

dharma life

BUDDHISM FOR TODAY

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FREEING THE HEART

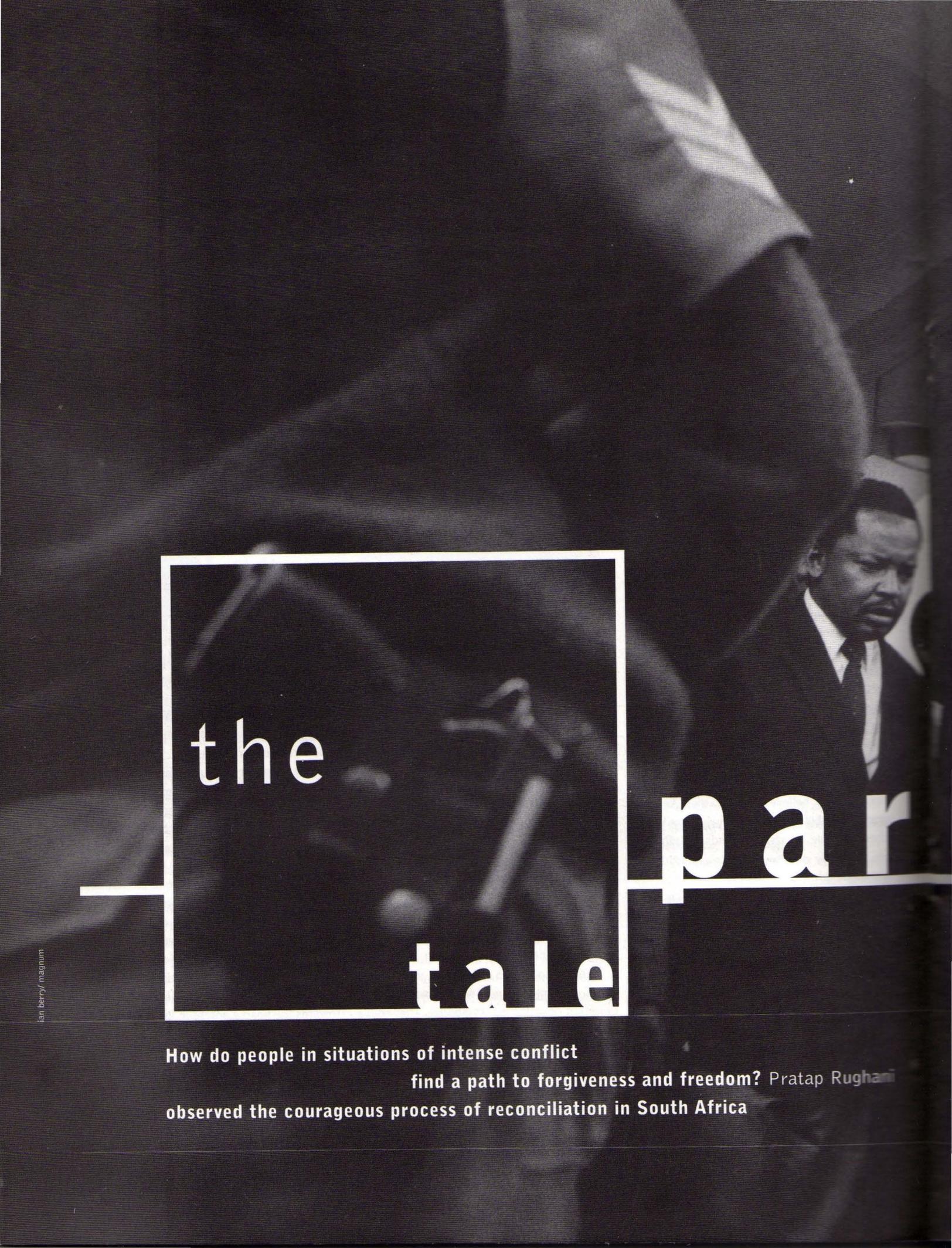
THE BUDDHIST PATH OF LOVE

mandela and tutu
on forgiveness

aung san suu kyi
freedom from hatred

romance
passions and pitfalls



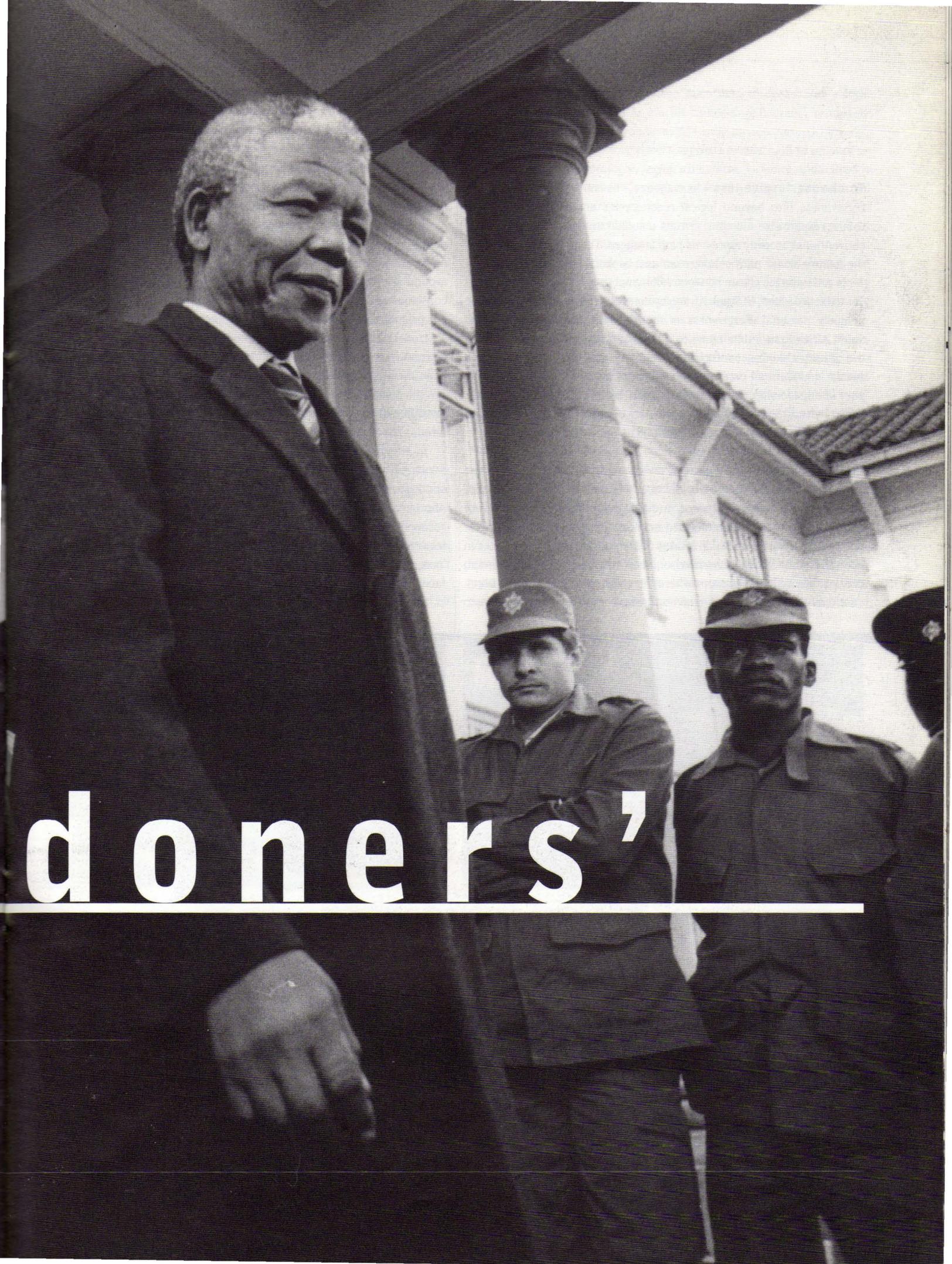


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How do people in situations of intense conflict
find a path to forgiveness and freedom? Pratap Rughani
observed the courageous process of reconciliation in South Africa



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To choose forgiveness is outrageous — as is the finest imagination. Forgiveness flies beyond logical reaction. It's a kind of reckoning; a robust response to bleeding. It runs a course on lines far deeper than conventional, worldly mores. Its path is jagged. The journey to it enfolds the torture of self-purification, even as it beckons towards the light.

In Australia the chasm between Aboriginal peoples and colonisers has yet to be breached. In South Africa, by contrast, the political has become uniquely personal. Forgiveness is the alchemy that has transformed South Africa from a time bomb to a byword for new hope. From one of the century's bleakest conflicts, the ambition to forgive is reborn of both secular and spiritual parents. It's the fruit of insight wrenched from the pain of a leadership that escaped brutality by refusing to be brutalised. When I visited South Africa I had the chance to discuss these issues with Nelson Mandela, Archbishop Desmond Tutu and other leading figures.

On a crisp blue morning we sailed across an azure harbour from Cape Town to Robben Island, the world's most infamous high-security prison. Here a regime was engineered around the peculiar obsessions of apartheid. Conditions were devised to break the spirits of the strongest political prisoners. I had read stories of men buried up to their necks in hot sand while warders urinated on their heads; of prisoners sent to break stone in the lime quarry where the glare caused many to go blind.

Lionel Davis, a 'coloured' man imprisoned on Robben Island between

to say; "If I get another chance, this is the role that I am going to play".

Lionel glanced with distant affection at his former home. 'We didn't call it a prison, we called it "the university" because we turned it into one. We educated ourselves, each other and gradually even some of the wardens.' Lionel took his cell and its isolation as the spur for an inner journey. Prison became a melting pot from which a new vision emerged as if the island's intense confrontation fired a process of purification.

'I wasn't born with prejudices,' Lionel said. 'When I was caned by police after a misunderstanding with a white woman I became even more anti-white. Having to live through apartheid I saw the wrongs around me and laid it at their door. But by becoming politically conscious and respecting others' views here in prison, we dismantled our prejudices. Now I'm not "anti" anything when it comes to people.'

Lionel's choice to forgive his captors rather than to burn with righteous anger is precious enough in individual experience; how much rarer in political life where appeals to fear and hatred rather than forgiveness are the common currency. The process of reconciliation that has been instituted in the new South Africa has many critics. How has the attempt fared, and what kind of an example does it offer to the world?

In attempting to understand the possibilities for forgiveness in situations of bitter political conflict, I had the chance to learn from the contrasting situations in Australia and New Zealand. In Melbourne the Aboriginal Reconciliation Convention was billed as a step towards reconciliation at a tense juncture in race relations, but many Aboriginal leaders said they were being asked to compromise for the sake of 'progress'. They felt that to 'swallow their pain' and remain silent in the face of continuing provocation would be a kind of collective betrayal.

The Prime Minister John Howard arrived at the convention with a



1964 and 1978, welcomed us through the razor wire and watchtowers. His one-time neighbours now sound like a role call of South Africa's new aristocracy — Mbeki, Sisulu, Kathrada, Mandela and many more. The degradation of prison life followed the logic of apartheid. 'They wanted to divide us,' Lionel said. 'Coloureds and Indians were given a quarter loaf of bread with margarine, blacks were not given bread. Blacks were forced to wear shorts, continuing the idea that an adult black male was a boy, while we wore long trousers. Beatings were common; in the bitter winters we spent years sleeping with just a mat on the bare floor.'

Today Davis remembers Robben Island less as a place of oppression, than the crucible of its transformation. Mandela remarked later: 'The physical assaults were not the most painful experience, it was the psychological torture that we suffered. But jail had its advantages. In jail you could stand away from yourself and look at your record and be able

warning: the government intended to advance with curbs on Aboriginal claims. When he rose to give his main address much of the audience stood, too. Then many quietly turned their backs. It was an extraordinary moment. The Premier, clearly insulted, said that if they would not do business with him they would face a far more hostile future in the form of the extremist White Australia parties. Clearly the early steps towards reconciliation have yet to be taken.

The aspiration of the meeting was laudable, but dialogue was impossible. Many Aboriginal people felt they were merely dealing with the ingrained hatreds that had rationalised their dispossession for generations. Since so little has been done to acknowledge the genocidal effects of colonial policy, many feel they must at least bear witness to it. The Premier asked how was he personally or white Australia in general to be held responsible for the actions of previous generations?

In New Zealand the recognition of diverse histories is more advanced. Here the British signed their one treaty with an indigenous people. When the Treaty of Waitangi was drawn up over 150 years ago many Maoris felt it conceded too much but the framework it established is proving useful today. In the revival of Maori consciousness, this neglected treaty has become a crucial reference point, like an impromptu constitution.

As more Maoris asserted the injustice of their losses, a tribunal was set up to hear how the Treaty of Waitangi has been broken. At Tribunal hearings in the Kaipara district, the good-humoured approach of either side was remarkable. In each community there was a shared understanding that both Maori and Europeans seek to settle the historical score. Russell Kemp, a Maori leader in Kaipara, set the tone: 'We don't seek any kind of triumph here. It's justice, justice is all we ask for'.

Having a legal framework like a treaty within which disputes can be

resolved is a great advance on the Australian *impasse*. But a legal solution can only go so far. As Martin Luther-King famously remarked: 'We can't legislate to make you love me – only to stop you lynching me'.

The Buddhist ideal of forgiveness suggests a truer path to reconciliation. For Buddhism, coming to terms with abuse, violence and hatred is quite separate from seeking justice, or at least is in no way conditional on it. *The Dhammapada* says:

'He abused me, he struck me, he overcame me, he robbed me' – in those who harbour such thoughts hatred will never cease.

'He abused me, he struck me, he overcame me, he robbed me' – in those who do not harbour such thoughts hatred will cease. Not at any time are enmities appeased here through enmity but they are appeased through non-enmity. This is the eternal law.'

To feel the full effects of enmity is (for most of us) an essential phase, but to continue to 'harbour such thoughts' and respond with hatred is to suffer a loss of our shared humanity. But how can the victims of various kinds of hatred speak out effectively without becoming consumed by it?

How remarkable that the figures who have addressed this most effectively emerge where bloodshed had looked most likely. In South Africa, Mandela, Tutu and others have come to understand that both oppressor and oppressed are dehumanised by the experience. Mandela said: 'I am often asked how it is that I emerged from prison without bitterness. The question is intended as a compliment. Nevertheless, millions of South Africa's people spent an even longer time in the prison of apartheid.'

'Some were imprisoned by the apartheid laws in a condition of homelessness and near despair. Others were imprisoned in the racism of the mind. These are places where some still languish. In such circumstances, personal bitterness is irrelevant. It is a luxury that we, as individuals and





as a country, simply cannot afford — any more than we can afford to listen to pleading from the privileged. Instead we must insist with quiet resolve on a firm policy of undoing the effects of the past.'

Back on Robben Island it was clear that something extraordinary had happened. After years in jail, Davis has moved back to the island with his (white) wife Barbara and their son Leon. A small community of former prisoners and prison wardens have returned to help run the prison — now fast becoming a top tourist attraction. In their willingness to live together, they are achieving an elegant triumph over the past.

Many political prisoners found a way out of the cycle of hatred by turning their prison cells into monastic ones. 'I wanted South Africa to see that I loved even my enemies while I hated the system that turned us against one another,' said Mandela. Below the agitation for rights by Mandela and Tutu lay an understanding that to move through the abyss they had to lead by offering more of themselves. They came to see forgiveness as a guiding force. With it they imagined what would have been unthinkable for many of their supporters.

The South African democratic miracle was thus brokered on a bold new experiment. The policy which emerged was: to forgive and not forget. Unlike in Australia, the past would be honoured and in so doing a way to move on personally and politically could be opened. 'If it's retributive justice you want,' Tutu insisted, 'then we've all had it'.

Under the new dispensation, perpetrators of crimes committed under apartheid could apply for amnesty from an independent Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC). It was both a practical and ethical way out, offering a future for perpetrators and a forum for victims. 'Without this, there would have been no negotiated settlement; the whole country would have gone up in flames,' Tutu said. I remember seeing the passions in Natal, Cape Town and Johannesburg around the first free election in 1994. Then violence subsided and there was a sudden moment of unique optimism. Incredibly, the will to make this formula work seemed to capture the collective imagination.

When we first met, Desmond Tutu ('The Arch', as he's affectionately called) started with a prayer. Then the passion. 'With no amnesty provision, we would not be sitting here; the security forces just wouldn't have allowed it. Yet they needed us. They may have military power but some realised, too, that what they maintained was immoral, unjust, evil.'

All South Africans had to feel confident that the new government would weigh justice with reconciliation and reject a culture of revenge. 'After World War II there were clear victors and losers. But Nuremberg was seen as the imposition of victor justice. We learnt from Chile, Argentina and Germany. We weren't prepared to indulge in collective amnesia of our horrendous past and finally we agreed on amnesty not amnesia.'

For many, the TRC hearings across the country have been significant. An agony of questions haunting bereaved families could at last begin to be unravelled. 'Hearings offer a chance for those who were despised to tell their story,' Tutu said. 'Some carried a 20- or 30-year burden of anguish and this process helps to rehabilitate their civic and human dignity — sometimes just to know they can bury a disappeared child.'

But the TRC has critics. Many victims still seek justice. Many perpetrators continue to enjoy the fruits of office. Only those who fear imminent prosecution seem bothered to make an amnesty application, and as long as they can establish a political motive and show they acted under instruction, they can escape punishment. Can victims truly forgive when the perpetrators so rarely show remorse or, like former state president PW Botha, deny knowledge of apartheid's excesses?



These remain crucial questions for people like Nkosinathi Biko, son of Steve Biko, the Black Consciousness leader murdered in police custody in 1977. His family appealed against the establishment of South Africa's TRC, arguing that it would deny justice to bereaved families. At the amnesty application of Gideon Niewoudt (one of the police officers involved in the beatings that resulted in his father's death) Nkosinathi Biko was a dignified figure amid the heightened emotions around him. 'The question of amnesty is sensitive because it is immediate. This man may be offered amnesty within a few weeks. Perhaps a month later I may walk past him. I might not have come to terms with the loss that he has put me through, so there's a painful gap between the two things.'

In that gap Biko maintained his clarity without surrendering to bitterness. He saw it as 'our attempt to build the spiritual foundation of what needs to happen to remake this society'. But on this day of testimony, it hurt. 'The loss is almost complete. Nothing can bring my father or any of them back. His death stole my youth and forced me to grow up faster than I should have; but it was meaningful ultimately and is a source of healing in many respects. This gives meaning to his sacrifice.'

Together we sat through the kind of testimony that makes one wonder what the human form is capable of. A reedy voice in the thick silence, Niewoudt spoke with a neutral coolness of how he applied his expertise in refining the assaults on Steve Biko. How would I respond to hearing about such an assault on my own father? Nkosinathi said, 'I like to believe that my sense of healing is reasonably removed from the outcome of the hearings'. It's just as well. The TRC, in its appeal for forgiveness, bypasses demands for justice. In so doing it has been severely criticised as providing an escape-route for murderers and is lambasted in the Afrikaner press for being pro-ANC.

George Bizos, counsel for the Biko family, focused on the contradictions in Niewoudt's testimony. His story had altered significantly since

photos: pratap rughani

Left: Former prisoner Lionel Davis; Nkosinathi Biko; Nelson Mandela's prison regulation cup and saucer.
Right: Archbishop Tutu and Chief Buthelezi; below, Tutu embracing Mandela in 1994

The South African democratic miracle was thus brokered on a bold new experiment: to forgive and not forget

the 1977 inquest that exonerated him and all others implicated in Biko's death. At no point did he look at Bizos or any of the Biko family. His answers seemed tailored to fit the criteria for granting amnesty but his eyes appeared lifeless and impenetrable. Niewoudt insisted on his political motives throughout the assaults. Bizos: 'What political objective did you have to achieve by hitting Mr Biko with a hosepipe on the back?' Niewoudt: 'I acted in the interests of the State'.

Nkosinathi Biko looked closely at Niewoudt. 'I sit there going through a roller-coaster of emotions but his face is largely expressionless; he's largely indifferent to pain. Perhaps even 20 years later he doesn't realise the level of pain he may have caused.'

The TRC cannot insist on apologies. To do so would throw up further problems. Those who show remorse may be accused of faking it. Those who don't appear callous. The key, as many other bereaved families emphasised, is to understand that true forgiveness is unconditional. For Nkosinathi Biko there are days when it still rankles. 'We have not said that they must hang, as many in other conflicts have. We're not even talking about that here. But I have seen nothing of the spirit of reconciliation from Afrikaners who come for amnesty to the TRC. Many don't show the gestures that may help them come to peace with themselves.'

So far the unvengeful nature of many of those persecuted in South Africa has been extraordinary. A significant proportion of the black majority seems to be moving towards forgiveness despite the refusal of many former opponents to acknowledge their crimes. No one I have spoken to said that they can forget, but forgiveness — that's an inspiring possibility. Laughing excitedly, Tutu said: 'Forgiveness is not abstract or woolly. It comes when we recognise our relatedness, what we call *ubuntu*. It's warm and welcoming and means "I am because you are".'

The transformation now playing out is both personal and political. Having won the argument for reform, many South Africans are advancing on something much more radical: leading by forgiveness. For those who choose it the struggle is not always neatly resolved. It is a continuing process of opening the heart; it's often difficult and painful but it offers a full release from suffering. The government has blessed a way forward that reaches far beyond a secular settling of scores.

It is a unique development in a century marked by entrenched hatreds. For those who feel able to follow their example, the likes of Tutu and Mandela have forged more than a path out of hell. They emphasise that it's within everyone's power to forgive. In so doing they offer a supreme challenge; to understand the effects of our actions and transform conflict by transforming ourselves.



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For decades the South African resistance dreamt of justice as well as freedom. By seeing the limits of justice, they offer the world a new model and an opportunity in victory that few imagined they would be asked to consider: in the heat of success to forgo revenge and forgive.

It is an outrageous move borne of a remarkable imagination. Ultimately it means meeting hatred with love. 'That's fine for them. Not everyone can be a Tutu or a Mandela,' I was sometimes told, but if a man who has suffered as much as Mandela refuses to become embittered, how much more easily should we find it within our hearts to imagine peace in our own communities, families and nations?

Most of us find it hard to forgive because it forces us beyond our ordinary sense of ourselves and even the comfort of familiar hurt. What degree of pain and which qualities will it take to work the alchemy of forgiveness in our own lives? True forgiveness is a path to freedom. How ready are we to take it?