Patience

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John Ferguson once said that the easiest people to teach are the ones who haven’t read too much about the Dhamma, who are willing to simply explore the minds, to find out about the practice by actually doing it. If you have too many people who have preconceived notions about where the practice is going, you’re always trying to squeeze it in that direction. When is the mind going to hurry up and gain concentration? When is it going to hurry up and gain insight in line with your preconceived notions? Ask yourself, “Where do those preconceived notions come from?” They come out of ignorance, even though you may have all the terms and concepts of Buddhism down. There are still concepts, concepts decorating your ignorance. It’s like costume jewelry. It may seem to be the real thing, but if you look carefully, it’s not. Many times it’s more of a weight than anything else. So, take off the costume jewelry and get to another mind on its own. Just let it be still as much as it can. If it doesn’t want to get still, give it things to think about that will lead it to stillness. That’s what the various recollections are. The recollection of the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha. Think of these things in a way that allows the mind to come to peace. If there are disturbances, distractions, learn to think of them in a way that cuts through the disturbance and the distraction. Jon Shaw has that great line, “It’s not that the sound is disturbing you, you’re disturbing the sound.” He’s building up all sorts of issues around it. These issues then make it an issue in your mind, rather than simply just sensory contact coming at the ears and going away, going away, going away. When you find the mind is finally ready to settle down, just let it stay there for a while. If the mind hits levels of stillness and wants to stay there, it’s fine. It’s a sign that it needs some refreshment, it needs some energizing. It’s got some healing work that it’s got to do that may not fit in line with your preconceived notions of where you want to take it, but it has its needs. So let it stay there. Don’t be afraid of getting stuck on concentration. In whatever particular stage you’re at, if you want to get on to the next stage, the only way to get on to that next stage is to really explore what you’ve got right here, right now. That means to live with it, get to know it, see where it’s coming from, see where it leads. These states don’t stay the same all the time. They have their variations and they have their development. That’s what we’re here to learn. Otherwise, all we have are preconceived notions squeezing things this way and squeezing things that way. We don’t give the mind a chance to show how it develops on its own. This is why patience is an important part of the practice. The patience required to get the mind to settle down. Once it has settled down, patience to see what it does next. And as for other issues around you, let them be for the time being, because it’s the development of the mind that’s the important issue in life. This is where you learn the Dhamma. You can learn the Dhamma through studying. We’ve talked about this before. You can listen to it, you can think about it, and it gives you a certain amount of help in bringing the mind to stillness. But the purpose of listening, the purpose of study, is to get the mind to meditate, because that’s where the real learning takes place, the real discovery. You’re learning how to explore. Exploration doesn’t necessarily always go where you think it will. Why do you think this skill was discovered by somebody wandering in the forest? You think about the life of a wandering monk. You wake up in the morning and you’re not sure you’re going to be staying in the same place that night. You have no idea where you’re going. You may have some idea, but you have to be willing to put up with incidents in the course of the day. That may make you change your plans, which means you learn to have less and less invested in your plans and more and more willingness to explore what’s going to happen. So give the mind a chance to develop. Be careful not to squeeze it too much in any particular direction. There’s that old story about the foolish, inexperienced cow. It’s in a meadow on one hillside with clear water and nice grass, but it sees another meadow on another hillside with clear water and nice grass. It wants to know, “Well, what does the grass over there taste like?” But because it’s a foolish, inexperienced cow, it doesn’t know how to get from one hill to the next. It goes down the hill and it gets stuck in the ravine. When it’s stuck in the ravine, it can’t get back to either meadow. So once you’ve got a particular state of concentration going, ride with it. See how it develops. It’s in watching the development that you learn. This is the process of learning how to observe. Learning how to observe means testing things a little bit, coming to some provisional conclusions, but realizing that a lot of your knowledge is still provisional. You want to watch again and again and again until you’re really, really familiar. With the movements of the mind, the sensation of the body from the inside, it’s amazing. We live in our bodies all our lives and yet we really aren’t familiar with all that’s going on in there, what it really feels like. You focus on certain sensations and they will encourage certain states of mind. You focus on other sensations in the body, they’ll encourage different states of mind. There’s plenty to explore. Exploring means that you’re willing to learn things that you hadn’t expected. A lot of us like to have everything explained beforehand so we don’t have to waste time exploring, but it’s the time spent exploring that really sharpens your discernment. Because discernment, to be really effective, has to come from within. It has to be your discernment. There’s no way it’s going to be your discernment unless you’re willing to put in the time to watch, to learn, to experiment. So be patient with the practice. This doesn’t mean that if things aren’t going well, you just let them not go well. But it means having the persistence to keep coming back. If one approach isn’t working, you try another. If that doesn’t work, well, you try another, with the realization that some approaches are going to take time to show the results. And when you do start getting results, stick with them for a while to learn what they have to show. Just think about how the Buddha himself discovered the Dhamma. He watched, he observed, he tested, and watched again. He didn’t come to snap judgments. And what did he watch? He watched what the mind had to show him, its own ways, etc., were playing there. When the mind is really resolute and focused enough, the ways of the mind are there to show what they’re doing, how the mind causes self-suffering, how it can stop causing self-suffering. If you watch, it’s there to see. The help you get from outside is simply there to see. It’s simply directing your attention and helping you focus your questions. But the answers come from watching the mind on what it’s doing on its own. As you nudge it into a certain state, well, watch what it does in that state. Then when that develops, watch what it does as it develops. Sometimes you may have to watch it again and again and again to really know what’s going on, to really know what all the variables are. Because when insight comes, it comes many times in unexpected ways. And you don’t get to see the unexpected if you have a lot of expectations shaping what you’re doing. This is why the Buddha paid so much attention to describing the path and was a lot less specific in describing the goal. He talks about the approaches you take to give rise to insight, but the actual nature of the insight itself is something you’re going to have to find out for yourself. It’s not simply a matter of confirming what the Buddha said. Even his instructions on insight are not telling you what you’re going to see. He says, “This is how you look as for what you see.” When you look in that way, that’s something you have to find out for yourself.

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