



Viewing Forgiveness through the Lens of Spirituality

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Abstract: While revenge has been considered a survival strategy by the ancient human, spiritually enlightened people like Jesus Christ have epitomized highest levels of forgiveness even in life-threatening situations. The present paper is an attempt to examine the interrelationship between forgiveness and spirituality. With descriptive research design and qualitative approach, the study aimed to find how common people, spiritual seekers and enlightened people conceptualize forgiveness. FGDs were conducted and thematic analysis of videos and text contents of the spiritual masters were done. Findings show that seekers and non-seekers consider that forgiveness is a higher value and with meditative practices propensity to forgive increases. Spiritual masters realize the oneness of consciousness everywhere and in everyone which makes compassion and forgiveness a natural outcome.

Keywords: Spirituality, Forgiveness, oneness of consciousness

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Introduction

In a common parlance, forgiveness is considered a desired behaviour, a higher order value while revenge and hitting back is taken as our innate nature, emerging out of our survival response. When seen from the viewpoint of morality, revenge may seem an unsettling reality but research for centuries has shown that unless there is some neurological anomaly, human beings are biologically hardwired to seek revenge when face any threat. Ample research studies have shown that 'revenge' played a critical role for ancestral humans in their survival and it may still be playing an important role, especially when viewed in the light of evolutionary theory (McCullough, 2008).

But then, the humanity has also seen epitome of compassion, empathy, forgiveness, expressed in the human body-mind, in contrast to the argument given that revenge is a natural survival response. The lives of Jesus Christ, Gautam Buddha and Mahavira, like many other 'spiritually enlightened' people reflect personification of non-violence, compassion and forgiveness. Numerous anecdotes and records of the lives of these spiritual masters have depicted that they chose forgiveness over anger and revenge even in life-threatening experiences. Jesus Christ even when crucified urged the God to forgive his transgressors as his last words, thereby setting the highest standards of forgiveness and implying that any act can be forgiven.

With vengeance at one extreme and forgiveness at the other, most humans keep on struggling in between the continuum while dealing with conflicts, frustrations, anger and violence in their everyday life. It is hypothesized that the more religious and spiritual an individual is, greater are the chances of his/her placement towards the forgiveness on the continuum. The Indian socio-cultural panorama is characterized by its strong tradition of integrating religion and spirituality as the way of life. It may be assumed that spirituality has a bearing on forgiveness, though both these notions are complex and dynamic and surely there is no linear linkage between the two variables. A review of research on the interplay of these two variables – forgiveness and spirituality – would be important at this juncture.

Literature Review

Forgiveness, though appears to be synonymous with pardoning and excusing, is not merely an overt behavior, but a dynamic concept involving integration of behavior, cognition and affect (see: Enright & Fitzgibbins, 2000). Forgiveness is an intra-personal pro-social change towards a perceived abuser (McCullough, *et al.*, 2001). It is a process that entails decreased motivation to retaliate against an offender and increased motivation toward reconciliation and goodwill for the transgressor (McCullough, *et al.* 1997; Ashton *et al.* 1998; Enright, *et al.* 1998).

Research studies have proven, beyond doubt, the benefits of forgiveness in not only strengthening social relations and maintaining social order but also promoting holistic health and well-being and facilitating greater life-satisfaction (Ashton *et al.* 1998; Enright and North 1998; Exline *et al.* 2008; Harris and Thoresen 2005; McCullough, Bono, and Root 2005; McCullough and Worthington 1999; Toussaint and Friedman 2008; Toussaint *et al.* 2001; Tutu 2000; Worthington 1998; Worthington, Sandage, and Berry 2000; Krause and Ellison 2003). Contrarily, un-forgiveness is highly correlated with increased

levels of anxiety and depression (Maltby, Macaskill, and Day 2001; Witvliet, Ludwig, and Laan, 2001).

Forgiveness is conceptualized as an element of religiosity/spirituality (religiosity carries somewhat similar connotation as spirituality in the present paper). Many empirical studies show a positive link between religiosity and propensity to forgive (Webb, *et al.* 2005; Lawler-Row & Pijeri, 2006; Jose & Alfons, 2007; Macaskill, 2007; Fox & Thomas, 2008; Gorsuch and Hao 1993; McCullough, Bono, and Root 2005; McCullough and Worthington 1999; Mullet *et al.* 2003; Rye 2005; Rye *et al.* 2001; Wuthnow 2000). However, few studies (Cohen *et al.* 2006; Subkoviak *et al.* 1995; cf. Tsang, McCullough, and Hoyt 2005) show contradictory results. Ayten (2012) notes that religiosity is positively linked to the increased likelihood to forgive and negatively associated with the feelings of taking revenge among the sample of 321 people from Istanbul, Turkey. Moreover, forgiveness is correlated positively with humility and negatively with pride. Baumeister, Exline & Sommer (1998) emphasize that pride and conceit exert a negative influence while humility, empathy, and compassion have a positive effect on the process of forgiving. Furthermore, Powers *et al.* (2007) and Davis *et al.* (2010) also find that forgiveness has a positive relation with humility. Forgiveness showed a stronger relation with humility and with pride than with religiosity. Humility and pride are more effective than religiosity during the process of forgiving.

However, research attempts have been made to unearth the qualities of religiosity that actually facilitates forgiving behavior. Religiousness has been conceptualized in three main ways – involvement in religious activities and ritual performance such as frequency of prayers, attending religious services; religious affiliation and teachings; and imitation of God. Pargament and Rye (1998) find no significant relation between carrying out religious activities and forgiveness. As in the complex nature of human mind, the self-ascribed religious identity derived from the official religious teachings may not be in sync with an individual's actual values, attitudes and beliefs, linking religious affiliation with self-reported forgiveness behavior has the potential of containing ecological fallacy. Likewise, imitation of God too may have inherent challenges of studying these variables in a scientific manner (Escher, 2013).

While further examining the complementary aspects of religiosity and forgiveness, Rye (2005) asserts that forgiveness is valued highly in most of the religions, but this does not guarantee that personal values and attitudes are always in sync with the doctrinal teachings about forgiveness. Parables of forgiveness in religious texts may serve as models, but it cannot be assumed

that every adherent has internalized and prioritized them (Mullet *et al.* 2003; Tsang, McCullough, and Hoyt 2005).

Rationale of the Study

People invariably are the products of their socio-cultural conditioning. And most societies, communities and families, condition the minds of children where gender, caste, class, religion play a crucial role. It is often said that violence is a learnt behavior and, assumingly, forgiveness too. Advocates of positive psychology propagate that un-forgiveness is a public health issue.

Spirituality is assumed to play a crucial role in forgiveness. In general, spiritual living is characterized by maturity, compassion, acceptance and forgiveness. In fact, to forgive someone and to ask for forgiveness are considered as the most crucial aspects of spiritual progress. All the traditions have placed the value of forgiveness on a high pedestal but majority of the people find it hard to practice forgiveness in their interpersonal relationships.

India takes pride in considering herself as world leader in spirituality and attracts the seekers from the world over to quench their spiritual quest. On the contrary, there is no dearth of episodes of abuse, exploitation and violence at the inter-personal, familial and community levels, reported daily. It is important to understand how people who consider themselves as 'seekers' and those who do not, conceptualize forgiveness. Moreover, there is a need to examine the notion of forgiveness as delineated by spiritual masters and the factors influencing this critical variable. The present study is a humble attempt in this direction.

Research Methodology

Review of literature shows that there is a link between spirituality and forgiveness. In this context it was considered relevant to look into the conceptual and practical notions of spiritual inclination and forgiveness. The present study is carried out with the aim to understand the meaning and modalities of forgiveness in spiritual terms and gain insights into the factors influencing forgiveness. The study revolves around the following research questions: How do spiritual people define forgiveness? Is their notion of forgiveness different than how laypersons consider it? Do spiritually mature people forgive easily? If yes, what is the alternative viewpoint of looking at the act of abuse and transgression that spiritual people possess? Is forgiveness dependent on the nature and intensity of the act of abuse?

Following are the research objectives

- To understand the conceptualization of forgiveness among people in relation to their spiritual inclination
- To examine the hurdles and challenges in readiness to forgive among the respondents
- To compare the views of spiritual seekers and non-seekers on their perceived readiness to forgive
- To comprehend the notion of forgiveness and the factors propagating forgiveness towards a peaceful society as delineated by the Spiritual Masters

Operational Definitions of certain key terms in the research are as follows:

Spirituality: It is a broad and dynamic notion that is based on an inherent belief that there is something beyond the apparent experiences on the physical plane and sensory levels, and body and mind. It entails a search for one's true nature and connect with the higher cosmic power.

Enlightenment: in the present study is understood as the attainment of the state of true knowledge about the Self and the nature of cosmic reality.

Forgiveness: is a conscious decision to release feelings of revenge or resentment towards one's perpetrator, regardless of whether the person who has hurt actually deserved the forgiveness or not and whether it is asked for or not.

Spiritual Master: Also known as enlightened being who has come out of the 'illusion' (*maya*) or all the binding forces of the social conditioning and knows the 'reality'.

Spiritual Seeker: An individual who has the quest to know his/her true nature and has taken membership of an organization that claims to provide guidance for spiritual attainment through their meditation programmes and similar other techniques.

Common person: An individual who may or may not have the quest to know his/her true nature but has not shown intent and willingness to pursue for spiritual goals by any kind of investment of money, time and energy such as joining an organization or group of spiritual seekers. At times, they are also referred to as non-seekers in the present paper.

With descriptive research design, the study adopts a qualitative approach. There are three sets of units of data collection that include spiritual seekers (n=18), common people (n=21) and spiritual masters (n=11). Focus group discussions (FGDs) were used as the main method for data collection with

spiritual seekers and non-seekers. Since the nature of information to be gathered did not require person specific attitudes and behaviours but rather an open discussion about the views on forgiveness and spirituality, FGD was considered an apt method. Four FGDs were conducted, two with each data set – one with male participants and another female participants. The site of the research is Delhi and National Capital Region.

The researchers contacted members of different spiritual groups like Isha Foundation group, Transcendental meditation group, Heartfulness meditation group, Radha Soami, Oshodhara, Bhrama Kumaris, Sivananda Yoga, Sri Aurobindo group, etc. and requested for participation in the research. Members of Oshodhara were the first ones to give consent. It is an organization established by the followers of Osho with 28 levels of spiritual programmes and having meditation centres at various places all across the world. From three meditation centres, the coordinators were contacted who gave the contact details of the members of Oshodhara. Through Whatsapp messages, these members were contacted and requested for their participation in the research. Nearly one-third declined and rest agreed for FGD. With collective consent, on convenient dates and times, two FGDs were conducted online through Google meet, one with female members and another with male members.

It was a huge challenge to recruit participants for another data set – with non-seekers or common people. On various social media and word of mouth information was passed on about the present research with a request to participate. After several failed attempts to gather nearly ten participants for FGD, women's group of a residential society apartments agreed. This is a voluntary group of ladies staying in an apartment in Dwarka, New Delhi. Likewise, among many voluntary groups, in Noida, ten members of one Residential Welfare Association consented for the FGD on the theme at hand. Both the FGDs were conducted online at the time convenient to the participants.

Further, videos, audios, books, magazines, and other modes of text contents of the discourses and sessions by the spiritual masters of contemporary times [Osho, J. Krishnamurti, Adyashanti, Dalai Lama, Eckhart Tolle, Sadhguru Vasudev Jaggi, Sister Shivani, Mooji, Anantsri, Whosoever, and Thich Nhat Hanh] with the key terms – forgiveness and spirituality, were searched and collated. With one spiritual master [Anantsri] telephonic interview was also held. Thematic analysis of the contents was done as themes were taken out from the research questions and objectives.

Ethical Considerations: Strict confidentiality was maintained and no identifying information was gathered from the participants. The purpose of the

FGD was informed and consent was again sought before the FGD. Participants were also informed about their right to decline to participate at any point or refuse to respond to any query asked. Online platforms of FGDs facilitated maintaining COVID protocols.

Limitations: The data were collected, in the months of April - May 2021, during the lockdown period in Delhi and NCR. Online FGDs were conducted, which somewhat limited the scope of a good rapport formation as well as substantiating data with observations.

Major Findings

Profile of the respondents: In the data set of common people, [who in contrast to another data set of 'spiritual seekers' are, at times, termed as non-seekers] two FGDs were conducted with total 21 respondents – 12 females (age range 28 years to 55 years) and 9 males (age range 34 years to 68 years). The salient discussion points emerging out of the FGD conducted with data set covering common people are as follows:

Forgiveness: meaning and benefits: On asking about their definition of forgiveness, the members maintained that forgiveness is a response which is considered a higher virtue where the abuser or the one who has hurt is pardoned. Almost everyone asserted that it is a behavior/ an act that explicitly depicts that the transgressor is forgiven.

However, a few also stressed that the person who forgives is released from the cage of negativity and resentment and many others agreed to this point. Everyone asserted that forgiveness is very beneficial for peace of mind and may be having positive impact on the health.

Barriers and facilitators in forgiving: When asked despite several benefits of forgiveness, why people are not readily able to forgive, participants told that often abusers don't ask for forgiveness and they keep on repeating their misdeeds.

Interestingly, the FGD with female respondents, candidly shared that in patriarchal social structure, women are expected to forgive, forget and overlook the misdeeds, betrayals, and abusive behavior. Gradually, most women participants admitted that cultural conditioning is such that women are 'forced' to forgive their husband for their abuse, exploitation, infidelity, so that their family remains 'intact', their children are not deprived of a parent's love and affection and, most importantly, oftentimes, they are economically dependent on their transgressing husband. For the same behavior, a woman is ridiculed, tortured and thrown out of the house, but never forgiven. In the

FGD with males, participants largely admitted that women are 'naturally' more forgiving because of their feminine temperament and the role of mother they play.

Participants in both the groups assumed that with increasing age, individuals become more mature and forgiving. Adolescents and young adults believe more in settling scores with the person who wronged them while when they reach old age, many contentious issues may seem trivial and they tend to forgive easily. However, one participant gave an opposite viewpoint citing examples based on his experience that in old age people become more aggressive and stubborn rather than forgiving. Others too agreed that old age is no guarantee of gaining maturity and showing greater propensity to forgive.

Spirituality and forgiveness: The participants were asked whether spiritual people are more forgiving. To this, all of the participants asserted that spiritual persons are more forgiving. Examples cited were of Jesus Christ who forgave those who crucified him. One participant even said that true forgiveness can be granted only by spiritually enlightened people, not the normal human beings like us who one day feel that we have forgiven our abuser and the very next day we find ourselves burning in revenge again. People may pretend to forgive but harbor grudges in their hearts.

Profile of the participants: In the next data set of spiritual seekers also two FGDs were held. There were 18 members in the FGDs, 10 females (age range 30 years to 65 years) and 8 males (age range 37 years to 53 years).

Following discussion points emerged out of the FGDs conducted with spiritual seekers:

Conceptualizing forgiveness: When asked what do they mean by forgiveness the respondents considered that forgiveness is one of the highest virtues that humans possess and it entails that one pardons his/her transgressor. Initially majority of the respondents considered behavioural aspect of forgiveness, which means actual verbalization of the statement that 'I forgive you' as an integral part of the act of forgiveness, to which some members opined differently saying that actual behavioural manifestation may not be an important aspect, one may forgive by letting go the feeling of taking revenge or settling score with the perpetrator. It is a psychological construct and behavioural act of forgiveness may or may not follow.

On asking when someone is forgiven, does rebooting of relationship with him/her is a must, there was a point of debate - a few considered rebooting of relationship as an important indicator that one has actually forgiven while others did not consider it a must.

Spirituality and forgiveness: When asked if spiritual persons have greater propensity to forgive, all the members affirmed. When asked after joining Oshodhara and attending meditations, do they find themselves more agreeable, one member Ramya (name changed) said that she is associated with oshodhara since the past 12 years and now she is much calmer and at peace. She cited an incident that one of their very close family friends did not invite her and her family in their son's wedding, which had made everyone in the family very upset and agitated. But Ramya was cool and said that its okay, they might have forgotten by mistake and see the positive side that when children's exams are approaching they do not have to go and participate in the marriage. One month later their friends apologized for their behavior and invited them for lunch and Ramya happily went there without any grudges. She attributes this change to her spiritual practice.

To this, one member intervened and narrated that one spiritual teacher of Oshodhara who as *Acharya* (revered teacher) has been taking meditation sessions for more than two decades and he is occupying the position of state coordinator too, few months back was seen uttering disdainful and demeaning words against one of his Gurus (considered to be spiritual master – an enlightened being) alleging him of some financial mismanagement.

One member commented that forgiveness and spirituality both are complex constructs. Some people may pretend to be spiritual while they actually are trying to meet their unfulfilled desires of power and prestige and in our country there is no dearth of people who disguise their lust for money and power, making spirituality a hot business proposition. Years of spiritual practice may not change a person even a bit while a sincere, genuine quest can do wonders in moments.

Spiritual Masters and their take on Forgiveness: Explaining the mechanism of hurt and forgiveness, Sister Shivani says, "In our lives when someone says something or does something, we create hurt and hold onto it for long. We feel bad. Sometimes the other person apologizes and sometimes they don't. But irrespective of that we take time for us to gradually understand their perspective. Even if we don't understand, it takes time for us to accept and gradually we start healing our hurt". She stresses, "Heal yourself to forgive people. True forgiveness is not an action after the (hurtful) act, (rather) it is the attitude with which you enter each moment" (BK Shivani, 2020).

When someone asked Sadguru Vasudev Jaggi what forgiveness means, he responded that different people have different notions about forgiveness. Some claim that forgiving means forgetting the hurtful incident. On the contrary, it

is not true. We never forget the sweetest and bitterest moments in our life. To forgive means you don't carry bitterness in you because it destroys your life (see: Scientific Spirituality with Sadhguru, 2018).

Sadhguru, further, asserts that forgiveness is a personal and natural choice – if one wants pleasantness and peace for oneself, he/she should opt for forgiveness. He says, “You want that even if you drink poison, the other person should die. Life doesn't work like that. Anger, frustration, resentment are poisons. What others (abusers) are doing – they know the best, as per their capabilities – you do what is best for you. Forgiveness is not about other person. It is your choice, for your health, mental health, 100% you are responsible” (Scientific Spirituality with Sadhguru, 2018).

In fact, Osho comments that if you 'try' to forgive someone, it may be an ego-trap rather than real forgiveness. Trials and efforts of forgiveness lead to repression. True forgiveness comes with understanding the stupidity of the game that goes on in the mind. Ego can thrive and strengthen itself on the idea that “I have forgiven...I have even forgiven my enemies. I am no ordinary person...I am so great”. But when one is in its true self, love, compassion, are the natural offshoots, and then there is no judgments, no complaints, but essence of love and forgiveness (Osho, 2021).

Jiddu Krishnamurti, further adds that this kind of forgiveness is not emerging out of true compassion. A mind that is capable of being hurt, cannot forgive. Compassion, as love, is not a function of mind, and so is real forgiveness. Mind can disguise itself to be forgiving and compassionate and loving. A conditioned mind may pretend to be forgiving and in that process nourishes its Ego to be great, wonderful, extraordinary, amazing human. In our true nature, our 'no-mind' state, we realize the innate oneness of existence and see ourselves in others. As long as there is the conscious cultivation of any particular influence, any particular virtue, there can be no love, there can be no compassion, because love and compassion are not the result of conscious efforts of the mind. Same is the case with true forgiveness (see: Krishnamurti, 1953; J.Krishnamurti Official Channel, 1981).

Adyashanti states that from the standpoint of oneness, when we look at the world around us, even including those who have hurt us, we see them as our own self. He maintains, “Forgiveness comes from that deep intuition of our sameness, of our shared humanity. That perception starts to lower the walls of defense, and being judgmental is ultimately a defensive game, a way of saying...I am not like you....To forgive is really a way of saying, “I see something in you that's the same as in me.” Then, even though you may be

upset, even though the other person may have caused you pain or harm, when you connect with your shared humanity, there is forgiveness.” Forgiveness comes from our spiritual essence, which is our divine being. From that inner space of psychological, emotional and spiritual unity we know that pain, sorrow, suffering emerge out of the ignorance of fundamental reality due to being in illusion. So forgiveness is ultimately an act that comes from that inner unification (Adyashanti, 2014; Adyashanti, 2017).

Anant Sri, another spiritual master, also states that the notion of forgiveness is absurd. It is the dance of duality played by one consciousness. *Maya* makes us believe that we are the doers, whereas the truth is that everything is being done through the cosmic mystery. Enlightenment simply means waking up to this reality only that we are non-doers. Even Gautam Buddha has asserted, “Events happen, deeds are done, consequences happen. But there is no personal doer of any deeds. Everything happens from the Source” (Anant Sri, 2018).

Swami Chaitanya Bharti, also known as ‘Whosoever’, adds, the life is like a movie that keeps on unfolding moment by moment and we are nothing but the actors. Here, deer is eaten by lion and both are the manifestation of that one consciousness. From this realization that everything happens as per the plan of the cosmic mystery, there comes a true sense of acceptance (Whosoever, 2013).

Likewise, Mooji states that there are two separate spectrums of looking at forgiveness – one from the eyes of ego – the forgiver is morally superior who pardons the other who has wronged something, and the other, from the space of ‘being’, which is your true self, where the entire life is a theatre form of consciousness where people are playing out these roles but actually there is not really a person doing something to another. One realizes the unity – the oneness in everything and everywhere and there is no difference between you and me and then who forgives whom? (Unconditioned, 2012).

Considering the entire notion of forgiveness as pointless, Sadhguru further elaborates, “when I don’t accuse you of anything, where is the question of forgiving you? When do I forgive you? First thing is, I criminalize you for something, then I am trying to forgive you – I don’t criminalize you, I just accept you the way you are. Where is the question of forgiveness?” (Sadhguru, 2019).

Unearthing the deeper layers of human psyche, Osho answers the query, why it is difficult to forgive others, despite knowing the benefits of forgiveness, as, “the ego exists on misery – the more misery the more nourishment for it. In blissful moments the ego totally disappears, and vice versa: if the ego disappears, bliss starts showering on you. If you want the ego, you cannot

forgive, you cannot forget – particularly the hurts, the wounds, the insults, the humiliations, the nightmares. Not only that you cannot forget, you will go on exaggerating them, you will emphasize them. You will tend to forget all that has been beautiful in your life, you will not remember joyous moments; they serve no purpose as far as the ego is concerned. Joy is like poison to the ego, and misery is like vitamins.” He further substantiates that awareness is the golden key. If you keep on looking at your anger, frustration, rage, sorrow..., with choice-less awareness, they get transformed into pure energy. Anger, frustration, become compassion, forgiveness, love. Once barriers disappear from vision, godliness is everywhere. If you can forgive and love then you will find it everywhere. You can’t see god in the sinner because you can’t forgive him. Once you start forgiving, the distinction between sinner and saint is lost; the distinction between good and bad disappears. There are no more distinctions; you start seeing the one, the distinction-less. There is no man, no woman, no black, no white, no Indian, no foreigner. There is pure energy, and that pure energy is God (Osho, 2021).

Echoing the same pointers, Eckhart Tolle puts forth that it must be noted that harming and hurting others is an act of unconsciousness that does not snatch away the divinity from the person considered as transgressor. Forgiveness means not to harbor the grievance. If you are connected with your ‘being’, of who you truly are, then you do not equate the behavior of the person with who the person is. You understand that the person is behaving out of conditioned mind and is not conscious, he did what the life has conditioned him. And then no act of forgiveness is needed. This is only possible if you are connected with your ‘formless Self’ within you, and in that dimension there is no hurt (Eckhart Teachings, 2019; 2020).

Further, Sadhguru gives an interesting and path-breaking insight as this: Forgiveness is independent of the behavioural outcome of the transgressor as well as the transgressed. He maintains that, “...sometimes forgiving means embracing the ones who committed crime, sometimes forgiving means rehabilitating them, sometimes forgiving means imprisoning them, sometimes forgiving means hanging them, sometimes forgiving means may be you have to butcher them on the streets. It is situational and you may have to do. If someone enters your house and starts butchering your family, you would do everything to stop him even to butcher him. Action depends upon situation. Then you are not giving chance to somebody to change. So forgiveness means you do not act out of resentment, you will act according to the situation; you will act out of what is needed for the situation...” Sadhguru

asserts, “Premeditated action is a crime”. Citing the example of Krishna, who epitomizes peak of human consciousness, Sadhguru says that he [Krishna] ran away from battlefield, killed people and got killed thousands of people during the Mahabharata war, conspired, lied to...whatever was needed he did, but there was no bitterness in his heart, there is no enmity in his heart, there is no stake, there is nothing to lose, nothing to gain – and that is Krishna (Mystics of India, 2020).

Similar insights are propagated by the noted Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh. Citing examples from his life, he asserts that people who commit violence and abuse, they suffer a lot. They need compassion and not punishment. Mindfulness teaches you to detach yourself from your thoughts and emotions and realize that everything is manifested from the same source. He provides practical strategies to deal with one’s past mistakes, forgive own-self and others. He shares same perspective as delineated by other spiritual masters. He says, “When you look deeply into your anger, you will see that the person you call your enemy is also suffering. As soon as you see that, the capacity for accepting and having compassion for them is there. And every one of us has the capacity to love, to forgive, to understand and to be compassionate.” (Global Well-being, 2016; Plum Village, 2021; Wkupmonk, 2010).

Likewise, Dalai Lama, too, points out that compassion and forgiveness are the real and ultimate sources of power for peace and success in life. When we are able to recognize and forgive the ignorant actions of the past or by others, we gain strength to constructively resolve the problems of the present times. He explains that there are different levels of forgiveness in consonance with our levels of consciousness. And in highest level of forgiveness one does not even realize that forgiveness is happening. He cautions that forgiveness does not mean forgetting what has happened. If something is serious and it is necessary to take counteractions, you must take them. But seek justice without holding anger inside you. You should totally oppose the sin and not the person. In that way, you can transform the energy into love, compassion, and forgiveness. These spiritual qualities provide basis for genuine happiness, for one’s own-self and others (Dalai Lama, 2011; Education Scotland, 2016; The Elijah Interfaith Institute, n.d.).

One of the characteristic features of spiritual enlightenment is realization of the ‘Universal Oneness of Consciousness’ which is visible as diverse expansion of the world through our five senses in innumerable ways. Failure to see that oneness and the fact that everything emerges out of the one un-manifested source of true potentiality, creates basis of ‘conditioned mind’. An enlightened

being is able to see the objective reality beyond the fallacy of sensory perceptions that creates illusion or *Maya*.

Discussion and Analysis

Indeed, spirituality and forgiveness are quite complex, multilayered concepts and their relationship is dynamic and not linear. Findings of the study show that people, in general, are driven by their respective identities, their ego-identity hurts when they perceive some interactions as threatening and they forgive or not forgive or offer and accept conditional forgiveness depending upon their upbringing, socialization and conditioning of their mind. In the second data set, spiritual seekers have shown higher propensity to forgive for reasons more than one. Some seekers believe that it is expected from them to forgive, others maintain that all humans are mix bags of virtues and vices and thus, we 'should' forgive. In both the cases, people behave from their false ego identity and consider themselves and others as doers. This gives rise to some kind of ego that 'I am great as I am forgiving him/her/them'. However, reaching to the highest level of consciousness the false identity from the body-mind breaks and one finds that even the word forgiveness is absurd as deeds are done and we are mere puppets in this cosmic play. This realization of non-doer-ship results in true compassion, love and forgiveness.

Thus, spiritual enlightenment brings a different viewpoint with regard to forgiveness. Spiritual enlightenment is an experience of realizing our true nature that is being the consciousness itself. The supreme power is nothing but a source of consciousness which is un-manifested. It gets manifested into countless forms as matter and energy that is visible and noticed in the world around through our senses. Only human beings, in the animal kingdom, have the capacity to realize this ultimate truth, which gives a clarity through experience, that body mind creates a false identity and until this spiritual slumber is broken, we are governed by this false identity and we behave according to our conditioning of mind which is a function of our differential socio-cultural milieus. That is the reason why some religious people tend to forgive easily as they are conditioned to do so.

On the flipside many people are prone to react violently when hurt while others suffer silently. Our cultural conditioning tells us how to behave, should we be forgiving or should we show our power and aggression so that no one can dare to hurt us. If during our socialization, we are trained to be God fearing, stuffed with notions of heaven and hell, and told that forgiveness is a virtue and we should be virtuous, forgiveness becomes, seemingly, our natural

response. In fact, until we actually experience that oneness of consciousness, our beliefs, our values, our personality traits would be the influencing factors. We would be like robots who behave and act as per the pre-fed information in terms of our conditioning. It implies that behavioural variability is a function of variability in socialization – how to behave, whether to forgive or take revenge and different conditions and riders put in forgiveness are the result of our identity, self-image and that of others, and personality development during our socialization process. This is also validated by several cases, examples and studies in the domain of biopsychology. A brain injury due to some accident has turned compassionate, empathetic, loving and caring individuals into cruel, violent and brutal humans. Individuals forget who they are and can't recognize their significant others in ailments like dementia.

Spiritual enlightenment breaks these conditioned responses and reactions, false identity sheds away, illusion is replaced by the truth and in the new gestalt shift, as the individual sees the inherent oneness with the entire universe and realizes that in reality, everything is a cosmic drama in reality.

This experience of enlightenment may be understood through the analogy of dreams in our sleep state. In dreadful nightmares, if someone hurts us badly or tortures our loved ones, after waking up we do not take revenge or give punishment or forgive the transgressor of the dream. We know it is was a dream, not reality. And then, forgiveness, in the manner, it is generally understood, becomes a weird and pointless concept.

Conclusions

The present paper has attempted to examine forgiveness through the lens of spirituality. In the study, while forgiveness is viewed as a difficult proposition in every wrongful act by the common people, some of the seekers reported being more amicable and forgiving through spiritual practice. However, spiritually enlightened people appeared to be naturally compassionate and forgiving and they advocated for these values for attaining peace and fulfillment. Spirituality is a way of life, a process that makes individuals realize their true self and when the endowment of spiritual maturity happens one becomes truly forgiving or rather realizes the divinity everywhere, in every form and there remains no sinner to be forgiven.

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