

Choose Your Battles

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Computers have spoiled us. We press a key and we want some information right away.

And if the computer or the iPad is slow—five seconds, ten seconds—we get impatient, forgetting that twenty, thirty years ago if you wanted that information you'd have to go someplace else, find a book, learn to look into the book, find the page where the information was—and not be all that certain you were going to find what you were looking for in that book. Then you'd try another one, then another one.

In this setting, we develop an unrealistic idea about the practice as well. We want things to be instant, automatic, right away. We've lost the ability to be patient and to understand what patience means: It doesn't mean just sitting around waiting, tapping your foot, for things to happen on their own. There's work to be done. But it's long-term work. Patience means the ability to stick with a task over the long term.

When difficult things come up, you have to learn how not to let the difficulty weigh you down. You're not just sitting there putting up with the pain. You've got to figure out: "If there's pain here, is there an area where there's no pain? Is there an area that gives me the strength that I can work on to develop resistance to that pain?" You change your focus. And sometimes you find that the whole problem was your focus to begin with.

Years back, when I was just getting started in the meditation, there was a period when I was away from Ajaan Fuang for several months. As I was meditating, I'd find that it was getting harder and harder to breathe. It was as if my body was just getting more and more solid all the time. The effort that went into trying to breathe seemed more and more laborious, more and more futile.

I finally had the chance to go see him and told him the problem. He said, "Oh, you're focusing on the earth element. Focus on space." As he said that, as I focused on space, and that sense of oppression immediately lifted.

In that case, the problem was something that I was doing. The problem was also my inability to think outside the box, to look for areas where there was some strength that I could fall back on.

So here we are on a long-term project, cleaning out the mind. It's like cleaning out an enormous house that's been vandalized and has had all kinds of animals moving in. Nobody proper has lived there for a long time; nobody's been cleaning

it up. It's full of all kinds of junk, all kinds of garbage. There are a few animals still living in there. And we've got to clear it out.

So you work on it room by room, task by task, bit by bit. If you start thinking about how big the job is, it can overwhelm you. So you don't think about that. You think about, "This is the problem I've got right now. Let's focus right here." Try to break it down into manageable bits, and you find that you can endure a lot more than you could have otherwise. You have more stick-to-itiveness than you would have had otherwise.

This also requires the ability to be equanimous about things that you can't do anything about—and equanimous about things you could do something about but would actually get in the way of your larger goals. This is a part of equanimity that's often overlooked. Sometimes there are things you can change, but if you make that change, you win that battle, but it sets you up to lose another battle.

We see this easily in life here in the community. You may win a battle over some issue but it offends other people. And they're going to be less likely to cooperate on a later battle.

So you've got to choose your battles, realizing that there are some things you could win if you wanted to, but those victories would be bad for you in the long run. Keep remembering the Buddha's statement that victory over yourself is better than victory over thousands of people.

And what are the victories over yourself? One is victory over your tendency to keep on creating unnecessary suffering for yourself. For the Buddha that was *the* big battle, the one most worth winning. And you're not going to be the only one who benefits when you win. People who create a lot of suffering for themselves tend to lean a lot on other people. They're constantly coming and saying, "Help me with this, help me with that, I've got this problem." The unnecessary suffering you place on yourself has a domino effect. It begins to affect other people as well. But the less you make yourself suffer, the less you need to lean on other people—and the more helpful you can be to them.

So take this as your main battle. Take this as the main focus. As for the little battles you might win along the way, if they're in line with this one, you can fight them. But if they're not in line with this, they're better not won.

This means that patience and equanimity require discernment, to figure out what has to be put up with, what doesn't have to be put up with.

As the Buddha says, there are certain things that you should endure and other things you shouldn't endure at all. You should learn how to endure hurtful words from other people. You should learn how to endure painful feelings. And you learn to endure those by thinking in the right way. With the painful feelings, you

know how to use the breath to work with pain. You know how to use your understanding of pain to help so that the pain doesn't overcome you.

The same principle applies with hurtful words. Learn to depersonalize them so that they're not like arrows aimed at your heart. Someone else may be aiming them at your heart, but if you open up your chest and say, "Here, right here, right here, stab me right here," of course they're going to hit you.

But if you refuse to take the words in... In other words, you hear them but you let them just stop right there at the ears. The Buddha says to tell yourself, "An unpleasant sound has made contact at the ear," and just leave it there—without all the extra narratives you tend to add to it, and particularly the narrative that says, "If I don't respond with some sharp comment, they're going to think I'm a doormat." You just let it stop.

We tend to forget that patience and endurance are strengths. They're not weaknesses. They may look like weakness outside when we're not snapping back at somebody. But then, the snapping back becomes your karma. You've won that battle maybe but you've lost a bigger one.

So those are the kinds of things you should endure: painful feelings and hurtful words.

Things you shouldn't endure are thoughts of ill will, thoughts of sensuality, and thoughts of harmfulness that arise in the mind. You don't let them stay; you don't let them take over. It's natural that they will come, but you don't have to continue with them.

In Ajaan Lee's image, you don't have to continue weaving that thought. Let its frayed ends dangle in the wind. But just leave it, leave it, leave it. Don't let it take hold in the mind.

So you need discernment to figure out what needs to be endured, what doesn't need to be endured; what needs to be changed, what can't be changed—and what could be changed but is better off left alone. That kind of discernment takes time, which is one of the reasons why the practice takes time.

After all, the deathless is always there, but our ability to detect it requires that our discernment get sharper and sharper. And discernment doesn't grow in leaps and bounds. It gets sharpened each time you use it, bit by bit by bit by bit, until that gradual process finally breaks through.

The Buddha's image is of the continental shelf off of India. There's a gradual slope and then a sudden drop. The gradual slope is the refinement of your discernment. As you get more and more clear about what you're doing and the results of what you're doing—in your practice of virtue and concentration—then when things come together, then there's a sharp drop. It's a quantum leap,

something very different from anything that went before.

But for that balance to come together, and for that sharpness of discernment to be there, requires long-term practice.

So understand patience, endurance, and equanimity as strengths. And understand that there's a skill in each case. When things are tough, where do you find the parts of your mind, where do you find a way of thinking that can make them not so tough? Look for the parts that can give you some support so that you're not totally one-on-one with nothing but pain, one-on-one with nothing but disappointment, whatever.

Every time there's a problem, ask yourself, "Okay, where's the countervailing force inside the mind? Where's the home where you can retreat to? A sense of a center that's yours?"

Sometimes it may not be in the body. If you can't find any place in the body, find an area in the space immediately around the body. Space can't be squeezed; space can't be turned into pain. Then from there, move back into the body with a new attitude, a new understanding.

So bring some discernment to your equanimity. Bring some discernment to the choice of battles you're going to take. Bring some discernment to your patience. That'll enable you to stick with the path and to gradually see results—and to see those gradually appearing results not as a sign of failure but actually as a sign of success.