

## *Patience*

*October 18, 2005*

Once when I was riding a taxi in Bangkok, I got to talk to a very interesting taxi-driver. He told me of a very vivid dream he had had one time in which he was up in heaven, looking at all the wonders of the deva world. As he was crossing a bridge over a pond, he looked down into the pond and saw some big fish in the water. The first thought that went through his head was that those fish would be good to eat. Immediately, it was like the ground opened beneath him, and he fell back down to earth, woke up. Just because he had that one thought, he couldn't stay in heaven.

The Buddha talks about living with virtuous people as a kind of heaven. He says it's like living with a deva, or a devi—that's a female deva—in the house, when you're living together with someone who's virtuous. And of course, to live with virtuous people, you have to maintain your virtue as well. Otherwise, the ground opens beneath your feet and you drop out. So it's good that we have the opportunity to live in a place where everybody's trying to be virtuous, trying to maintain the precepts, where personal honor is something that's valued.

There's a Jataka tale in which two swans are investigating a pond and one of them gets caught in a trap. The other one is faithful to the first one and refuses to leave. The hunter comes along, finds the two swans, and is surprised that the one that wasn't trapped has not gone away. So the one that wasn't trapped explains why he's staying: He's being faithful to his friend. The hunter is impressed with his virtue. We were talking about this the other day, and we commented how most people nowadays would say, "You fool" and would take the two of them, but in the story, because the hunter is so impressed with the virtue of the second one that he frees them both. It's good to live in a world where there are people who are impressed with virtue, who value it.

That's why one of the prerequisites for living together in a good community is for everyone to have the same virtue, the same concern for virtue. Everybody values it. This creates a good place to practice. It doesn't matter whether the surroundings are poor or comfortable as long as there's that quality of virtue, that appreciation for virtue in the group. This is what makes a place really good to live.

This is one of the things we all have to work on. We have to value it highly in our own behavior and appreciate it in the behavior of other people. This means we have to look after our virtue—and that's where patience comes in, because there are going to be temptations to do or say things that go against our precepts, and sometimes the temptations are pretty strong. But we have to remember that those strong temptations don't stay that way forever. They eventually peter out. So when there's the temptation to say something that's not quite true, that's hurtful, divisive, or just simply idle chatter, or anything that goes against anything in the

precepts: When it feels really strong and really tempting, remember that it seems strong only for a little while, and all you have to do is be patient.

See your patience as a power. The Buddha called it the ultimate *tapas*, the ultimate internal fire. The trick to patience is that no matter what happens, don't think about how long you have to withstand whatever the pressure is. Just this moment, this moment, this moment: Can you stand it, this moment? Well yes. Usually, though, it's because of the thought, "I can't think of staying there for five minutes longer, I've got to give in": That's the end of patience right there. You're weighing down the present moment with your conception of the next five minutes, the next hour, or the next day, whatever. Just remind yourself, "This moment, I have to withstand only the pressure of this moment." As for the next moment, it'll have its strength to withstand the pressure of that moment. So you don't have to worry about it. Worry about only this moment, this moment. When you cut it down like that, it's a lot easier to bear things that are otherwise hard to bear.

That's a lot of the strength of it right there: learning how not to weigh yourself down unnecessarily.

It's typical, when you go to Thailand, that some people will ask you, "How can you stand this? You come from a comfortable place, there are all these hardships here." Well, if you don't think of them as hardships, then they don't become hardships. Focus more on the opportunities you've got to practice. It's the same with practicing the precepts or any aspect of your practice that requires patience: sitting through pain, sitting through lust, anger, whatever comes up. Don't focus on the hardships, focus on the opportunity you've got to develop skillful qualities here, because that opportunity is not that widely available.

So patience is not so much gritting your teeth and just bearing with difficult situations. It's learning how not to pile difficulty on top of what's there—either thinking about how long you've had to bear with something, or how long you'll have to bear with something, or getting obsessed with the difficulty right here and now. All that's unnecessary extra weight, placing an unnecessary handicap on yourself. When you can avoid doing that, then whatever comes up, you find you can bear it. You can wear it lightly. This is so much of the practice here.

When the Buddha talks about suffering in the four noble truths, it's the suffering we place on ourselves unnecessarily. Like that old question Ajaan Suwat would ask about the mountain. "Is the mountain heavy? Well, yes, it's heavy in and of itself, but as long as you don't pick it up, it's not going to be heavy for you." That's what matters. That's the suffering of the four noble truths, the suffering caused by craving: craving for this pleasure, that pleasure, craving to be this or that or craving to annihilate things that have happened, that are already there. That's just placing lots and lots of extra weight on yourself, and if you break down, who can you blame?

So look at yourself when you find yourself tempted to say something that's not quite true or to say something hurtful. Exactly where is it unbearable, not to say those things? What's the great compulsion to say those things? Think about the people from the past who were in much

more difficult circumstances than you are now, and they didn't drop their precepts. So what's the great compulsion?

In other words, a lot of patience is not just resilience and the strength to bear up with things, it's also the wisdom to see through the unnecessary burdens we place on ourselves. Even the lies we say simply because someone gives us a funny look, or we're afraid we'll look stupid in their eyes: no real compulsion at all, yet there seems to be this internal compulsion, internal fear, that drives us. But when you look at the actual situations, you see there's nothing there.

Nobody makes you break your precepts. It's all this unnecessary stuff you pile on top of yourself by thinking in the wrong ways or having the wrong attitudes. So when patience and endurance seem hard, turn around and look at your attitude. Look at your presuppositions. Find where they're creating the unnecessary weight. Take that weight off and you realize there's nothing there.

This makes patience a lot easier. When patience is easy, then the practice as a whole gets easier as well.