributed to the upset or rupture in your relationship.
4. Allow your awareness to move back and forth between yourself and the other person, giving you an enlarged perspective and an objectivity with which to view the relationship.

5. Imagine that the two of you are bathed in a ray of golden sunlight that melts your resentment and allows forgiveness to take root within your heart. Rest in the warmth of this sunlight for a while.
6. With a sincere desire to mend the relationship, say, “I forgive you with all my heart and wish you nothing but unalloyed goodness. And I forgive myself for my complicity in creating this misunderstanding. May neither of us have to suffer any further painful consequences from our past encounter.”
7. Now visualize being in the presence of your former antagonist and mending your relationship with kind words and gestures. As you contemplate this auspicious encounter, feel how a great weight is being lifted from you and how a sense of inner peace is replacing it.
8. Slowly open your eyes and relax for a few moments. When you return to everyday awareness, record your observations in your journal.

A TESTIMONIAL DINNER FOR SEVERE TEACHERS

This exercise uses the broad spectrum of time to reframe some hurtful relationships and situations. With this perspective, you welcome people back into your life, thanking and blessing them for the unexpected good fortune that resulted from the apparent injustice that was inflicted upon you. Besides coming to terms

with these “severe teachers,” we can use this exercise to investigate how our own behavior unconsciously may have contributed to our victimization. As we witness our behavior from an objective platform that was unavailable earlier in life, we can take responsibility for actions on our part that unwittingly led to personal suffering. In this way, we can end the blame game and reclaim a sense of personal empowerment.

This exercise is not perfectly suited to all of the difficult and traumatic relationships in our life, but it applies well to many of them. Keep this in mind as you do this exercise and try to take a broad, elevated perspective, seeing the karmic patterns of your life as a perfect network of connections, creating the unique person you are today. From this place, you should be able to find some way to work with most of your difficult relationships.

1. Sit in a comfortable chair or posture, relax your body, and take some long, rhythmic breaths to center your mind.
2. Divide a piece of paper into three columns. In the first column, list the guests whom you are inviting to this testimonial dinner, those who have wronged you in some significant way. In the second column, describe the apparent injustice that was inflicted on you. In the third column, describe the unforeseen benefits, the unexpected good that resulted from these actions.
3. Using the broad perspective of time, say to each of the offending parties, “I understand now that you

did me a great deal of good by your actions when you did _____, for which I want to thank you. I understand now that it was difficult for you, and it was difficult for me. But now that I forgive you, I am grateful for your contribution to my life.”

4. As you consider how each of the offending parties treated you, ask yourself, “What part did I play in being victimized? Did I have an unconscious program that made me an unwitting collaborator in this scenario?” If you uncover ways in which you sabotaged yourself, extend the same courtesy to yourself that you just extended to your severe teachers. Forgive yourself. As you free yourself from the blame game and take responsibility for yourself, you can release the energy that has been tied up in resentment and redirect it into your conscious growth today.