LEARNING FORGIVENESS

Reflections from a conversation with the Dalai Lama

SHAGUFE HOSSAIN

IS forgiveness a phenomenon that is learned or is it something that some of us are inherently better at than others?

It's been just over two weeks since my return from India where I was invited to attend this year's Mind & Life Conversations with the Dalai Lama under the themes of compassion, interconnection, and transformation. I sat through the two-day event, where two thought leaders joined in conversations with the Dalai Lama Dharamsala at his residence in exile, with significant discomfort.

The first day of the event highlighted the importance of interconnectedness—communication and collaboration for survival. According to recent experiments conducted in the fields of evolutionary biology (which now takes into account both genetic as well as cultural evolution), both compassion and aggression are inheritable. And from a cultural evolution perspective, compassion is the only way a species can survive. Unless we practice a collective compassion, in a few generations, we will all be extinct.

This was neither an uncomfortable realisation for me, nor surprising.

It was only during the second day that the discomfort really began to sink in. The topic of the day was an African tradition, called *ubuntu*, often translated as "I am because we are", or "humanity towards others." The term is often used in a more philosophical sense to mean "the belief in a universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity", enabling a culture of forgiveness threaded through the very fabric of Africa, through her language and deep communal structures.

We Bangladeshis, on the other hand, at risk of evoking nationalistic defensiveness, aren't exactly great at forgiveness, primarily as a result of two things: 1) we are a nation formed through a genocide, which is, largely, yet to be recognised as one, and 2) the political rhetoric that is continually perpetuated doesn't allow us to forgive and/or forget. So, we live and relive the past and create a kind of hostile political consciousness deemed as a necessary part of patriotism.

I consider myself a patriot. At this point, I am hoping my discomfort is starting to make a little more sense. Whether as a result of generational trauma, cultural violence being absorbed into my internal value system or the vicious cycle of relentless unkindness we seem to regularly witness and be subjected to—forgiveness is a difficult, uncomfortable and foreign process for me.

But Dr Pumla Gobodo Madikizela, the speaker of the day, who served as a member of post-genocidal South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, had also come from a post-genocidal nation. One that was subjected to gross violations of human rights, dehumanisation resulting from a system of institutionalised racial segregation and unimaginable violence known as the apartheid. So when she spoke of mothers who had watched their children being murdered in front of them but forgave the murderers anyway, I was intrigued.

But that was only the beginning.

The Dalai Lama's response, unwaveringly grounded in compassion, spoke of feeling gratitude toward his enemies for giving him the opportunity to learn and practise forgiveness. "We don't expect the ones who are close to us to hurt us, to betray us. Who else but the enemy, through antagonising us, would give us the opportunity to learn patience?"

Then I started to wonder about the pain that is inflicted upon us by those who we believe are our closest. Our next-door neighbours who turn their backs on us when we are subjected to violence by oppressive forces or regimes, our husbands who beat us until we bleed, or friends who rape us when we are intoxicated, our parents who set us on fire for not protecting our "honours", teachers who harass and molest in attempts to hijack our honour. Or even in less extreme forms, what do we do when those who we trust not to hurt us, hurt us?

I had grown up with the idea that if you perceive an assault on yourself and your body as too wrong to forgive, you are not necessarily being small-minded. Even though we are often told that we'll feel better if we forgive people who've done us wrong, the very act of forgiveness—by its very nature—can be an act of denial. So, can't the decision to not forgive represent a legitimate response to an offender's continuing actions and place in society and/or

our personal lives? Should we then, in order to reach peace or spiritual enlightenment, practice coerced forgiveness—a forgiveness granted because it is believed to be the only virtuous or healthy thing to do?

But according to the Dalai Lama, there is no alternative to forgiveness. He laid the foundation of his response with the following Tibetan prayer:

When it comes to suffering, I do not want an iota of it

When it comes to joy, I cannot have enough of it

In this regard, there is no difference between me and another

May I be blessed so that I can take joy in the joy of others.

It all starts with the recognition of the fact that we exist only in relation to others. "I am because we are." If we see ourselves as only a part of an interconnected whole, there is no Self that is separate from the Other. There is no "I versus you". There is only a collective We. And then forgiveness

becomes the only way of being because not forgiving entails perpetuating a kind of unkindness toward oneself.

This, then, also necessitates a better understanding of forgiveness. Forgiveness is a conscious, difficult choice that is a learned process and takes significant work even after the decision to forgive has been made. It is a decision to let the past be what it was and not what we wish it had been; and an openness to meeting the present moment freshly. It is a willingness to drop the existing narrative on a particular injustice, to stop telling ourselves over and over again the story of what happened, what this other person did, how we were injured, and all the rest of the things we keep reminding ourselves of in relation to this unforgivable-ness. In doing so, we stop employing the present moment to validate, correct, vindicate or punish the past. We show up, maybe, forever changed as a result of the past, but nonetheless with all of our senses wide open and available to Right Now in all its possibilities.

So, the process of forgiveness of the other, interestingly, invites and guides our attention away from the other, away from what they did, haven't done, or need to do. We no longer wait for or want them to be different. There is no further need to get compassion or acknowledgment out of the other, to get them to see and know our pain, to show us that our suffering matters. Forgiveness means that we lose interest or simply give up the fight to have the other get it, get what they've done, get that we matter. We move towards ourselves, our own experience, our heart. Through forgiving you, I come into being.

What an empowering thought. Now, how do we go about it?

Shagufe Hossain is the founder of Leaping Boundaries, an organisation that aims to raise visibility of female madrasah students, and a Dalai Lama Fellow.

Getting the measurements right

How to keep development projects on track

NAWSHAD AHMED

MONITORING and evaluation are proven tools to determine the extent to which public sector development projects and programmes are on track and if adjustments are required to improve their performance. For the last three decades, these tools are being increasingly employed around the world to help assess performance, improve organisational learning and make informed decisions about programme operation and service delivery.

The need for quality data increased globally since the turn of this century due to the requirements for country-level progress reporting towards achievement of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals (MDG). Due to both global demand and donor-funded project requirements, a country led monitoring and evaluation (M&E) system development became a necessity to gauge the achievement of results in a variety of public sector programmes such as in health, basic education, agriculture, infrastructure, utility services and others that are mainly funded from government budget. A good M&E system can provide timely and reliable information for continuous learning and adjustment of inputs and activities that help achieve the desired social outcomes and impacts. These are also a means to verify that the earmarked project funds are being well managed and spent for the desired purposes.

It is necessary to distinguish between monitoring and evaluation. Monitoring is a continuous assessment of performance of implementation of all activities under a project or programme aimed at providing a set of information to the senior managers on an ongoing basis for them to decide if all planned inputs are delivered on time at a minimum

cost. Monitoring entails a regular and systematic collection of data and analysis of information to track the progress of programme implementation vis-à-vis the planned targets to achieve the ultimate objectives of the programme. Monitoring is also a tool for assessing regular service delivery by the public sector; for example, in the education sector, if all text books were printed and delivered to the students at the beginning of the year as planned.

Evaluation is conducted periodically, commonly at the middle or end of a programme or project cycle to learn about their achievements or final results; if intended beneficiaries have been reached and if the causal relationships between the initiatives implemented and the results achieved can be established. It looks at both the positive and negative aspects

and also explores the issues faced during the implementation period. It explores what worked and what did not work so well and recommends improvements of similar initiatives in future. Conducting evaluation requires good training on its techniques, methodologies, sampling design and often requires a team effort with capacities in different backgrounds. A well conducted evaluation can help with the designing of qualitatively better development projects and programmes in the future. For instance, if an evaluation of a rural health centre construction project comes out with the finding that not enough waiting space was kept at the outdoor, in view the future growth of population in the area, an evaluation recommendation could be to construct future health centres with more waiting spaces. Sometimes government pilot projects are

evaluated with a view to explore the prospect of scaling them up. This type of evaluation looks more closely at the cost implications of scaling up, ways to reduce cost at different stages and their wide-ranging benefit potentials.

In order to better utilise the M&E tools, it is advisable that an M&E framework and an M&E plan are designed at the programme formulation stage so that appropriate short and long term indicators are established as part of the planning process and they can be measured throughout the implementation period. This will give the programme managers and decision makers signals at an early stage about the performance of the implementation of the programme and enable them to take corrective measures whenever required. This advance information is crucial in order to avoid unforeseen situation from arising and help timely and successful completion of the programme and achieve the desired results.

Both monitoring and evaluation are management tools and are means to ensure accountability and transparency. The government should establish a good M&E system to generate timely and accurate data, create an effective management information system and make them available for better decision-making and future planning. M&E can improve implementation performance of the development programmes and functioning of the public sector service delivery system. In today's increasingly competitive environment, knowledge and learning in the public arena and utilisation of quality information are crucial for attaining Sustainable Development Goals and achieving the development objectives of the government. The M&E skills, technical competencies along with motivation for using knowledge are crucial elements of a better governance system. Allocation of increased amount of resources is also essential for building a stronger M&E system in the country.

Dr Nawshad Ahmed is an economist and urban planner. He worked previously as a UN official in Bangladesh and abroad.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 Mans the buckets
6 Chowder chunk
10 Palmer, to his fans
11 City on the Nile
12 Willem of "Platoon"
13 Puts up
14 Sign, of a sort
15 Dipping dish
16 Remote
17 Polite address
18 "Sure thing!"
19 Connoisseur's concern
22 Stallion-to-be
23 Floral rings
26 Colonial stingers
29 Play division
32 Roulette bet
33 Crude home
34 Wordy
36 Rover's pal
37 Swiss cheese feature
38 Like a judge
39 Cove
40 Cake coating
41 Editor's spot
42 Tiny

DOWN
1 Hurting for money
2 Language of biblical times
3 Dante topic
4 Safari sight
5 Take in
6 "Brian's Song" star
7 Jitterbug's cousin
8 Bicker
9 Exodus figure
11 Laughed gleefully
15 Fragrant tree
17 Swift, e.g.
20 North Pole worker
21 Neptune's realm
24 Hold back
25 Pupil
27 Writer Stout
28 Hidebound
29 Garden pest
30 Witch
31 Bridge costs
35 Vichyssoise veggie
36 Ellipse points
38 Vault part

YESTERDAY'S **ANSWERS**

R	O	A	D	S			S	A	R	A	H
I	N	S	E	T		A	L	A	M	O	
D	E	T	R	O	I	T	L	I	O	N	
E	U	R		O	D	E		S	U	E	
S	P	O	I	L	E	D		E	N	S	
			D	I	S		M	U	T	T	
T	A	B	L	E		T	I	P	S	Y	
O	B	E	Y		W	E	T				
B	A	D		D	I	N	E	T	T	E	
A	S	S		E	N	D		H	E	R	
C	H	I	C	A	G	O	B	E	A	R	
C	E	D	A	R		N	O	R	S	E	
O	D	E	T	S			S	P	E	E	D	

BEETLE BAILEY — by Mort Walker

BABY BLUES — by Kirkman & Scott