

# Patience (6 of 6) Patience in Practice

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Today I want to talk a little about patience with the practice.

When we really settle down to doing Buddhist meditation practice, I think it is best done most efficiently, if we don't try to be efficient. We try to be sincere and dedicated to our practice. We are trying to develop freedom from compulsion. Our practice goes in the wrong direction from that when we are in a hurry or impatient. To be caught in impatience is to be caught in the world of clinging. In moving towards non-clinging, we want to learn how to be patient with the ongoingness of the path of practice.

There is a very touching story that I heard secondhand from someone who was at a gathering in Arizona with the Dalai Lama many years ago. The Dalai Lama was

giving a weekend of teachings. He was addressing questions. A person stood up in the middle of the auditorium and asked for the quickest way to enlightenment.

The Dalai Lama paused for a long time. He just stood there without responding. At some point, a tear started running down his cheek. He then said how sad he felt about this drive to be quick in the practice – to try to get something. I don't know what was going on for the person who asked the question, but I wonder if the Dalai Lama felt that there was some kind of greed, selfishness, or acquisitive relationship with the Dharma for someone to ask that kind of question. To settle in to the practice patiently – in a sense, inefficiently – is often the most efficient.

There is a fairy tale story that I have also told. A very capable person comes to the monastery to practice. He is dedicated to his practice. He is quite accomplished in the world and has a high degree. He is very smart, clever, and skilled. He has lots of innate ability to manage things. The person comes to the monastery and says: “I am here to practice. If I practice well, how long would it take for me to become enlightened?” The Abbess says, “Oh, it will take you about 10 years.” Then the person says: “Wait a minute. I am quite capable, and I really know how to apply myself. I will be very

diligent and work really hard. How long will it take then?” The Abbess says, “Oh, then it will take 20 years.”

There is something about the patience of just accepting a situation and how things are, including the challenges in our practice. A steady ongoingness of patience allows us to go step after step. If we try to sprint or push too hard in the practice, we often have to stop practicing to recover. Going off and doing something that we think might be efficient is very different than just the mundane, ordinary, step by step – this breath, this act of mindfulness. To practice mindfulness sincerely, we just take step after step after step.

Patience for me allows for sincerity. It allows for offering ourselves to the practice more fully, without it being an exchange or a transactional thing – “If I do this, the practice will give me this back.” We are just here willingly, allowing it to unfold as it wants. I very much like the idea that the Dharma knows better than I do what I need to experience and practice with – now, today, or anytime.

I have seen this happen over and over again. I might have one idea of what I am supposed to be doing or what is supposed to be happening in practice. Then something else comes along and I practice with that. In the long term, I eventually say, “Oh that was great.” In the immediacy, I won’t quite understand how it is

beneficial, but as I practice, I have learned to trust how things unfold. Just practice with this, practice with this, patiently, patiently.

There is a story that I am very fond of. I am sure some of you have heard me tell it. A friend of mine was a student of Zen master Shunryū Suzuki Roshi, the founder of the San Francisco Zen Center. My friend asked Suzuki Roshi, “If I practice Zen will I become enlightened?” Suzuki Roshi answered, “If your practice is sincere, it is almost as good.”

Rather than rushing and forcefully demanding and expecting enlightenment, practice patiently and sincerely. That will be pretty good. Maybe you will become enlightened, but if not, it is almost as good. This is part of the benefits of patience. We are willing to settle in for the long term and to practice with what is. We are not getting ahead of ourselves or protesting what the Dharma is offering. We accept what arises in our practice, the challenges and the joys that come. Steadily, very steady ongoingness – practice, practice, practice.

At some point, when the impatience disappears, compulsions quiet down, and greed, clinging, and anxieties settle and abate, then there is a wonderful, higher, special kind of patience. This is patience that is non-patience.

Let me describe it this way. Two people are experiencing the same very trying, difficult situation that is very stressful. One person sits down and puts on a seatbelt or something and really bears down. They do not react and stay very still. It is a lot of work to stay patient. They have to really work at it. They have to hold and check their obsessive, compulsive reactions. People might say, “Oh, that person managed to be patient with a difficult situation.”

The other person is in the same situation, but none of their buttons are pushed. It is stressful and difficult, but they are not reacting to it. There are no inner compulsions, obsessions, or reactivity to the situation. The person has no reactivity and sits there calmly. From the outside, one might say that both people look like they are equally patient. On the inside, one person is doing patience, and the other one is being patient. One could say that the second person has no need for patience. It is a non-patience that allows them to be present for a situation without being reactive.

As the practice deepens and we follow this path patiently, the time will come when we will start recognizing, “Oh I am patient without being patient.” We are patient without needing to do anything. We can just be here. We are not reacting. We are present and clearly know what is happening. We can let it register

and see clearly what is happening, without reacting. When this happens, there is a lot more room and space for us to care. We can be aware in a caring, sympathetic way. If it is appropriate, we can act in caring ways for the world.

To be patient is one of the great gifts that we can give ourselves when we do this practice. It is also a gift we can give the world because being impatient is not a gift for anyone.

Thank you for this time and this chance to talk about patience.