

The Skill of Patience

August 4, 2016

Notice what sense you have of the body right now. There may be some parts that are perfectly still. Others are moving. And there's a sense of where you're sitting, your contact with the floor.

You can focus on any of these things. And it turns out that they're all aspects of the breath. The movement, of course, is the obvious breath. The simple fact that you're aware that you have arms and legs even when you're not touching anything: That's an aspect of what's called breath energy. And it's through the breath energy that you notice that you're touching things. Without the breath, you'd be dead. There'd be no sense of awareness at all.

So wherever there's a sense of the body that you're clear about, focus there. If you have trouble gaining a sense of the breath, just hold your breath for a while until you feel you can't hold it any longer and then you'll notice, when you breathe in, where you feel the breathing. Focus on that sensation.

All of this is to help ground you in the present moment, to give you a place where you can look at your thoughts and not get carried away by them. But for the time being, don't look much at your thoughts. Just let them go, let them go, let them go—aside from the thoughts that help you stay here.

Sometimes the mind needs a little bit of reasoning as to why to stay here and why not to be spending the whole hour obsessing about something else. This is why we have that series of chants before the meditation. The obvious one, of course, is the one we do every night: the one on the brahmaviharas. You can sit here for a little while thinking thoughts of goodwill, "May I be happy. May all beings be happy." And then ask yourself, "Do you really believe that? Do you really want all beings to be happy?"

Remember what it means for beings to be happy. It's not that you're going to touch them with a magic wand and make them happy with your thoughts. For them to be happy, they have to create the causes for happiness—which means that they have to act skillfully. And when you think about people you resent or people you've had really bad relationships with, the idea that if they could become skillful in their actions is not such a bad idea.

Now, part of your mind may say, "Well, I'd like to see them suffer a little bit first, so that they could have a taste of what they've done to others." But then you can ask yourself, "Is that a part of the mind that you really want to encourage?"

Then you start thinking: "If they're going to be happy through doing skillful

things, then that's where my happiness is going to come from." And where does that come from? It comes from the mind. The mind needs to be trained—partly because it's so fickle, it can change so easily. You've got to get it to settle down for a while. Teach it some patience, some endurance.

The Buddha gave one of his very first sermons—not *the* first sermon but an early sermon in his career—when over a thousand arahant disciples came to see him one afternoon. Many of them had gained awakening simply by listening to one Dhamma talk, and now he was going to send them out to teach to spread the word. So he reviewed some of the basic principles, and he started with patient endurance.

This, of course, is a skill that we've lost in our modern culture. I was reading the other day that for a lot of people if a video doesn't download within two seconds, they move on. They're not interested in waiting.

If that's your approach to meditation, you're not going to see any results. You're going to get frustrated. You've got to be willing to sit with it for a while. And not just sit with it: the skill of patience requires that you learn how to encourage yourself, talk to yourself in a way that gives you a sense that you can do this gladly.

If you stick with the breath for two or three breaths and then lose it, tell yourself, "Okay, next time let's do it for five." Set goals for yourself that won't set you up for failure, things that you can manage. Then try to stretch and stretch and stretch a little bit. And keep that positive attitude that "Yes, we can do this."

The key to patient endurance is to realize that not everything is hard in the meditation. Simply breathing easily gives a sense of ease to the body. Learn how to appreciate that. Learn how to make the most of that. Don't drop the breath for the sake of the ease, but let the ease do its work so that it feels good to be here.

There's something called the pleasure and rapture of seclusion, which means that you're just simply dropping the thoughts that used to obsess you. You're allowing this awareness in your body—the awareness that tells you that this is where the legs are, this is where the hands are, etc.—you allow this to have some space so that you can sense it more clearly, more blatantly.

We tend to block out our sensation of the body when we're thinking about things. This is one of the reasons why people who think a lot tend to be dissociated from their bodies. They're taking the sensation of the body and translating it into thoughts. Now you've got to learn how to translate it back the other way. It's just body, and you don't have to translate it into any kind of thinking at all.

The simple fact that you're not using these sensations to squeeze little thoughts

out of them gives a sense of relief. Learn to appreciate that relief. It may not seem like much to begin with, but a lot of the things in the meditation start out as very gentle sensations, very gentle thoughts.

In this case, it's just gentle sensations. It's like a little seed. You've got the seed for a redwood, which doesn't look like a redwood at all. In fact, it's very, very small. But if it has the right conditions, it'll grow and become a huge tree.

The same with the well-being that comes from concentration: You have to learn how to protect the little things in the beginning. A little sense of ease, a little sense of respite: Learn how to appreciate that. Once you appreciate it, then you can let it spread and allow more of the body to be soothed by it.

In this way, you've got the energy you need to maintain your endurance and develop more patience. All too often, we think of patience as just simply gritting your teeth and bearing with things until you break. But the real trick to patience is learning that there are positive things even in the midst of difficulties.

You may have read about getting into jhana and having the whole body bathed in ease. You say, "When's that going to happen? I don't see the whole body bathed in ease." Well, there are little bits and pieces of ease scattered around the body. If there weren't *some* pleasant sensations in the body, you'd die. So they're there, just learn how to give them some space. Take some nourishment from them. Then it'll be easier to stay with the breath, easier to stay here grounded in the body.

The more you can bring this sense of the awareness of the body up to the forefront, the easier it will be to withstand floods of thoughts that may come over the mind. You're here, and they can just wash past, wash past. You don't have to get involved. Some of the thinking comes from past karma—and it's going to happen. Other thinking comes from the fact that you're getting involved with your past-karma thinking. You want to add a few more thoughts, a few more details. But then you twist the strands of thought into large ropes to tie yourself up with: That's what happens.

But now you can say, "No. Just let the strands be loose ends, frayed ends. I don't have to make them into anything that makes any sense at all." They're just random chatter in the background of the mind. Keep it in the background.

With some thinking, you can simply say No and it goes away. With other thinking, the more you say No to it, the more it flares up—the part of the mind that doesn't like being said No to. In this case you say, "Okay go ahead and chatter, but I'm not going to pay any attention." It'll say some outrageous things for a while to get your attention. But if you're really persistent, if you have some patience, it'll start to wear down.

A lot of the results in the meditation come slowly—or they come suddenly,

but only after a long time. You have to spend quite a while getting the conditions together before the quick insights or the quick sort of quantum leaps in your concentration will happen.

An image that's used in the Canon is of the continental shelf off of India. There's a gradual slope out, and then there's a sudden drop.

So if nothing seems to be happening for a while, just remind yourself that you're on the gentle slope, as long as you keep coming back to the breath, back to the breath. And learn how to relate to the sense of the body here in the present moment, however you interpret it: as breath or simply the presence of the body. Relate to it in a way that's not putting too much pressure on it and not putting too much of a squeeze on any part of the body—and at the same time not being too light or too disconnected from the body. Just be right there with the sensations, and let the sensations have some space. The gradual slope will finally reach that point where there are some sudden changes.

So patient endurance: This is why the Buddha put this at the very beginning of his explanation of the basic principles of the teachings. It's what allows things to grow.

Back in the old days, people were used to this kind of issue. You plant a grain of rice and it's going to take a while. You have to be patient. You have to have the confidence that, Yes, if you look after the grain of rice, it'll grow. Nowadays, we want everything yesterday. In other words, we want to be already there.

We're like the cartoon in the last Sunday paper. Some guys were ordering a pizza. It took ten seconds to get there and they complained about how slow instant gratification is nowadays.

Here we're working on delayed gratification—but that doesn't mean there's no gratification at all right now. The way to be patient is to keep reminding yourself of the good things that are happening right now. Survey the body; survey your mind. See where things are quiet or have a sense of ease. It may not be much, but remember: These are little seeds. Seeds take a while to grow.

So learn the patience of a farmer. Learn the patience of someone who's doing a reforestation project. You plant the seeds and you know if you look after things, the results will come. If you don't look after things, the little seeds will just die.

And for a lot of us, that's been our experience with seeds. We plant them and then they die and they don't seem to offer much—which is why we tend to dismiss them. But now gain a sense of appreciation: Seeds can grow and they can contain huge trees inside them. They've got that potential. Your duty is simply to provide the water, provide the ground.

In other words, be interested and keep coming back, coming back. Maintain

the intention to keep coming back. It's through your patient application of effort that the results will come.