

Patience (3 of 6) Patience Under Insult

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Today's talk on patience has to do with patience under insult. This includes any circumstance where the tendency is to get angry, agitated, or maybe so afraid that we become impatient and are in a hurry. In the Buddhist tradition, it especially has to do with situations where we get angry, annoyed, irritated, or furious, sometimes with other people, sometimes about events in the world. We might get angry with our computer because it's not behaving right. The weather could irritate us because it is not what we expected.

Here, the word "patience" – patience under insult, patience under assault – might be interpreted as a kind of tolerance: tolerance of people being unkind, saying mean things, or doing things that are provoking. But I think tolerance is not really a helpful orientation

because tolerance is a focus outwards on the other, something out there. In Buddhism, the practice more often begins not with the other, but here, with oneself: what is going on here. So, rather than tolerating insult, patience under insult maybe means a kind of intolerance – an intolerance for anything that diminishes us inside, causes us suffering, or harms us. It is this kind of intolerance: “No, I don’t want to harm myself.”

The specific intolerance that the tradition emphasizes is that of being angry. Our intolerance of injustice and our relationship to injustice in the world – things that are wrong and make us angry – is an important topic. But the core aspect of patience under insult is that we don’t allow ourselves to succumb to anger. This refers to a particular kind of anger, because in English the word “anger” covers a wider span than what is classically considered anger in Buddhism. In Buddhism, anger is always connected to hostility and malice. So if you are angry but there is no hostility, then it is not what Buddhists call anger. You have to translate between languages when you hear Buddhists talk about anger. It always implies that there is some hostility involved in the motivation, the fury, and the fire.

But hostility towards others always hurts the one who is hostile. It always hurts and harms us. This is hard to see when the focus is on others. Being really angry can actually be a kind of pleasure, with that anger focused

and directed one-pointedly someplace else. It can feel very alive and energizing. Some people feel powerful that way, and they enjoy the power.

When we stop focusing on the other and on what it feels like to be other-directed, and feel intimately what is happening for us, centered here, then we can see that hostility always harms us. And we don't want to harm ourselves. Buddhist practice always begins with us. It doesn't end there, though. It ends with caring for the world. But if we can care for ourselves properly, we will have more to offer the world. We are safer for the world. We're not so liable to make quick mistakes in what we do.

Sometimes we talk about patience under insult as a practice of restraint, of not giving in to the anger. Restraint is maybe the first line of action here. Buddhism likes to divide human activities into body, speech, and mind, with the understanding (maybe you don't share this understanding) that the coarsest level is what we do physically with our body. We can see it, it is visible, and we can have a little bit more control over the body. So, to restrain oneself from harming people with our bodies. That can mean glares or gestures.

The second level, which is a little bit, maybe a lot harder, is mindful speech – to restrain oneself from causing harm through speech. When we feel angry, we

start becoming very, very careful with speech, and don't cross the line and speak in ways that express hostility. Wait if you can, if it's appropriate to wait. Calm down. Don't leave the situation, and don't address what's going on. Hold back until you feel you can do so without hostility. You'll be much wiser that way and more effective, especially in the long term. Hostility is effective in the short term because it frightens people, and they pull away or stop what they're doing. So there is a kind of reward in being hostile. But the long-term consequences in human relationships are not good, and they can actually be more harmful for you socially. So, to be restrained in speech.

The more subtle but more important area for Buddhist practice is to be really careful with your thoughts. If your thoughts are mean or hostile, be very careful. Hold back and restrain yourself from giving in to those. Don't succumb to them. This act of restraint is an act of strength. It's not an act of repression. But it is an act of protecting yourself from yourself. The impact on oneself of actions and speech that harm others is actually quite big. The Buddhist tradition suggests that we don't really recognize how big it is, because its karmic impact affects deeper conditioning – the deeper subconscious workings of the mind, how things are remembered, and how they return in a future time in an unexpected way. The impact of harmful thoughts, actions, and speech is huge.

The question is how to be restrained and to hold back in a way that is not repression, but is really for our own good. One way is by recognizing the results of othering – directing our mind and our concerns towards others, and thinking others have to be different, others have to do things a certain way, others have wronged us. Of course, sometimes that kind of thinking is accurate. But to be preoccupied with that thinking and caught in it is an alienation and a loss to ourselves. When we focus externally, we are not grounded in ourselves. That is when hostility can slip out because we're not following ourselves, mindful and careful about what is going on here.

In meditation, learn to not spend a lot of time thinking othering thoughts. Recognize it as othering, and become skilled at not going down those channels. Coming back here is training for being patient under insult in life. Learn to recognize what is happening here, focusing here and being careful and attentive. Learn to be so attentive that you are here with yourself at those moments of choice – what you're going to do with your body, what you're going to do with your voice, and what you're going to do with your trains of thought.

You are right here, and this is where you relax. This is where you let go. This is where you settle back. If necessary, so you don't cause harm, this is where you

practice restraint. Maybe you just clamp your mouth shut. If necessary, bite your tongue, so you don't say something that you later regret. Restraint is the right action when the alternative is worse.

Through practice, we can do better than restraint. We can let go. We can stay close to that place where we are free and not caught in these impulses. We might still feel angry. We might feel hostile. But there is no tendency to pick the anger up, no tendency to go with it, or to do anything. The anger has no power over us, even though it might bubble up. The power is in us, and in our ability to be mindful, attentive, centered, and have choices about how we work with all the inner impulses that come along.

As we live that way, we start having wisdom and clarity about how to interact with others, how to have difficult conversations, how to show up in ways that do not frighten others, but also don't lead to retaliation or difficult dynamics – where we meet anger with anger, and it flares up even more.

Finally, I want you to take what I said seriously, but maybe not hold it up too idealistically, so I'll say that sometimes the way to irritate someone who is being hostile to you, or being a problem for you, is by not returning irritation in kind, not getting angry in return. Staying calm, non-reactive, and unconcerned about

what is coming – staying free. Sometimes there is the little reward of knowing: “Oh, I got to that person. The person is frustrated and now irritated.” Maybe it’s not the healthiest thing to do, but maybe it can inspire you to find your way to healthy patience under insult.

If you have opportunities in the next 24 hours where you feel frustrated, irritated, or angry, you might use them as occasions to see how some of the things I’ve said today play out in you – how they work inside of you. Maybe you can have more wisdom and more options for living with your frustration and anger. Thank you.