

Patience & Curiosity

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Patience is one of the most misunderstood teachings of the Buddha. He put it at the very beginning of one of his most famous talks, the Ovada Patimokkha: *Khanti paramam tapo titikkha*, patient endurance is the foremost austerity—austerity here in the sense of something that burns away bad qualities in the mind and generates energy for the practice.

The area where this is most often misunderstood is the idea that you just sit there and accept whatever is coming along, and that's all you do: just sit there and accept. But that's not how patience functions in the practice. You look at the way the Buddha taught his son, Rahula, how to meditate. He taught him a practice for developing patience, which is try to make your mind like that the different elements. He said to make your mind in tune with earth. Realize that you have earth in your body, and then someone says something really nasty to you, what does the earth do? Does the earth react? No. He says that, in the same way that earth outside doesn't react when you throw clean or unclean things on it—spit, mucus, feces, urine—the earth doesn't shrink away, you train your mind not to shrink away from unpleasant things. Or if you got some nice perfume and poured it on the earth, the earth wouldn't react either. In the same way, you don't react to pleasant things.

Similarly with the other elements: Wind blows clean and unclean things and doesn't make any distinction between the two. Water is used to wash away clean and unclean things, and doesn't get horrified by the unclean things or pleased by the clean ones. Fire burns up unclean things and clean things, but it doesn't shrink away from the unclean ones or specifically go after the clean ones. You try to develop the same quality in your mind.

So the Buddha taught Rahula patience, endurance, equanimity, as a basic prerequisite for then working with the breath. Working with the breath wasn't just a matter of accepting what's already there. Some of the steps of breath meditation require that you sit and watch, and others require that you actively interfere, that you play around with the breath, do things with the breath.

What this means was that when the Buddha was teaching patience to Rahula, he wasn't teaching the patience of a clod of earth, or a clod of dirt. He was teaching the patience of a scientist or an artist. The patience of a scientist is that of one who runs an experiment and wants to be careful not to jump to false or hasty

conclusions. The patience of an artist is that of one who wants to work out a problem and will keep working at it no matter how long it takes. That's the kind of patience you want to bring to the meditation, because as you're meditating, you're experimenting. You need the qualities of mind that make you a good experimenter: someone who, like the scientist, doesn't jump to hasty conclusions, or like the artist, who keeps trying again and again and again to get something just right.

So it's more an active form of patience. It's coupled with curiosity. This is where you, as a meditator, are different from a clod of dirt. A clod of dirt has no curiosity at all. It just sits there. If you want to meditate well, you've got to be curious. When the Buddha says to train yourself to breathe in and out sensitive to the entire body, how do you do that? Notice that he doesn't explain. Ajaan Lee gives some pointers, but even his pointers raise questions. What does it mean to breathe in and out sensitive to the entire body? In Ajaan Lee's pointers about letting the breath flow through the bloodstream and the nerves, what does he mean by breath? He doesn't explain too much, and part of that is because it's subverbal; another part is he just want to pique your curiosity, so that you develop the attitude of being an explorer, an experimenter, someone who wants to find things out, and is willing to try to figure them out.

That's how discernment comes. It doesn't come simply through trusting a process, putting your mind into a factory, letting it go down the assembly line, allowing the process work on the mind, and trusting that insight will come out the other end. John Steinbeck had a good line about that. He said that the way factories process things is like peristalsis, and usually the product that comes out the other end of factories is about as interesting as the product that comes out from peristalsis. Real insight comes from wanting to know, really wanting to know, which means that you're not going to settle for facile conclusions. You want to see real results, results that can stand the test of time, that can stand the test of all kinds of conditions.

So patience, in order to be part of the path, has to be coupled with curiosity. Patience acts as a kind of a ballast, keeping the mind grounded, giving a solidity to what you're doing, and preventing curiosity from the zipping away too fast, saying this must be this, and that must be that. It makes sure that you go through the steps. Once you find something else, then you try to test it, to see if it really works. Curiosity is what keeps patience from getting dead. The two qualities go together. You sit with things for a while so you can watch them carefully.

It's like the patience of a hunter. You can't decide that the animal you're trying to hunt will come by at any particular time, so you have to learn how to sit there

very quietly, so as not to scare off the animal, but you have to be very alert, so that when the animal does show signs of coming, you sense it and are ready for it.

So the stillness has to be combined with alertness, the patience combined with curiosity. It's like learning how to play a guitar. You don't just sit there and listen to the guitar without strumming it, because you wouldn't hear anything. You don't strum it without listening. If you just keep strumming away and don't really care what you sound like, you never really get very good. You have to strum and listen, and strum some more and listen some more. Over time, your ear gets better and your technique gets better, because they're working together.

So we're trying to work on the kind of patience that doesn't turn into apathy. An apathetic guitar player goes nowhere. But if you can combine patience and curiosity well, you get so that you become a better player. The music sounds better because you want it to be better: That's the curiosity part. You're willing to take all the time and effort that's required to make it better: That's the patience part. As you come to know the guitar in this way, you find that you not only have the pleasure of making nice sounds, but also the satisfaction of having developed a skill.

This is one of our real weaknesses as meditators in this day and age. Back in the time of the Buddha, you would expect people to have developed lots of skills in their lives. The Buddha would often draw analogies, saying that the skills of a meditator are like the skills of a warrior, the skills of a cook, the skills of a carpenter, the skills of an archer, of an acrobat. He could expect that people would know about these skills, and have direct experience of having mastered at least one or two of them. In our day and age, though, that's pretty rare. People still learn how to play musical instruments. So if you have some background in music, it's helpful.

As you meditate, try to think about any particular skill you've mastered, and think about the lessons you learned in terms of patience and curiosity, how to use desire to be a help in the skill and not a hindrance, how much you should try to push things, and get a sense of when you're pushing too hard.

This involves all of the bases for success: desire, persistence, intent, and your analytical powers. Think about how you applied them in learning that skill and how you found balance among them. Then see if you can apply the same lessons to working with the breath. In particular, this issue of curiosity: When the Buddha gave meditation instructions, he didn't spell everything out, he didn't have an ironclad method. Some people claim to have a scientific method: All you have to do is trust the method and it will take you there, as if the mind were an object you could beat into awakening.

The Buddha very purposely did not fill in all the details, and for that reason a lot of his meditation instructions end up sounding like questions. When he says, “Learn to breathe in and out sensitive to rapture; breathe in and out sensitive to pleasure,” how do you do that? The important thing is asking that question, wanting to learn, and then looking at your breath: To what extent can this breath be related to rapture or pleasure? How do you perceive the breath? How do you adjust the rhythm and texture of the breath so that you can breathe in and out sensitive to rapture and pleasure? He says to learn how to breathe in and out gladdening the mind, steadying the mind, releasing the mind. He provides those instructions to give you a sense of what can be done, to pique your curiosity, so that you want to explore.

It’s in this way that you develop your discernment, not through trying to clone what you’ve read about awakening, but actually looking at what you’re doing, and trying to figure out how to do it well. It’s in understanding the intentions behind the doing that you learn to get to a point where you can go beyond the intention. There’s no other way.