



**How Buddhism and Christianity can Help Victims in Burma to Forgive:  
An Exploration**

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### Abstract

The word forgiveness is a word that people hear quite frequently. While some people believe that they need to or should forgive, there are also people who want to be forgiven or believe that they deserve to be forgiven. Some people want to forgive while others do not. Some people believe that there are good reasons to forgive while others think that those reasons are not good enough for them to forgive. Whenever there is a consideration to offer forgiveness or the desire to seek forgiveness, it is highly possible that someone has wronged another person or one group has hurt another group. Many people in Burma today are the victims of a long and brutal military rule of that country. This military rule killed many innocent people, made many people to become Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) or refugees in some neighboring countries, and committed many forms of human rights violations against its citizenry. If the talk of forgiveness comes into this context, millions of people in Burma will be the group that can offer forgiveness while the military is the group who can receive forgiveness. This author argues that it is a good thing if the victims in Burma can forgive their wrongdoers because forgiveness benefits the victims first and foremost. The author does not urge the victims in Burma to forgive their perpetrators because he acknowledges that it is inappropriate to urge any victim to forgive his/her perpetrator. He does not ask the victims in Burma to forgive also because he believes that it can be very difficult for them to forgive because of what happened to them. However, the author does point out that it can be detrimental to the victims if they rule out the option to consider forgiveness because forgiveness benefits the victims first and foremost, and not the perpetrators. Since it can be very difficult for the victims in Burma to forgive, it may be possible for them to forgive if they receive help. The author believes that Christianity and Buddhism can help the victims in Burma to be able to forgive.

**Keywords:** Christianity, Buddhism, Burma, forgiveness, victim, perpetrator, Burmese military

## Introduction

Burma fell under complete military control at least from 1962 to 2010 (Smith, 1999; Holliday, 2011). This decades-long militarization in Burma has harmed many people in Burma. Under military rule, many people in Burma suffered from rape (Shan Human Rights Foundation & Shan Women's Action Network, 2002), extrajudicial killings (International Human Rights Clinic at Harvard Law School, 2009), forced labor, torture (Human Rights Documentation Unit, 2007), and forced relocations (International Human Rights Clinic at Harvard Law School, 2009). This brutal military rule victimized the majority of the population in Burma.

The author argues two points here. The first is that the practice of forgiveness benefits these victims in two particular ways. The victims may consider if they can forgive their offenders. The second is that both Buddhism and Christianity can help these victims to be able to forgive.

### Forgiveness Benefits Victims in Burma

At present, even though Burma is not free from military control, the country has become more open and free (Holliday, 2011). Politically, the country is trying to move on after the end of complete military control. However, victims of political oppression in Burma have never been apologized to, let alone compensated for what they have suffered. Military rule in Burma has caused a lot of injuries to these victims, and their wounds have not been attended to. They are still in pain. The practice of forgiveness has the potential to help victims of militarization in Burma to reduce the pain that they have been suffering from. Certainly, to forgive is easier said than done and there are people in Burma who cannot forgive the military for what they did to them.

For instance, Win Tin, who was one of the most famous political prisoners in Burma, admitted that he found it very difficult to forgive the military government. Win Tin was a writer, politician, founding member of the National League for Democracy (NLD), which was the main opposition political party to the military government in Burma. He served in prison more than nineteen years because of his political activities and beliefs. He never received fair trial and was tortured in prison (Wiles, 2015; Martin, 2014). After he came out of prison, he said the following:

I have no grudge against the military rulers and junta members, but I cannot forgive and forget, as long as they don't change their minds, practices, and political ambitions. How can we forgive? Thousands of people are dead, in prisons and so on. Nowadays there are people including Aung San Suu Kyi who would like to forgive the military — but I said I cannot do it so long as they don't change their philosophy and don't give assistance to ex-political prisoners. (Wiles, 2015, pp. 63-64)

To forgive, according to *Oxford English Dictionary*, means to pardon an offense or an offender. To pardon an offense means to give up anger or claim, and compensation or retaliation for an offense. On the other hand, to pardon an offender means to give up resentment that one has against an offender. Therefore, if someone does not forgive his/her offender, that person still holds resentment against his/her offender, and refuses to give up the possibility of retaliation or claim for compensation from the offender (Tutu & Tutu, 2014). Tutu and Tutu (2014) believe that when an individual fails to forgive his/her

offender, it means that that individual cannot yet let go of feelings of bitterness toward his/her offender.

If victims in Burma can forgive their offenders, these victims will benefit in two particular ways. First, they will be free from harm that an unforgiving heart imposes upon them. Feelings such as anger, resentment, and revenge cause harm to the humanity and personhood of a person (Tutu, 1999). When someone forgives, he/she gets rid of the feelings that harm him/her. For this reason, Desmond Tutu (1999) believes that forgiveness serves as the best form of self-interest for victims. However, Andrew Fiala (2012) argues that “forgiveness offered as an exchange would not count as genuinely moral” (p. 495).

Fiala (2012) makes a fair and important argument, but this argument misses something important. It misses the reality of the pain that the victim is suffering. It is moral for victims to forgive because the practice of forgiveness takes away some of the pain that they are suffering. Their practice of forgiveness does not hurt anyone. It is immoral to counsel victims not to forgive because these victims want to forgive as they want some of their pain to go away. This counsel is not appropriate because it does not take the suffering of the victims into account. Therefore, it is not morally wrong for the victims in Burma to forgive their perpetrators because these victims want to feel less pain.

Second, the practice of forgiveness puts victims in the position of power. Offenders do not enact the practice of forgiveness, but the victims do. Victims do not owe forgiveness to their offenders. Offenders also do not have the right to forgiveness (Philpot, 2012). Only the victims decide whether to forgive or not, but no one else. This puts victims in the position of power over their offenders. Victims were once objects in their relation to their perpetrators. But when it comes to forgiveness, there is nothing perpetrators can do. Victims are in full control. Victims are no longer humiliated in their relationship with their offenders. Since forgiveness serves victims primarily at least in these two particular ways, victims in Burma may not want to ignore to try to forgive their offenders.

#### *It may not be easy to forgive, but there is help*

It could be easier for victims to forgive their perpetrators if their perpetrators feel remorse and offer an apology (Philpot, 2012; Tutu, 1999). However, sometimes it is still very difficult for victims to forgive their perpetrators even when perpetrators offer an apology (Tutu, 1999). Therefore, it can be much more difficult to forgive when perpetrators do not offer an apology. Perpetrators in Burma have not apologized to their victims yet, and it is not clear whether they will do so at all. This means that it is likely that victims in Burma will have to forgive their offenders before their offenders apologize or without hoping that they will apologize at all.

As it can be more difficult to forgive without an apology from offenders, victims in Burma may forgive their perpetrators if they receive help. To that end, the author wants to explore how Buddhism and Christianity can help victims in Burma to practice forgiveness. The author wants to explore these two particular religions on this subject because Buddhism is the majority religion in Burma (Augurlion, 2018) and the author is a Christian from Burma. The author also wants to find out how these two religions can supplement each other when it comes to the practice of forgiveness.

#### *Forgiveness in Buddhism*

Buddhism does not have a concept or vocabulary that perfectly matches the Western understanding of forgiveness (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), but this does not mean that forgiveness is unimportant to Buddha. Buddhism gives strong emphasis on forgiveness in personal relationship. Buddha understands

forgiveness as an action that prevents harmful thoughts that harm the one who cannot forgive. Buddha teaches that when someone cannot forgive, that person holds on to anger. To hold on to anger is like holding a *hot coal*, which one wants to throw at someone else. However, the person who is holding that *hot coal* is the one who gets burned. Therefore, Buddha encourages to forgive because when someone forgives, that person stops hurting himself/herself (Pareek & Mathur, 2013).

To forgo the perpetrator and perpetrator's action serves as a foundation for forgiveness in Buddhism (Cheng, 2008). Buddhism teaches two virtues that have become a method to forgo the perpetrator and the perpetrator's action. These two virtues are forbearance and compassion (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). First, one practices forbearance toward one's perpetrator. The forbearing person eliminates the possibility of retribution. A victim may give up the possibility of retribution in forbearing, but this victim may still hold on to anger. Therefore, in the second step, the forbearing person moves on to show compassion to the wrongdoer. This requires an individual to abandon anger or resentment that one has for one's wrongdoer (Rye et al., 2000).

In fact, to show compassion to one's wrongdoer, in Buddhism, goes beyond the abandonment of anger. Generally, the English word *compassion* is the translation for Pali word *karuṇa*. The person who has *karuṇa* wants others to be free from suffering (Harvey, 1990). Therefore, when a victim shows *karuṇa* to his/her perpetrator, this victim does not want the perpetrator to suffer. What Buddha said about his response to wrongdoing helps one to understand more about the practice of *karuṇa*. Buddha said: "if a person foolishly does me wrong, I will return to him the protection of my boundless love. The more evil that comes from him, the more good will go from me. I will only give off the fragrance of goodness" (Alarid & Want, 2001, p. 236).

Buddha clearly ruled out the option to retaliate (the practice of forbearance). He gave no place for anger toward his wrongdoer. Instead, he would give this person the protection of his boundless love (the practice of *karuṇa*). What Buddha did not say here was also important to note. Buddha did not say that the wrongdoer needed to be remorseful in order to earn forbearance and *karuṇa* from him. Either apology or remorseful heart is a requirement here, because what matters most here is suffering. The practices of forbearing and *karuṇa* aim to end suffering. Buddhism teaches that "suffering pervades all experience in the world" (Rye et al., 2000, p. 27) and Buddhism seeks to end this suffering (Rye et al., 2000). The Buddhist practice of forgiveness also aims to end suffering.

When someone retaliates against his/her offender, suffering does not end. Instead, retaliation increases suffering. In order to avoid more suffering and even to end it, one needs to give up anger and the desire to retaliate. That is to practice forbearance. However, the effort to end suffering does not end with the practice of forbearance. One still needs to have compassion for his/her offender. When a person has compassion for his/her offender, that person will not only avoid causing pain, but will also try to do good to his/her offender. Buddhist version of forgiveness, which is to practice forbearance and compassion toward one's wrongdoer, helps to end the suffering of both the victim and perpetrator. Buddhist practice of forgiveness helps the victim to drop the *hot coal* he/she is holding. It prevents more suffering as it helps the victim not to retaliate, but to give the perpetrator boundless love.

### *Forgiveness in Christianity*

Christianity places a strong emphasis on forgiveness. It teaches to forgive without any condition. This means that Christians need to forgive even if the wrongdoer is not remorseful (Lutjen et al., 2012;

Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The Christian understanding of forgiveness is based on God's action: how God acts to forgive human beings (Philpot, 2012). Christian understanding of God's forgiveness for human beings begins with the sinfulness of human beings. All human beings perform sinful actions, are guilty of their sinful actions, and the result is that they are trapped in their own sin. There is no way out for them except God saves or delivers them from this situation (Eastman, 2016).

In Christianity, the price for sin is death (eternal death) (Romans, 6:23). This means that human beings will experience death if their sins are not forgiven. For this reason, God acts to grant forgiveness to human beings. God became a human being in Jesus Christ (the incarnation of God). Jesus Christ died in the place of human beings and he resurrected from death three days after his death (1 Corinthians, 15:4). Jesus Christ died in the place of human beings means that through his death God liberates human beings from the power of sin because Jesus Christ (God incarnate) paid the wage of human sin (Kärkkäinen, 2016; Philpot, 2012). This divine forgiveness delivers human beings from death and gives eternal life as a free gift (Romans, 6:23). Therefore, in Christian tradition God's forgiveness for human beings is a free gift (Eastman, 2016).

Human to human forgiveness in Christianity is based on this divine forgiveness for human beings (Schreiter, 1998). Christians are urged to forgive others as God forgives them (Ephesians, 4:32). Jesus Christ himself, on many occasions, encouraged his followers to forgive one another in order to be forgiven by God (Philpot, 2012). This sounds like there is a requirement to receive God's forgiveness. However, the *New Testament* seems to indicate that there are no requirements in advance for humans to receive God's forgiveness. Instead, they receive God's forgiveness unconditionally (Romans, 5:8). If human to human forgiveness is modeled on divine forgiveness for human beings, humans need to forgive each other without any precondition. Therefore, Christianity teaches that human beings need to imitate divine forgiveness and forgive each other in the same manner (Kärkkäinen, 2016).

God's unconditional forgiveness for human beings is best understood in light of God's love for human beings (Schreiter, 1998). God decided to save human beings from sin because God loved them so much that God did not want them to perish because of their sins (John, 3:16-17). For Christians, this means that they forgive their offenders because they are able to love their offenders. In fact, Jesus Christ teaches to love even one's enemies (Matthew, 5:44). Therefore, Christianity teaches not only to forgive one's perpetrators unconditionally, but also to love them.

However, Christian understanding of human forgiveness does not simply teach to forgive offenders and love them. Jesus said, "If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one" (Matthew, 18:15). This means that the forgiver has the responsibility to expose the offense of the offender. This exposure of the offense of the offender has to happen in private, not in public. The aim here is not to shame the offender, but to convince him/her that he/she has done something wrong. To expose the offense of the offender is to invoke justice between the forgiver and offender (Kärkkäinen, 2016).

### Comparison of Forgiveness in Buddhism and Christianity

*Forgive unconditionally.* Both Buddhism and Christianity teach to forgive unconditionally. Buddhism teaches to forego the offense and its agent even if the agent is lacking remorse. Christianity, likewise, teaches to imitate divine forgiveness and forgive unconditionally. Therefore, there is hope that

if victims in Burma take their respective religion's teaching on forgiveness seriously, they will likely consider to forgive if they have not done so. They may be able to forgive even if their offenders do not apologize to them just as both Buddhism and Christianity teach to forgive even if one's perpetrator is not repentant.

*Love your offender.* After getting rid of anger, Buddhism teaches to have compassion for one's offender. In the same way, Christianity teaches not only to give up resentment and the desire to retaliate, but also to love one's enemies (Matthew, 5: 44). Both religions teach this same point not simply as an ideal, but also because of practical reasons. Buddhism teaches to practice forbearance and compassion (that is, to forgive) for two basic practical reasons. This practice, firstly, prevents victims from hurting themselves more as they let go negative feelings such as anger and resentment. Secondly, as victims forgive, they foreclose the option to retaliate. As victims do not retaliate, the practice of forgiveness ends suffering and promotes bliss in the society. Christianity also teaches to forgive and even to love one's enemies because it is the only way to end anger, hatred, and more violence.

*Justice.* To assert that in general Buddhism does not give explicit attention to the idea of justice or an elaborated understanding of justice, as Paul F. Knitter (2013) believes, is not a fair assessment of Buddhism. In Khetjoi and Thasa's (2017) journal article, an in-depth understanding of the place of justice in Buddhist teachings is presented. Like Jesus, Buddha was born into an unjust society and was deeply concerned with justice as Jesus was (Phan, 2006). However, it is clear that Buddhist teaching on forgiveness does not have a direct relation to the idea of justice. The emphasis is only on forbearing and compassion. Buddhists' understanding of the Buddhist doctrine of *kamma* (Sanskrit: *karma*) at times makes Buddhists to disassociate justice from the practice of forgiveness. For instance, there are Buddhists in Thailand who forgive their offenders with little or no attachment to the issue of justice because of their understanding of the doctrine of *kamma* (Engel & Engel, 2010).

In Buddhism, *kamma* "means volitional action in deeds, words, and thoughts which may be morally good or bad" (Jones, 1988, p. 67). *Kamma* has its fruit or result. Good *kamma* yields good results while bad *kamma* yields bad results (Rahula, 1974). One may reap the fruits of one's *kamma* either in this life or in a future one (King, 2009). This, sometimes, makes victims to believe that they suffer now not because of the action of an outside agent or agents. Instead, these victims believe that they are simply reaping the fruits of their bad *kamma* from the past.

Even if they believe that what they are suffering now is the result of someone's wrongdoing, they also tend to believe that justice will prevail in the future because of the law of *kamma*. The wrongdoer will reap his/her fruit of bad *kamma* either in this life or in a future life. The author has come across many Buddhists in Burma who sincerely believe that they suffered under a repressive military regime because of their past bad *kamma*. Some Buddhists in Thailand too think in the same way (Engel & Engel, 2010). This understanding of *kamma* may lead many Buddhists in Burma to forgive their offenders too quickly (King, 2005). Sulak Sivaraksa, a scholar and activist from Thailand, believes that this kind of understanding of *kamma* as a system of justice may make people to forgive prematurely (King, 2005).

At this point, Christians in Burma have the responsibility to remind their Buddhist brothers and sisters about the importance of justice in the practice of forgiveness. Otherwise, forgiveness can become a cheap word and practice. It would not be difficult for Buddhists in Burma to understand the importance of justice in forgiveness when their Christian brothers and sisters remind them about that. One prominent Buddhist from Thailand, Sulak Sivaraksa, believes that to forgive without thinking about justice is not

appropriate in all cases. For instance, he believes that it is important to bring the leaders of Khmer Rouge in Cambodia to trial (King, 2005). As their fellow Buddhist such as Sulak understands the importance of justice in forgiving, there is hope that Buddhists in Burma too can understand this.

On the other hand, preoccupation with justice may hinder one to practice forgiveness (Volf, 1996). Indeed, there are Christians who prefer *justice before forgiveness* sequence. For instance, liberation theologians believe that it is inappropriate to offer forgiveness without addressing injustice first (Bell, 2001). Justice is important, but the fixation on justice should not become a roadblock for victims to practice forgiveness. This should not be the case especially because the practice of forgiveness primarily benefits the victims, and not the perpetrators. If the issue of justice in forgiveness becomes a roadblock for Christians to forgive their offenders, Buddhists have the potential to help Christians to overcome it.

Buddhism teaches non-attachment or non-self, known in Pali as *anatta*. Buddha teaches that everything is impermanent (*anicca*) and there is no such thing as permanent soul or self (Soko, 2009). This is not the place to elaborate extensively on the Buddhist doctrine of *anatta*. For a fuller account on this doctrine consult sources such as Soko (2009), Harvey (1990), and Rahula (1974). The aim here is to explain how Buddhist doctrine of *anatta* can help Christians who are entangled with justice issue in forgiveness. This Buddhist doctrine of the non-existence of self “is primarily a practical teaching aimed at the overcoming of attachment” (Harvey, 1990, p. 52). The desire to see justice prevail before forgiving one’s offender is the result of attachment to self. Preoccupation with one’s suffering as a result of someone else’s actions leads to preoccupation with *justice before forgiveness* sequence.

Christians in Burma do not necessarily have to agree with the Buddhist’s view on self to be able to overcome their preoccupation with self in forgiveness. Instead, the Buddhist doctrine of non-self and nonattachment will remind these Christians that Jesus also teaches to forgive without seeking justice first. Yes, Jesus teaches to include justice in forgiveness (Matthew, 18:15). But he also teaches that in the practice of forgiveness one gives up the claim against the wrongdoer or one sets free one’s debtors from the responsibility to repay the debts (Matthew, 18: 27; Luke, 7: 42-43; Pettigrove, 2009). Therefore, here the Buddhist doctrine of non-self will serve as a reminder for Christians that Jesus also teaches to forgive without thinking first about justice for oneself.

### Conclusion

Victims of political oppression in Burma have suffered a lot. They will continue to suffer in some forms if they cannot forgive their perpetrators. As they cannot forgive, they will be under the influence of negative feelings such as anger, resentment, and the desire to retaliate. However, if they can forgive their perpetrators, they will be free from these negative feelings that can harm them. To forgive for this seemingly therapeutic reason may not sound as noble as the view that one needs to forgive because it is morally right to do so. However, the argument that it is a good thing to forgive because the practice of forgiveness serves the victims in the first place is as noble as the moral argument and is not less moral.

To agree with victims who want to forgive their offenders because it serves the victims primarily is noble especially in light of the sufferings of the victims of political oppression in Burma. These victims have not received acknowledgement, apology, or compensations from their offenders for what they have suffered. Therefore, they are still suffering. When they are able to forgive their offenders, they will be in less pain. Their practice of forgiveness will take away some negative feelings and emotions that continue to hurt them.

Here the practice of forgiveness is not viewed as merely instrumental. To agree with victims who want to forgive their violators because this will serve them first and foremost means to acknowledge that they have been wronged and support them in their desire and effort to continue their lives with less pain. It is a noble decision to agree with them to forgive for this particular reason because it means to stand on the side of the victims. It is not also less moral than the moral argument because their practice of forgiveness does not hurt their former perpetrators. Instead, it is morally commendable because in forgiveness the victims not only cease negative views and feelings about the offenders, they also love the offenders.

The practice of forgiveness also changes the nature of the relationship between victims of political oppression in Burma and their former offenders dramatically. This change begins even when these victims start to think about forgiving their former perpetrators. They are no longer helpless individuals who were under the tight control of their former violators. They are now in power. They have the power either to forgive or not to forgive. Their former offenders do not have the right to the victims' forgiveness. Since the practice of forgiveness can benefit the victims in this particular way as well, it is important for the victims in Burma not to foreclose the option to forgive.

Both Buddhism and Christianity have the potential to help victims of political oppression in Burma to be able to forgive their perpetrators. Therefore, it is important for Buddhists and Christians in Burma to take both Buddhism and Christianity seriously on the issue of forgiveness. These religions can help the victims in Burma to be in less pain as Buddhism and Christianity can assist them in the practice of forgiveness. When victims of political oppression in Burma are able to forgive their violators, there is hope that eventually this ability to forgive might lead to reconciliation. Although Erin Daly and Jeremy Sarkin (2007) argue that the practice of forgiveness does not always lead to reconciliation, the author agrees with Philpot (2012) that forgiveness is "a practice of reconciliation and a tool of peacebuilding" (p. 252). The practice of forgiveness is a crucial component in the reconciliation process.

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