

Endurance

June 29, 2020

In the Ovada Patimokkha, which was the Buddha's summary of his teachings very early in his career, the very first topic is patient endurance. He says it's the best quality, the best practice, for burning away your defilements. And yet it's strange, there's not that much in the Canon on the topic.

There's one sutta that connects endurance very directly with goodwill. It's when people come to insult you, or harm you, creating a lot of pain, and the Buddha says that you have to have goodwill for them, even in difficult circumstances like that. This also means you have to have goodwill for yourself, because that's the reason for wanting to have goodwill for other people. You want to make sure you don't do anything unskillful under the power of anger or impatience.

The Buddha gives a few analogies. He says to try to make your mind like earth, make your goodwill large like earth. People come and try to make the Earth go away—they spit on it and they urinate on it and they dig here and they dig there—but they can't make it go away because it's so much bigger than their efforts. Make your mind like the river Ganges. People can come with a torch and try to set fire to the river, but the river is water; you can't set fire to water. Make your mind like space. People try to draw pictures in space but there's nothing to draw on.

That's the kind of quality you want to develop in the mind, and you do that first by thinking about these images, thinking about these perceptions.

But there's more, and it's important that we learn the "more," because our culture is really good at making us impatient. Traditional cultures were the other way around. The first thing they wanted to teach children was to be patient and enduring, because they realized that the children, as they grew up, were going to suffer a lot if they couldn't develop some patience and endurance. But we let our children be raised by the mass media, and the mass media don't care about the children's well-being. All they want is what they can get out of you. By making you impatient, they get you to buy more.

So we have to go against our acculturation and the basic tendency of human beings who, if they're not trained, tend to be impatient anyhow. This means we have to train ourselves. The training is very similar to the training for dealing with physical pain. In other words, it follows

the steps of the tetrad in breath meditation dealing with feelings. Remember, the first step in the tetrad is to breathe in and out sensitive to rapture. The next step is to breathe in and out sensitive to pleasure. The third is to breathe in and out sensitive to mental fabrications, which are perceptions and feelings, and the fourth is to breathe in and out calming mental fabrications.

Those first two steps deal with the principle that when you're faced with a difficult situation, you don't talk to yourself about how difficult it is. You find what opportunities for pleasure there are, what opportunities there are that provide strength inside. In other words, focus on what's good in the situation, what opportunities are open, and don't focus on areas where the opportunities are closed.

This topic has come up several times now as the quarantine begins to extend. It's beginning to seem as if there's no end in sight, and people make themselves miserable thinking about how long it's going to last.

Well, that perception of how long it's going to last is a big problem right there. So, don't focus on it. Focus instead on where you can find pleasure in the meantime—harmless pleasure. That may entail giving yourself pep talks, or reminding yourself that you can make your mind large like the Earth. You can make your goodwill large like the Earth, cool like the river Ganges, as surface-less as space, and you can do that through the meditation.

This is one of the reasons why we practice concentration: There can be a sense of well-being, a sense of fullness, rapture, that you can gain as you train the mind to be still, totally independent of outside conditions, and you can learn to feed off that.

Ajaan Fuang talks about how he was trapped up in northern Thailand during World War II. He was missing Ajaan Lee and was cut off from everybody he knew. So, he would spend his days in concentration, feeding off the rapture as a way of sustaining himself in some very lonely and, in some cases, deprived situations.

So, learn how to appreciate what you've got with the breath. Appreciate the opportunity to get the mind quiet. Give yourself something positive to focus on. Those are the first two steps.

The second two have to do with mental fabrications: feelings and perceptions. This is the step where you look into the perceptions you hold around things, like the perception that the quarantine is going to be endless. That's not a very calming perception. So, you replace it with something else.

When the Buddha is talking about physical pain, he has you remind yourself that the pain

is something separate from the body. When you're dealing with unpleasant words, he has you remind yourself to think in ways that depersonalize them.

For instance, if someone says something really bad, remind yourself: "There's an unpleasant sound making contact at the ear." You don't pretend that it's not unpleasant, but it doesn't have to go any further than the ear. Have the perception that it stops right there.

You could apply the same perception to all kinds of things that are unpleasant in your surroundings: Have them stop right at the sense door. Don't let them in. They can come knocking but you don't have to respond, because otherwise we take them in and we weave all kinds of narratives around them. Or as in the Buddha's image of the arrows: It's as if we've been shot with one arrow, and we pull it out and we stab ourselves with it again, and again, and again.

We think about: "Why did that person say that? Or, "Why did that person do that? Why do they disrespect me? Why do they treat me so badly?" Those things just eat away at you. If you can leave the sound at the contact, then you can tell yourself other stories.

As when the Buddha has you remind yourself about unpleasant words: The nature of human speech is that sometimes it's true, sometimes it's false; sometimes it's well-meaning, sometimes ill-meaning, and so the fact that people are lying to you or saying things with bad intentions: That's really nothing new or out of the ordinary.

The same goes for pandemics. Think of all the many pandemics there have been throughout the world. This is a feature of human society, and so don't take it personally. You've got a human body. It's subject to disease. When people live together, they spread diseases around.

We're fortunate now that we know a lot more about how pandemics work than they did in the old days. In the past, things were a total mystery. In the time of the Black Plague, people noticed that the disease tended to be spread especially fast among people who went to public baths, and so they came to the conclusion that bathing was bad for you. And so, for centuries after that, people in Europe wouldn't bathe. Imagine what that was like.

At least we know something about the disease, and we can take some precautions. But the important point is to learn to see this as normal. Make allowances for what special measures have to be made, but otherwise, realize that the important things in life are the things you develop in the mind, the qualities you develop in your mind, the perfections. Even in a pandemic whether you get sick, or don't get sick, you can still develop those perfections.

You can develop goodwill. You can develop endurance. You can develop determination.

Here's an opportunity for improving your mind. So, change your perceptions. Instead of getting yourself upset and worked up, perceive things in a way that helps you to calm the mind and keep its focus on what really is important.

Calming the mind doesn't mean you simply say, "Well, I'm just not going to do anything at all." You get the mind calm so that you can do the work that needs to be done with more focus, a greater sense of dedication, greater consistency, because that's the problem with a lack of endurance: You get inconsistent in your good efforts.

The virtue of endurance is that your goodness doesn't have to depend on outside circumstances, and this relates directly to the principle of four noble truths. Suffering comes from the way you talk to yourself. Physical pain may be inherent in having a body, but the suffering that goes into the mind is not automatic. It comes from how you relate to the pain—and that's good news, because you can relate in new ways. It's the same with learning some endurance around the conditions of the pandemic. The human mind can make itself suffer over anything, anything at all.

During the retreat in Brazil, one of the questions that came in wasn't really a question, it was a statement: "The silence is driving me crazy." In response, I said, "It's not the fact that the silence is driving you crazy. It's the fact that your mind isn't silent; that's driving you crazy. The mind is talking to itself in all kinds of ways that just makes the situation worse." After all, here you have the opportunity to meditate, to look at your mind, to understand your mind. If it seems like a mess right now, well, all the more reason to want to look into it. The Buddha gives you the tools for parsing things out, so here's your chance to put them to use.

So much of the problem has to do those two types of fabrication: verbal fabrication and mental fabrication. And, of course, if you can learn to breathe in a way that feels refreshing to the body, that takes a lot of the edge off right there, because when situations come that we find hard to endure, a lot of it has to do with the fact that we're already weighing ourselves down. Then whatever else is added on just becomes too much. But if we don't weigh ourselves down, these other things can't weigh us down.

So when you find yourself facing a situation that's hard to endure, remember those steps in the breath meditation. Be sensitive to the potentials for pleasure, even in the midst of the hardship. And regardless of whether the situation that's hard to endure is physical pain, harsh words, the sense of confinement and frustration caused by the pandemic, or a sense of uncertainty and anxiety, learn how to talk to yourself in new ways.

Depersonalize the situation, and see what opportunities you have for training the mind to be large like the Earth, to have goodwill for yourself that's as impervious to change as the Earth, as cool as the river Ganges, as surface-less as space. You'll find that that quality of endurance, as the Buddha said, is the best thing for burning away your defilements. When the defilements are burned away, then the mind can shine like the sun.