Patience

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 57:29

I'm told that in the early days of IMS—been here 40 years now, that's pretty amazing, isn't it?—in the early days of IMS, they got mail addressed using that acronym in different ways. One of those was addressed to the Instant Meditation Society. That reflects the kind of culture we have. We expect instant gratification or, at least, results after two weeks. I mean, we've been here for two weeks and what do we have to show for it? Well, we've been sitting and walking.

So tonight I'd like to talk about the quality of patience.

One of the ways in to explore patience is to look at the different ways we get impatient. There are different ways we get impatient, and that can help us understand some of the different qualities of patience.

One of the ways we get impatient that I think is very familiar to us, perhaps from the time we were children, is that we get impatient waiting for something good to happen in the future. Birthdays, holidays, end of school. I remember being so excited about certain things coming. That quality of impatience is there from a very young age—that kind of expectation or anticipation of something good to happen in the future.

When we start to look at this, and this is what our practice asks of us—to look at these qualities, to look at what happens in our minds—think about how you feel when you get impatient in this way. There's often some excitement, some kind of leaning towards, a sense of how great it's going to be when that happens. That's how I was when I was a kid anyway. And that kind of mind state is believing—believing that something in the future is going to be better than something now. There's some future configuration of experience that will be so wonderful.

I just want to point you back to something Bhante said yesterday about how all that's happening is just these sixth sense experiences. That's all that's happening. And yet we are excited waiting for some configuration of sixth sense experience. That's what's happening when we get impatient like that.

So think about how you feel. There is the excitement, and if there's the kind of projection into the future, we're really in our thoughts thinking about how great it's going to be. We're anticipating future pleasantness, feeling happy about future pleasantness, and completely ignoring the fact that right now it's actually kind of agitating. There's a restlessness in experience when we have this kind of impatience. I could hardly sit still when I was a kid waiting for my birthday.

This kind of impatience for something good to happen comes into our practice. We get impatient for some good meditative experience. Perhaps we've had a taste of calm or ease or peace, and having had that taste,

we want it back. We want more of it. There's an impatient quality. It's like, there's this experience happening now, but it's kind of like, "Yeah, yeah, yeah, I know I'm supposed to be paying attention to aversion and stuff, but what's really important, where the action really is, is where it's really calm." And so we get impatient for that experience to come.

I think Steve Armstrong coined the phrase: there's nothing like a good sit to ruin your day. You have a good sit and then you spend the rest of the day wanting it back.

So what do we do here? What's a helpful thing to do in this kind of situation? Notice the impatience. This is actually a helpful strategy. If we want to cultivate a wholesome quality—whether patience or love or happiness or kindness—we can look at what gets in its way. To cultivate patience, we can get familiar with impatience.

So what does it mean to notice impatience? To notice in particular this kind of impatience of leaning into experience, of hoping for something good to happen? The first thing is just to check in: What's this? What is this experience of impatience? It probably has an experience in the body; there's probably some agitation. There's often a lot in the world of thoughts and mind states going on around impatience.

On one retreat—I think it was my first three-month course—I remember doing walking meditation and I kept having all these thoughts about talking to my teacher. Any of you had that experience? What I realized was that in those thoughts there was this impatience for something good to happen. I was having a wanting, an impatience, for insight into impermanence. And this was manifesting by imagining I was having conversations with my teacher, telling him—

that I was having all these amazing insights into impermanence. And as I explored this, as I looked at this whole process of what was going on there, I saw that what I really wanted was to tell somebody I had had these great experiences. Because I had no clue what an insight into impermanence actually looked like. I didn't even know what I wanted.

This is very interesting, actually—this happens to us in practice. When we're impatient for results, often we're impatient for some idea, because often we have no clue what it is that we want. What the result is, what we're hoping for. Freedom. Nibbana. We have no clue what that is. And yet we're impatient for it.

So when we look at that, when we look at the actual experience of impatience, we see it's an idea. And in this case what I saw was an idea about wanting to look good to my teacher.

So investigating—what is this experience of impatience?

Thanissaro Bhikkhu talks about patience, this kind of patience with something that we are expecting or hoping to happen in the future, as being the patience of a farmer. I'll read this little section to you from one of his books. One of his teachers, Ajahn Tante, talks about being patient like farmers. Those of you who've never lived on a farm, even you know that farmers don't have an easy life. They work hard,

especially in Thailand where they don't have a lot of labor-saving devices. When the time comes to do what needs to be done, they have to do it quickly. In other words, when the rice grains are ready, you have to harvest them quickly before the mice get to them. You have to take care of them quickly, winnow the rice quickly before any late season rain comes to spoil it. So it's not a matter of being slow or casual, this patience of a farmer. The patience of a farmer is the sort that knows you can't plant rice today and expect to have the grains ripen tomorrow. It's going to take time, and during that time it's going to require work.

So patience, using this story, this example, doesn't mean passivity or slowness. There's an active quality to patience. Actually, I think sometimes we think about patience as being kind of sitting back and not doing. That's an idea we sometimes have about what patience is—like, "yeah, whatever." But the patience of our practice is a patience that is engaged. It's got a persistence to it.

So this brings in one of the qualities of patience: this gentle, persistent connecting with experience. This aspect of patience points to perseverance, diligence, steadiness, steadfastness. And one of the keys with this aspect of patience is patience with results—continuing our practice even if it seems like nothing is happening.

Sometimes in practice things feel like they're just in a flat place or an even place and it doesn't seem like much is happening. In those times we can feel like, "What am I doing wrong?" Nothing seems particularly wrong, but our instant gratification kicks in—where's the result?

Sometimes results ripen slowly. Think about the way fruit ripens on a tree. The apples are coming into season right now, and the apples are hanging on the tree and they may look really ripe. They look nice and red on the outside. And yet there's an imperceptible sweetening that happens on the inside. Day by day you may not notice any change as you look at that apple. But you may reach and try to pull on it and it doesn't release from the tree very easily. And so you know it's not ready, it's not ripe. Day by day you don't see much change. But there is an imperceptible sweetening happening. And one day you reach and the apple releases easily in your hand.

The practice of patience can have this quality where it seems like nothing is happening, and yet no moment of mindfulness is wasted. There can be these subtle shifts, subtle meetings—these meetings of experience that gently allow the connection to become more and more clear. And at some point the mind releases and understands something it didn't understand. But it's not just about that one moment.

It's not just about the moment when the apple falls into your hand. It's also about all those many, many moments of sweetening. And so in our practice, often we need to cultivate this quality of patience with that imperceptible sweetening, the imperceptible sense of understanding that's growing, that will allow for release at some point.

Kamala Masters has a story from her own practice around this. She was in a place of just feeling like not

much was happening, and she went and talked to her teacher about it. Munindraji used this analogy of the fruit. He said, "When the fruit is ripe, it will fall from the tree." I heard her say that and just used it over and over again. It became a little mantra for me: when the fruit is ripe, it will fall from the tree. A reminder that I don't have control over when the ripening happens. All we can really do is meet experience moment after moment. And when the time is ripe, when the conditions are ripe, understanding will happen.

As we persist in our practice with this gentle persistence, sometimes it seems that little more than will keeps us coming back—that place where it feels like not much is happening. We need to apply that persistence, connect, just meet this moment and this moment and this moment. But over time we do start to experience benefits in small ways and in large ways. In our meetings, you've all talked about even small ways of seeing how the mind can meet something challenging and be okay about it. There's a little shift of perspective around our usual relationship to the hindrances. Or we actually recognize happiness and feel it and know it, instead of grasping after it.

This was one of my patterns actually. At one point I realized I talked myself out of happiness. Happiness arose and rather than allowing myself to feel it, I began telling myself things along the lines of, "Well, yes, I'm happy now, but this isn't going to last. Besides that, I know most of the time I'm miserable." Or if I was connecting with the happiness, I might get lost in a story about how to keep it, instead of really just opening to it here and now. Sometimes we need patience to open to beautiful things too.

I remember one time I was sitting at my table having a meal. It was not during a retreat but in daily life, perhaps soon after a retreat. Some wave of joy arose in my experience, and it was a little overwhelming. The first thing my mind said was, "Whoa, I can't handle this," and it tried to shut it down. Then some wisdom in my mind said, "It's okay, it's impermanent, it won't last." That actually let me feel it more fully. It crested and got very strong, and then on the other side there was just this pervading happiness. So even patience with wholesome states sometimes, allowing ourselves to truly open to these beautiful states—it's not just about patience with hindrances.

These little shifts over time begin to encourage us. They begin to encourage the persistence, partly because we are experiencing the benefit of the practice. We are experiencing how the practice works. This generates confidence, it generates faith, it sometimes can generate a sense of curiosity. All of these qualities then in turn support more patience, and so it becomes a positive feedback loop.

Sometimes in this place of not seeming like much is happening, another analogy can be helpful: our job here is to meet our experience as if we were a naturalist looking at something new in our environment. Sayadaw U Tejaniya used this example. He said, think about the first people that went out under the stars at night, our ancestors way long ago. The first ones that actually looked up and had a cognizance of the stars in the night sky. There wasn't anybody to tell them what was happening up there. They just would go out each night and look at the sky. Over time they began to see patterns. They noticed perhaps over a very

long stretch of time that certain of those patterns were present in the spring and certain of them present in the fall, certain present at certain times of year and others present at other times. Just noticing the patterns. Nobody there to tell them about it. Now we've got all these books.

You know, you can go out now and find out which stars are up at certain times of the year, and which ones appear at other times. In the Northern Hemisphere, you can always find the North Star and orient yourself from there. We have people to tell us these things. Our ancestors didn't have that. What did they do? They went out and looked at the sky over and over and over again. They began to understand something about it through repeated observation, through the repeated meeting of experience.

Our practice is like that. We explore our experience as naturalists, with no need to overlay an idea about what is there, but rather with a curiosity about what is here. The patterns begin to reveal themselves. That's how insight works, in a way—the patterns of our minds begin to show themselves just through the willingness to meet experience over and over again.

Another kind of impatience that may be familiar to you is the impatience to get rid of, get over, or get past something unpleasant. This is an impatience connected to aversion toward what's happening in the present moment. For me, this was a big part of my life, this aspect of impatience.

One of the early places it really showed up was toward the end of my first three-month course, about two weeks before that retreat was over. There was so much impatience. I saw that transitions were very uncomfortable for me, and I was really impatient to have that transition over with. There was the unpleasantness of uncertainty about the transition, but also there was the idea of transition—and I didn't like that idea. Get me out of here. It was very painful for those last two weeks.

Actually, I got to have a little wake-up call, because I was so impatient to get home. Some of it was wondering how much I had changed—how great was it going to be when I got home? What would my friends think? So there was the impatience about the unpleasantness of the transition, but also an impatience to check out what I'd learned on retreat.

At some point in those last two weeks, I got a very sore throat. I looked in my throat and saw some very odd-looking things there. I realized I should go to the clinic, so I made an appointment and went. I sat at the clinic, and there was all this music playing and people bustling around. I looked around and thought: this is what I was impatient for. This is life outside. This is what I was waiting for. Reality check—this isn't so great. Again, it's just the six sense bases happening over and over again.

So we are impatient at times about something unpleasant in our present experience. We can see this kind of impatience in small ways too—like the impatience standing in the lunch line, waiting for the people ahead of you to make their salad or cut their fruit. Or the impatience as you're opening a drawer in your room and it sticks a little bit—just a little flash of irritation. Sometimes through these small moments, we can get familiar with this quality of impatience about unpleasantness.

At one point in my practice, I recognized that impatience was a big mind state for me. It happened a lot, and mostly what I saw were the big impatiences—the impatience about the end of a retreat, the impatience about a major life transition, the impatience to know something so I didn't have to be in this in-between ground. So I decided to make a study of impatience. I began noticing when impatience came up in my life, exploring patience by getting familiar with its opposite quality.

And it was everywhere. I was impatient when I was brushing my teeth. I was impatient when my shower ended—impatient to finish drying off and get on to the next thing. I began to see that it was very helpful not to just brush past those small impatiences. Sometimes when little impatiences flare up, little aversions, we think, "Oh, that's not a big deal." We kind of overlay something on top of it—as I was talking about the other day—like "Oh, it's so lovely taking a walk," instead of recognizing the impatience for the walk to be over, knowing the not wanting to be walking. We can overlay and not clearly recognize that in truth there is this little flash of impatience. This little flash.

So it can be really helpful to get familiar with those little flashes. The skill that you develop in meeting the small ones supports you in being able to meet the pattern when it gets large. Because the pattern in the small is very similar to the pattern in the large—it's just not quite grown so much yet. And so there's a lot you can understand by looking at it in the small. It's not so hard to be with when it's small, so you can learn a great deal about that.

Sometimes in practice, small things can seem very large. We have a name for this phenomenon. We call it yogi mind. It seems to happen as we settle in retreat. We get more settled, more calm, and then small things become so huge. Like the way somebody uses their knife—it becomes disastrous.

The classic story of yogi mind comes from a retreat that happens in the desert in California each year. This must have happened in the 80s sometime, but somebody apparently left a note for the managers asking if they would mind calling the airport to get them to reroute the planes flying overhead. They obviously didn't know there was a retreat center happening there, and they could clearly reroute the planes so that they wouldn't disturb the yogis when the planes flew overhead. This is an example of yogi mind—something small becoming like, "This needs to be fixed now."

This is about the time in retreat when this kind of thing happens, so you might be noticing things like this, where it seems like the reaction is out of proportion to the actual event. If you're noticing something like that, it's very natural. It's part of the process. Just recognize: okay, yogi mind is happening. You don't need to believe the story that this is a major problem and we need to ask the managers to do something about it. Check in to what's actually happening. Sometimes there may be a bit of over-response, over-reactivity. Just remind yourself of yogi mind and see if you can be patient with the small things, partly by reminding yourself that they are small. But not repressing the response—that's not what this is about. There can be a big response. Know that response, but remind yourself of what's actually happening.

This kind of impatience—being impatient when something unpleasant is happening—we can also see in

larger ways around issues of injustice, things that actually need to change in this society. There are two sides I'd like to explore around patience in this kind of scenario.

One aspect, when we think about this kind of patience, is that it points to qualities of forbearance, tolerance, patience under insult. How do we meet experience with a patient mind? And so one side of the exploration is to look at when it is skillful to act and when it is skillful to refrain from acting.

For instance, if there's a sense that something is wrong or off and there's real anger and aversion about it, a sense of hatred in the mind, it may be helpful to explore that in the mind and not allow the hatred to leak out into experience. Perhaps somebody says something to you and you realize that it's not fair or it's an injustice, and you have a flaring up. Maybe there's a recognition of the aversion or ill will in the mind at that point, and so you settle back. This isn't about repressing the feeling. There may be an exploration of what it's like to fully allow that feeling—that's wrong, that person is behaving unskillfully and causing harm, and I'm really mad about that. To not repress all of that, but also to explore not letting it leak out into our actions. Perhaps taking a pause before responding. So that's one side of the exploration: looking at whether this is the time for action, or the time to explore inwardly what's happening.

Another side—and there are probably more sides to this than I'm bringing up right now—is that there are times when definitely action is called for. The practice of patience itself doesn't necessarily mean passivity. It doesn't mean non-action. Gandhi had a beautiful phrase for his philosophy of engagement with the repressive regime of British rule in India. He had a philosophy of non-passive, non-violent, non-cooperation.

In this case, my exploration or my understanding is that the tolerance or forbearance here isn't about saying that it's okay that this injustice is happening. It's about forbearance with the process of change. Taking action and understanding, knowing that sometimes action doesn't create change immediately.

Martin Luther King had a beautiful way of expressing this, and he called it a philosophy of love. This is from his famous 1963 speech:

"There's another thing about this philosophy, this philosophy of love, that says you can stand before an unjust system and resist it with all your might and yet maintain an attitude of active goodwill toward the perpetrators of that unjust system."

He goes on to say that the ethic of love can stand at the center of the nonviolent movement. "In many instances we've been able to stand before the most violent opponents and say in substance: We will meet your capacity to inflict suffering by our capacity to endure suffering. We will meet your physical force with soul force. Do to us what you will and we will still love you. Throw us in jail and we will still love you. Threaten our children and bomb our homes and our churches, and as difficult as it is, we will still love you. Send your hooded perpetrators of violence into our communities at midnight hours and drag us onto some wayside road and beat us and leave us half dead, and as difficult as it is, we will still love you. But be

assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer, and one day we will win our freedom. We will not only win our freedom for ourselves, we will so appeal to your heart and your conscience that we will win you in the process, and our victory will be a double victory."

This bringing of the quality of love to action rather than hatred—in our practice, this soul force, this force of love to meet difficult experience, can be so helpful. We can cultivate patience with the difficulties of practice. And the more mindful we get, the more we see them. This is one of the ironies of our practice. It's not a mistake when you see mindfulness revealing more suffering. It's not that the suffering wasn't there. It's that the mindfulness is revealing it. I think it was Trungpa Rinpoche who said practice is one insult after another. That's what it feels like.

And so we can cultivate patience with our own minds. We've actually spent a lot of years cultivating our habits, our patterns of mind. We've practiced over and over again the ways that we react. And so it's not surprising that one three-month retreat, or two weeks of a retreat, or six weeks of retreat is not going to uproot a whole lifetime—if not multiple lifetimes—of habit. The first noble truth: understand dukkha. And for us in practice, this also means being patient with the cycles of practice.

Pretty much most of the people I've talked to have experienced some form of cycle in the practice where there have been periods of ease and peace followed by periods of chaos and confusion and hindrance attacks. This is part of the process. I think it was Sharon who talked about this using an analogy of firing a rocket. There's a lot of junk up in space—old satellites and parts of things. Apparently there's a big garbage dump up there. In order to fire a rocket, you need to know where all that stuff is, and then when there's a clear space, you can fire. It's kind of like that. The mind moves into a space where there's clearness perhaps, some ease, some peace. And parts of the psyche that haven't had their day in the sun yet are going, "Oh, my turn now!" Then you have some new thing arise, some kind of reactivity.

This is part of the process. One teacher, Michelle McDonald, called it the cycle of purity and purification. Purity and purification. It's a very natural part of this unfolding. And so it's not a mistake when, after a period of ease, it may feel more challenging or more difficult for a time. It's not a mistake. It's part of the natural unfolding of this process.

There are times when it's challenging to be with those difficult states. I appreciate one of Nyanaponika Thera's phrases—he was a German scholar and monastic who worked for the Buddhist Publication Society and wrote many beautiful things. One phrase he had that resonates with me, one of those mantras that comes back: "We aim for a peaceful penetration of the irrational regions of our mind." That's a good description of patience. A peaceful penetration of the irrational regions of our mind. We can think of Gandhi's non-passive, non-violent, non-cooperation with respect to working with these difficult states.

Non-passive in that we meet these hindrances, actively engage with what's happening when it's difficult. Non-violent in that we bring, or try to bring, a mind of kindness to that exploration. And non-cooperation in that we don't let the hindrance just run amok.

Running through the two kinds of impatience—impatience for pleasant things to happen, impatience for unpleasant things to go away—is a deeper pattern of non-acceptance with just how things are in the present moment. And this connects with another aspect of patience, which is a deep kind of acceptance. Acceptance for things as they are.

As we start to touch in and actually meet our experience, we see that what is here, what has arisen—here it is. It's here. It's already here. This anger, this frustration, this joy, this boredom. It's here already. You can't change that. It's already here. And so there's a patience with meeting what's here, and yet learning how to respond skillfully to shape the next moment of experience. This meeting of moment-to-moment experience really begins to show us this unfolding. When we taste this quality of acceptance, we really start to understand the depth of patience, what it's capable of for us in our minds and hearts.

Ajahn Sumedho says, "It's a great relief to accept things the way they are. Because the only real misery is wanting to see them in some other way." This is, again, pointing to this moment. This moment, what's already here. Accepting what is already here. And with wisdom, choosing to step forward.

It's again not about passivity, but about allowing, through the direct meeting of things as they are in this moment. As we meet things as they are, wisdom begins to emerge, and wisdom helps us act. Wisdom is not passive. Wisdom acts for the benefit of ourselves and others. So we can explore this aspect of acceptance. But we cannot rush the process of change. When the fruit is ripe, it will fall from the tree.

Sometimes after we've had some kind of understanding or insight, we've seen into something clearly in a moment, and we have this little thought in our mind of, "Ah, figured that one out." I had that happen at one point on an early retreat when I was at Spirit Rock. I had a kind of shift of perspective around pain in my body. And that shift of perspective allowed me to be completely okay with quite unpleasant sensation. It was one of the first times—I think it maybe was the first time—I really had seen the way a shift of the mind could allow unpleasant physical sensation to be experienced with ease. And the thought that went through my mind—I laugh at this point—it's like, "Wow, I'm glad I don't have to go through that again." I actually thought that I'd figured it out.

And so sometimes—many times—we have an insight. That experience, that shift of perspective of being able to meet, of the mind being at ease with unpleasant experience—that's a moment of insight. It's an understanding in the mind. It's a letting go of something. It's a letting go of craving things to be some other way. An actual releasing of that in the mind in the moment.

Our insights aren't quite like knowledge that, once we've learned them, we can just decide to pick them up. "Oh yeah, I'm having pain right now. Let me pick up that insight I had three weeks ago and put that on." It doesn't work that way. And so sometimes we have to have patience after we've had insights, because insights are impermanent. Patience is actually needed at all points on the path, this quality of patience.

We may have had an insight into the way the mind clings and grasps around pain and seen it release. And yet at another sitting—I remember, I think I was sitting right about there—I was sitting with so much pain in the body, so much dukkha. And I could feel the clinging. I could feel the mind just squeezing down around the pain.

And my mind basically said, "I'd let go if I knew how. I'd let go if I knew what to let go of, how to let go of this." The mind was simply not in the place where it could do that in that moment.

And so we have to meet that experience. This is also not a mistake. This is part of the way the path works, the way the practice unfolds. At that point, the mind is learning about dukkha. It's not just something we say—it's actually true. As the mind really gets it, part of what has to happen is that it truly understands that craving equals dukkha. At very, very deep levels the mind has to understand this message over and over and over again. Some part of our mind just really wants there to be something—anything—out there that we can hold on to that will make us happy. And we have to learn this lesson over and over again.

Through patience with that process of meeting dukkha over and over again, the mind begins to understand. It's like the mind begins to understand how to let go. In that situation I described, I had no idea how to let go of that pain, and I could see that I had no idea. That's the beginning of the insight that this isn't about me doing it. It's about cultivating the conditions for the releasing to happen, for the wisdom to arise and the releasing to occur.

Sometimes we think if only we could get past all this dukkha and be in a state of ease or peace or bliss, that would be great. And so we do, perhaps at times, start to feel happiness or ease or peace—calm, wholesome, beautiful states of mind arising. And we also begin to see... well, we first might think, who would need patience with those? But over time we might find that we start to wonder, "What's next? Is it just about being calm? Is that what this is about? Is that what I signed up for—a life of everything being calm?" Maybe we think, "Is that really what I want? Is that really it?"

The Buddha actually made one reflection once. He said—and this is a paraphrase, I don't have the actual quote—something along the lines of: "The way I found freedom was that I wasn't satisfied with simply experiencing wholesome mind states." It's not just about experiencing wholesome mind states.

And so sometimes we also need the patience to meet this: calm is happening, ease is happening, peace is happening. Without the mind going, "And where's—whatever it is that I'm expecting? Some kind of mind-blowing enlightenment? Where's that?" Calm is like this. Peace is like this. Ease is like this.

There's a saying in Burma: patience is the road to Nibbana. It is through this quality of patient willingness to meet experience—whatever that experience is—to meet pleasant experience, unpleasant experience, neutral experience, to meet change in many forms, to meet dukkha. This willingness to be patiently in the moment—and it is a patience that's right in this moment—that is the quality that allows the unfolding of the practice to lead to freedom.

Let's just sit for a moment.

Thank you for your attention.

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