Endurance

November 6, 2006

The first word in the Uvada Patimokkha, which was the Buddha’s first summary of his teachings, is patience. Kanti is the Pali word. It’s patience, endurance, tolerance. The Buddha gives it prime importance because it’s essential for everything in the path. You have to learn how to endure unpleasant sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and tactile sensations if you want to be generous, if you want to observe the precepts, and if you want to meditate. Take the precepts, for example. There are certain things you want to do. You get angry at something someone else has said, and you want to get back at them. So you lie or you steal or you kill. Because you can’t endure what that person said or did. In the end, your precepts just get shredded to bits. The same with concentration practice. If you try to focus on one thing but can’t endure anything else happening or coming into your range of awareness, you’ll never settle down. How uncomfortable things may be or how irritating things may be, you have to learn how to put them aside and choose what to focus on. Then make up your mind that you’re going to stay there no matter what. This way you can be withdrawn from unskillful mental qualities, withdrawn from sensual desires, which is the beginning of right concentration. You just pull yourself out of those mind states. By learning not to get irritated. The same with discernment. You have to see which forms of stress are things that you simply have to put up with in life and which ones are the ones you can change. You can’t put up with the facts of inconstancy, stress, and not-self. You’ll never get to focus on where the real problems are. You’re trying to gain happiness out of those things that are inconstant, stressful, and not-self. They’re not the problem. The mind is the problem. Your craving, your ignorance, those are the problems. To focus on those, you have to learn how to be tolerant and patient. Learning how to tolerate, that varies from person to person. We all have our different strengths and weaknesses. So you see that someone else is weak in a particular area. Don’t look down on them for that. You see, some people are physically very strong. They can put up with all kinds of physical hardships, but one word can really set them off. This is Jhana Mahaprabhu. He likes to say it’s just the breeze of that other person’s voice, a gentle thing. Your ear hardly feels the breeze coming out of their voice. You hardly feel the sound waves. But the word can penetrate into your heart. So learn to look at it just as the breeze from someone else’s voice. Other people are mentally strong. They’re not swayed by what other people say, but physically they may be weak. They have trouble dealing with physical irritations. So each of us has to look at his or her own weaknesses and not focus on the weaknesses of others. You don’t make fun of the weaknesses of others. There’s an area in the mind where you have to learn to be intolerant. The Buddha talks about the various ways of training. There are some areas where you’re tolerant, specifically of things that come from outside. Sight, sound, smell, taste, tactile sensations, ideas you hear from other people, ideas that come up in your mind. But you have to be intolerant of anything that unskillful comes up in your mind. So you’re not going to give into it. Or if you can think of it as a variety of tolerance or endurance, you endure the feeling that you want to say or do something that’s unskillful. But you don’t give into it. When you see an unskillful mental state coming up in your mind, you’ve got to deal with it as quickly as possible. The image in the canon of someone whose head is on fire. Imagine yesterday’s fire as if it were actually on your head and how quickly you try to get it out. In that sense, the Buddha teaches lack of tolerance. He says you do not tolerate these states. You don’t give into them. As I say in Thay, you don’t keep a stable of them and feed them. One good image that the Buddha gives is keeping your mind like Earth. On the one hand, the Earth is not disturbed by things that happen around it. You can throw disgusting things on the Earth and the Earth doesn’t shrink away. You can pour perfume on the Earth and the Earth doesn’t get excited. That’s a symbol for the ability to tolerate things that are normally hard to endure. Hold to that image in mind. You’ll find what you’re doing, actually, is focusing on one spot of your awareness that you can tolerate where things are going well. This is why it’s so important when you’re meditating to get a sense of ease. At least one spot in the body where you can stay at home, stay at your ease, be comfortable, and let all the irritating things be someplace else. You don’t have to go getting involved with them. You don’t have to put yourself in the line of fire. If they’re shooting at you, you just don’t put yourself in the line of the bullet. So the Buddha’s not telling you just to endure. He’s saying find a strategy so the mind doesn’t start feeding on the things that get it worked up. If you can create this sense of solidity inside where the mind is really focused, where it’s really one, even though other things may be coming into your awareness, you don’t have to go and get involved with them. Chan Chah used to say, “It’s not that sounds disturb you, you’re disturbing the sounds. You’re going out making a comment on all these things that disturb you.” So just simply keep that sense of solidity, lack of disturbance in the mind, and to focus all your awareness there. And as for the things that are disturbing, just let them pass, pass, pass. As for unskillful mind states that may come up, you let those pass as well. You don’t feed them, you don’t encourage them. Many times you’ll find with these things that just simply letting them go is enough to put them aside and they go away on their own. There are times, of course, when you do have to analyze why you have a particular penchant for getting upset about what someone has said. Physical discomfort, or whatever the disturbance is, why you have a penchant for greed, anger, and delusion. In cases like that, you really have to analyze the causes. And the image of being just solid like the earth is not going to do all the work that needs to be done, but it helps you through an awful lot. Of course, there are other reflections as well, like the one I mentioned this afternoon, the monk who was going to a difficult place. The people were pretty savage. Death wasn’t a suicide. You can learn how to think like that. You can learn to endure an awful lot. So learn to put up with the things you have to put up with, so you can focus on curing the real problem, which is the problem in the mind. Focus on your own weaknesses and not the irritating weaknesses of other people. That kind of focus is what keeps you in line with the Dhamma. You’re practicing the Dhamma in line with the Dhamma. And that principle, as the Buddha said, is what guarantees that there will continue to be enlightened people in the world. (wind blowing)

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