

**WHAT'S IN A GRUDGE?
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Few things have caused me more personal pain and anguish than grudges — grudges I've held and grudges held against me. They keep me anchored in the past, in a state of arrested development, stewing and fretting. Or worse, a grudge becomes so familiar, so much a part of the way I function, that I no longer recognize it as a grudge. Instead, it becomes a facet of who I think I am, or who I think others are: "I loathe that person." "That person loathes me." Or I perceive it as a fact of life: "There's too much ugly history; things will never work out."

A grudge can be described, perhaps, as an overly personalized accumulation of anger. Maybe I felt slighted — or I slighted someone else — and a grudge was born. Or perhaps a serious injustice was committed, and it feels wrong to just let it go. From my grudge-oriented perspective, I see people and events through the eyes of prejudice; rather than looking at things afresh, open to seeing them in a new light, I look for evidence to justify my ill feelings and for new slights to feed the grudge.

Most of the time, this all happens unconsciously, and I suppose it's both precarious and energy-consuming, like lugging around a trunk full of gunpowder and oily rags. Sometimes a mere crosswise glance or vocal inflection is enough to spark an explosion. And maybe sometimes a grudge needs to explode in order to be expiated.

While a grudge is rooted in the past, Buddhist practice is oriented in the present and toward the future. In Buddhism, to forgive others (and ourselves) entails reflecting on the past for the sake of the future and making a forward-looking determination. This doesn't mean that we have to deny or disavow the anger inherent in a grudge; anger can be destructive, but its benefit or harm depends on what we aim to destroy. We can focus our anger on destroying the seeming brick wall that stands between our heart and the heart of another person, for example. Or we can focus on destroying the misperceptions, judgments and "lesser self" concerns that keep the grudge alive. Through prayer and self-reflection, a grudge can be transformed into a compassionate desire to eradicate suffering.

Forgiveness is hollow, though, if we neglect to point out someone's wrongdoing. I'm not talking about making petty accusations or quibbling over who said what. But to let a person know when he or she has done something hurtful, for example, or has committed a serious injustice against you or others, can be an act of compassion. Perhaps the person is unaware that his or her actions have caused pain, and perhaps by speaking out you can protect yourself and others from being harmed in the future. We cannot short-circuit the strict, certain workings of cause and effect, but through our continuous, determined prayers and actions, we can influence others to self-reflect and make different causes in the present and future.

When I find myself in conflict with others, my first impulse is to withdraw from them. Usually, the space I put between that person and me becomes fertile acreage for a grudge. It's better, I think, to address conflict forthrightly: chanting, reflecting, listening and saying what needs to be said. Perhaps the degree of difficulty in doing this is commensurate to its value.

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