

Nurturing Patient Endurance

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There was a point early in the Buddha's teaching career where more than a thousand arahants came to see him. They hadn't determined beforehand that they would come. They all came spontaneously. And these were people for the most part who had heard one Dhamma talk from the Buddha and gained awakening. But now they were going to go out to teach, so the Buddha gave them a long Dhamma talk that afternoon that filled in the details, starting with some of the more basic principles, so they could teach the Dhamma to a wide range of people.

The talk began with the theme of patient endurance. As the Buddha said, this is the quality that burns away your defilements. Now, patience doesn't mean you simply just put up with things. There's a skill to patience. Patience can often mean perseverance, meaning that you stick with an activity for a long time. You're not just on the receiving end of being patient about pain, say, but you're also going to go on the offensive, with the realization that it may take a long time to see the results. But if you don't put in any effort, you're just stuck where you are.

So you learn how to talk to yourself. This is one of those areas where all three fabrications come in, because an important part of patience is learning that not everything in the present moment is hard to bear. There have to be some ways that you can give rise to a sense of well-being, mental or physical, preferably both, and you start with the breath: How are you breathing right now? Where in the body does the breath feel good? Focus your attention there, and be patient with it, because *good* may not be very good in the beginning.

To be protective of that spot in the right way, think of it being wide open. Don't allow any thoughts to come in that would squeeze it up, tighten it up. After a while, the sense of fullness there will begin to grow, and then you have something good to spread around.

As you do this, you have to talk to yourself, one, to remind yourself that you've got to be patient and persevering, but that, two, the results are going to be good. The more you can get interested in the breath, the less you'll be worried about the things that are weighing down the mind in other areas.

So talk to yourself about the breath.

Some people find that that spot where they're very sensitive to the breath is right around the area of the heart, the area of the sternum. How do you breathe in a way so that spot stays open and unrestricted right there, both in the in-breath, and with the out-, and also in-between?

And what perception allows you to maintain that feeling of fullness, ease, well-being?

Use your ingenuity. It's one of the qualities the Buddha said you have to develop as you work on the path. Sometimes we look at the path and we say, "*I'm not equal to a path like that.*" But then, the person you are right now is not going to be the one who finishes the path. As you develop the qualities that are developed along the path, you become a different person. You have new skills, and your sense of yourself will grow.

The Buddha lists six qualities altogether you want to look for. There's *conviction*: This is a large part of how you talk to yourself, giving yourself good reasons for why you want to stick with this path, why you want to have confidence in it. After all, if you don't have confidence in the power of your own actions, what are you going to fall back on? You look at the state of the world, is anything out there reliable? Whoever created this world, is that the kind of person you could rely on? You're better off learning how to train yourself to be reliable, so that you can depend on yourself—which is what the message of the Buddha's awakening is.

Who trained the Buddha? He had training in previous lifetimes, but the final steps of how to reach awakening were things he had to work on himself. But he did it through his own ingenuity, his own actions. And the message is: He could do it, you can do it too.

On top of conviction, comes *virtue*. In fact, virtue is part of conviction. If you really are convinced in the power of your actions, you're going to be very careful about how you act.

And *generosity*: That, too, grows out of conviction. As the Buddha said, you're convinced that something good will come from your generosity; it's not a waste. It develops a good environment outside, and it develops a good environment inside the mind.

Then there's *learning*: How much do you know of the Buddha's teachings? We like to think of the forest ajaans as going out and not having much background in the teachings. In fact, they usually say, "Put what you've learned in the books aside, and focus on what you're doing." But what you're doing is determined by what you've read. The fact that you're sitting here, watching your breath: The idea of doing that probably wouldn't have occurred to you if you hadn't read it someplace. So you want to make sure that you've got a good fund of knowledge to fall back on when you need it.

The remaining two qualities the Buddha said you have to work on are *discernment* and *ingenuity*. Discernment means basically seeing what you're doing and the results of what you're doing.

And then ingenuity, quick-wittedness: *Patibhana* is the Pali term. It's a term that doesn't appear in many lists, but it is important. You don't go just by what you've read or heard. A problem comes up, and you figure out: How can you attack it? What angles do you have to come from? If you're coming from one angle and nothing seems to be working, what other angles can you approach it from? In what way is the problem similar to another problem you've experienced, either in the meditation or outside the meditation?

This quality of ingenuity is very closely related to similes. There was a time when a monk was talking to a prince who was related to him, and he could not get through to the prince. He

went to see the Buddha and explained how he tried to explain things to the prince, and the Buddha said, “Well, you could have given him these similes.” And he gave a series of similes: *That* would have made the matter clear. But the monk said, “How could I have given that series of similes, because I’d never heard them before?” Ingenuity is what allows you to come up with similes, to see parallels that you haven’t been told.

I think it was Aristotle who said that’s what intelligence is measured by your ability to see connections that haven’t been pointed out to you. So when you think of any skills you’ve developed in the past, you can ask yourself: How do the lessons you learned then apply now? In other words, borrow your insights from your other skills. That’s what a lot of ingenuity is—seeing parallels that haven’t been pointed out to you.

Now, all of these are qualities you’re going to need in the practice, strengths you can develop so that you get better and better at talking to yourself when you find yourself dealing with difficulties, and part of the mind wants to give up or feels totally oppressed. You have to remind yourself, “No, there’s got to be some way out.” The Buddha didn’t teach the Dhamma for people to reach a dead end.

No matter what the defilement, no matter what the problem in terms of physical pain or mental pain, there’s a way around it so that you can learn how to live with the difficulties that are inherent in having a body, living in the human realm, but not suffer from them. Look for that distinction. The reason we find some things hard to endure is because we glue a lot of things together and then carry them around. You’ve got to find something that dissolves the glue, so that there’s not such a big burden on your shoulders.

And these six qualities of *conviction, generosity, virtue, learning, discernment, and ingenuity* are a really good solvent so that big problems become small, and small problems get solved, and your patience does become large.

One of the Pali words for patience is *khama*. It’s also the name of the Earth—so hold that image in mind. Make that part of the mental fabrication you use as you keep yourself going. When your patience is as large as the Earth, you can bear with anything. And not just bear it—with your discernment and ingenuity, you can find the way out.