Bearing with Life:
Khanti Pāramī

Earlier I mentioned the three stages of developing *pāramī*: the initiating stage, when you build your boat of right intention; the gathering stage of meeting the flood, when you hit the white water of negativity, seductive reasoning, wild impulses and doubt; and then the completion stage in which your boat comes through, bigger, deeper and having jettisoned some unnecessary cargo. This process is very clear with the next perfection, that of *khanti* — patience, forbearance or acceptance. This one really moves through the white water. The Buddha famously declared *khanti* to be the supreme purification practice. He was playing on the Vedic term *tapas,* which signifies the taking on of an austere or ascetic practice such as fasting or mortifying the body in order to cleanse the mind of passions and attachments. But the Buddha pointed not to physical asceticism — which he frequently spoke against — but of the restraint of holding the heart still in the presence of its suffering until it lets go of the ways in which it creates that suffering. That is, the mind/heart (*citta*) habitually creates suffering and stress through reacting to, holding onto or getting caught up with what life throws at us. All the perfections contribute to the lessening or dismantling of that *dukkha*, but the specific quality of patience is to carry the heart through the turbulence of existence so that it no longer shakes, sinks or lashes out.

One of the traditional chanted recitations in Buddhism refers to the Buddha's own confrontation with the demon host of Mara:

'The Buddha overcame Mara through practising *khanti*.' He overcame the forces of delusion, anger, fear, aversion and greed through practising patience, not through blaming anyone, ignoring those forces or running away from them. So when you're stuck in a traffic jam, anxious for resolution to a crisis or beset with a migraine, it's good to remember that the Buddha was here too and found a way through. In an age where one is encouraged not to wait but to go faster, not to accept but to be more demanding, this *pāramī* may be the one you use most frequently to cross the floods.

Acceptance Without Expectation

Patience deals with checking emotional reactions, but it's not a denial of emotional intelligence. Patience has the gut-knowledge that recognizes that a problem or a pain is not something to run away from, get flustered by or be self-pitying about. It has the wisdom to know that we have to prioritize the steps through which we can resolve suffering. It's true that it may be possible to find an alternative route to the destination; it may well be that more negotiations are needed to resolve the problem; it may be that there's a medicine that will ease the pain. But the first thing to do is to not react — to not rage, despair or mentally proliferate. Our first effort is to draw a line around the suffering, take a step back and know 'that's that.' Then there's the effort to recollect that we can be free of the suffering: that we can let go; we don't have to take suffering in and adopt it as final, real and solid. After that initial recollection we have the encouragement to investigate, and then to draw out the hook that snags our hearts on the rough stuff of life.

All this takes patience. Patience holds us present with the suffering in a spacious way, encouraging the mind to open. And an open mind both feels more peaceful in itself, and more readily sees into the cause of its suffering.

Patience is not a numbing resignation to the difficulties of life; it doesn't mean that suffering is all right. It doesn't mean shrugging

things off and not looking to improve our behaviour. Nor does it mean putting up with something until it goes away. The practice of patience means bearing with *dukkha* without the expectation that it will go away. In its perfection, patience means giving up any kind of deadline, so the mind is serene and equanimous. But if the patience isn't pure yet (and it takes time to develop patience!), the mind still feels pushy or defensive. Impure patience is the attitude: 'Just hold on and eventually things will get better; I'll get my own way in the end if I'm patient enough.' This approach can temporarily block or blunt the edge of suffering, but it doesn't deal with the resistance or the desire that is suffering's root.

Pure patience is the kind of acceptance that acknowledges the presence of something without adding anything to it or covering it up. It is supported by the insight that when one's mind stops fidgeting, whining and blaming, then suffering can be understood. It is this suffering that stirs up hatred and greed and despair, and it is through practising the Dhamma, or Way, of liberation that its energy and emotional current can be stopped. Reactivity isn't the truth of the mind; it's a conditioned reflex, and it's not self. Because of that, suffering can be undone, and when it is, the mind is free.

Therefore, all conditioned reflexes have to be understood as unreliable and dependent on causes and conditions. They're not to be adopted as real and solid. Yet they do happen! Although we can intellectually understand that holding on, expecting things to be satisfying or feeling cheated are immature responses, in order to undo these attitudes we must first be patient with them. Rather than adopt more miserable reactions — 'Why isn't it working? Why did you let me down? I shouldn't complain. Why is it like this?' — the practice is to bear with the waves of turbulence. The world, including our own bodies and emotions, is unsatisfying and a bit of a mess. But the practice does urge us to cross over it all. And this requires us to grow stronger and broader rather than hide or run away. Then the process of bearing with the suffering is not a punishment but a voyage of growth.

I remember my mother telling me of a woman she used to visit. This woman was over ninety years old, had been very poor when she was young and lived in an agricultural district in Cambridgeshire. There are many stories of agricultural workers going out into the cold Cambridgeshire fields, picking vegetables in November, in the cold mud. This kind of work ruined her feet and she developed terrible rheumatism. Even as a young person she was quite hampered by it because she didn't have enough money to buy shoes. This must have been around 1910 or perhaps even earlier. My mother didn't meet this old lady until she was already ninety, when she was crippled and had intense pain. All the bones of her body were painful and her feet were ruined. And yet this woman was a tremendously and totally sweet, loving light. This was a great inspiration to my mother because the old woman had eventually learnt to be patient with this pain. And as the patience purified her of the mental suffering, she also became radiant.

The World and Its Winds

We all have to be with some kind of physical burden, or limitation, although for most of us it is not that bad. We may just need to wriggle, scratch, switch on some gadget or take a few pills. But the suffering that can be relinquished arises dependent on causes and conditions: on attitudes and assumptions that things should go our way, that life should be comfortable, that bodies shouldn't experience pain and that society should be fair and peaceful. We look for conditioned phenomena to be satisfying, conclusive, reasonable, productive and so on. But taken as a whole over a period of time, they aren't. So we cause ourselves and others suffering when we expect them to be so.

Now of course, we can organize and create supportive conditions such as health and education and laws, but those conditions have to be constructed and maintained; they're not a given norm. It's also noticeable that even as human beings improve the conditions and circumstances of their environment, suffering doesn't abate: anxiety and depression are now the number one disease of the developed world. Here we find the widespread pain of being driven

to attain material goals that are never fulfilled or fulfilling, and the anxiety of competitive pressure and loneliness. Some of the chief sources of this emotional pain are called the 'worldly winds': the gusts of praise and blame, gain and loss, fame and ignominy, happiness and unhappiness. These impressions trigger demand, anxiety and despond wherein we never feel good enough where and how we are. And like winds, they can blow through the heart at gale force and throw us completely off balance.

Take for example enjoying fame versus being ignored. When you are famous and the centre of attention, you feel magically empowered: 'Here I am. It's wonderful. Everybody has been waiting for me.' Then there's the opposite, being ignored: 'Who? Do you want something?' You are just a number in the crowd, and you think, 'Nobody cares; I don't count.' People will struggle and strive to be famous — to eat the most beans in a contest, to dive over Niagara Falls in a barrel, and other such life-threatening feats — the *Guinness Book of Records* is full of them. And at the other extreme, we can get lonely and depressed if we don't get positive attention; when we're ignored, our lives become miserable — most of the blues is about that. But if you clamour after fame or get stuck in an impression of having been overlooked, you go nuts.

Take another pair: how powerful the experience of praise and blame can be! We can hunger for compliments or a little crumb of approval now and then, 'Well, you're not so bad.' Then you can feel jealous if somebody else is getting huge amounts of it, and you are standing by the door, hardly noticed.

As for blame, how we wriggle and contort to try to avoid it! We aspire to being liked, and we work at it, but still somebody doesn't like us. Or maybe we blame ourselves. So we try to do what's right and fair, yet somebody misunderstands or is offended, and we get blamed. We are careful to be polite: 'I must remember she's a little sensitive about that. I mustn't forget this, in case I get blamed. I want to make sure that I understand everyone's perspectives and that everyone agrees on this point.' Doing this can make you so nervous that you slip up ... then the blame hits you, 'You're an

insensitive, callous pig. How could you say that?' Then you're writhing on the point of the arrow of suffering.

The Buddha made a very helpful summary of blame: '*They blame one who remains silent, they blame one who speaks much, they blame one who speaks in moderation. There is no one in this world who is not blamed' (Dhp. 227).* That applied to him, too, for the Buddha was blamed many times. So when we know it's inevitable we can just focus on doing our best, all the time keeping our wisdom-ear cocked for the mind's yearning for approval and its dread of disapproval. Once the mind starts to even anticipate being blamed, a flurry enters into it. And when the blaming begins ... our mind may try to come up with a rational explanation for whatever it was we're being blamed for. Or maybe we try apologising. Or we retort, 'You're just as bad.' We flounder in these ways, rather than simply feeling where the blame is digging in and then drawing a line around it: 'This is painful mental feeling.' It's a trigger, so we need to be extremely patient with that feeling. Patience can't just be idealised; it has to be learned by feeling a painful feeling and no longer reacting. It's a humbling lesson: to feel the pain, be patient with it and learn something about letting it pass through.

With fame and praise, the sting is manipulativeness, intoxication and self-inflation. People do deals or compromise their integrity in order to be winners: athletes cheat at games, or people try to fix their bodies with obsessive dieting or cosmetic surgery. All this suffering and loss of dignity for the glow of attention! And how long is a fame or praise addict satisfied before wanting another hit? If you crave that rush of positive attention, get it, feed and rely on it — you inflate and crash. On the other hand if you hang on to blame, become a victim and make a self out of it — you bury your heart in despair. And if you try to avoid these, you'll be running forever.

So can you focus simply on the impression in the heart and not shrug it off, not fight back, not go under? An impression is an impression. Don't rely on it, don't adopt it, don't try to avoid it. Instead, understand it for what it is. Then you can see the truth

about someone blaming you. Have you made a mistake? Is there something you can learn from this? And you can see the truth about someone praising you. How much good will fame do for you? Doesn't it deprive you of privacy? And that surge that you feel from gain ... doesn't it make you vulnerable to loss? These winds are there to teach you patience. Even your neediness and despair aren't reliable, so be patient; focus on how patience feels and value it. Then you can acknowledge specific mistakes you've made without taking on the sense of being a failure. And you can experience others' gratitude or praise with a sense of gladness that they have received something of benefit. You don't have to own it.

Learning the True Response

For an achievement that will provide long-lasting nourishment, we have to develop a response to unsatisfactoriness, *dukkha*. The Buddha's encouragement was that *dukkha* must be understood. The unsatisfactory, inconclusive, never-quite-fitting, things-going-wrong, unstable quality has to be understood in order to realize the place where it ceases. And in order to understand, we have to 'stand under' that unsatisfactoriness. We don't pole-vault over it to the nice bit on the other shore. Instead, we stand under it as it cascades over us. When there is a complete standing-under, we feel the quality of that flood. You look to where things touch you, where things are felt. You look at physical pain and what that does to you. You see how first of all you wriggle a bit to find a way to soften it; then you begin to get a little annoyed by it; then you get very annoyed by it. Or you remember some harsh words that have been placed at your door. You think, 'It's not fair this is happening to me; not fair that it's going on for so long.' Then you think, 'Oh, give up.' But still it hasn't gone. It didn't go because you haven't really given up; you were waiting for it to end, so you've only given up ninety percent. Eventually, it pushes you into a corner, and the only thing you can do is accept its presence and work on your reactions.

I learnt this pretty early on in my monastic life. I was living in a monastery that had a section in it for intensive meditation

practice, while the rest of the community was involved with the sort of things that a lot of Asian monasteries take on: servicing the lay community, performing ceremonies, offering classes to children, maintaining the property. The meditation area was kept apart; but of course from time to time when there was a big occasion, the sound of the public address system could be heard clearly. This was all reasonable enough, but the mind isn't always about being reasonable. So I'd get irritated by these disturbances. My concentration was so fragile that I couldn't maintain my meditation topic in the presence of noise. Even the croaking of the local frogs would bother me.

Well it so happened that at one time, the monastery had a very big celebration: an ordination hall was being opened, and for this occasion, ninety-nine men were undertaking temporary ordination over a period of eleven days. As the rule is that three is the maximum number that can be ordained together at any one time, this meant thirty-three ordination ceremonies, all of which required the presence of the entire resident male community. Actually, because of some judicial procedure, each of us only had to go to half that number. Nevertheless, while allowing for meal breaks and so on, this meant that for several days there were ceremonies round the clock, day and night. I'd be in my hut until there was a knock on the door, then off to an ordination, get back for an hour or two, then off again.

The environment was steeped in sound: the sound of the loudspeaker celebrating donations by naming each individual donor and how much they'd given; the sound of chanting; Dhamma talks; announcements; and the sound from any of the four film shows that were playing in the monastery grounds. There was no way that I could block it out. But wonderfully enough the sound was more continual and implacable than the complaining and the resistance of my mind. Eventually after a few days of turmoil, the mind gave up and just bathed in the sound; and with that, the sound stopped stirring my heart. It was amazing to feel a sense of silence and space in the midst of so much noise. And I think my mind learned something important, because sound

has never been a problem since. I now know that the wise response to disturbance is to make it the object of meditation.

In that full allowing of conditions to be what they are, we stabilize our hearts and find peace. It's like putting a boat into water. We make an ark of truth: 'Conditions are like this,' and in that truth, we don't adopt the conditions as our own. This is important: you can't drain the sea, but you don't have to drown.

Why we feel overwhelmed, as if we're drowning, is because the heart is 'leaky.' When it isn't secure, perceptions and feelings flood in and cause it to sink. But even then it's just mind-stuff — no sights, sounds, physical pains or harsh words, just the impressions of those. It is these impressions that mount up to a sense of overwhelm and alienation. And the heart can recycle them for years, even when their apparent external source has long disappeared.

These perceptions, moods and reactions arise dependent on the mind's expectations, fragility or aims. We have to learn deeply that the approval of others, the success in our career, and the presence of what we love are not to be taken as given, not to be adopted as mine. This adopting of conditions is what knocks holes in our boat. But when these conditions can be held in the truth of their nature, the mind lets go and senses a freedom that doesn't depend on supports. Gain, loss, praise, blame — you don't have to go under. You can wear out the reflex of hanging on to the world. But for this you have to be very patient.

Building Patience Around One Point

At the core of our suffering is the crucial point where we don't want emotional pain. Our resistance can throw us into a fit of doubt, lack of confidence and the feeling that we are useless. In that loss of balance, the mind thrashes around and creates either a self who is the victim or a self who is to blame. But when we get right to the point, we can see that what's actually there is the wriggling in order to deflect the pain in our hearts. We blame

others, we blame ourselves, the world, fate, or past *kamma* or some such concept — we search for scapegoats to carry the pain. All this is the mind resisting or wriggling away from painful feeling. And in this process, the mind loses the strength and clarity that would enable it to bear with and even let go of the feeling.

On the other hand, if we draw attention gently but steadily back to the source of our suffering, we find a place where we can work and assemble our skills around this pain, rather than trying to find a way round it. If we go directly to the feeling itself, we can sense that the feeling has no intention; it has no aim to hurt us, it's just doing what feeling does. Feeling feels. It's not self; it has no aim, no agent, and belongs to no one. Why not let it go its own way, and keep the heart free from tangling with it? If we do that, even if the physical feeling remains, the mind can be serene. It doesn't mean that we don't act for our own or other people's welfare, but we do so from a cool and wise place. In this way, we use that which is painful, embarrassing or tedious as a tool to purify and strengthen the mind.

The ten *pāramī* fit together and support each other at this point. For example, to be patient one has to apply energy — it's not a passive response. The mind has to be clear and awake; patience requires a courageous and full-hearted willingness to experience one's mind and its reflexes. At the same time, if you're patient, you conserve and consolidate energy by not squandering it on useless reactions and turmoil.

Resolve (*adhitthāna*) is another vital perfection that connects to patience; it strengthens the support structure. We need to be held by making commitments, in terms of our activities or in terms of responsibilities to the people we live with. But as you may have noticed, when you commit yourself to anything, sooner or later, the wish will arise to change direction and get out of that commitment. Things start out being attractive, interesting or inspiring, but then, eventually, the feeling will move the other way. But if you really commit, you bear through the tides of feeling to

get to a deeper source of wisdom. With that you begin to cross over your world.

When we cultivate patience within the floods, it encourages us to see that the unskilful or grasping energies, the desires that the mind adopts, can be borne with and released. And because we can let go of those pushes, we know that they aren't the mind in and of itself; we know that there is an awareness that can come through the heat and pressure. But this realization depends on the patient fortitude to keep holding the mind steady time and time again so that it doesn't waver or adopt craving or aversion, fear or despair as a true thing. Which, even after a degree of realization, it will do. Even then, when you think you're clear, your mind gets caught in some petty jealousy or hankering that you should have outgrown years ago. More patience! The reality of Dhamma practice is that, as much as we would like to be pure and free, we have to learn to develop patience with our attachments and passions, and our views and opinions about them. Then out of the crucible of these *pāramī*, deep compassion flows, and the mind broadens and opens so that its wisdom can penetrate.

Recognizing Patience Teachers

Living with other people, in families, relationships and communities, can be an occasion for developing patience. This is certainly the case in monastic communities: you've left your own space; sometimes you're in a foreign country, with a language that you're not familiar with; you might be living with people whose personalities aren't necessarily those that you would have chosen to live with; and you're following a discipline and a routine that operates independent of and sometimes in contradiction to your wishes and moods. There are routines to follow which require patience: the meal time is generally an hour or so, of which forty minutes are spent waiting for people to arrive, for the meal to be formally offered, for blessings to be chanted, and so on. All this is great for letting go, but for quite a while it is radically destabilizing, and moods based on frustration come up. Then

when the pressure's on and other people aren't the way you want them to be, the mind gets irritable. 'What on earth do I live in a community for? Surely it would be better to be in the forest, where it's peaceful. Then I could experience rapture and joy, all the lovely things they talk about in the scriptures.'

Instead, in community life, you get into a wrangle with a monk over the way the chanting should be done or the way the work should be organized. Or it's some opinion about the teachings, or the teacher. Or you start thinking, 'Why does he have to talk so loud? Why does he have to crack silly jokes? Why do these lay people want their babies blessed? Why don't people live harmoniously? Why are people always finding fault with this, that and the other? Why are people always getting psyched up about work projects? Why does everyone have to bother me? This has got to stop. It's getting in the way of my seclusion and bliss.'

If you are a senior monk or nun, then maybe you have people who are new to the training, and you have to go through the same things repeatedly: make sure you clean your cup after tea; don't talk too loudly when the person in the next room is meditating; please don't run up the telephone bills ... and so on. Next year, it's the same thing, because it's another lot of new people. You say the same things over and over again, until you start feeling like some sort of robot or automaton. The same stuff: people are always doing the same stuff, and all the same stuff keeps happening. Then you come up with different ways of saying things just to put another angle on it. 'Isn't it fun not to run up phone bills?' Or, 'There's a lot of joy in cleaning your cup after you've finished your tea.' After a while you run out of juice and get snappy: 'Oh, for God's sake, behave!' Then people come back with, 'Why are you so mean and irritable? You're supposed to be compassionate and happy.'

During the yearly summer retreat period in the monastery, which we call the Rains Retreat, it's customary for the samanas (monastics) to take on resolutions. These might be something like refraining from taking sugar, or giving up reading books; or it

might be taking on something like a particular course of study or longer periods of private meditation. What you choose depends on what you think you need, or where you feel short in terms of *pāramī*. One year, I decided to not allow my mind to complain about anyone or anything. I was at Amaravati then, which was busy and there was a large community of people of many nationalities, with different languages and from different cultures. So in the general confusion and dysfunction of it all, my longing for simplicity and stability was sorely challenged, and I could get quite irritable. I kept most of it to myself, but still my mind was discontented. Hence the resolution.

So with this resolution, I had to develop patience: patience with having to explain things repeatedly; patience with what my mind could do noticing my porridge go cold as Ajahn Sumedho gave daily instructions at breakfast time; patience with these inner struggles. 'You can't complain!' said the voice of resolution in my mind. So instead I had to watch the irritation. Just putting up with it didn't really take me across. I could put up with things and become a patronizing old grump who puts up with things. But instead, as the practice of patience deepened, it took me to that point in the mind where I could feel the chafing, the tension, the disappointment — and the wanting to get away from it. At that point, where there was no excuse and no alternative, there was also no condemnation. After all, no one likes suffering. And we're all in this together — wanting peace and harmony, but disappointing and irritating each other nonetheless. 'It shouldn't be this way, there shouldn't be any suffering.' But then isn't understanding and letting go of suffering what it's all about. What else are we here for?

And from there, my mind began to open into love and compassion for all of us. It shouldn't be like this, but it is — and we have to support each other. I could realize, 'There's nothing wrong with them. They're my patience teachers; they're helping me to cross over the flood by getting me to jettison my demands, impatience and narrow-mindedness.'

Releasing the Mind with Patience

All the perfections merge in the highest wisdom, the steady insight into suffering. But it is patience, if cultivated thoroughly and insightfully, that penetrates our will to do, or intention (*cetana*). Intention is the mental activation that seeks, wavers and tightens. It is also the source of *kamma*, because *kamma* is based on the intention behind the mind's thinking, responses, habitual strategies and general jumping around. Intention directs one's attention and interest in a particular way, so corresponding concerns and aims come to mind, and sometimes speech or bodily action follows. And this is what our 'world' is made of. Say you are very involved with your business, or a relationship. Then your concerns might become, 'Well, it looks like things are going wrong.' Or, 'Things are going right. We had a good year — what next?' The sphere of one's concern is one's world, within which there is gaining and losing. And all of that depends on the activity of mind.

A mind whose intentions are affected by the floods gets turbulent. And it creates a self who is stuck in them. I am measured in accordance with the world that my mind has constructed. Whether it is the refined world of meditation or the world of business, the floods flow and the worldly winds blow.

However, there is a place where the floods stop and the wind doesn't blow. It is in the ending of intention. The world stops, or rather doesn't get created, when that process of seeking, wavering and tightening stops. Transcendence, or crossing over, finally means that the movement of mind, which tries to circumvent, forget, defeat, stop, divert, allay or placate — stops. In that stopping, the very conditions that appear to confront us evaporate. And through knowing that, one is unafraid of conditions; one does not hanker after them and one is not intimidated by them.

Patience is a big part of that. With patience, instead of trying to wriggle out of suffering, one learns to be still and to release the mind from its wilfulness and possessiveness. Then, when the perfections have done their work and the flood of one's world has receded, intention — even the good intention of *pāramī* — can relax. There is true peace of mind.

And you can even feel respect for the ungrateful and the exasperating. They help you to wear out your addiction to self-view, to having your own way. And they help you to lose your fascination or irritation with the personalities of other people, and all that which is just *kamma* and no real self at all. Then you say 'Thank you' to pointless situations and people who irritate you. This is the perfection of patience: it can make one's life a vehicle for blessing.