



The Value of Patience

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Talk 1

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Bhikkhu Thanissaro notes: “We're an impatient society. Everything has to be done fast, the results have to come fast, or else we lose interest quickly. It's because we're so impatient that we don't understand what patience is all about. When we're told to be patient, many times we think it's a sign that we shouldn't care about the results, that we don't have to be so committed to the practice, that we can let things take their course whenever they want to. We think that patience means a lack of resolution, a lack of dedication, that you're a carefree and indifferent about when things are going to come together, when the results are going to show.”¹

That’s not what patience means. We are going to explore patience, one of the ten virtues that the Buddha attained on the way to his awakening. These ten virtues are called the paramis or perfections.

What is the value of patience? Let’s first look at impatience, the lack of patience.

Exercise:

Reflect on impatience:

What are 3 situations in which you usually become impatient?

Look deeply to see what the root of the impatience in each situation might be. Could it be desire, ill-will, fear, dissatisfaction, or something else?

What bodily feelings arise when you are impatient?

For me, 3 examples of when I experienced impatience included when I was traveling by air, when Sandy, my spouse, would spend time in the parking lot of a store looking for a closer space, waiting in line for anything. I recall that I became very impatient waiting in a long time to get to the ticket agent when we were leaving Cuba. When Sandy asked what was wrong, I said that I was getting very passive-aggressive. One of our travel mates said, “Well, you are certainly doing a good job of it.” The root of these experiences, I will share later. My bodily feelings were ones of anxiety, restlessness, frustration and worry.

What is the value of patience, one of the paramis?

What are the paramis?

The paramis were considered to be the ten virtues that the Buddha attained on the way to his awakening. The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism notes that in Sanskrit, parami is translated as “perfection,” a virtue or quality developed and practiced by a Bodhisattva on the path to becoming a buddha.² These 10 perfections are giving, virtue, renunciation, discernment, persistence, endurance (patience), truth, determination, goodwill, and equanimity.³ One school, called the Sarvāstivādins, listed six perfections, a list that was later adopted by the Mahāyāna: giving, virtue, endurance, persistence, jhāna (mental absorption), and discernment.

The perfections emanate from the Jātaka tales which are a voluminous body of literature native to India concerning the previous births of Gautama Buddha in both human and animal form. The future Buddha may appear as a king, an outcast, a god, an elephant—but, in whatever form, he exhibits some virtue that the tale thereby inculcates. Often, Jātaka tales include an extensive cast of characters who interact and get into various kinds of trouble - whereupon the Buddha character intervenes to resolve all the problems and bring about a happy ending. The Theravāda Jātakas comprise 547 poems, arranged roughly by an increasing number of verses.⁴

One can view the paramis as virtues that serve as general antidotes to the three poisons: greed, hatred and delusion.

Patience

Khanti is the Pali word that means “patience.” As noted above, patience as also be termed as persistence or perseverance. I will use the term patience as a general meaning.

Allan Lokos, a well-known meditation teacher wrote a book titled, *Patience: The Art of Peaceful Living*.⁵ He quotes various sources which define patience as “a virtuous quality characterized by calm endurance when dealing with difficult circumstances; perseverance when facing provocation or delay; not reacting negatively to annoyance or anger; forbearance when under stress, particularly that which is long-term; steadfastness when faced with difficulties; bearing misfortunes or pain without loss of temper.”

We can certainly appreciate the value of patience. When confronted with any of the three poisons (greed, hatred, delusion) that cause suffering, we can see that if we only had enough patience to deal with the situation, we might not have become afflicted.

Lokos notes: “As we journey through these pages we will explore various aspects of everyday living that can challenge the patience of the most well-intentioned among us. Don’t worry about finding opportunities to practice. Rest assured that someone or something will show up to test how well your patience is developing. There is a small plaque in the guest bathroom of a friend’s house that reads, “God give me patience, and I mean right now!” it doesn’t happen that way. One thing we will surely see is that it takes patience to develop patience.”⁶

Lokos goes on to say: “I used to turn negative feelings into anger so that I wouldn’t feel the pain of a hurtful situation. Of course, I didn’t know I was doing that, and the result was like fanning burning embers inside me. I would hold on to the anger, and consequently the suffering within me was never addressed. That is a potent recipe for anguish and despair, not to mention physical pain. For years I paid the price of loneliness even among loved ones and sadness in the midst of delight. It is through the development of mindfulness and patience that our more joyful nature has the opportunity to emerge. Over time we become sentient beings guided by well-honed wisdom and compassion. As we will see, even” though we may need a little work (from a quote by Shenryu Suzuki: “Each of you is perfect the way you are ... and you can use a little improvement.”),⁷ we are already whole and perfect. We may have lost touch with aspects of our perfection, but they are always there, just as the sun is always there, waiting for its chance to shine when the clouds have passed. As the sun waits patiently for a clear sky, we too can learn to be patient. This is the essence of spiritual practice; our work is not to become a better person, but to become present to the perfection we already are. That perfection may at times be a bit loony, shy, angry, righteous, or filled with self-doubt, but we still want to become friends with who we are. Just as the Buddha advised his followers to learn from their own experience, we too must pay attention to the messages from our own mind and body and learn what causes us dukkha and, alternatively, what brings peace and joy for ourselves and those around us. Then we make the wise decisions that determine our actions. We start with whatever patience we have; we can only start from where we are.”⁸

Practicing patience

Lokos notes: “We can train the mind in a way to make the word patience readily available. Here is a deceptively simple yet highly effective program that can be done over a two to four-week period. Working this exercise will help prevent the damage that can be done by a single burst of anger, and it will lay the ground for the development of true patience. Each day during the training period, think patience just as you are about to do a specific activity that you tend to do fairly often on most days. This is an exercise designed to repeatedly bring the word patience to mind. You are not likely to need patience while doing any of these daily activities. You will be training the mind in a way similar to how we train the muscles of the body. In most cases it will be best to use only one of these exercises per day:

- If you send a lot of e-mails, every time you are about to press the Send button, think, *patience*.
- If you make phone calls regularly throughout the day, just before you dial, think, *patience*.
- While reading the newspaper, as you are about to turn each page, think, *patience*.
- At meals, as you are bringing the fork to your mouth, think *patience*; or each time you bring a glass to your lips, think, *patience*.
- Every time you are about to touch a handle to open a door, think, *patience*.
- Every time you are going to stand up, think, *patience*.
- Every time you are about to sit down, think, *patience*.
- Every time you change the channel on the television, think, *patience*.

These are just examples. Make up other versions of this practice in accordance with your regular activities. For instance, I often play a word game on my iPad and when I am doing the training, each time I change the words of the game, I think, *patience*. The practice itself is quite easy to do. The most challenging part is remembering to do the exercise throughout the day. If it helps, try training every

other day or on alternate weeks: a week of training and a week off. The important thing is to stick with the schedule you set up; consistency reaps rewards. Just like training the body, training the mind works best when you train regularly. There may be times when the exercise itself feels annoying. To be absolutely honest, the practice is no more exhilarating than thirty minutes on a treadmill, but the results can be life-altering.

Sometimes it is wise to state the obvious. If, in a given circumstance, you become adamant that the behavior of another is so offensive or the conditions to which you are being subjected are so unacceptable that you decide to no longer be patient, then you are, in that moment, willing to undermine your progress, and understand that you must live with the consequences. My own experience is that as patience develops, those circumstances diminish. I believe your experience will be similar, especially as you see that you are the one who is hurt most by your loss of patience. No matter what the external circumstances, your impatience can only exist within you. You develop patience by working on yourself, not by attempting to change others.

At first, even with the best intentions, you might do the practice for a few minutes and then forget. What a perfect time to practice patience with yourself. Everything we endeavor to learn is most difficult in the beginning, whether it is a new language, playing the piano, or riding a bike. Just return to the practice as soon as you remember. Think of the enormous benefits of developing real patience. Be creative and let it be fun; no one looks forward to drudgery. Also, this part of the practice is not intended to be ongoing. You will soon move to deeper levels and become a master. Give it a fair trial for at least two weeks and then practice as needed. After the first few days begin to notice if there is a feeling that comes up as you think patience. Don't force anything, just be aware of whether the tone of the feeling is pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. If you stay with this practice, it can be very effective. If you let it go, the next time you lose your patience or find yourself agitated or angry, you can go back and train again for a week or two. The patience you are developing is both calm and vibrant. You are practicing the kind of skillful means that we can think of as compassionate action. It not only moves you forward, but guides you ever so gently, ever so magnificently upward as well. Remember these words of the Buddha: "It is easy to do things that are not good and cause harm to oneself, but what is good and beneficial can be quite difficult to do."⁹

Talk 2

June 15, 2022

Now that you have had a chance to practice, let's go deeper into patience.

What patience is not

While you might think that you are being patient in a situation by using some practices, true patience is not derived from employing techniques such as deep breathing, distracting yourself or by subtly showing annoyance.

As Lokos notes: "To begin an exploration of the practice of patience it is helpful to have a sense not only of what patience is, but also of what it is not. For example, when facing an intolerable situation such as two-year-old Jimmy's latest inexhaustible tantrum in a crowded supermarket, gritting your teeth and slowly counting to ten is not true patience. Likewise, while waiting on an interminable line, say at the

airport security gate (which you suspect is not all that secure), consciously breathing deeply (and perhaps loudly so that the person you believe to be causing the line's comatose state can be made acutely aware of your annoyance) is also not true patience. These practices are more like techniques, skills used for getting through a challenging situation without completely "losing it." They employ qualities such as forbearance, tolerance, and endurance, and even if they feel forced or contrived, they can put a bit of space between your feelings and your actions. They are a starting place and can be invaluable, although they are not yet the skills that will bring insight and advance us on the path to greater wisdom and inner peace. They do not emerge naturally from a well-practiced and skillfully developed quality of patience. That is because the development of genuine patience requires introspection over time so that we can come to know the root causes of our impatience."

The three characteristics of patience

Lokos notes: "Buddhism views patience as having three aspects: forbearance or perseverance, endurance when stressed, and acceptance of truth."

Bhikkhu Bodhi notes: "Patience has the characteristic of acceptance; its function is to endure the desirable and undesirable; its manifestation is tolerance or nonopposition; seeing things as they really are is its proximate cause."¹⁰

Perseverance (the property of continuing to be persistent despite difficulties)

Lokos notes: "As mentioned earlier, perseverance is not true patience. It is more like the skills we develop that can get us through challenging moments--an interminable wait on the phone with the utility company, Uncle Fred's ubiquitous hurtful comments at Thanksgiving dinner, the insane driver who cuts you off and nearly causes your demise, and so forth. These are the "take a deep breath and count to ten" or "remember, this too shall pass" type practices that prevent us from causing (or perpetuating) suffering with a conditioned response or knee-jerk reaction. They keep us from making reactive comments or acting out while annoyed, actions that we would likely regret later on. While a gentle use of forbearance in a given moment may not feel authentic, it can be invaluable while we work to develop deeper levels of true patience.

With perseverance we learn to pause, and in that crucial moment a door to the heart can open and allow space for the arising of compassion. Understanding that others want to be happy, just as we do, and don't want to suffer, brings us in touch with our common humanity. We all slip and act poorly at times. Forgiveness of self and others arises more easily when we are in touch with our feelings and see clearly what triggered our anger. Otherwise, we can get caught up in justifying it, which does nothing to move us toward a sense of peace. The fire will continue to burn and we will be holding the hot coals."¹¹

Endurance (the ability to endure hardship)

Lokos notes: "Patience is born when we create a pause between our experience of a feeling and our response to that feeling. Without a pause we are likely to find ourselves reacting in our conditioned manner. After all, that is what conditioning is. With a pause there is at least the possibility of a more positive response, and certainly we are less likely to cause harm. Patience lives in the gap between our experience of an event and our response to that experience. If we spend time with our experience-the

thoughts, feelings, and sensations that arise—we can gain insight. Wisdom arises as we see things with greater clarity. Forgiveness has space to develop; fires have a chance to cool.

When we see that the experience of sentient beings includes aging, illness, stress, and suffering, we can relax a bit and accept that it is the nature of things; it is the way things are. Perhaps if you or I had created the world, things would be different, but for now this is it. This acceptance does not mean that we do nothing to alleviate dukkha. Quite the opposite. It means that we can be patient and then take action that is well considered, wise, and compassionate rather than reactive, unskillful, or vengeful. Patience, unlike popular misconception, is not characterized by passivity. It is alive, vital, and active. It is thoughtful and compassionate for one's self and others. We can look at things, including our own impatience, with a sense of curiosity and investigation, asking, "What is this?" rather than with a judgmental, dismissive view.

Both forbearance and endurance can help us avoid reacting with anger when we feel threatened or mistreated, or when the inefficiencies of others cause unnecessary delays. We can instead be mindful and take time to consider our response. Even a momentary pause can help us see more clearly, perhaps opening up a different perspective or an understanding of the other person's point of view. One of the tributaries of patience is compassion."¹²

Thanissaro Bhikkhu notes: "*Khanti*, the Pali word we often translate as patience, also means endurance. It means that you stick with things even when they take a long time to show results. You don't get frustrated. You remind yourself: This a path that takes time. After all, we're unlearning a lot of habits that we've been indulging for who knows how long. So it only stands to reason that it's going to take time to unlearn those habits. The only way to unlearn them is to actually stick with the practice, to be resolute in what you're doing. This firm resolution is what's going to make the difference."¹³

Acceptance of Truth (the wisdom to see what is)

Lokos notes: "In Buddhist thought, the beginning of wisdom is the ability to see things as they really are. Acceptance of truth relies on the development of wisdom because if we are to accept the truth, we must be able to recognize the truth. Discernment of truth, of course, is not always easy, which contributes to the challenge of developing true patience. It requires our taking the time to look beyond the surface to the deeper levels of our experience. We see that there is no self that has to be protected, inflated, or aggrandized. We do not have to defend some self-image that we have created. The ego may feel threatened, and Mara: (ego) can be a formidable opponent to spiritual growth. This is when patience is challenged at its deepest level. Here we must allow time to open a sense of spaciousness so that we ourselves become the fertile soil from which patience grows. Time is no longer an enemy; we do not feel rushed to react. Just as the Buddha looked right at Mara and calmly said, "I know you," and thus dissipated its power, we too can look directly at our fear and say, "I know you. You are a feeling. You have no power unless I empower you and I choose not to do so." As we see that defensiveness is unnecessary, we can then view a potentially confrontational situation with curiosity, interested in what is really going on with the other person. Like me, he wants to be happy. Like me, she doesn't want to suffer. What can I do to ease this tension? Have I really heard his point? With acceptance we have the time we need. We no longer have to rush in and change things. We can enjoy the opulent abundance of a patient mind."¹⁴

True patience is being present

Lokos notes: "Being mindful of the causes of our impatience we learn not to encourage them. We sense impatience, annoyance, and anger as they begin to arise within us and we then invite our calmer wiser self to be present. Impatience and anger are natural feelings, and we don't want to suppress feelings. However, we do want to be aware of our feelings as they arise so that we don't speak or act while fires are burning, a practice likely to cause misery for ourselves and others. We have to learn how to disagree without becoming annoyed and impatient. When we see the interconnected nature of all beings, we realize that we are all in this together. There is nothing for us to defend. With practices like mindfulness, meditation, compassion, and loving-kindness we can transform our anger into more positive, productive energy. We learn how to create a pause, a sacred moment in time, between our feelings of frustration, of not being heard, seen, or understood, and our response to those feelings. As we want to be forgiven for our unskillfulness, we learn to graciously forgive others .as well. The more patient we become, the more at peace we become. We see that patience is wise and compassionate. Without compassion and a willingness to forgive, the development of patience would be unlikely."¹⁵

In conclusion, when suffering arises, *think, patience.*

References

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¹¹ Ibid pp. 30-31

¹² Ibid pp. 31-2

¹³ Patience: [Meditations 1: Forty Dhamma Talks \(accesstoinsight.org\)](https://www.accesstoinsight.org/)

¹⁴ Ibid pp. 32-3

¹⁵ Ibid pp. 21-22