

Notes on Patience

By Suvarnaprabha

Audio available at: <http://www.freebuddhistaudio.com/audio/details?num=LOC79>

Talk given at San Francisco Buddhist Center, November 2008

It is quite awesome to be here, I have to say. I've never quite been in a situation like this before [LAUGHTER]. We'll see how it goes.

Clarification of a few terms and names: Sangharakshita, Mahayana Buddhism and the Bodhisattva

So, I'm just going to refer to a couple of things in my talk and I know we've got a range of experience going on here, so I just want to clarify a couple things. One is, there's a Buddhist teacher, who some of you might not have heard of, called Sangharakshita, and he's actually the founder of our order, which is the Western Buddhist Order. Our order was started in 1968, in London. It emphasizes creativity and imagination, spiritual friendship, study, meditation and Right Livelihood.

Mahayana Buddhism is a form of Buddhism that appeared later, after the time of the historical Buddha, and it also very much emphasizes compassion and imagination – very “other-regarding”. So, Mahayana Buddhism especially emphasizes compassion in the form of something called the Bodhisattva Ideal, and I got this off of a book cover, actually, but I think it explains the spirit of the Bodhisattva well:

“In Mahayana Buddhism the Bodhisattva’s life exemplifies the resolution of the conflict between our own desires and the needs of others...The development of inner calm and positivity that leads to true wisdom is balanced by genuine and active concern for others, which flowers into great compassion.”

So, if we think of wisdom as a willingness to acknowledge how things are (and) how things work, including ourselves. Part of this means that we are interacting with forms of life that do not want to acknowledge how things are, and that we are also one of those forms of life. So, this is how things are, which is to say that there is suffering, because most of us do not accept life on its own terms. We prefer our own. And we stubbornly might even cling to our own terms, even if, on some level, we know that it's unrealistic. So, the Bodhisattva, this kind of ideal sort of being, is willing to acknowledge things, and beings, and ourselves, as we are.

And this requires an enormous amount of patience, which is the subject of this talk. More specifically, in Sanskrit, the word is *kshanti*, which I'm going to be talking about. It's usually translated as “patience”. It can also be translated as “forbearance, endurance” and “tolerance”.

Defining Kshanti

Sangharakshita says:

"It is difficult to translate kshanti by any one English word because it means a number of things. It means patience: patience with people, patience when things don't go your way. It means tolerance: allowing other people to have their own thoughts, their own ideas, their own beliefs, even their own prejudices. It means love and kindness. And it also means openness, willingness to take things in, and, especially, receptivity to truth."

So *kshanti* means not only patience, but a constellation of other positive, life-affirming mental states that we can cultivate: tolerance, love, kindness, generosity, openness and receptivity. It DOES NOT mean gritting your teeth, harming yourself, silence, bottled up rage, or being a passive victim. When we are patient, in this sense of the word, we are taking care of ourselves. Sometimes we take care of ourselves by being patient. I think we can all agree that most of the time, if not all the time, impatience kind of adds more problems to situations.

Kshanti is one of what are known as the Six or the Ten Perfections of Mahayana Buddhism, depending on which list you have. The Six Perfections are grouped into three sets of pairs. There's generosity and morality, patience and vigor, meditation and wisdom. These various pairs balance each other. So, patience is balanced with energy, and energy is balanced by patience. In the end they will merge. We might notice that we have a tendency toward one or the other of these kind of pulls. I think personally, I'm more of an energy type, enthusiastic. Which for many of us, for me, means that I'm easily frustrated and prone to getting irritated. So, I'm aware of that. It's just important for us to be aware of our tendencies and work with our habits when we're trying to practice. And I think that this is probably one of the main things we're doing in Buddhist practice. We are working with our tendencies and becoming more and more aware of habitual responses that we have that aren't that helpful sometimes.

It's easy to think of patience as being something that's kind of passive but this shows that that is not what is meant by *kshanti*. *Kshanti* is an expression of wisdom infused with energy, especially infused with loving energy. So Sangharakshita also says:

"Kshanti is a form of awareness, an awareness of suffering in which one does not react with anger."

So, I think of awareness of suffering as being like a prerequisite for us to be able to be patient. If we can see somebody who annoys us as a suffering being, and acknowledge our responsibility in that dynamic that's going on between us and this other person, in a way that's all we need to do. So, I think tuning into suffering is very important. Which is not to say that the person is not responsible for their actions, but it's not really about that. I'm thinking more in terms of, if we can look without self-reference at someone who is shouting at us, you will see that there is some pain there. It's not really about excusing them. It's just about being aware of suffering as part of how things are.

Patience features prominently in pre-Mahayana forms of Buddhism as well. The Dhammapada says, *"Patience is the highest austerity."* At the time of the Buddha and even today in India there are all kinds of people who are going around trying to purify themselves and practice spiritually by kinds of self-mortification: starvation, holding your arm up for six months until it starts to wither away, this kind of thing. And this

kind of idea, maybe in more subtle forms, definitely exists today. But the Buddha said, “you don’t need to physically harm yourself.” In other words, you do not need to go out looking for trouble, trouble will find you. Because our world is absolutely full of opportunities for us to practice patience. So, “*Patience is the highest austerity.*” I think the Buddha was quite a genius when he came up with that.

What Patience is Not

I’m going to say some more about patience and things that we can work with, but maybe before I do that, maybe we could be clear about things that are NOT patience. Would anybody care to give an example? Something that is NOT patience? A mental state?

[Audience members: “Despair.” “Anxiety.” “Anger.” “Endurance.” “Swallowing feelings.”] Good. Great, thank you. Repressing...

[“Indifference.”] Excellent.

[“Seconds on ice cream?”] [LAUGHTER] Seconds on ice cream!!

Okay one more on impatience.

[“Restlessness.” “Aggression.”] Thank you.

So, I was thinking about the difference between patience and impatience and I was reminded of the Taoist saying, “*Soft overcomes hard,*” or “*Soft wisdom overcomes hard wisdom.*” And, by hardness I mean resistance, being brittle or rigid. These are not wholesome mental states. I find that personally sometimes my response to stress or some kind of issue is that I do tend to get this kind of protective thing that comes up, or this kind of pseudo-protective thing, like a kind of toughness. So that’s one of the things I work with. I’m sure we all have our own customized responses.

So, the idea is that we need to keep the energy flowing between us and the world, even when we momentarily might hate the world sometimes. But we can’t completely separate ourselves from it. Just basically learning to live in a way that’s healthy for us and for the world.

Mahayana literature takes kind of an uncompromising stance about anger. For example, I believe this is from Shantideva, an Indian master, who says, “*One moment of anger destroys all merits one has accumulated through practice.*”

So, that can be a bit depressing [LAUGHTER]. Because, what’s the point, really? So, sometimes things can get a bit over the top in Buddhist literature, so I think one thing that’s good to do is not worry about taking things super literally, and looking at the spirit of the teaching rather than getting caught up in ideas that might just make ourselves feel bad about ourselves and not really help that much. So, I think the *spirit* of that quotation is that, as aspiring bodhisattvas, we want to just be able to acknowledge our connectedness to other beings, and anger can cut us off.

I heard a talk once where someone was making a distinction between patience with animate versus inanimate objects. Some people are very patient with other people, but they’ll get really pissed off if they lose their keys, or if the toothpaste tube isn’t working, or some things break. And I notice that some people have a lot of patience for animals and children, but hardly any for adults. [Audience member: “Like bears.”] [Laughter] So, obviously, in this talk I’m talking about not so much the inanimate

objects, although that's an excellent place for us to practice. Starting with the easier steps is kind of a good idea. That way we can have some practice for when more challenging things come around. So, I'm talking about other people, and also of course about ourselves.

So, I wanted to get into something a bit more practical as well. I thought of four areas that we can be mindful of that might help us cultivate patience. And, I ended up with an acronym, which is RED, but then I had to do two D's, because I thought of one other thing to add to it. But, anyway, I'm sure it will be super easy to remember. So the first part of **R.E.D.D.**, which is the R, is:

Rationalization: Working on Our Justifications for Negative Mental States

Especially of anger or other unskillful mental states. For example, righteous indignation. This is us telling ourselves that our anger is good. Justifying our feelings.

And I was really tripping on this because I was asking, "why do we always need to tell ourselves that we're right, or that we're wrong, or that we're good, or that we're bad?" I think doing this just puts another veil between us and what we're trying to perceive. And it's suffering. Some people might argue that it's suffering to tell yourself you're bad, but it's not suffering to tell yourself you're good. Although one might be slightly preferable over the other, I think they're both... I don't know, I'm just not sure how *real* they are. And especially if they're kind of supporting us *rationalizing* negative mental states. So, we have anger. There's nothing *wrong* with anger insofar as it's just energy. It's just energy coming out, bursting forth even. But, I think, when we're talking about expressing it, I think we need to be very careful, or at least mindful, about what we're doing. We need to not harm ourselves and other people, and this can be very tricky, because we don't want to repress – you know, swallow the feelings – and we don't want to cause harm.

This is why just being aware of our thoughts and emotions is so important. Especially when they're strong. You know, what do we do when we have a really strong emotion? Do we pin it on somebody else as blame? Do we say, "Okay, this has nothing to do with me, this is totally somebody else's responsibility"? Because that will not serve us, to the extent that we have that attitude. So, it's not really about being right and wrong, it's about being more interested in connecting or acknowledging our connectedness than in being right.

Expectations: Dealing with the Realities of Life

So, the second part of my not-perfect acronym, R.E.D.D., is expectations. I read a fascinating book a few months ago called *Deep Survival*. It was this guy who studied why in certain kind of extreme situations, certain people survived and some people did not. He was looking at all kinds of reasons, but some of the very interesting ones were psychological. One of the points that this book made was that there aren't really any accidents. Any kind of a system that you have isn't going to be perfect, and it's guaranteed that some of the time it's going to break down. That's just the way things work. The people who can't cope with changes in plans and actively work with them are often the ones who did not survive. I think this principle applies to our daily lives.

For example, one thing that isn't an accident is illness, or physical pain. Illness is an intrinsic part of the human form, and no one on Earth has ever escaped it. Yet, our expectations are such that we expect that we're not going to get sick – I mean, we might not even realize that, until we get sick, and we're super pissed off. We expect not to age, and we don't realize that either until it suddenly starts happening. I've personally found that really quite shocking. [LAUGHTER] Anyway, I think a lot of times expectations are mostly unconscious, but we can find out when we're surprised. Something that it was just perfectly obvious that it was going to happen, and we're just like "Wow, that's super shocking!"

Another example of this is, actually I remember reading something by Pema Chodron who said that.. she was in contact with somebody who I think was an alcoholic and they had had a relapse, and she was really disappointed in him. She was talking about it to her teacher, and he said, kind of like "What did you expect?" and "Just be kind to the person and help them. They don't really need your disappointment." And of course, those of us who are involved in 12-Step type things know that relapse is absolutely part of that system as well. So, why be surprised? That's the thing.

One last thing about expectations. I've really noticed this in terms of family. We seem like we always expect people in our family to behave *completely* differently than they always have [LAUGHTER]. And, so they do the thing that they always do, and you're just totally shocked. Like, "Oh, my God, how could they do that?" It's part of this weird cognitive dissonance going on between you. You know, "They've done that the last 400 times I've seen them, chances are they're going to continue." And again, we might not realize what we're expecting, but then we're all offended or shocked or whatever it is. So, I think that's also a really interesting area to just look into a bit more. And, in a way, just not being so attached to results. We want to engage with things, see what we can do, and then we let it go. One of the numerous things that is easy to say, but not as easy to do.

So, yes, rationalization, expectation, and then we come to... [Audience member: "There's a great quote that you might want to use: "I become aware of my expectations when they are not met."] Yeah. That's great. Well, that would have been a lot shorter than what I said [LAUGHTER]. That boils it down a bit more. [LAUGHTER].

Defensiveness: Using Our Soft Spots as Teaching Tools

So, then we have defensiveness. And again, this is something where we don't know what's going on, someone just says something, they might not even think they're saying anything, and you're like... you know, we *feel* like we're being attacked. Somebody else could say exactly the same thing to someone else and it doesn't bother them, but for some reason they hit a spot. They hit a spot for us. We might not even know it's there. Somehow it's getting to our sense of vulnerability, our fragility.

So, one excellent way that I get to practice this is when I read evaluations of a class I've offered, or a retreat or something. It's absolutely excruciating. But, it's very useful also, and it lets me basically find out what my insecurities are. Lucky me! [Laughter] I've also noticed that when the subject of money comes up at our board meetings, people get defensive and everything gets super weird.

So, anyway, something to be aware of. Something to be aware of in ourselves. Maybe we can ease up on blaming other people a bit if we just realize that we *are* being defensive, which is not to say that our feelings are invalid or anything like that, but it's something to be aware of. And if somebody else is being super touchy, maybe having a bit of sensitivity around that too, and again, rather than trying to be right, just seeing what we can do to connect with the situation.

Doormat (Passivity): Avoiding Abuse by Looking at Our Attitudes

So, the last "D" is Doormat, and this should be called "Passivity," but I was already having some issues with the acronym, making it work. So you might think, "Well, if I'm just patient and don't ask for anything, people will walk all over me." And, yes, they will. Or some people will. So, is that what this means, is that what we're meant to be doing?

I think that if we think of the Dharma as the pinnacle of sanity and health, we will realize that that's not going to be including abuse. That just doesn't make sense if we think of it in that kind of a framework. So, I hope it's clear that co-dependence and patience are what are called "near enemies" in Buddhism. In other words, we might mistake one for the other. But, they're not the same, at least in the motivation behind them, because co-dependence is motivated by fear, insecurity, confusion, craving, all sorts of other things. Patience is motivated by an understanding of how things are and understanding of interconnectedness that is infused with love.

So, Rationalization, Expectations, Defensiveness, and Doormat are just areas we can bring mindfulness into. And more proactively - because sometimes these things are sort of happening after the fact - but more proactively, we can resolve to bring patience into a situation or to a person before we even see them. So, as a way to just engage with challenges. We don't know what's going to happen when we walk out the door. We don't know at any time what's going to happen, so in a way, kind of having this sense of preparing ourselves for whatever may arise. For example, maybe when we get into our car, especially if we know we're a super aggressive driver or whatever, when we get into our car we can say, "Okay, if I get irritated, or if something happens, or if there's traffic, how am I going to respond to that?" Not that we want to anticipate everything coming from all directions, but you know, stuff's happening all the time. We're all surprised by it.

So, I was just wondering - I'm wrapping it up now, but - I was just wondering if anybody would like to say, perhaps, an area of your life that is challenging for you, that you think might benefit from you bringing more patience into. Any thoughts?

[Audience member: "Prop 8"] [Laughter] Yes!

[Audience members: "Driving." "Houseguests." "Aging." "Dieting." "4-month review." "Unemployment" "Illness." "Universal homophobia in my church."]

[Audience member: "All relationships."] [Laughter]

It's pretty much endless, isn't it?

[Audience member: "My question is, 'What pain do I have to recognize in a Mormon?'] Sorry?

[Repeats question]

That's a great question. Let me just wrap this up, and we'll get to that. You know, it's funny, I actually have something in here about the elections.

Treating Difficult People as Teachers

So, Mahayana Buddhism says, think of people, think of enemies or people who bug you as your teachers. And I do try to do this. I try to accept situations I don't like, and see if I can find a way for them to actually be helpful for me. And this is counter-intuitive in the extreme. I was really noticing, in the sense of tolerance and kindness, etc., I was just really aware during the election of my own intolerance. And I was very disturbed by it. I found myself thinking, with frustration, that most American voters are such selfish idiots, for example. But, even when I was talking with people who were on the same page as me, I still felt that I was getting kind of aggressive. I don't think of myself as being that way – I think of myself as being a tolerant person – so it was kind of upsetting. I think part of the problem is intolerance, and I don't want to be one of those people, even from the other side.

One of the verses from Tibetan Buddhism, from the Seven-Point Mind Training, says,

"When the environment and its inhabitants are enslaved by evil, turn unfavorable circumstances into the path of awakening."

So again, thinking of people, what can we learn from the situations that we're in? One thing that happens is that our hard spots get pointed out and since they're rigid it hurts to have something press against them. But of course, in a way, it's what we want sometimes. And I think that this is the way that we can heal ourselves by stopping the fight. One of my favorite lines from Leonard Cohen is:

*Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in*

There is a crack in everything and this is part of our system that we live in. This is what we can bring our love and understanding into more and more, every day, even if nobody else is doing it.

So, I'm just going to end with a few beautiful sentences about patience by Rilke. He's talking in terms of being an artist, but of course we're all artists in the sense that we create our lives. So he says:

"Being an artist means: not numbering and counting, but ripening like a tree, which doesn't force its sap, and stands confidently in the storms of spring. Summer comes only to those who are patient, who are there as if eternity lay before them, so unconcernedly silent and vast. I learn it every day of my life, learn it with pain I am grateful for. Patience is everything!"

[Discussion Period]