

Forgiving History, Surviving Memory: A Buddhist and Deconstructive Perspective

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As the world become more globalized each day and nation states make a gesture of envisioning a world without borders, the issue of how to deal with history of traumatic memories becomes not only an issue for individuals who have survived the trauma of the past but also that of a community which shares the collected memory called history.

How do we survive memories and forgive history? And more importantly for our conference, what does traditional Asian thought like Buddhism offer to us to deal with these issues? What is Buddhist idea of history and memory in this context? Is forgiving possible in Buddhism? Who is forgiving what and how?

This paper is a preliminary meditation on what Buddhism can offer to us in dealing with history of traumatic memories in our time. After a brief review of discussions on history and memory in Buddhist tradition, I will develop a possible Buddhist interpretation of the issue by introducing Jacques Derrida's view on forgiveness and its relation to history and memory. What follows is a consideration of Buddhist response to Derrida's view. I will conclude the paper with a discussion on the ethical implication of forgiveness.

1. Memory and History in Buddhism: a brief review

Memory is a problematic concept in Buddhism. On the one hand, as a non-substantialist philosophy which denies an unchanging essence of being, Buddhism by nature cannot support the idea of memory, if memory, as we use the term in our daily language, presupposes the continuation of the subject from the past to the present and thus assumes the existence of an unchanging self. On the other hand, we notice that memory has played an essential role in Buddhist tradition. Among others, recollection of the past actions constitutes an important part in the process of the Buddha's enlightenment. The early scriptures describe the night of the Buddha's awakening with his recollection of his past lives as we read:

I truly made effort and endeavor, my thought was firm and undistracted, my body was tranquil and passive, and my mind was concentrated. I was free of desires and unwholesome thoughts, and though I still had initial thought and discursive thought, I had arrived at the first meditation with the joy created by such a separation... [Having attained the second, third and fourth meditations] in this manner my mind became concentrated, purified, cleansed without defilement, pliable, flexible, established and immovable. I then directed my mind to wisdom raising the recollections of my past lives... recalling numerous

past lives along with each individual appearance and detailed conditions... This was the first light of wisdom attained during the early part of the night.¹

Buddhist negation of the existence of permanent unchanging elements in a being raises a question of how we should understand the Buddha's recollection of the past. Different interpretations have appeared in this context. Some tried to explain this description of the night of the Buddha's enlightenment as a symbolic statement which has a mythological function, but which cannot be counted as a history of facts as it is; or one can also interpret it in the context of "mindfulness" (sk. *smṛti*) and try to bridge the gap between the existence of memory and the non-substantialist position of Buddhist thought.²

Unlike the Indian and Tibetan tradition, East Asian Buddhism has not been too keen about the function of memory.³ Instead history has played an important role in the construction of the identity of East Asian Chan Buddhist tradition. One most well-known case is the lineage compilation in Chan Buddhism. Whether the Chan lineage represents the sinicized aspect of Buddhism as John Maraldo claims,⁴ or whether it is the tradition that already existed in Indian Buddhism as John McRae has it,⁵ the Chan lineage has played an important role in the construction of the sectarian identity in Chan Buddhism. As with memory, historical consciousness inevitably presupposes one's sense of identity. How effectively Chan Buddhism can defend itself for its use of Chan lineage as a way to legitimize a certain Chan school has been an issue that cannot be easily resolved.

At this point, we need to ask whether the discourse on memory in early Buddhism and of history in Chan Buddhist tradition can help us outline a Buddhist view on how to deal with history of traumatic memory. This job seems to demand different qualifications, because memory we are dealing with here is not the mindfulness that will lead to awakening. And the history we have is not something that can legitimize our actions but something that brought trauma to individuals and communities. Examples are ample in our post-world war two era: the conflict of Koreans or Chinese with the Japanese; that between the survivals of Auschwitz and Germany; between Vietnam and her colonizers; and the Tibetans and the Chinese government. Does Buddhism have a

¹ *Majjhima-nikāya*, I, 21.

² For discussions on this see Janet Gyatso ed., *In the Mirror of Memory: Reflection on Mindfulness and Remembrance in Indian and Tibetan Buddhism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992).

³ A claim can be made that mindful recollection (*smṛti*) in the early Buddhist tradition continues in Chan Buddhist concept of "thought" (C. *nien*). Discussion on the issue is beyond the scope of this paper.

⁴ See John C. Maraldo, "Is There Historical Consciousness within Ch'an?" *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 12/2-3: 141-172; John C. Maraldo, "Hermeneutics and Historicity in the Study of Buddhism," *Eastern Buddhist* 19, no. 1 (Spring 1986): 17-43.

⁵ John R. McRae, *Seeing through Zen: Encounter, Transformation, and Genealogy in Chinese Chan Buddhism* (Berkeley/ Los Angeles/ London: University of California Press, 2003).

blueprint to offer to resolve these situations? Let me give you the following two examples and see whether we can find a door to the Buddhist way of resolving the historical trauma of our time.

My first example is related to the conflict between Tibet and China. Victor Chan, the co-author of *The Wisdom of Forgiveness: Intimate Conversations and Journeys* describes his first encounter with the Dalai Lama as follows:

“As you remember... in my first audience with you back in 1972, the question uppermost in my mind was whether you hated the Chinese. You told me you don’t hate them; you told me you have truly forgiven them. Your Holiness, this was just thirteen years after you’d lost your country. I was very surprised at your magnanimity.”

“That’s Buddhist training,” the Dalai Lama replied. “Not something unique in my case... Forgiveness and compassion are important parts of practice.”⁶

The second example reflects the conflict between the Jews and the Nazis. January 27, 2005 marks the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau in Poland. As many as 1.5 million people were gassed, shot or abused to death in this rural southern Poland. Dick Cheney, Vice President of the United States, attended the ceremony and was reported to have commented on the occasion with a statement: “The story of the camps reminds us that evil is real and must be called by its name and confronted.”⁷ Vice President Cheney’s determination to confront evil made a stark contrast with a statement made by a woman who survived Auschwitz. Her name is Eve Mezes Kor. She was one of 7000 people left behind by the Nazis when the Nazis left the camp. She was only ten years old at the time and had been abused by Dr. Joseph Mengele, Auschwitz’s head physician who conducted gruesome medical experiments on humans. Since the liberation, Eve Kor has returned to the camp several times. As the liberation marks the 60th anniversary she was quoted to have said: “I know most people won’t understand this, but I have forgiven the Nazis. I have forgiven Mengele, I have forgiven everybody. I no longer carry the burden of pain. I have given myself the gift of forgiveness.”⁸

Auschwitz and Tibet are two of most well know incidents in the history of the 20th century which have left behind traumatic memories and unforgivable history. In the case of Tibet the situation continues even today. Despite the extreme situations the historical situation created for them, the Dalai Lama and Eve Mezes Kor expressed forgiveness as the ultimate way for them to make peace with history and memory.

⁶ His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Victor Chan, *The Wisdom of Forgiveness: Intimate Conversations and Journeys* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2004), 105-106.

⁷ The Washington Post, 27 January 2005.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A40627-2005Jan27?langauge=printer>. Visited on Jan. 27, 2005.

⁸ *Ibid.* The Post reports that Eva was a victim of Dr. Joseph Mengele who was Auschwitz’s head physician and conducted gruesome medical experiments on humans.

When forgiveness is expressed as the ultimate way of reconciling with one's memories and thus history, what do people forgive? And how did they do that? Is forgiveness Buddhist or is it Western by nature? Below we will consider more specifically how forgiveness is related to our way of dealing history and memory, how Buddhist doctrine functions in that context, and how it also has to do with non-Buddhist tradition.

2. History, Memory, and Forgiveness

In his essay "On Forgiveness," Jacques Derrida brings our attention to the pervasiveness of "asking forgiveness" in the international scene since the Second World War. In that context, he asks why the Abrahamic tradition of asking forgiveness is so pervasive even in the nations, such as Korea, China, or Japan, whose dominant tradition is not based on Abrahamic religions. He further states: "The proliferation of scenes of repentance, or of asking 'forgiveness', signifies, no doubt, a *universal urgency* of memory: it is necessary to turn toward the past; and it is *necessary* to take this act of memory, of self-accusation, of repentance', of appearance [*comparution*] at the same time beyond the juridical instance, or that of the Nation-State" (emphasis original).⁹

As we already noticed in the statement by the Dalai Lama, Derrida was not completely right in assuming that to compromise the history of traumatic memory through the exercise of "forgiveness" is exclusively Abrahamic in its nature. However, his meditation on the meaning of forgiveness provides us with an important question to consider from a Buddhist perspective. As Derrida discusses the meaning of forgiveness, he asks whether conditionality is possible in the act of forgiving and of asking forgiveness. This issue is especially relevant to our discussion on history and memory, because by resorting to the act of forgiveness, one is searching for an ultimate way to reconcile with the memory of the past. However this urgency of reconciling with history of traumatic memory is frequently charged with its conditionality, Derrida argues. Because, when forgiveness is brought up, a society, a nation-state, or an individual tends to use the act of asking forgiveness as a means to move beyond that act. For example, between two nations, normalization of the relationship is frequently an expected end result of the act of asking forgiveness. If an individual, or the head of a society or of a nation states: "I" ask for your forgiveness so that we can normalize our relationship, does this statement actually ask for forgiveness? And if the other party in this act of asking forgiveness and of forgiving responds: "I" will forgive you on the condition that you do this and that, is the act of forgiving actually taking place here? What we witness in this case is an exchange of benefits through the means of forgiveness. Forgiveness in this case has conditions the fulfillment of which will result

⁹ Jacques Derrida, "On Forgiveness," in *Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, trans. Mark Dooley and Michael Hughes (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 28. Hereafter "OF."

in the expected profits or gains of that action. Exchange of values as a reward or a cost of one's action is a familiar discourse in our capitalist society. However, if forgiveness can be on the horizon only within that context, is forgiveness actually taking place? Derrida thus asks whether forgiveness can have finality and is exchangeable:

each time forgiveness is at the service of a finality, be it noble and spiritual (atonement or redemption, reconciliation, salvation), each time that it aims to re-establish a normality (social, national, political, psychological) by a work of mourning, by some therapy or ecology of memory, then the 'forgiveness' is not pure -- nor is its concept. Forgiveness is not, it *should not be*, normal, normative, normalizing. It *should* remain exceptional and extraordinary, in the face of the impossible: as if it interrupted the ordinary course of historical temporality ("OF" 31-2).

In this statement, Derrida places the act of the forgiveness in the context outside "historical temporality." To think about the act of the forgiveness as an atemporal action without imposing any supreme being such as God or Absolute Spirit means that one should be able to confront the impossible, since there is no being which will offer resolution of the atemporal nature of forgiveness within the temporal frame of history. Put it another way, from Derrida's perspective, if forgiveness takes place as forgiveness, without being subjugated by the logic of exchange or conditionality, the act as well as the concept of forgiveness is an aporia. That is, to forgive means to forgive even the unforgivable. Because if we forgive only that which is forgivable, what do we actually forgive? The unforgivable by nature means that which cannot be forgiven. However to forgive means to forgive unconditionally which should include forgiving the unforgivable. Here comes the aporia: the full scope activation of forgiveness demands forgiving the unforgivable. Does it imply that our attempt to make peace with history and memory through the act of forgiveness has actually been a futile or even a self-deceiving attempt? Below we will investigate the philosophical ground of Buddhist concept of forgiveness which will take us to a different dimension of the meaning of aporia in the act of forgiveness.

3. Forgiveness, Emptiness and the Ethics of Forgiveness

In the aforementioned book, *The Wisdom of Forgiveness*, the Dalai Lama explains the two wings of Buddhist philosophy as compassion and interdependence. These are also what he identifies as two foundations of the act of the forgiveness. As a core teaching of Buddhism, the theory of interdependence interprets the world as multi-layer causations. The Buddhist concept of interdependency is characterized by the lack of a substantial moment which can be identified as an entity. Interdependency in this sense is interaction without substance. Since existence of a being means this constant flux of change, Nagarjuna identified Buddhist interdependence with emptiness.

In explaining how forgiveness is and should eventually be a natural and logical way of reacting to situations one encounters in life, the Dalai Lama gives an example of a Chinese boy who were beaten to death by a Chinese soldier because the boy's father was counterrevolutionary. From the logic of our daily life, the Chinese soldier is either a devil or a patriot. However, the Dalai Lama's logic suggests that the Chinese soldier is actually neither and could be both. But eventually, he suggest, one should distinguish actor from act. The Dalai Lama states:

The officer's action depends on his motivation; his motivation depends on propaganda. Because of propaganda, the counterrevolutionary father is seen as evil. Elimination of evil is something positive. That kind of faith—wrong faith. You can't blame that person. ... Interdependence gives you whole picture: this happens because of that, and that happens because of this....

We have to oppose bad action. But that does not mean we against [sic] that person, actor. Once action stopped, different action come [sic], then that person could be friend. That's why today Chinese is enemy; the next day, there's always the possibility to become friend. And that's why I have no problems forgiving the Chinese for what they've done to my country and people.¹⁰

As the Dalai Lama explains in the above, the theoretical ground of Buddhist forgiveness is the idea of interdependence and thus of emptiness of the self. A being, or an actor, is not an entity which has a substance that can be reified either as good or bad, but a result of multilevel causations. The act of beating a child for the crime committed by his father might not be fair. But the Chinese soldier who performed that action is also a result of historical situation as much as the child beaten by that soldier, the Dalai Lama states. Seen from this line of argument, history and memories are not to be understood as a series of individual events but within the context of what Buddhism calls the Indra's net. From the Buddhist perspective the act of forgiveness is possible because of one's understanding of this intertwining of events that constitutes the world. With this realization, the overcoming of that history, because forgiveness in this case "interrupt[s] the ordinary course of historical temporality," not in the sense that one moves beyond the world of causation or history itself, but in the sense that one's view on history moves beyond the segmented view on the events which constitutes history. The act of

¹⁰ The Dalai Lama and Chan, *The Wisdom of Forgiveness*, p. 111-112.

forgiveness here cannot be a part of a transaction but an act of unconditional forgiveness.

Here comes a question regarding the ethical stance of the unconditional forgiveness. Does forgiveness in this case suggest that no justice can be done in any level? If we separate the actor from the action, and excuse the actor from the responsibility of her/his actions based on the theory of interdependence, how do we accomplish justice and maintain a society? Is the Buddhist concept of forgiveness a viable option to deal with history and memory in a society which needs a certain form of a regulatory power? How does a society then protect its citizens from various kind of evil? Is there any other way of understanding the Dalai Lama's and Derrida's concept of the unconditional forgiveness?

In several places in the *Wisdom of Forgiveness*, the Dalai Lama emphasizes the importance of emptiness in Buddhism. For example in one place he states: "According to Buddhist belief, unless you meditate on and experience emptiness thoroughly, directly, it is very difficult to eliminate your destructive emotions"¹¹ How and why does one's meditation on emptiness prevents one from falling into the prey of destructive emotions? The answer to this question comes directly from the meaning of emptiness. The Dalai Lama states: "Emptiness does not mean nothing exists. Things exist but the way they exist, we cannot find. Therefore empty." He further elaborates the concept by using an example of a flower vase: "So emptiness means this vase, ... it exists, but it is the way of existence that we cannot find. Therefore empty. Empty nature."¹²

From Buddhist perspective, the reality of the world always already exceeds the frame of reference created by the human mind. This excess however does not presuppose a super-natural or transcendental being, because the excess itself is the nature of existence of beings when one sees the world as structured through multi-layer causations of dependent co-arising. Jacques Derrida explains this excessiveness in the structure of the world as viewed by Buddhism through the concept of the inexhaustibility of the context. Derrida states:

there is a context but one cannot analyse it exhaustively; the context is open because 'it comes' [*ça vient*], because there is something to come [*il y a de l'avenir*]. We have to accept the concept of a non-saturable context, and take into account both the context itself and its open structure, its non-closure, if we are to make decisions and engage in a wager—or give as a pledge—without knowing, without being sure that it will pay off, that it will be a winner, etc.¹³

¹¹ Ibid, p. 135.

¹² Ibid, p. 139.

¹³ Jacques Derrida, "I Have A Taste for the Secret" in *A Taste for the Secret* (Polity, 2001), p. 13.

To be aware of the inexhaustibility of the context, the non-saturability of context is possible only when human beings give up their desire to domesticate the world by imposing a value created by individual minds. Once one accepts that the world is beyond the domestication of human minds, the end result is, as Derrida states, the awareness of “non-closure” or “openness” of the context. The openness is possible because one is aware of one’s relation to others which Buddhism identifies as interdependence; hence, with the awareness of interdependence, that is, of emptiness, one develops wider perspectives. To realize the emptiness of a being is equivalent to be aware of the openness of being and situation. The self-centeredness of an individual with which one can easily resort to negative emotions as anger when things do not develop as one expects can be replaced with the center-less view of open-ending which allows individuals to practice the act of forgiveness.

To understand emptiness as the insaturability of the context of our existence and thus inevitable openness of one’s perspective leads us to the ethical implication of the act of forgiveness. To forgive does not mean that we will be ignorant of justice, fairness, or law. But how then is justice realized in the act of forgiveness? The Dalai Lama states:

In my own case, in Tibet, all this destruction, death, all happened. Painful experiences. But revenge... this creates more unhappiness. So, think wider perspective: revenge no good, so forgive. Forgiveness does not mean you just forget about the past. No, you remember the past. Should be aware that these past sufferings happened because of narrow-mindedness on both sides. So now, time passed. We feel more wise, more developed. I think that’s the only way.¹⁴

The exercise of forgiveness, instead of revenge, can produce positive results as the Dalai Lama states. But is justice actually realized in this act of forgiveness? To answer this question, let us return to Derrida and consider his understanding of the relationship between justice and forgiveness.

In the aforementioned essay, Derrida asks whether the act of the forgiveness goes together with the realization of justice. And he states:

We can imagine that someone, a victim of the worst, himself a member of his family, in his generation or the preceding, demands that justice be done, that the criminals appear before a court, be judged and condemned by a court – and yet in his heart forgives. The inverse, of course, is also true. We can imagine,

¹⁴ *The Wisdom of Forgiveness*, p. 109.

and accept, that someone would never forgive, even after a process of acquittal or amnesty. The secret of this experience remains.¹⁵

Derrida's statement raises a question whether one can talk about the completion of the act of forgiveness. In other words, when does the act of forgiveness reach its completion? When does an individual or a society absolutely make peace with history when they exercise forgiveness? Is this possible at all?

Interestingly the Dalai Lama himself also makes a statement which raises such a question when he describes the situation of a Chinese boy beaten by a Chinese soldier because of his father's counterrevolutionary activities. After stating that he has forgiven the Chinese for what they have done to his country and his people, the Dalai Lama also says: "But if I was on the spot and meet the Chinese soldier, the officer who beat that boy... If I was there, and I have gun, then I don't know. ... Such moment, I may shoot the Chinese."¹⁶ The Dalai Lama did not elaborate on this issue except saying that "Sometimes, thinking comes later. Action comes first." But both Derrida's thought on the relationship between justice and forgiveness and the Dalai Lama's mentioning of the possibility for him to be controlled by the situation suggest that the forgiveness is not an action which has finality. It is constant efforts to realize the emptiness of reality from the Buddhist perspective and the insaturability of context from Derridean perspective. The finality is a foreign concept for both Buddhism and Derridean deconstruction, for finality by definition and in its spirit anchors itself on the closed concept of identity. If forgiveness is understood as an openness of being, then the justice is also an open concept, which we can describe as "justice to be done" in line with Derrida's concept of "democracy to come." The intrinsic incomplete nature of justice and democracy in this sense is not contingent upon time or history for its completion. The openness of the world, its unfathomability, demands us, in both Buddhist view of the world and that in deconstruction, constant reappropriation of our position. Such an effort is necessary in order not to subjugate justice or forgiveness to the power of sovereignty.

In concluding, let us go back to the two examples I provided in which reconciliation with history and memory has been taking place through the act of the forgiveness. The Dalai Lama expressed that he has forgiven the Chinese; Eve Mezes Kor declared she has forgiven the Nazis. Both cases are expressed in the present perfect tense. However, to be exact, the act of forgiveness is always something that will be accomplished in the future and thus is the act that need be expressed in the future perfect in English, or rather in future anterior in French language. If a being is empty because we cannot know the ultimate structure of one's existence from a

¹⁵ Jacques Derrida, "On Forgiveness," p. 54-55.

¹⁶ The Dalai Lama and Victor Chan, *The Wisdom of Forgiveness*, p. 112.

Buddhist perspective, and because the context of life is never saturable from Derridean perspective, the act of facing, re-interpreting and thus reconciling history of traumatic memory is always something to come in the future which will be forever delayed. The act of forgiveness is in a strict sense the ‘forgiveness to come’ to follow Derrida’s ‘democracy to come’ once again. And in this forgiveness to come there shall have been no subject to forgive, for the subject is always already in the act of forgiveness.