

Perfection of Patience Part 2 of 2
by Ven. Thubten Chodron©, Dharma Friendship Foundation, 27 Dec 93

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Patience is the attitude that enables us to remain undisturbed in the face of harm or disagreeable situations. There are three kinds of patience: (1) Patience of not retaliating; (2) Patience of voluntarily enduring suffering; (3) Patience of practicing the Dharma. Since we have already discussed the patience of not retaliating, we will now focus on the remaining two.

Patience of Voluntarily Enduring Suffering

The second one, the patience of voluntarily enduring suffering is when we meet unpleasant situations in our life, when things don't turn out the way we want, like getting sick, or being in a car accident, and we are able to just live with them. How do we do that? One way is to remember the nature of cyclic existence and really let it sink into our heart. Usually we say, "OK, yeah, yeah, suffering is the nature of cyclic existence...(but I wonder how you get out of it?)" We have not really accepted the first of the four facts that the noble ones have seen as true - that there are a lot of undesirable experiences that constitute the very nature of our existence. As long as we are under the influence of disturbing attitudes -- ignorance, anger and attachment, and we create actions of karma by means of those, we are going to experience unpleasant results repeatedly. However, every time a difficult situation arises, we get really upset because we feel, "This shouldn't happen!" I notice this particularly in the West. I wonder if it is because we grew up in a Judeo-Christian culture influenced by the myth of the Garden of Eden, where everything was hunky-dory. Then somebody screwed up, and as a result, we have all of our problems. This might lead to the thinking, "Hold on! Suffering is a goof-up. It shouldn't be like this." Buddhism takes the "should" out of it and says, as long as there is the cause, there is the result. This is the definition of what cyclic existence is -- undesirable experiences. So as long as we still have the causes, such as ignorance and karma in our mindstream, then to expect anything else than this result is fanciful thinking.

Our tendency, when confronted with suffering, is to rebel and reject. We get into our American mentality of "We have to fix it". We are a culture of "fix-its". It is just incredible, especially when you live overseas and you experience how other people react to problems in the society or family. It is not like here; every time something goes wrong, we have to immediately step in and fix it! We do not reflect, "Let's survey the situation, look at its deep causes and really understand before we act." We do not have that very much in our culture. Our foreign policy reflects this,

like in Vietnam and Somalia; we just jump in, send some soldiers and try to fix it. There is something in that attitude that rejects accepting the reality of things as they are.

This is not to say that we need to be discouraged or fatalistic. Instead we can develop the kind of mind that looks at the situation and acknowledges, "Well, it is like that. What's happening right now is what's happening right now." We often confuse acceptance with fatalism. Acceptance is when you accept what is happening right now. Fatalism is when you dream up a future and think that that is going to happen.

Accepting reality also does not necessarily mean being passive. We must examine each situation and act accordingly. But often we do one of two things: sometimes we can influence a situation but we just roll over and don't; at other times we cannot influence a situation and we knock our head against the wall trying to. So this is really where a lot of wisdom needs to be developed, through trial and error, standing back and assessing situations instead of immediately jumping in and reacting. I personally find this way of thinking very helpful. Rather than getting discouraged in the face of pain and suffering, we acknowledge and accept them. "We're in cyclic existence. To expect anything different is ignorant and hallucination."

Determination to be Free

To take that one step further - this is precisely why the Buddha talked about the determination to be free. When we hear all these teachings about the determination to be free, and the different kinds of undesirable samsaric experiences, we say, "Oh, yes! There are eight sufferings and six sufferings and three sufferings," listing them all out. But then when one of those comes into play in our life, we say "But this can't happen; it is not supposed to be like this." This is precisely the time when we begin to see that those lists we studied are not mere intellectual things. They are descriptions of what our life experiences are. The Buddha pointed those things out because by noticing them, it helps us develop a very strong effort to free ourselves from them. There is no other way to achieve liberation except by developing the determination to be free. This is not possible without understanding the suffering nature of cyclic existence. So when we encounter unpleasant situations, we say, "This is exactly what the Buddha referred to in the First Noble Truth. This suffering does not happen by accident nor is it due to some injustice. I have to look at it because this is what I want to be free of." This is a really different way of looking at things. I think this is something that as Westerners, maybe Easterners too, we really have to wrestle with a lot.

It was interesting that at a teachers' conference I was at, many of the teachers were talking in depth about their own personal pain and abusive situations, trying to work it all out psychologically. At one point, one of the teachers said, "Isn't this the First Noble Truth?" It is exactly what the Buddha was talking about. Why we go to therapy or support groups, why we go to this plan and that plan. All these turmoil in our life, are exactly the nature of samsara. Buddha instructed us to examine it in order for us to develop the determination to be freed from it. So this is a very different attitude.

That is why regarding therapy, I think it is good to look back at childhood but I do not think that it is always necessary because anyway we had unlimited numbers of childhoods. It is impossible to work out every single thing that happened in every single childhood we ever had - or even everything that happened in one childhood! But if we could just look at the nature of cyclic existence, this is what it is about. Our parents are not perfect. We are forty-five and we are still trying to come to terms with this. It would be better to simply recognize "Yeah, this is the nature of samsara. There is delusion and karma. This pain I am having right now is why I am practicing Dharma. Because if I could practice Dharma and realize emptiness and develop bodhicitta, it would free me of this kind of pain."

Constantly lamenting and thinking life is unfair is not going to set us free. We are going to stay quite stuck. I have never heard the term “justice” discussed in Buddhism. Karma has nothing to do with justice. Suffering has nothing to do with justice and yet so often, when we encounter suffering, we think, “It is not fair! It is not just! The world should be different!”, as if somebody is banging the gavel and handing out the terms to everybody. Fully contemplating the First Noble Truth as it unfolds in our life leads us to the practice of the patience of enduring suffering, which in turn allows us to transform our sufferings and do something about them. But how is this wish to abandon samsaric suffering different from rejection and denial of regular suffering? The first wish is grounded in an attitude of openness that allows for examination and acceptance. The second one involves reacting to suffering out of fear and aversion. If we confront suffering with an understanding of the Third and Fourth Noble Truths, that there is a state of cessation and also a way to actualize it, then we can develop the confidence and skillful means to transform it.

Developing Compassion

Just to be healthy and balanced people, we need to be able to look at the garbage in our life. In order to be able to benefit others, we have to be able to face suffering. Suffering provides the impetus to develop the determination to be free as well as very strong compassion towards others. Compassion is not some intellectual thing that we do on Sunday mornings. It is something very earthy and rooted in really being able to touch suffering. So when we are enduring a painful situation, it is helpful to reflect, “First of all this is created by my own ignorance and karma, what else do I expect? Second, this is exactly what I'm determining to be free from. And third, what about everybody else who is in this situation? This is sensitizing me to understand other people's suffering.” So often it is easy to give advice to people about their problems. But when we face the same problems, we falter. It is important then to recognize every time we have a problem, “Well, this is helping me learn a skill so that I can also help other people who are in the same situation. By doing this, we transform painful situations to help us develop compassion for others.

Here is a story that relates to this. When I was at Kopan monastery in Nepal, I got a really wanton case of hepatitis. It was so bad that going to the bathroom was like asking me to climb Mt Everest for the amount of strength it took. It was the first year of my practice and being very enthusiastic, I would say, “I should practice; Dharma is a good thing. I know the alarm clock is going off and I should get out of bed and practice.” You know that kind of mind - all the “shoulds” about what I should do. Then I got hepatitis and someone gave me this book “Wheel of Sharp Weapons” which talks about karma. I began to see that this illness was the result of my own negative actions due to my self-cherishing. All of a sudden, the “I *should* practice the Dharma” turned into “I *want* to practice Dharma.” In this way, the situation, which was actually quite horrible, became quite beneficial for my practice and good in the long run.

Also, in situations where you have a serious illness you can think, “This is what other people are going through too. I now understand their experience”. Then when we help, we can do it from this deep understanding of what they are going through – real deep compassion. It doesn't have to be that if I have cancer, I am only going to have compassion for people who have cancer. We can have compassion for people who have stomachaches too or other ailments because we comprehend the common nature of suffering. Therefore, it is really important for the development of compassion to have a courageous way of dealing with our own suffering. If we cannot deal with our own suffering, how are we going to deal with anybody else's?

Decreasing Pride

Another advantage of suffering is that it decreases our pride. We take everything in our life for

granted. We have all the good circumstances but then all of a sudden, we get sick. Our pride just goes like that. Again, we've touched a basic human condition related to the nature of the body and that makes us appreciate things in a much deeper way. We can use these situations to deplete our pride and our taking things for granted. I remember watching these incredible lamas -- Serkong Rinpoche or Ling Rinpoche -- when they were really old, doing prostrations before they were to teach. Their bodies being old, you could just tell how much effort making three prostrations took. That really stuck in my mind so that sometimes when I make prostrations, I think, "Wow! I'm so fortunate to be healthy and be able to do this." So you see, getting sick or having unpleasant situations can bring about a strong appreciation of what we do have when we are well, or when we do not have any pressing problems. It also depletes the pride that makes us think, "My life, everything is wonderful!" So these ways of thinking are extremely important to remember, practice and use when you have problems.

Taking and Giving

Another way to cultivate this patience when you're suffering, is to do the "taking and giving" meditation. We imagine voluntarily taking on the suffering of others and voluntarily giving them our happiness. This is a meditation to develop love and compassion. Also, to remember that if we train ourselves to endure small inconveniences and miseries, then through practice, we would be able to endure bigger ones. So do not get discouraged when unpleasant things happen, just think, "OK. If I can cope with this, then it's going to help me in future when bigger things happen." Through familiarity, we learn to deal with problems.

However, what I am talking about has nothing to do with martyrdom, which involves a lot of ego - "Look how much I'm suffering! Isn't my suffering wonderful? Shouldn't I get more attention than everybody else?" That is not what we are getting at in Buddhism. We are trying to transcend the ego, not to develop it. In martyrdom, there is a certain kind of tightness. In Buddhism, there is none. What we are trying to develop in Buddhism is a complete letting go. In other words, we are really transforming the situation, accepting it for what it is and using it to develop compassion and the determination to be free. We are not using it to develop ego, self-importance or self-pity.

Patience of Definitely Practicing the Dharma

Helping Others

Next is the patience of practicing the Dharma. One example of this relates to the patience you need when trying to help people. This is a good one, "How do you help people when they don't do what you want them to do? How do you keep helping them when they do not appreciate you? And when they aren't what you want them to be, and when they act just the opposite, how do we keep ourselves from getting so angry that we throw in the towel and walk off?"

We have to really protect our Bodhicitta. It is so easy to get fed up and say, "I'm trying to help. I know the way to help and this person doesn't get it. They don't want to listen." So what can we do in those situations? We have very strong ideas of what they should do and how they should do it.. One thing is to say, "This is samsara, isn't it? This is samsara in that they aren't what I want them to be. This is samsara because they are confused." To illustrate, here is another story. A young person with a brain tumor came to me and said, "Please, I had surgery because of a brain tumor, give me a purification practice so that it doesn't come back." So I called Lama Zopa and finally got him a specially tailored practice. When I called him up and said, "Come on over. I'll teach you how to do this meditation," his reply was, "I'm working overtime and can't come." After I had gone through all that to get him these special practices and he does not even

appreciate it!!! I just had to acknowledge, "Well, this is samsara!" I know very clearly that when his tumor came back, he was going to call and ask for help. I knew I wouldn't be able to help at that point in time because by then, the tumour would have been deadly. We kept in touch over the months. The tumor recurred and he got really sick again. I went to visit him at the hospital. It was clear that I could not do anything. His whole physical appearance changed; he could not focus on things due to the drugs he was on.

It is never too late to practice the dharma. But why wait until three weeks before you die to start? That is not the time. This is what they mean when they talk about confusion and delusion! But this situation made me reflect on how many times my teachers had tried to help me and I walked in the other direction. How often my teachers had offered me help or instruction and I said, "This doesn't interest me. I don't have time." It is not just how many times I have done it in *this* lifetime but I can imagine having done this in many past lifetimes too. And so now I think, "Look at the Bodhisattvas! They hang in there lifetime after lifetime with somebody like me, who messes up a lot. The least I can do is hang in there for somebody else."

But the problem is that when we help people, we always have an idea of what exactly they should do with our help. They should appreciate and put it into practice. They should acknowledge us and say "Thank you". They should help us in return. We have a little checklist of how the perfect recipient should act. But very few people get the honor of that job. If we wait to help somebody until we can be sure that he fulfils every qualification we have for a perfect recipient of our help, when will we ever help anybody? Actually, isn't helping others all about helping people who are under the influence of ignorance, anger, attachment and karma? Isn't that what helping people is about? People under the influence of disturbing attitudes and karma are not going to do what we want them to do as perfect recipients of the great and glorious gift of OUR HELP. If I wait for them to be the perfect recipients, am I really helping them or am I just increasing my own ego? Here again is when I remember the bodhisattvas - what they are doing and what they put up with... I think of all the things people have put up with that I have done in my life. I have made so many mistakes in my life and so many people have put up with them again and again. So okay, maybe I need to be a bit patient then.

One way to keep our motivation pure is to think that our help is a gift. The important thing is that we give it. What they do with it is their choice as long as they are not abusing it such as using money for drugs. Whether they say "Thank you" or not, we have to let go of the expectations. But it's hard, isn't it?

Enduring Physical Hardship

Some other things that are included in this third kind of patience – the patience of practicing the Dharma -- involves having appreciation for positive actions and for the Buddha's qualities, thereby generating the wish to gain those qualities. This gives us the patience to endure whatever is necessary to do our practice such as getting up early in the morning even if we feel tired. When you go to Dharamsala to listen to teachings, you develop patience by hearing the teachings in close quarters, unable to move your legs, everyone crowded in a tent outside. Here, it is so easy -- just jump in your car and go. Sometimes it takes a bit of effort and endurance to get to the place where the teachings are, even if it is in the city or another country. So this type of patience allows us to go through that, to endure sitting in teachings with your back hurting, your knees aching and the teacher talking too long – "Why doesn't she shut up. Can't she see that I am tired!" – enduring all of that, even when your mind just doesn't want to hear another word of Dharma.

Having this kind of patience and courage (to really stick it out) is so important because our mind goes up and down like yo-yos all the time. It is full of hindrances. If at the first hindrance, we get

discouraged and say, "It is too difficult, too upsetting!" and split, we are never going to get anywhere in our practice. We actually have pretty cushy circumstances here. When I think about how I learned the Dharma in Nepal sitting on a stone floor in a building without electricity with this incredible Geshe and a translator who barely knew English... I listened day after day writing down what the translator said, word for word, even though it did not make a whole sentence. Later I would sit with my friends trying to figure out what the sentences were and what the Geshe was saying. This was just trying to get the words, let alone the meaning. We lived in a place with no tap water. Coolies carried water up for us. We had to drive to town to do shopping once a week. Between India and Nepal, I lived this way for several years. There was no heating in the rooms during the cold winters and everybody was crammed together. But we stuck it out and learned.

You have it easier -- there is carpeting and heat, your teacher speaks English -- doesn't know so much, but she cracks a few jokes. When you go to hear His Holiness in Dharamsala, not everybody can fit in the main temple, so everybody sits outside, and inevitably it rains. We sit outside and are not allowed to cover our arm due to tradition. But it is raining, hailing, and the wind is howling through. We endure because we want to hear the teachings. When you go to His Holiness' teaching in this country, you sit in a nice fold-down chair that is padded and comfortable. There is acoustics and His Holiness pauses while the translator talks in English instead of the translator doing it on the radio.

Enduring suffering to hear teachings is actually the patience of practicing the Dharma, and it's also (the second patience,) the patience of enduring suffering. Nyung Nay is a good example of cultivating not only the patience of practicing Dharma, but also the patience of undergoing suffering. Nyung Nay is a practice that involves doing a lot of prayers, prostrations and mantras with Chenresig. Participants take the Eight Mahayana precepts both days, eating only one meal the first day and not eating, drinking or speaking on the second day. The benefits, as described in the prayer, are: "During this fast, if the FORTUNATE person feels hot, cold or tired, may the karma which through the power of hatred would cause one's rebirth in the hellish realm be purified and may the gate to rebirth in the hellish realm be closed." This refers to transforming bad circumstances into the path and developing both kinds of patience. So when you are hot, cold, or tired while doing the practice, you think, "This is my karma that would ordinarily ripen in me having a hellish rebirth, and now it's ripening in this temporary discomfort." That gives you the ability to go through it, because you are doing it for a purpose.

"Because of the difficulty of not eating and drinking during this fast, if the miseries of hunger and thirst arise, may the karma, which through miserliness, would cause one to be reborn amongst the hungry ghost be purified, and may the gate to rebirth amongst the hungry ghosts be closed." During these two days it is very easy to get hungry or thirsty, but instead of sneaking in a meal when no one is looking and breaking the precept, you can contemplate - "This is my own karma created through the force of miserliness that would normally ripen in me being born as a hungry ghost, and now it's ripening in this relatively minor discomfort." So you cultivate the patience to endure that circumstance.

"During the fast, if through not letting the mind wander about, it becomes maddened by agitation, drowsiness, sleepiness and dullness..." -- you are sitting there trying to say mantra, and you're falling asleep, and your mind is completely wild -- "may the karma which through stupidity would cause one to be reborn amongst animals be purified. And may the gate to rebirth in the animal realm be closed." So again, instead of getting discouraged or just falling asleep in the middle of a session, you make an effort to stay awake to do the practice. By exerting effort in this way you purify the karma (created through stupidity) which would have caused you to be reborn as an animal. In this way you are developing both kinds of patience.

So it says "In general, at all times during this fast, with our mind bent towards the benefit and happiness of others, and by thinking that whatever misery of body and mind arises is the suffering of all sentient beings, may we take it upon ourselves." This is the essence of the whole thing. Instead of feeling sorry for ourselves when we have a problem, we say, "May this suffice for the misery of all others. I'm going through this, it's not changing; may it suffice for the misery of all others." And you do the taking and giving meditation which allows for the whole thing to become transformed. When you do the Nyung Nay, you're specifically developing these two kinds of patience.

There are some other verses too that describe how to transform difficult circumstances. The whole point is, that to get anywhere in our Dharma practice, we need to have patience with discomfort. If we always want our mind to be happy and our body to be comfortable when we are doing Dharma practice, it is going to be extremely difficult to do any practice at all. The whole reason we are practicing is because we have a body and mind which are by nature uncomfortable. So if we're going to wait for them to be comfortable before we practice, we're never going to get there. So we have to develop some kind of patience to willingly endure discomfort for the sake of the Dharma. Our mind isn't just aimed at whether we feel okay right now (8 worldly concerns). It's okay for us to endure some discomfort because where we're going is some place really beneficial. Again, this isn't masochism. We're not wishing ourselves to suffer and we're not thinking that it's virtuous to suffer, but we're just saying that there's no way to escape suffering, so we might as well transform it into the path.

Enduring Disturbing Attitudes

Another point in this patience of practicing the Dharma is dealing with the mind and body that are out of control and voluntarily enduring the suffering of that. Sometimes when we think about death, or impermanence, it causes anxiety. Sometimes when we think about emptiness, because our understanding isn't completely correct or because our self-grasping is so strong, we feel anxious. Sometimes we hear teachings about karma or the eight worldly concerns and we feel anxious. We must learn to bear the fact that the Dharma and our spiritual teacher continually beat up on our egos. So we have to have the stamina to cope with emotional disturbances. Once I was reading a book by a psychologist discussing some of the things he found that made people most anxious. The first thing was death. The second was thinking about freedom and responsibility for your own life. Third was isolation and aloneness and fourth was thinking about the meaning of life. These are all things that we think about in the course of Dharma practice too, aren't they? We're thinking about them in a different way, but still they're the same things. Initially it can produce some anxiety but as we face our disturbing attitudes instead of back away, we leave some space around it.

It is so interesting sometimes to hear about other people's experiences when they go to teachings, or to look at our own experiences. Have you ever gotten furiously angry in the middle of teachings? You get so angry; you can barely sit in your seat -- angry with the teacher, the teaching, the situation, at everybody else sitting in the room? Your mind just becomes enraged! I am talking about developing the patience to endure when your mind is going bonkers, fighting and resisting the teachings, and when your mind cannot stand anybody in the room, just all the stuff -- you know how the mind gets sometimes. Very difficult to please.

It is also important to practice this when living the ordained life. For example, when people say, "What a pity somebody like you is celibate. Really you should get married!" Or having someone say "Isn't being ordained escaping from society and responsibility?" People who are not Buddhists usually say that. What is even worse is when Buddhists say, "By being ordained, aren't you escaping relationships? Aren't you denying your sexuality?" I think they are saying more about themselves than about ordained people. Or people say, "Oh! When you wore lay

clothes, I could really relate to you. You were my friend. But now you are wearing these funny clothes and have a funny name, you are not my friend anymore. I can't relate to you." There are many things that people say when you are ordained. Or the people who say, "Oh, you're just leeching off of society, why don't you go out and get a job? Why do you want a free lunch for?" Bob Thurman, for those of you who know him, was a monk at one point and then he gave his ordination back. He talks very much in favor of a monastic life and says it is very good for society to have a group of people that gets free lunches (laughter). He says this group of people should not be put down – the free lunch club is very important! These are some of the nicer comments people have made. A lot of things get thrown at ordained people, especially in the West. It is much more difficult here.

Generating Effort

At the heart of developing the patience of practicing the dharma is to have a far range goal in mind, because then there is a willingness in the short term to endure all types of discomfort. It also involves the patience to enrich our conviction in cause and effect, enrich our refuge. We develop the patience of looking at our own life, of meditating on impermanence and death, of meditating on suffering, of not forgetting what you heard in Dharma class and trying to put it into practice, even though the mind has great resistance and denial. These are all included in the patience of practicing the Dharma.

Finally, we also need patience when we have happy circumstances because if we don't, then we are likely, because of the good fortune, to get arrogant, complacent, or be completely overwhelmed by all the pleasure and comfort of the situation. We maintain some kind of patience with that too instead of just jumping into it. Actually, in some ways, it is much harder. It is really interesting because they say when we have a lot of suffering, we do not practice because we are overwhelmed, but also when we have a lot of happiness, we don't practice, because we are also overwhelmed. When things are going super deluxe in our life, it is really difficult to recall the determination to be free because now we finally have praise and approval. We have a great reputation. We are very famous. People finally appreciate us. We have a nice house and car. We have a fantastic boyfriend or girlfriend. Why do I need Dharma? So we really need a lot of patience with good circumstances in order to not get sucked up because we know that it is impermanent and that samsaric perfections cannot be trusted.