

Perfection of Patience Part 1 of 2
by Venerable Thubten Chodron©, Dharma Friendship Foundation, 22 Dec 93

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Patience of Not Retaliating to Harm. Antidotes to Anger:

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Dependent Arising

Earlier we were talking about one technique that is included in the patience of not retaliating when others harm us. First of all, we examine what happened in this lifetime from a causal perspective, looking at conditions that led to our being in a really unpleasant situation. In this way we recognize it as dependent arising and see our responsibility in it, which gives us some ability to change.

Reaping the Fruits of Karma

The second way is understanding karma and that what we experience now is a result of actions done in the past. In doing this, it is really important to remember that we are not blaming the victim or ourselves. It is also very important to note that these techniques are not meant to be told to other people when they are angry, but are for us to apply to ourselves when we are angry. Similarly, when we talk about the disadvantages of anger, it is not the disadvantages of other people's anger, but of our own. It makes a big difference when we frame it in this way. When we have an unpleasant situation, instead of getting angry and striking back at the other person, we recognize that we are in that situation because of our own negative actions that we committed in previous lives.

Many times people do not like to think like this because it involves acknowledging our negative actions. Coming from a Judeo-Christian culture we don't like to admit that

because then it means we are evil and sinful, and we are going to hell, and we have to feel guilty and hopeless! So we go from step one to step three in one leap. We must recognize that that way of thinking was not what the Buddha taught; it is the way a six-year-old kid in a Catechism class might think.

We can acknowledge our own negative actions from previous lives and learn from that experience, by recognizing that they bring about consequences that we don't like. And sometimes when we look at how we've acted towards other people even in this lifetime, the kind of predicaments that we find ourselves in are no big surprise. Every time somebody criticizes us, we feel, "This is unfair, why do they criticize me? ..." and yet we have all criticized other people numerous times. Remember when we were teenagers, remember things we said today. We criticize others a lot, so is it any wonder that sometimes we're the recipient, rather than the giver? So when we look at it this way, admitting that our present uncomfortable situations are due to past negative actions, it's no big deal. It follows quite naturally when we look at our actions and experiences. In fact, it's a wonder why we don't meet with more unfortunate experiences considering how we've acted towards others.

Maintaining this view helps us avoid being angry in a situation because we don't blame the other person for our difficulties; instead we recognize that we do have a measure of control over what we experience. In that way we can make a stronger determination about how we want to act or not act in the future. That is what is called really learning from our experience.

This is quite a powerful technique taught in the thought-training texts, especially in "The Wheel of Sharp Weapons". The first section addresses these horrendous problems; and instead of blaming others for our current negative situation, we see our past karmic action as being the cause. We trace all of that to the self-centered attitude, which is the ultimate enemy. Actually, the whole text really hammers away at that, and if we understand that perspective, it is really effective for subduing anger. This is because all of a sudden, this bad situation seems to make some sense: "Oh yes, of course this is going to happen to me;" "Yes, I can make it through and I don't need to freak out about it;" and "It's going to help me learn and grow for the future." In the "Guide to a Bodhisattva's way of Life" there is a whole chapter full of techniques related to working with anger and difficulties.

Kindness of "Enemies"

The next technique is to remember the kindness of the person who harms us. When I say "enemy", it just refers to the person who harms us, not to someone like Saddam Hussein. It could mean your best friend who is at this particular moment harming you, it could be your boss or your dog, whatever. So "enemy" does not fall into a hard and fast category, but just whoever is bugging us. This technique involves remembering the kindness of the "enemy", those people who bother us.

One way they are kind is that they show us the things that we need to work on. Many times when people give us negative feedback they are directly mirroring the stuff that we are throwing out to them. This gives us a really good look at what we need to improve. Also, they very often notice our faults clearly and state them at very high decibel levels and sometimes in a slightly exaggerated manner. If we can distill the essence and see what truth there is, maybe we can learn something. That is not saying every criticism we receive is accurate, but that sometimes there is some truth in it and we need to listen. So that is one way in which our “enemies” can be kind.

The second way in which they are kind is that they give us opportunities to practice patience. To become a Buddha, one of the chief ‘far-reaching attitudes’ is patience. The practice of patience is essential; you never hear of an angry or impatient Buddha! So developing this quality is very, very important! We can’t practice with the people who are kind to us. How can you be patient with somebody who is nice to you? You can’t! So we definitely need the people who harm us in order to practice patience.

There is one story I’ve told before that illustrates this practice. In the past, I spent several years working at a Dharma Center in Europe as the spiritual director. The dharma center was wonderful except the director whom I didn’t get along with for a very long time. I remember writing to Lama Yeshe saying, “Please Lama, Can I leave this place?” This was in the spring and he wrote back and said, “Yes, dear, we’ll talk about it, I will be there in the autumn.” I would think, “Oh! How am I going to make it? This guy is such a ___!” Finally autumn rolled around, Lama came and we decided that I could leave and go back to Nepal.

I returned to Nepal and met with Lama Zopa, sitting with him on the roof of his house. It was so peaceful, overlooking the countryside, the fields, with dogs barking in the distance, away from this person who was driving me nuts. When I lived at the dharma center in Europe, I studied chapter six of Shantideva’s text very diligently every morning. Then during the day I found myself getting furiously angry with this person. At night I would come back home and study this text again. It was very hard to put what I was reading into practice because I was so convinced that I was right and he was wrong. I wondered how I could practice these techniques on patience. So when I was with Lama Zopa on his rooftop at one point in the discussion, he asked me “Who is kinder to you, this person (let’s call him Sam) or the Buddha?” I was very puzzled, and said, “Rinpoche, the Buddha has been very, very kind to me. The Buddha teaches the path.” I just didn’t understand the question and then Rinpoche looked at me, as if to say, “Still didn’t get it, did you?” And then he went on to explain that actually Sam was much kinder to me than the Buddha because I couldn’t practice patience with the Buddha. The Buddha is very compassionate and therefore it is impossible to practice patience with him. So Sam could do something for me on the path that even the Buddha couldn’t do, and I actually really needed him. Of course this was not what I wanted to hear. I desperately wanted Rinpoche simply to confirm that in these quarrels Sam was really wrong, and I was really right. Rinpoche just told me to practice patience and I didn’t want to hear that. But when I went away and thought about it (and I am still thinking about it), I really began to see that what he said made sense.

So we can recognize those situations when somebody is harming us and say "This is a precious opportunity for me to develop qualities that in other situations I can't develop." Instead of focusing on "I don't like this, I needed that ...blah, blah, blah" we can view it as a way for us to really examine and transform our own anger. Not "This is an opportunity to practice patience which means stuff my anger down and ignore it". Not that! But it's an opportunity for us to really investigate our anger, look at what our buttons are and really work with it. If we can hold that view then something positive emerges so that we can transform a bad circumstance into a path to enlightenment. Since we are living in a world with many bad circumstances, it is really important to be able to make this kind of transformation. Of course it is easier to look at from hindsight, isn't it? To look back at the quarrels we've had with people and say "That was a really good opportunity for me. I grew a lot and had the opportunity to practice patience." This reflection is useful but we should also try to apply it to our current situations as well.

Giving the Pain to the Self-Cherishing Attitude

There is another technique to apply to calm our anger. That is to give the pain that we are receiving to our selfish attitude. It is quite a difficult technique that you might not understand in the beginning; I certainly didn't. What this is based on is recognizing that who we are and our self-centered attitude are not the same thing. The self-centered attitude is like the thief in the house who pretends to live there and says, "Oh, listen to me, I will take care of you; if I don't take care of you, nobody else will..." We are deceived by the self-centered attitude and follow it along. But from the Buddhist view, the self-centered attitude and we as people are two different things. For example, when somebody is harming us, instead of taking the harm ourselves and saying, "I don't want this, therefore I'm going to get angry at this person who's giving it!" we decide, "I am taking this harm but I'm giving it to the self-centered attitude which is the real cause for me to receive this harm." As we discussed before, we suffer in the present due to our negative actions from previous lives, which were done under the influence of the self-centered attitude. So now when we are experiencing the result of those negative actions, instead of taking the pain ourselves, feeling upset about it, that it is unfair, we take that pain and give it to the self-centered attitude by saying, "You self-centered attitude, you are the one who has been harming me this whole time, now you can take all these problems!" Try doing this on the spot when another person is criticizing you (or whatever they are doing to you). Sit there and say, "Yeah, keep on criticizing, it's fine, this is great!" Give all the criticism to the self-centered attitude, which is our real enemy because it controls so much of our lives.

So we give the difficulty to the self-centered attitude. Doing this involves recognizing that we are **not** our self-centered attitude. It is crucial to contemplate this because we identify so much with the self-centered attitude. This self-cherishing is one of those clouds in the open clear sky; it is not "us". It's something that can be removed. So again, I remember the first few times I heard this technique, I didn't get it. Then one time due to the kindness of another "enemy" I had the opportunity to practice it.

It's a really funny thing because this person whom I spoke of earlier had once been a friend of mine, and then for some reason, he didn't want to talk to me anymore, which still continues to this day. But we happened to be in a situation when we were on pilgrimage to Tibet with some other people. We were going by horse to the lake in which auspicious visions appear, like for the selection of the Dalai Lama. It was a tough journey to the lake and back, and there were five people in our group who were really dependent on each other. On the third day, we approached the lake where we were going to camp for the night. It had turned out that this particular person had a really stubborn horse. It was totally incredible. At one point, the horse went half way across the stream and stopped with the man sitting on it. This horse wasn't co-operating at all so the man had to get off and walk. My horse was pretty good and I had some energy so I offered him mine. For some reason that I still don't understand this made him furious, and he proceeded to tell me things from five years ago that I had done that had really bothered him, and then things that I had done that had harmed other people that he had heard through the grapevine. So he just tore into me -- in the middle of Tibet on pilgrimage to this holy lake where nobody is around and it's gorgeous. This person was dumping years of stuff on me, and I was really taken aback -- "Where did this come from?" And for some reason I don't understand, (and I think this is like the blessing of the pilgrimage -- what pilgrimage means,) all of a sudden I had the idea "Ah! Let's practice this technique!" So I started to do that, thinking, "OK! All these criticisms I'm giving to my self-cherishing thought."

And I just continued practicing in that way and let him go on. To all the stuff he directed at me I just kept saying to myself "OK! Self-cherishing, you take it, you take it, you take it..." By the time we camped that evening, much to my surprise, I wasn't upset, which was really something new for me because usually I'm quite sensitive about stuff like that. It just really hit me that this was a viable way to practice so that we don't get angry.

Because I employed that technique I was able to listen to and learn from some of what the man said. However, a lot of the unfair accusations, the anger that he had held on to for so many years was clearly directed to the person whom I was no longer, so I just gave that to the self-cherishing attitude. I think a lot of times when people dump on us, they are basically saying more about their state of mind than they are about us, which is why a lot of stuff gets really exaggerated. So instead of reacting to it, just give it to the self-centeredness, recognizing that self-centeredness is our real enemy.

Also, in most circumstances we usually want to give problems to somebody that we don't like. There's something nasty in the office to do, pass the buck to somebody else - it is this kind of thing. So let's give all the pain, all the criticism, and all the unfairness of the situation to the self-cherishing attitude.

Of course, with all these conflicts and mental disturbances, we have to really practice repeatedly when we are sitting on our cushion. I think it is very helpful to think of situations that have happened in our life that we have not completely healed, where there is still some residue and apply the techniques so that we can really let go of that

anger, grudge or hurt that we are holding on to. Practice it in that way in order to get some familiarity to use the technique now.

Basic Nature: Evil or just Clouded Over?

Then another technique to use is to investigate the basic nature of the people who harm us. Is it their nature to be harmful, obnoxious, rude, inconsiderate and vicious, and everything else we happen to be attributing to them at that moment? Is it their nature to be like that or not? If we decide that it is their basic nature, then why get angry? That would be like getting angry at fire, which has the nature to burn! So if we decide that it is this person's nature to be cruel and vicious or whatever, then why be angry? That's just the way the person is.

On the other hand if we decide that it's not their nature to be like that, then again, why get angry? That would be like getting angry at the sky because of clouds in it. When there are clouds in the sky, we don't get angry because we recognize that the sky and the clouds are of different natures. They can be separated. So in the same way, if we decide that the person's attitude and behavior is not their nature, then it is like clouds in the sky. It isn't the person's nature, so let it go and recognize that there is something positive underneath all of the disturbing attitudes.

So when you are sitting there contemplating the person's nature, there are a few different things to consider. I remember one time just being with somebody who was obnoxious and I began thinking, "Is it in this person's nature to be like this?" In one way it is because this person is in samsara just like me, and the nature of being in samsara is to be overwhelmed by disturbing attitudes and to dump it outwards. So if I look at this person as somebody in samsara, then of course it is his nature. What am I supposed to expect from him? He's not a Buddha. Because of his negative mind, he's going to do things that I find disturbing. So why be surprised? Why expect otherwise? Why be angry with him?

But then another time when I thought about it, I thought, "Actually no!" That's not his nature because his real nature is Buddha nature. The real nature of his mind is something that is clear and knowing, and all the negative attributes are like clouds in the sky or dirt on the mirror. These are just temporary obscurations, not his basic nature. So why be angry? His basic nature is clouded over, making him behave in this way. The person is in samsara, cyclic existence, getting a body and mind that are under the control of disturbing attitudes and karma.

So it's a really interesting way to analyze situations. It shows us how we expect people to be continuously kind and reasonable. We ignore the fact that they, just like us, happen to be overwhelmed by disturbing attitudes and karma. So why get angry?

Again, when you really practice these methods and let them sink into your mind, then your anger goes away. Of course when we first start practicing them, they sound quite

intellectual. We go through this nice intellectual gymnastic thing about the situation in which we feel so much passion, and we can't put these two things together. I went to do retreat one time after I had left this particular situation that I was referring to. Thank goodness it was a long retreat because the first two weeks I spent just being completely angry. If it had been a shorter retreat I wouldn't have gotten anywhere! I remember practicing this technique and the mind would say "Yes, but..." which is often what our mind does when we practice these antidotes to the delusions. We say, "Yes" because we understand them intellectually, but our deeply entrenched attitude comes out with "Yes, but really it is their fault because blah, blah, blah..." and we present our case. But then being Dharma practitioners, that doesn't get us anywhere. We're still stuck with the fact that anger is a disturbing attitude that creates negative karma, which in turn creates samsara. So if I am right and they are wrong, why am I angry? Anger is a defilement. We keep on having to look our own anger in the face.

So we must continue practicing these techniques. As you do more purification, collect more positive potential, and practice these techniques, they kind of sink into the mind. At first they are very intellectual, but then the more you go over them your mind really begins to change. This is especially true if you are working with a grudge or hurt that you've held on to for a long time, or something that you get a lot of mileage out of. We hold on to our hurt and pain a lot. The remedies for both are the same because there is a connection between them. We have a lot vested in holding on to our pain and the past situation, but we just have to keep using these methods. It becomes like peeling layers off an onion: over a period of years we let go of this little bit of hostility, and let go of that, and let go of that... Sometimes it all comes back again but then we can dismantle it much more quickly. But it really takes a lot of time and effort to work with anger and pain.

However, there will be times when we are contemplating a situation in our life and we just feel that we are not going anywhere; then it is better to put it aside. Also, we can look back sometimes at problems that we had with our friends when we were sixteen and think, "Oh, my goodness! How long did I spend crying over that, and for what?" It is so easy to look back and wonder, "Why did I get upset?" So those are things, with time, that give us a whole different perspective.

Disadvantages of Anger and Holding a Grudge

Another antidote is to think of the disadvantages of anger and holding a grudge. We hold grudges because we are holding onto pain. We create this real solid thing about how somebody harmed us in the past and we just can't forget it. We have this grudge and we really want to retaliate in some way although of course we're much too polite to say that (As 'good Buddhists', we don't want to retaliate).

First of all, we need to recognize that holding the grudge hurts us more than it hurts the other person, and really, really think about that, because that gives us the ability to later apply one of these other techniques. But initially, we have to be willing to question that

grudge instead of just holding on to it, making it the center of our identity. We have to be willing just to say “Wow! This grudge hurts me much more than it hurts the other person because the other person hurt me one time or five times or however many times it was, but every time I think about what he did, I hurt myself again.” We really project this incredibly solid image of how some people behaved towards us and we envision them as solid characters, not seeing any other aspects of their personality except this particular quality that they happened to have when they harmed us. So we focus on certain instances and qualities and think this is the person and this is the only relationship we have. We need to recognize that this way of thinking harms us much more than the other person because, regardless of what they did, they're living their life now or maybe even they're dead. They are certainly not thinking about it right now. But we can't let go of that situation and daily harm comes to us by us continually dwelling on it. So just acknowledging that gives us some ability to say “Well! Maybe I'm going to have to let go of this anger because it's not getting me any where.” We admit that the problem at this present moment is not what somebody did to us in the past but our current clinging to our anger and our inability to let go. We do that so much in this country, this culture – very much!

If you have difficulty applying this technique then you can use one of the others and question, “Was it this person's nature or not?” Or you can think this was the kindness of the person harming me by giving me the opportunity to generate patience. Or, you can recognize that the person who harmed you is somebody who is suffering and unhappy himself. If you really see that person as a suffering, unhappy human being, you can let go of so much anger.

Somebody recently told me a story that was quite moving. His childhood had been very difficult; his mother committed suicide and his father had been involved in alcohol. He had a lot of resentment and anger towards his father that originated from everything that happened when he was young. One day he went out sailing with his father. During the course of the day his father proceeded to tell him about what it was like for him when the mother killed herself and the kids were growing up; he described his own problems and torment. My friend told me that after hearing that, he recognized how desperately unhappy and confused his father had been. So much of his anger at that point just faded away and he felt compassion for his father. Instead of viewing his father as a hostile person who hated him, he saw him as someone who wanted to be happy but who was in a lot of pain. I thought it was really moving how he came to see his father in a completely different light.

Walking in the Other Person's Samsara

So this application of one of the techniques to look at the situation differently, allows our feelings to become transformed. Actually, that's the next technique here, that of recognizing the other person's unhappiness. So instead of just locking ourselves in the position, “I am unhappy because they did X, Y and Z”, we investigate, “Wow, why are they doing X, Y and Z?” We then realize it's because they are unhappy. What does it

feel like to be them and be unhappy? What does it feel like to really put ourselves in the shoes of the other person? This would be an excellent meditation for George Bush and Saddam Hussein, for them to think of the suffering the other one is going through. Because, we know what it feels like to be unhappy, we can recognize it in others, which makes it harder to be angry with other people.

Buttons, Buttons. What are our Buttons?

Another technique, which I personally find incredibly beneficial, is recognizing what all our buttons are in a particular situation. When we get angry, it's because someone is hitting on that thing that we are sensitive about. We usually say, "You're pushing my button. It is your fault. Stop!" But our buttons are our responsibility. Nobody can push our buttons if we did not have them.

So we have to look at our buttons, which are usually the things that we're attached to. In doing so, we really come to see the whole relationship between attachment and anger because the more attached we are to something, the angrier we get when things don't happen the way we want or if we get the opposite of what we desire.

Let's say somebody criticizes me -and I use this because we all get criticized - even though we feel like we're the only ones who get unfairly dumped on, it's actually a universal phenomenon. When we get criticized it is useful to respond by asking, "Well, what's my button here? Why am I so sensitive to this person's criticism?" and to really investigate our sensitivity to the criticism. We might find many different reasons. One is we really like them and we want them to think well of us. Or, it might be because we think what we did was good and want other people to acknowledge that, revealing our attachment to praise, approval or recognition. Or it might be because if they don't like us; then they are going to tell somebody else whom we do like, and that person won't like us anymore. So then it is attachment to another person. Or because they are criticizing us, we might get docked in pay and that's attachment to money. So to really look when we are getting criticized or when we have any kind of harmful event, what is it in our mind that says, "I'm sorry, but this is not permitted." We must examine that which we cling to, how we want things to be and ask why we are so very attached and see if there is space in the mind where things can be another way. We need to recognize what our buttons are, especially our attachment to possessions.

Another thing we are super attached to is our sense of justice. This one is so hard because you don't even recognize it until you live in another culture where there are different concepts about what justice means. We grow up from the time we're little with our own idea of what is and isn't fair, and since then our notions of fairness have been a source of conflict. When my brother got something I didn't, "Sorry, mum and dad, that is not fair! I want it too!" In school, "That's not fair. You can't let that kid do it and not me!" So our whole life, look at how we relate politically... In this country, we are always proclaiming, "It is not fair! It is not fair!" and this is how we relate to so many situations and conflicts. Things that we don't like we claim as not being unfair. So we have our

idea of what fairness is and what justice is, and basically, the world doesn't operate that way and we get really, really upset.

I'm not saying that we shouldn't be concerned when things are unfair. We can still say a situation is unjust but why become angry? That's the question. Why cling so strongly to the way we want things to be and why retaliate with anger?

Stopping the Cause for Future Unhappiness

So acknowledging our buttons is really helpful. Another way to help us subdue our anger is to recognize that if we just go along with our patterned behavior and retaliate, then we are in fact creating the cause to have more of this unpleasant situation. When we say or do things out of anger we're creating negative karma, which is the principal reason why we are having this unpleasant situation to start with. So come back to this notion of, "I want myself to be happy, therefore I'm not going to strike back at other people with anger." That's a completely different way of thinking from our usual mind. Usually we think, "I want myself to be happy, therefore I am going to beat somebody up who bothers me."

Buddha Atoms

Yet another thing that sometimes is quite useful is that when the image of the person who harmed you comes into your mind, have him exploded into molecules with each molecule transforming into a Buddha. Instead of seeing him as this rigid, solid person, you just look at every little atom of his body and imagine it is a Buddha. So the image of this devilish person just kind of disappears! We've watched Walt Disney enough, we can make this happen...Really, Walt Disney is very good for visualization. Just imagine something, and it goes poof -- all these Buddhas kind of radiate out. You don't need to be afraid of the image because it is only a thought with nothing substantial to it. It is like watching cartoons -- there is nothing real in the image or thought in our mind. It's kind of fun to do.

Remembering the Past Kindness of the People who Harmed us

Because often the person we hate most is also the person we care about a lot, it is helpful to remember the kindness that person showed us in the past. Some people get angrier with people they know well than they do with strangers. Others are more sensitive and get angrier with strangers. I had a really interesting conversation with somebody one day about this, and he was saying if a friend thinks something bad about him, he doesn't care so much because he just figures that with a friend, things can be worked out. But when there is some kind of prejudice in society against whatever kind of group people belong to, that makes him really, really angry.

For me, it's the exact opposite. Although I care about the prejudices that exist in society, I don't get angry about them. But if a friend pushes my button... So we are all quite different in these ways. One technique that can be applied in both situations is to remember the kindness of the person who harmed us, so that we release this attitude of him being this solid evil person. We recognize that this person has a lot of different qualities, and that we've related to them in many different ways. So we know, for example, in previous lives, everybody has been our parents, our lover, somebody who rescued us, or fed us and protected us. Remember that. In this lifetime maybe there are some bumps in the relationship, but in previous lifetimes this person was kind to us. So again that prevents us from making things super solid – "This is who this person is, therefore I am going to hate him forever", – by recognizing that actually in the previous lives, he had been very kind.

Sometimes we don't even have to look at previous lives, we can just look at this lifetime. We can even do this with our families of origin and transform the anger, resentment we hold towards our family members. We can recognize that those very same people were incredibly kind to us in other situations. They are the people who kept us alive and enabled us to be adults right now. If it wasn't for our family who took care of us when we were babies by feeding, clothing and protecting us, we wouldn't be alive right now. Instead of the harm we try to look at the whole picture. I think that it's really important to view it this way because it gives us a much more balanced perspective, even though sometimes it's hard to do.

Recalling the Essence of Taking Refuge

Also, when the mind arises that wants to retaliate, then it is really important to remember why we are taking refuge in the Buddha. Why would we want to harm other sentient beings?! We might usually think "I take refuge in the Buddha because the Buddha is good; He will protect me from this jerk". Remember the whole essence of taking refuge is in not harming other sentient beings. So if our refuge is something we cherish and protect in our heart, then remember that if we really have that kind of trust, faith and confidence in the Buddha, we must examine the desire to retaliate and harm somebody else. Recognize that it's not something that would make the Buddha happy.

Anger can also arise when people criticize Buddhism and it's tempting sometimes to get really defensive. "How can you say that? That's my religion!" Remember again that the Buddha is the one we trust, have faith in and take as our example and guide. The Buddhas cherish other sentient beings more than they cherish themselves. Then if we harm those very sentient beings that the Buddhas cherish so much, somehow we're not being true to our own refuge. Thinking in this way can sometimes ground us a little bit and help us to sit down and say, "Wow! I really have to look at this."

So all these are techniques for practice - it's like peeling away layers of an onion; we really have to go over it again and again.