

Slogging Through Difficulties

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A narrative of each person's practice is something very individual. The Buddha set out four basic patterns: people for whom the practice is easy and fast, those for whom it's easy and slow; then those for whom it's painful or difficult and fast, and those for whom it's painful and slow.

We'd all like our path to be the one that's easy and fast, but those people are all gone. The people who simply had to listen to a few words of the Buddha and were able to gain awakening: They've all gained awakening.

That leaves the rest of us. You can't determine ahead of time what your path is going to be. A lot of it has to do with past karma, so if your path is difficult, whether it's fast or slow, you've got to learn how to deal with the difficulties. Sometimes that means just slogging through.

This is one of those areas where faith in the principle of karma is very important. This is why faith or conviction is one of the strengths, the very first one: conviction in the Buddha's awakening, which basically means conviction in the principle of karma and specifically the conviction that our happiness and our misery, our pleasure and our pain, really do come from our own actions. We can learn from our past mistakes and through our own efforts we can gain awakening.

After all, the Buddha said that his awakening came not because he was a special person but because he developed qualities of the mind that everybody can potentially develop. And even in his case, he had to go through six years of torment before he found the right path.

That means you have to be prepared for difficulties in your path, too. Otherwise, you try to bypass the difficulties and you just create more problems for yourself, because the bypasses tend to be dead-ends. You've got to work your way back to get back on the path.

In other words, sometimes we'd like not to have to deal with the body at all. Say there's pain in the body or we have negative associations with our body and we'd rather just drop it, blank it out, and find another path. But the path doesn't work that way. All the Buddha's practices start out with the body. So you've got to work through that, whatever your relationship to your body is. Whether it's difficult based on problems associated with abuse, negative associations, or whatever, you've got to back up and reconnect with the body, no matter how difficult it may be.

And there are techniques to make it easier, in the sense of learning how to breathe through the body so that it's not total pain, not totally alien. But there are times in the practice where you simply have to sit with the difficulty to figure it out.

This is how wisdom develops, how discernment develops. It's not the case that the mind settles down all the time and gets into a nice, blissful state and then gains quick and easy

insights. Sometimes the insights have to come through making mistakes, slogging through the difficult parts of the practice.

This is where equanimity and patience come in. You may not want the difficulties, but they're there. So you say, "Well, what am I going to do? I've got to face them." As for why they're there, what your past karma may have been that created these difficulties, just put that thought aside for the time being. Otherwise, you tie yourself up even further in knots. Tell yourself, "Okay, whatever the problems were in the past, this is the problem I'm facing right now." Don't load the present moment down with past problems or future problems. Just focus on whatever the issue is right now, whatever problems you have relating to the breath, relating to the body, relating to the dry patches in your meditation.

Remind yourself that patience and equanimity are perfections. Equanimity is also a factor for awakening. Patience, as the Buddha said, is the ultimate austerity, the fire of austerity that burns away the defilements of the mind. So even if you don't feel that you're developing anything else in the practice, you are developing patience, you are developing equanimity. Those are important qualities to master.

Then, around those qualities, you want to develop discernment. In other words, if your patience keeps thinking about how long you've had to be patient with a particular difficulty or your equanimity is carrying around how long you've had to just sit there and watch, that's not really patience, it's not really equanimity. You're carrying around too much patience. You're carrying around your past patience, you're carrying around your past equanimity, and it gets heavy. Just say, "All I have to do is be patient and equanimous *right now, right now, right now*." As for how long you've had to carry it, don't make that an issue. How much longer you'll have to carry it into the future, don't make that an issue, either.

Remember: The Buddha said, "Days and nights fly past, fly past." And what's his question? "What are you doing right now?" That's all that matters: what you're doing right now. Can you carry the patience on through this moment? Can you carry the equanimity on through this moment? When it's just a matter of a moment, you can say, "Yes." As for the next moment, you'll deal with it in the next moment.

This is how persistence becomes less and less of a big issue, because you realize that it's just one moment at a time. The old story that every journey starts with one step or is taken one step at a time: Remember that.

Years back when I was in Thailand, sometimes there would be heavy rains during the almsround—rain and wind—and there was no way you were going to go out there and not get wet, even with a big umbrella. The walk was an hour and a half. If you thought about the whole hour and a half, it seemed like a big obstacle: an hour and a half of being drenched, coming back and not having dry robes to put on because your dry robes were up at the top of the hill. If you thought about that, it just made it harder. But if you simply took it one step at a time, you

found that after a while you were back and you were okay. You had your food in your bowl, you had food to eat for the day. The almsround was passed and it wasn't that big of a burden.

You have to take the same attitude toward the difficult patches in your path. You don't know how much longer they're going to last, so don't entertain any notions about how much you think that patch is going to last. Just say, "Okay, I've got this right now but it's not too difficult, I'm not dying." Tell yourself, "Maybe it's an issue I haven't worked out yet, but who knows, maybe something will come in this session." So don't let yourself get frustrated with the obstacles or the difficulties you encounter.

Keep remembering that patience and equanimity are important virtues—and this is how they're built, one breath at a time. This is how all of those Capricorn perfections—determination, truthfulness, persistence, patience, the ones that require work, the ones that require that you slog through things—this is how they're built: one step at a time.

Those steps are nurtured by your conviction in the principle of action, realizing that the meditation is your only hope. Even if it's not going well at the moment, you've got to pin your hopes on it, so you stick with it.

Ajaan Fuang used to like to make a pun about the issues of persistence and mindfulness. He said in each case it's a little thing—the word in Thai is *nit*—but you have to do it continually: the word also is *nit*—spelled differently. It's something small but you just keep at it continually: That's how you build these perfections.

That may not fit in line with the narrative we we'd like to write about our practice—the person who sat down and without much difficulty figured everything out—but you can't write the whole narrative simply through your present actions. A lot of your past actions have determined the arc of the narrative. And if it's a narrative where the practice is going to be difficult and long, at least even a long and difficult practice does end in awakening if you stick with it and if you learn how to encourage yourself along the way.

This is one area where our culture's really lacking: teaching children how to be patient, how to be equanimous, and how to stick with difficult tasks for a long period of time. Generally, we're encouraged to focus on areas where we're already talented, on areas where we see quick results. But not everything in life is going to be an area where you're talented and can see quick results. A lot of the things in life are going to require this ability to slog on through. And that will depend on your ability to encourage yourself, to give yourself pep talks along the way.

This is one of the reasons why we have *sanghanussati*, recollection of the Sangha, as part of our practice. Think about all the difficulties the monks and the nuns went through: the ones who were about to commit suicide because they hadn't gotten any concentration for thirty, forty years, and then something clicked, and they gained awakening.

So instead of hoping for some god to come down and help you, realize that you *do* have the potential. Now, it may take some time for that potential to mature, but you can help the

maturity along by being mature in your attitude, learning to have a balanced attitude of equanimity and patience.

If your path is one that's painful, difficult, and long, at least see the narrative all the way through to the end. After all, as the Buddha once said, if you could make a deal that someone would spear you with a hundred spears in the morning, with a hundred spears at noon, and with another hundred in the evening, every day for a hundred years, but at the end you'd be guaranteed to gain awakening, it would be a deal worth making. And when the awakening finally came, you wouldn't see that it had been attained through pain and difficulty, because at that point the bliss of the awakening would blot out your concern over the difficulty of the pain you'd been through. Awakening is that valuable, that important, that worthwhile.

So take these thoughts and make them part of your pep talks, part of your way of encouraging yourself along the path, during the times when it's difficult, when the dry patches seem awfully dry and awfully long. Drop the thought of the dryness, drop the thought of the length, and just tell yourself, "I'm just right here, right now. Can I manage this moment? Well, yes." Just do that moment by moment by moment, continually. That's how a moment of patience becomes part of the perfection of patience, a moment of equanimity becomes part of the perfection of equanimity.

That's how the narrative—whether it's fast or slow, pleasant or painful—gets good. That's the part that you can write in the present moment.