

Dying Friends

March 2, 2004

The qualities that really see you through the practice are often very unassuming. The flashy things that can happen in the meditation are not necessarily things you can rely on. Your real friends are the ones that stay in the background.

Take patience and endurance, for example. These qualities are not emphasized in our society. In fact we are probably one of the few societies that encourages children to be impatient, one that actually provokes their desires, provokes their anger, provokes their delusion. All those advertisements that are aimed at kids to make them want things right away, right now. So we end up with qualities that should be strong friends in the mind but instead are very weak.

So we consciously have to work on them to make them strong. When meditation goes well, you stick with it. When it doesn't go well, you still stick with it. When strong emotions are screaming in your ears, you just stick there with the breath. It may not seem to be accomplishing much, but the patience you're developing is actually a very important weapon in your arsenal, an important ally to have in your battle with the defilements. Because many times when the defilements come on strong, the strong part is the initial impact. If you can withstand that and sit through it for a while, you get to the point where it weakens. That's when you can deliver a blow.

This is how patience and endurance are your friends. They help you last through the difficult periods so that when things are more propitious, when things will work, when you can finally think of a way of dealing with the problem, or suddenly see something that you haven't seen for a long time, the patience and endurance are what get you there. These are mild unassuming qualities. If you had a color for them, it would probably be gray, but they're the ones you have to depend on. So learn to have an appreciation for them and learn to work with them.

Patience doesn't mean that you just sit there and don't do anything. It means that you're willing to be in this over the long haul. If something is not working in the mind, you keep trying various approaches. You don't get discouraged. You don't give up.

One approach for developing patience is simply watching things, but there are other approaches that you can try as well when something comes into the mind. If the breath is uncomfortable, try various ways of making it more comfortable. If the mind has trouble settling down, try to figure out exactly what the problem is. Is it a physical discomfort in the present moment, or is it some unresolved issue that you're carrying in from the day or the week or whatever. But the important is that you keep trying. You don't give up after one approach doesn't work. You try three, four, five. You keep at it.

Some of the effective approaches may be proactive; some may be more passive, just simply watching. But you keep at them to see if there's some way you can learn to understand what's going on, some way you can deal with whatever the issue is. And if you run out of ideas, well, just sit there and watch for a while, to see what comes up. Keep yourself solidly grounded.

This is important for endurance, because if you don't have a good solid grounding, it's very easy for things to snap. So keep reminding yourself why you're here, why you're practicing, and

think of all those countless sufferings that you are avoiding, simply by being here practicing. Sometimes we forget. Sitting here meditating begins to seem like a burden, a big wasteland in our lives when everything lush and appealing is out there someplace else. Well, do a reality check. Frequently. What is there out there? There are lots of other people running around deluded, closing their eyes to the fact aging, illness, and death are going to come, and they are not the least bit prepared, hoping that somehow if they don't think about these things, these things will not come, or thinking that there's nothing you can do about them so you might as well grab what you can while you can, all of which is delusion.

There's a story of a monk—it's in the Canon—a monk who was out in a little hut in the forest. He overheard the sounds of some merrymaking in a village nearby, probably some holiday of some kind. He was sitting here thinking about how much fun they must be having there in the village and how little fun he was having here where he was. A deva that appears to him and says: "You don't realize how lucky you are. All those people who are going to hell, they really envy you right here." Of course, hell is not the only alternative that would make this practice look good. But just look at where most people's lives are going right now. Either they're totally aimless, or they've got bizarre aims that are going to create more suffering for themselves or for other people around them. All the important work in their minds is just not getting done. But here we are. We have all the time, the opportunity, and the support we need to focus directly on our mind. It's a difficult job, but we've got the opportunity. Most people in the world don't have that opportunity.

So even when the meditation is not going well, it is better than not meditating. How so? You have the opportunity to look at your mind. Even if you haven't figured out the issues yet, things don't seem to be going in the way you want them to be going, the fact you are here looking at your mind means that there's hope. There is a possibility that the answers will come, that you'll figure things out, or suddenly see things that you didn't see before. If you're not looking, you can't see those things.

Most people's lives are distracted. Thoreau's line about people living lives of quiet desperation: They're also leading lives of very noisy distraction. All the things that are really important in their lives are getting drowned out by all their other responsibilities. Even when they can take a breather from their responsibilities, they get drowned out by other distractions: people clamoring for their vote, clamoring for their money/ They don't even have a scrap of time for themselves. But here we have whole days, weeks, months, to look at the mind.

So remind yourself how fortunate you are to be here: a place where the bottom line is not the dollar. The bottom line is how you're training your mind. It's a big job, but big jobs always require patience. What does it mean? Your willingness just to sit here with whatever comes up, and your willingness to use your ingenuity to deal with whatever comes up, your willingness to learn from your mistakes. A lot of times one of the things that undercuts patience is that we make a mistake and we get frustrated over the mistake. We give up easily.

If you see that happening, remind yourself that right here in the mind is where the real problem is. You do whatever is needed to solve it. If something doesn't work, well, try something else. If that doesn't work, try something else. If nothing seems to work, just sit there. Let things follow their own course for a while. Just watch what happens on its own. Maybe you'll get a glimpse of a new idea, a new approach, a new understanding.

Insight doesn't come when you will it. There are things you can will in the practice and there are things you can't. A lot of important insights come totally unexpectedly. What you can

will is to keep putting yourself in a position where you're more likely to see. But you can't know beforehand when the insights will come. So you need patience, like the hunter. The hunter goes out, he doesn't know whether the rabbit will come by at ten o'clock in the morning, two o'clock in the afternoon. But he does have an idea of where the rabbits are most likely to com. So he simply has to wait there, alert, quiet, and maybe hungry, but he has learn how not to focus on the hunger. He has to focus on being alert, being quiet. Those are the qualities that will allow him to see the rabbit when it comes by.

So you're here to be quiet, alert, to watch when the mind begins to show itself. Because our problem is that we tend to run around inside the mind, inside our thoughts. We put them on like clothes and so we can't see them, because we're inside them. But if you learn to step back and not just grab everything that comes by, learn to watch it instead, patiently, with endurance, you begin to see things for what they are.

When you are sitting through a bad meditation and nothing seems to work, remind yourself: At least you're developing powers of endurance, powers of patience, and those are not to be sneezed at. Those are your unassuming friends, the ones that are not flashy, but when push comes to shove, they're there.

The Thais have an expression: *phyan kin*. *Phyan kin* literally means "eating friends." They're the friends you have a good time with, they like to eat with you, but when push comes to shove, they disappear. Then there are friends of another kind: *phyan taai*, literally "dying friends." They'll stand next to you while you're dying, they'll help you even when death threatens. Patience and endurance are that second kind of friend. When things get difficult, they're there to help you. So encourage their friendship. Keep them around. Associate with them as much you can, and they'll see you through a lot of things.