

Enduring the Disagreeable

I've always found it surprising that patience is considered one of the most important skillful qualities, that it's given such lofty standing in the Buddha's scheme of things. I guess I undervalued patience. I guess I didn't think it was that important. But it is. It's extremely important.

I think it's fair to say that, as a culture, we don't put much value on the quality of patience. We're not disposed to cultivate patience. To put it kindly, it isn't our forte. The truth is, we're an impatient lot. We want immediate results. We demand instant gratification. We don't like to have to wait. If we can't get it quickly, with a click, it's hardly worth getting.

We live in a technological culture, and much of the technology is designed to provide different phenomena with greater and greater speed. More and faster. That's the prevailing direction. That's the way of the world.

Laptop computers, tablet computers, smart phones, cell phones, portable media devices make it possible to garner sense experience, receive entertainment forms, procure information, interact with others whenever we want, wherever we are.

The cell phone, now ubiquitous, allows us to make contact with others almost instantaneously, at any moment. If we study the habits of cell phone users, we find that the technology exacerbates the cultural impatience. In New York City, it's not uncommon to encounter somebody walking on the sidewalk, cell phone pressed to the ear, talking to a

companion with whom, apparently, he's just about to meet. "I'm down the block from your place," he says. "I see your building. I'll be there in a minute." We have an increasing inability to endure gaps. We can't tolerate unfilled space.

The computer is the perfect apparatus for an impatient world. High-speed internet connections enable us to tap into all manner of sense experience, access vast amounts of information, and make transactions in a matter of moments.

I'm somewhat astounded when I notice impatience arising in my mind while I'm waiting for a website to appear on my computer screen. It wasn't all that long ago, after all, that the primary means of communication across any distance was the Pony Express. It's a fast moving world, and we'd like it to move even faster.

As dharma students, it's imperative that we develop a willingness to go against the stream, to cultivate patience. We have to recognize the criticalness of developing this decidedly countercultural quality. We have to give it priority, as the Buddha did.

If you're going to follow the Buddha's path, you're going to need patience. If you're going to go through life in a truly awake, joyful way, you're going to need patience. You're going to need a ton of patience. You're going to need the sort of patience the poet Adrienne Rich refers to when she speaks of "a wild patience."

In developing patience, we learn to "endure the disagreeable." A good definition for patience is "The ability to skillfully endure what's disagreeable."

Three categories of experience that we may find disagreeable or unpleasant include:

1-human beings

2-hardships

3-dharma practice

The first category is human beings. There will be times when people will act in ways that you'll find disagreeable, unpleasant. You may become impatient when interacting with certain human beings.

The second category is the hardships you encounter, the difficulties that occur in your life, the adversities, dilemmas, obstacles. The road isn't always wide open. There will be times when the traffic isn't flowing smoothly, and, in response, you may become impatient.

There will be times when you'll be asked to endure blatant hardships. A long, cold bitter winter. An oppressively hot, humid summer. A storm knocks out electrical power. Having to wait to find out if you've been accepted for a certain position. Your job is a struggle, you'd like to retire, but you've still got a few years before you're eligible for a full pension. You break your leg and you're laid up, in a cast, for six weeks. You're afflicted with severe physical pain. You're stricken with a debilitating illness.

Most days you'll confront subtle hardships: a common cold, inclement weather, a long line in the post office, a traffic jam, a flat tire. You misplace your keys. You can't find an email. You accidentally delete an email. Your internet connection is on the fritz. The train is late. The train breaks down.

The third category is dharma practice. There will be times when you'll find dharma practice disagreeable, unpleasant. There will be times when you may become impatient with the way it's going. Or not going.

Dharma practice develops gradually, and for many of us that's a disagreeable fact. Many of us become impatient, wanting to get further down the road, wanting results, wanting to attain certain levels of concentration and insight.

Like everything in life, dharma practice will have its ups and downs. We'd like, no doubt, for the arc of our progress to resemble a smooth, ever-upward line on a graph. But that's not how it works. The line on the graph is going to be jagged. There will be peaks and valleys. And we may find the valleys disagreeable, unpleasant. We may become impatient when we struggle to practice breath meditation. We may become impatient when we try to act skillfully but act unskillfully. As we've said, it's going to take a while to change the habits of a lifetime. But when we hit low points or slide into habitually unskillful patterns, we may become impatient. It's very important, in these situations, to notice our impatience. If we don't make an effort to put impatience to the side, we may very well descend into doubt. If our doubt increases, we may forsake the practice. We may quit.

Progress along the Buddha's path is generally incremental. We change, we move forward, step by step, action by action, intention by intention. If we keep practicing, if we follow the Buddha's instructions, we'll make progress. There's no question about it. But we may not always be able to see the progress we're making. Explaining the way growth presents itself, the Buddha uses the example of a brand new axe. You take the axe, chop some wood. Afterwards, you look at the axe but don't notice any wear and tear. The blade looks exactly the same. During the next week, you chop wood every day. But still you don't perceive any change in the axe blade. It's changed, of course. There's some wear. But you can't see it. It's the same with dharma practice. Progress is often imperceptible. Often times you're not able to see the changes that are taking place.

After using the axe for a year, chopping wood every day, you don't have any trouble seeing that the blade has worn down. You can see the change. Again, that's how it is with dharma practice. Eventually you're able to see that change has occurred.

But, of course, you may find the process unpleasant. You may become impatient, wanting to see results.

In developing patience, we're asked to cultivate a skill. Developing patience is a skill. It involves a step-by-step process. The Buddha doesn't say, "Be patient," and leave it at that. He provides a method. He teaches a skill.

The first step in cultivating the skill is to recognize when you're impatient.

You develop patience by seeing impatience.

You're heedful. You notice when you're impatient. You notice your impatient thinking. You notice your impatient actions. You notice when you're having difficulty enduring what's disagreeable, whether it's dharma practice, a hardship, or another person.

Recognizing your impatience, you see the drawbacks in it. At this stage you might ask: Is this impatience useful? Is it serving me?

In seeing the drawbacks in impatience, you might, for a moment, notice the body, the dissonance in the body, the dis-ease.

This is the second step: seeing the drawbacks in impatience.

Seeing the drawbacks in it, you leave the impatience to the side, the same way you'd forsake that chocolate cake sitting on the kitchen table. You distance yourself from it. You don't feed on it. And you put your mind someplace else. You find an agreeable place to put your mind. This is the third step: finding an agreeable refuge, a place to reside while enduring what's disagreeable. You find a comfortable dwelling, someplace where you can weather the storm. Usually this means putting your mind on your breath. You reside in the calm, easeful breath.

So these are the three steps for developing the skill of patience:

1-seeing impatience.

2-seeing the drawbacks in the impatience.

3-putting the attention on the breath.

Let's say you're waiting on line in the supermarket. The line is inordinately long. And it's not moving. Or at least it's not moving very quickly. Or at least not as quickly as you'd like.

You find the situation distasteful.

You feel impatient.

You begin to fabricate a stream of aversive thinking. This is terrible, you think. This is awful. I don't have time for this. What's going on here? Why is this line so long? Why isn't it moving?

Then you're heedful.

You recognize your impatience. You make a mental note: Impatience.

At this juncture you take the role of the observer. Instead of involving yourself in the impatient thinking, you observe the thinking. You watch the thoughts flow through your mind, as if you're sitting in a cafe, looking through the window, watching the cars flow down the street.

You ask: Are there drawbacks in this impatience? What are the consequences of engaging in this sort of impatient thinking? Is it useful? Is it in my best interests?

Exploring your body, you get a felt sense of the drawbacks of the impatience. You notice the suffering that impatience brings about. You notice that your body is contracted, ill-at-ease.

You put the impatience to the side. It's still there, in the mind, but you don't give it any weight. You don't engage with it. You don't feed on it.

You put your mind in a calm, easeful, agreeable place. You put your mind on your breath. You reside there.

If you follow these steps, you'll find freedom from impatience. You'll be able to skillfully endure the disagreeable. This is how you develop patience. The key is the first step, being heedful, seeing your impatience. You've got to notice your impatience; you've got to be on the look out for it.

When you have an opportunity, an opening, you may want to take some time to further investigate impatience. The more insight you acquire into impatience, the less likely you'll be to become enmeshed in it. In investigating impatience, we deconstruct it, we take it apart, the way a watchmaker might take apart a watch in order to learn more about it. Thankfully, impatience doesn't have quite as many parts. In examining impatience, we're asked to discern that impatience has three component parts: (1) the experience: the person, hardship, or slow pace of the practice; (2) the movement in the mind that registers the experience "disagreeable;" and (3) our aversion to what's disagreeable, our "disliking."

Let's use the example of a dharma student who's attempting to complete a work project. She's hit some barriers. She'd thought the project would take about a week to complete, but several weeks have passed and she's not close to being finished. She's feeling impatient. She's obsessing about the project, the fact that it isn't going the way it's supposed to be going, the fact that it isn't finished.

She decides at some point to take a deeper look at her impatience.

Investigating her impatience, the dharma student recognizes that she's dealing with a particular hardship.

She recognizes that there's a movement in her mind that, responding to the hardship, registers: "disagreeable." She acknowledges, in other words, that she finds her experience,

what's going on with the project, disagreeable, unpleasant. She makes a mental note:

Disagreeable.

She recognizes her aversion. She discerns that she dislikes the disagreeable experience. Sensitive to the quality of her mind, she perceives the mental movement of "disliking." She makes a note: Disliking.

Scrutinizing her impatience, the dharma student recognizes that the mental movements of "disagreeable" and "disliking" are two entirely separate events. Typically, we don't understand this. Typically, we mush "disagreeable" and "disliking" together. We think they're one thing, a thick loathsome mass of impatience, pain. But the Buddha's teachings indicate that, in fact, they're two discrete movements. Investigating impatience, cultivating insight, we're asked to see this.

Separating the "disagreeable" and "disliking," the dharma student takes a close look at the "disliking." She investigates it. Her investigation comprises, at heart, seeing the drawbacks in the "disliking." To this end, she asks: Is this disliking useful? Is it serving me? Is it necessary? What would it be like if I let it go?

Aware of her body, she notices the consequences of participating in "disliking." She notices the dis-ease, suffering.

Continuing her investigation, the dharma student asks: Can I simply be with what's disagreeable?

The teachings suggest that if we don't add the "disliking," and simply endure what's "disagreeable," there's no problem, no suffering. There's no impatience.

Accordingly, the dharma student asks: What's it like when I don't engage in the "disliking?" What's it like when I'm just with what's "disagreeable?"

She centers herself in the breath. She remains focused right there, on the breath, in that pleasant abode. She takes refuge.

It's essential in developing patience, in enduring the disagreeable, to have an agreeable place to put the mind. The fact is, it's not possible to endure what's disagreeable if we don't have an agreeable place to reside in. If the only experience that we know is disagreeable, we won't have a chance. We'll collapse under that heavy, burdensome weight. We won't be able to endure.

In developing patience, the breath is an essential refuge. It gives us a good place to put the mind. As Ajaan Lee says, the breath provides a "home for the mind." A comfortable home.

Recognizing impatience, developing patience, we put the mind on the easeful, pleasurable breath. We reside there. We connect to the happiness inside.

In this way, we skillfully endure the disagreeable.

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