

Patience & Urgency

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We're both lucky and unlucky that there are so many books on the practice. Lucky in the sense that we get to hear the message that it is possible to put an end to suffering, that it is possible through the development of virtue, concentration, and discernment to find something deathless. We're unlucky because we tend to bring all these notions into the practice and we want to see the results right away. We have everything all figured out, and it's simply a matter of: "How quickly can we get through all the preliminaries so we can get to all that good stuff at the end?"

That attitude is a defilement. And this presents us with a paradox: In the texts, the Buddha says that, as you come to the practice, you have to be like a person who finds that his hair is on fire. You have to put it out as quickly as you can. You can't wait. So we should have a sense of urgency, but at the same time, we can't allow that urgency to turn into impatience. Because there are definite steps to the practice, and, as we practice, we find that our abilities grow a lot more slowly than we might expect. If you try to push the practice too much, you end up spoiling it.

One of the images in the Canon is of a woman who's pregnant, and she wants to have a baby monkey for her baby to play with. She asks her husband to get the baby monkey, and the question is, of course, what color to dye the baby monkey? Blue or pink? And so she gets impatient and she cuts open her womb to see whether it's a baby boy or a baby girl. Of course, you know what happens: She dies and the fetus dies as well.

You don't want that to happen in your meditation. And the best way to express your urgency without impatience is not to focus on the goal. You focus on what you're doing right now. You've got this breath, so try to be as sensitive as possible to this breath. Where is this going to take you? You know it's going to take you someplace good. How long is it going to take? You don't know. But you do know that the only way you're going to find the goal is by focusing very intently on the path. Because the practice isn't a mechanical process where you simply force on the mind through the meat grinder and you come out with nibbana as the product. The technique is here to develop your powers of perception, to develop your powers of concentration, so that you can use your discernment to figure things out more clearly for yourself. If you rush through things, discernment doesn't have its chance to develop its skill, doesn't have its chance to develop its powers of observation.

What happens all too often when you're in too great hurry is that you go for the shortcut, and the shortcut can often lead you astray. You need to be very careful in what you do. Now, this doesn't mean that you have to walk around slowly all the time and act like a ninety-year-old man. It means that you simply have to pay very careful attention to your actions, to your words, to your thoughts. And because your thoughts come quickly, you have to be quick in your discernment, quick in your alertness.

And you have to learn how to judge things. The judgment here is especially important when you find issues in the mind that you would like to deal with really quickly. Something is bothering you and eating away at part of your mind, and you'd like to get done with it. Fast. But some things can't be handled fast. They take time. This is where your discernment comes in. And to develop discernment, you have to develop your powers of concentration. An important stage in the practice is saying No to any other thought that comes up. If you're going to think, think about the breath, evaluate the breath, play with the breath, get to know it really well. The only way you can really know the breath is by playing with it, trying to make it comfortable. If it's not comfortable, try other ways of making it comfortable. Keep trying to figure out, if things are not going well, what's a new approach to try?

You can read in Ajaan Lee's writings where he talks about the different levels of the breath, and the various types of breath energy in the body. He has lots of different ways of analyzing this energy. In some cases, he talks about the blatant breath, i.e., the in-and-out breath, and then the more refined breath: the breath sensations flowing through the nerves, and then the subtle breath, which is the still breath, the breath that doesn't move at all. At other times, he talks about the breath sensations going up, going down, moving in, moving out, spinning around in place. There's another place where he talks about the strong breath energy coming up the spine, and another weaker breath energy going from the navel up to the nose.

These ways of conceiving the breath are useful in different circumstances. And you might find that you have other ways of conceiving the breath that are useful for some of your problems. So you try out his ways of analysis, and that will lead you to think of other ways as well. You've got to develop your ingenuity as you deal with the breath. But as for anything else that comes up while you're getting to know the breath, you don't want it to interfere.

Then, when you feel that your concentration is strong enough, you may want to test it. One way of testing it is to bring in a difficult issue—"Okay, let's think about it for a while"—with the purpose of using your concentration to observe:

How does the mind approach that issue? How does it relate to that issue? At what point does it to move into it and take it on as a state of becoming? What are the attractions of that issue? Why do you feel compelled to keep going back to it? What are the drawbacks of holding onto that issue? If it's something bothering you, exactly what is it related to? What about it bothers you? Which part of your sense of identity is it threatening? And do you have to hold onto that particular sense of identity? Is it something really solid?

You want to get to the point where you can see these things simply arising and passing away: They come in; they go away. There's nothing given about your identity. It's totally your fabrication. And if it's a fabrication that's causing you to suffer, why do you want to keep doing it? Why do you want to hold onto it?

These are some of the questions you can ask.

But you may find that as soon as you bring up the issue, all those questions just disappear, and you move into the same old mood that there was before. That's a sign that your concentration is not equal to it yet. You have to be able to notice this, recognize it, and then use whatever skills you've learned in developing concentration to drop the issue and treat it as you would any other distraction. In other words, you have to learn how to recognize what you're ready for and what you're not.

We like to think ideally that we're all great Dhamma warriors, and with any issue that comes up, we should be brave and handle it. But as any skilled warrior knows, you can't take on any enemy at any time. You have to choose your battles. You have to be prepared. An important lesson that many of our leaders tend to forget is: If you have plans to go in and make an attack, you also have to have plans for how you're going to retreat safely if things don't go well. So always be ready for the idea that you may have to retreat when you find that the thought you're analyzing suddenly turns on you, and you find yourself dropping all of your tools. You're not just going to stand there and let it eat you up. You have to run away. And that's not a sign of cowardice, it's a sign of intelligence. But you've got to have a good, safe place to run away to.

This is what the concentration is for. It creates a sense of well-being in the mind, a sense of belonging right here. You're not going to let anybody else come and push you out of this seat. No matter how insistent the thought, you're going to stay right here. If it's a physical pain, no matter how insistent the pain, you're going to stay right here with the breath, fully inhabiting your body, trying to get the sense of security that can come from staying right here until you're ready to tackle the thought again, tackle the pain again.

Now, in some cases these issues come up willy-nilly, and you've got to deal with them somehow. You can't wait until you're fully ready. But then you're going to have to learn to recognize how to give it a quick karate chop, enough to take care of it for the time being; realizing that you haven't uprooted it, you haven't fully understood it, but at least you've got it somewhat under control, using the discernment you've got.

It's in this way that you strengthen your discernment. Because it's not always the case that you can wait until the discernment is fully strong and ready to tackle the big issues. You have to develop your discernment bit by bit, all along the way.

A good comparison is with lifting weights. You can't just sit around and wait until your arms are strong and then lift the heavy weights. You take your weak arm, your scrawny arm, and use it to lift the weights that you can lift. And then gradually you build up your strength, and you find that you can lift bigger and bigger weights. That's how a weak arm becomes a strong arm.

It's the same with discernment. You use what weak discernment you have to tackle the issues you can manage. As you do this, you find that, over time, you can tackle more and more complicated issues. But this also requires that you have concentration to retreat to when you need it to nourish yourself. Again, like lifting weights: If you just lift the weights without eating and nourishing the body, the muscle wears out. You've got to nourish yourself, you've got to feed yourself, so that you have the strength to make your next attack. Concentration is nourishment. Concentration is a safe place for the mind.

An important way to develop discernment around this is to see: What can you handle? What can you not? If you can't handle a particular issue, admit the fact: Tell yourself that you're not ready for that yet, and then retreat into concentration to build yourself up for the next attack.

In other words, an important part of the practice is not trying to clone the goal. You want to be really clear about where you are, which powers you have developed, which ones you haven't. This right here is a lot of what discernment means: being very clear, very focused, very observant of what you're capable of handling right now. The path isn't a matter of simply hoping for the goal, and pushing, pushing, pushing in the direction where you think it lies. It's a matter of focusing on what you have to do right now—and in being very focused on each step as you do it, very clear about each step as you do it. You develop the mindfulness, alertness, the ability to observe, all of which are going to be needed to see through to the deathless, to see through to the goal that you want.

So don't just push yourself through the motions, hoping that somehow the techniques are going to take care of everything. You have to develop your discernment around the techniques if you want to get anywhere at all.