Patience

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One of our society’s basic weaknesses is impatience. We work on a computer from five years ago, and it doesn’t respond as instantaneously as the computers now. We get impatient with them, forgetting, of course, that five years ago the computers seemed to be amazing. We realize how much more quickly they could do things than we could do them before. There’s that theory that society is going to reach a singularity because technological progress keeps accelerating. Well, whatever singularity we have is going to be a singularity of impatience. We want everything right now, right now, right now. All of it, right now. And so what you’ve got to learn as you meditate, of course, is lots of patience. And John Fuehring, when he would encounter students he knew were impatient, would give them especially meticulous meditation objects or projects to do. One woman I remember told him when she was contemplating her body to take out every hair and put it back in. And she said in her imagination she was taking out the hair by big handfuls and planting them by big handfuls. He said, “No, you’ve got to plant each hair one by one by one. Don’t stop until you’ve replanted your whole head.” And sometimes the tasks around the monastery, even though they weren’t directly imposed by him, required a lot of patience. He had a disease of rheumatoid psoriasis. His skin would get very raw and the lymph would come out. And then these little tiny, tiny ants would come and they liked to bite. And every day we had to change his bedding twice. And I had to go over his bedding, every piece of the bedding, sort of inch by inch by inch, to make sure there were none of these tiny, tiny ants there. When you do a job like that, if you’re impatient, you can’t get the job well done. It’s like sharpening a knife on a stone. If you’re in a hurry to get the knife done, you ruin the knife. So you have to sit there and talk to yourself to keep your mind entertained as you’re doing something very meticulous. Once you’ve learned that skill of talking to yourself, then you can apply it to the meditation and to any area of your life where you find that you’re trying to make progress but the progress is slow. Remind yourself you’re doing something good. You may not be making immediate progress, visible progress, but it’s a lot better than not making an effort at all, because that’s hopeless. But this way, at least you’ve got some hope. And so you can keep plugging away, plugging away. And John Lee used to combine his teachings on patience with teachings on harmlessness. The only way we get ourselves to do something and to accelerate our efforts is to come down really hard on ourselves, get really critical about ourselves. And what usually happens then, of course, is progress isn’t coming, and you get sick and tired of being critical about yourself, and you start getting critical about other people. As Mahaprabhu used to say, you take the mud that you have inside and you splatter it around on everybody else. Patience requires being gentle with yourself, but not so gentle that you just stop. It’s the kind of gentleness that keeps encouraging and encouraging. So learn to develop that encouraging voice inside, one where you can sort out your strengths and not belittle them to yourself. Because belittling your strengths doesn’t make you stronger. You begin to think more and more that you have nothing. You have nothing to draw on. So wherever those critical voices came from, and we all pretty much have some pretty good ideas, you’ve got to outgrow them. Maybe somebody thought this would work with a little child, but you’re an adult now and you want to be an adult dealing with an adult inside. So learn how to encourage yourself. Look for your strengths. Once someone asked me what the hardest thing was in my training in Thailand. I had to stop and think. Then I realized the fact that I had to stop and think was probably why I was able to stick with my training. In other words, I didn’t focus on anything as being the big problem. There were problems, but none of them seemed insurmountable. Whatever problems you encounter in your practice, learn how to take them apart. They’re all made out of little tiny acts of the mind. So learn to look at the mind, not in terms of its large qualities or what kind of person you are. Look at the individual acts of the mind as they come up. And you say, “What do I do with this?” And the next one comes up. “What do I do with this?” And just keep them at that bit-by-bit-by-bit level. At the same time, give yourself a good place to go. You’ve got the breath here. You can learn how to maximize the ease, the well-being, the sense of fullness that comes with the breath. Even if your concentration isn’t steady, the moments when you are there with the breath, or the stretches of time when you are there with the breath, you can learn about it. Make this an exercise in breathing comfortably, breathing well. And if your insight doesn’t come with this breath, well, there’s always another breath, and then there’s another one, and there’s another one. Have that kind of attitude, that you have strength to draw in, and the opportunity to do something new is always there with every moment, with every breath. As you’re talking to yourself, remember, use the encouraging voice. The type of judgment you want to employ in the practice is not the judgment of a final judgment that’s going to determine whether you’re going to go to heaven or hell. You’re judging a work in progress. And that kind of judgment means looking for where things are going well and trying to maintain it. And if they’re not going well, what do you change? The fact that they’re not going well is not a sign that you’re bad. It’s simply that there’s a little slip. But you can get back on course. A lot of these skills are learned by doing manual skills. When you’re working at carpentry or working at anything that requires that you stick with a job for a long period of time, you’ve got to learn how to talk to yourself in a way that allows you to stick with it a long period of time. Keep yourself in a good mood. Noticing when things are not going well, the immediate question should be not, “What an awful person I am. Why don’t I just give up?” The question should be, “What can I change?” Often it’s just little things. And it’s in this way that you develop the patience you need to stick with things. The word kanti in Pali was included in that chant we had just now in the form of mangala. A mangala is both a blessing to yourself and a protection. You bless yourself with your patience. You protect yourself. You protect yourself with your patience. It also means endurance. There are going to be times when things are not going well and you just have to learn how to stick with things. Again, endurance, like patience, is built by focusing on your strengths. What are you doing right now? Focus on that. So you have something to hold on to. Then when you’ve got that to hold on to, then you can add some other good things. Don’t tear down the good that you’ve got, because it takes a lot of effort to build it back up again. John Lee talks about how patience and effort have to go together. Patience is what gives your effort the continuity that it needs. And the right effort is not just a matter of doing something for five minutes really hard. It’s stopping. You have to stick with it bit by bit by bit. Again, with the Chan Fu, there’s a phrase in Thai that he said, “This effort that we do is something that is nit, but we have to do it ben nit.” Nit in Thai has two meanings. Nit can either mean “a little bit” or “continuously.” The homonyms are spelled differently. The point he was making is that the effort is not a huge effort at any one time, but what makes it work, what makes it give results, is the fact that you stick with it again and again and over and over and continuously as possible. In John Chah’s images of a stream of water, when you tilt the tea kettle and the water comes out, first it comes out in just drips. You tilt it a little bit more and the drips get more and more frequent, and finally the frequency turns into a continuous stream. So in the beginning, your meditation will be like that, your practice will be like that, little drips and drabs with huge gaps in between. Just learn how to stitch those gaps together, and then you’ve got something really solid that you can really depend on. So appreciate what you’ve got, the goodness you’ve got. Use that to encourage you. Then you’ll find that your effort is something that your persistence and your endurance and your tolerance turn into a steady stream. And it’s the steadiness of the stream that allows for progress in the meditation and allows for progress in all aspects of our practice.

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