Patience: Active Acceptance

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 55:10

I want to read one of my favorite quotations from the Dalai Lama. He's talking about the need for peace and freedom and how calling on governments to provide peace and freedom is not sufficient:

"It is crucial to investigate what the true nature of happiness is, what the true source of peace is, so that we can develop a form of peace that will last. The question of real lasting world peace concerns human beings, so basic human feelings are also at its root. Through inner peace, genuine world peace can be achieved. In this, the importance of individual responsibility is quite clear. Peace must first be discovered within ourselves, then gradually expanded to include our families, our communities, and ultimately the whole planet. Developing attitudes such as love, compassion, patience, and understanding between human beings is not merely a source of personal happiness, but has become a condition for human survival."

Tonight I want to talk a little bit about one of the deep-rooted habits of our conditioned mind that keeps us from recognizing true peace and profound happiness. I also want to explore how this quality that the Dalai Lama spoke of—patience—can be helpful in our practice and in our lives to open our awareness, enabling us to recognize and abide in true peace and happiness.

Throughout these days we have been speaking, and will probably continue to speak, of how this is a practice of awakening—of how our true nature is peace, that peace is our very existence. But is that actually our experience in an ongoing way? We may have glimpses of our true nature of peace. Maybe for some people the glimpses last a little longer. Maybe you have frequent glimpses. I know for many of us the glimpses are much less frequent—if we even notice them at all. They're there, but whether we notice them is the question.

What seems to come up in talking with people, especially in the first days of a meditation retreat, is that what we actually seem to be opening to is frustration, pain, discontent, sleepiness, boredom, doubt—the whole list—with an occasional moment of happiness and peace and quietness maybe to balance it. So how do we lose sight of what is our true nature?

The Buddha said that one of the things that motivated him to teach, that really deeply touched his heart of compassion, was that in looking through the world he could tell that the deepest motivation of everybody—something we all share—is that we want to be happy. It seems like that's something that links us all. What is so sad is that through our not understanding clearly our own nature, the nature of reality, what we tend to do in our pursuit of happiness—which we're guaranteed in this country—is things that increase and continue the cycle of suffering and confusion. It's really sad because it's so unnecessary.

One of the great benefits of taking time like this, these ten days on a meditation retreat, is that for a little while we've stopped some of our cycle of frenzied activity and we're taking the time to really inquire into what's going on here. What's the nature of happiness? What's the nature of suffering? How does suffering arise? How is it created? How does it continue?

Khenpo Rinpoche said once that the main purpose of these Dharma teachings is to find out what is the nature of the non-deluded mind as well as how the deluded mind works. You'll find that experience fluctuates between the two. There are times when we're really seeing, knowing, understanding the nature of the non-deluded mind. And there are other times that we're deeply entrenched in discovering how the deluded mind works. That's the point of our mindful awareness practice—to be with the suffering, the difficulty, and pay attention to see what's really going on.

I feel that one of the basic manifestations of our deluded mind is a core misunderstanding of what will really make us happy. This is what sets up the ongoing cycle of craving and trying to get and being dissatisfied.

Some very simple examples: Our idea of happiness or peace might be, very crassly, getting what we want. Getting what we want could be physical comfort. It could be certain physical conditions. It could be having people treat us the way we want them to. It could be having all the injustice in the world disappear. It could be having certain types of sitting—spacious, alert, aware, really concentrated, really focused. It could just be absence of pain. You can add whatever comes up in your own list.

As we begin to inquire into what's really happening in our experience through the process of mindful, undiscriminating, choiceless awareness, we begin to see that inquiry challenges these basic assumptions of what happiness is. If you can imagine or remember, or even touch for a moment, times here—sitting and walking or just having tea—one of those moments of very alert, awake, spacious awareness, regardless of what particular experience or appearance is arising. It might be that there's hearing and just that vivid awakeness that's fully present. Or it could be seeing, or sensation in the body.

It could be an emotion. It doesn't matter what's happening. But in that moment where the relationship to whatever is arising is not one of clinging or grasping, not one of resistance or pushing away, not in any way involved and stuck to that experience, but very clearly awake and present, knowing quite clearly what is arising—in that moment, what's the problem?

In those sometimes all too brief moments of this vivid non-grasping awareness, nothing that arises is really such a problem that we're acutely suffering. We're not lost in fighting or holding on. Moments like this point to the nature of our mind, point to the peace that is who and what we truly are. And in that moment there's nothing we have to do. It seems so simple.

And yet so quickly—at least for me, I won't speak for anybody else—so quickly, over and over and over, the attention in the mind gets distracted, gets somehow involved in a particular experience. Either

struggle or conflict with myself, conflict with my experience, wanting things to be different.

If we look at what's happened in that moment where we get distracted, we can find that on one level we've begun again to believe that our happiness or peace depends on some changing condition. We're looking for it where it can never be found. As soon as there's a sense of struggle, as soon as there's some grasping or desire going on, somewhere, somehow, I'm thinking that this particular internal experience that's happening is going to make me happy. That ease of body will make me happy. That the weather is the thing that will make me happy. That the way other people behave is the thing that makes me happy or makes me unhappy.

We find that we're looking either to internal changing experience or to so-called external changing experience. But it's all, all of it, in constant flux. There is no experience that lasts. This goes to what Joseph spoke about last night as one of the mind turnings: the deep, visceral understanding of impermanence. Because when we really, really get it, then that clinging to some changing experience is not going to arise. And it's that clinging, that resistance, that turns us away from recognizing the potential for peace here and now.

It's not that that particular experience—the leg pain, the beautiful day, whatever—has to go away. It's the clinging and the resistance that blinds us to what is possible.

So one of the root ways that we get in the habit of getting lost in this confused way of relating to experience is what I want to talk about. And that's the deep-rooted habit of mind of relating to experience with craving and holding on if it's pleasant, with pushing away, resistance, some kind of aversion or anger if the experience is unpleasant. And if it's neutral, we tend not to notice it too much. We get bored, we space out, we create some whole melodrama that at least holds our attention more than a neutral experience.

In Buddhist psychology, in the way of describing our mental and physical experience, it's really brought down to the very basic, bare experience without interpretation. In any moment we're experiencing one of six sense experiences: seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, tasting, and whatever mental experience might be arising—thoughts, emotions. The mind in that way is treated as a sense door. And in that moment of, say, hearing, it's said to be experienced as either pleasant or unpleasant or neutral.

Now this can be really obvious sometimes, but a lot of times it's quite subtle. And it's not what we're so tuned into noticing. So what happens in that moment, if it's a pleasant sound, for example, and we don't notice that, there's not awareness at that point of contact at the sense door—then almost immediately the habit of the deluded mind will say, "Oh, that's nice. I like it. Let's have some more." If it's unpleasant, it almost immediately moves into, "This isn't really good. In fact it's bad, it's a big mistake, and it needs to change." And it can go on from there, depending how long the experience lasts and our particular propensity. If it's neutral, we tend not to notice. It just kind of passes us by.

These three reactions are spoken of as some of the roots of unwholesome behavior in the mind: the root of greed, of hatred, of confusion or delusion. In a lot of the way Buddhist psychology describes experience and suffering, it often comes back to one of these three roots as the motivation or intention of thought, speech, and action.

What I want to talk about tonight, though, is how when we don't realize this process is happening—and it's a habit, it's not inevitable—when we don't realize the sensing of pleasant and wanting more, it becomes a filter through which we tend to interpret our experience without even realizing it. So if it's pleasant: "Oh good, this is good, this is how things are supposed to be, this is correct." If it's unpleasant: "It's bad or evil or a big mistake, it's not supposed to happen." And again, neutral, we don't interpret, we just go and create something else.

What's interesting is that often people will come in during a long retreat and say they've begun to notice that they're very calm. And rather than that being something they're relaxing into, they're realizing that they found the calm sort of neutral and boring. And the mind then began to create suffering scenarios in order to wake up.

These filters of our conditioning, these ways that we interpret experience, are very strong and powerful if we don't recognize them when they're present. What we often find happening in a day of sitting or walking on retreat—it's easier to notice there, but it's the same thing that goes on when we're at our jobs or with our family—is that when we're caught in the blinders of attachment or aversion, we're not able at that moment to open up to the big picture. It's sort of like tunnel vision; we're locked on that particular thing.

We get so entangled in either trying to prolong or bring back the pleasant experience, or in fighting and struggling with the unpleasant experience, judging it. We get so entangled, and we suffer so much from that, that the activity itself keeps us so occupied we don't notice another possibility altogether. I've used this example before: it's like being in prison and spending all your time trying to rearrange the furniture and make the room nice so it's as comfortable and spacious as possible—and that keeps you so busy you don't notice that the door is open all the time and you can just walk out. It's sort of like that in the way we engage with experience, with this push-pull and judging of it.

So as you go through the day, tonight, tomorrow, see if you notice this filter on experience happening at all. And again, it's not to judge it as bad or good, but simply to begin to notice the filter. Simple retreat examples: you have a sitting that is pleasant. Pleasant could mean simply that it meets your expectations of what's supposed to be happening. Or it could be that it's comfortable, or that you felt really concentrated, or really spacious. It really doesn't matter what it is—it's just the fact that it was pleasant, and immediately, without realizing it, there arises: "Oh, this is how it's supposed to be. This is correct meditation. This is what's supposed to be happening."

And then another sitting that's spacey, all over the place, or the body's really painful, or thoughts are

arising every half of a breath, and there's this sense of uncomfortableness. It's so easy not to notice the filter that says, "This is wrong, this is bad, this is a mistake, I'm not doing it right, this isn't what's supposed to happen." Both of these filters, when unseen, are taking us far away from the actual bare experience. This is how we get so lost, so out of touch with the bare experience of what's happening now.

A lot of what we're doing in the very simple practice of sitting—coming back to the bare experience of hearing or breathing or sensation in the body, whatever's arising—is to help us begin to actually know what's happening and tell the difference between that and all the interpretations and stories and hoopla that we build up and then take to be so without realizing it.

For example, say in the hall there's somebody coughing. It's unpleasant. Without noticing that, it's so easy to move into aversion and judgment and hypochondria and anger. Quite literally, I'm not exaggerating—there are some retreats where people have reported that they felt they were barely restraining themselves from throttling the person next to them because they were sniffing or coughing or something. And they would have a little sense: "I think this is out of proportion." But the pain, the suffering, is very genuine. I laugh to try and lighten it, but the person is really in deep suffering about this.

Our practice is simply: "Oh, can I come back to the experience of hearing? Just the sound itself." And in that, you might notice if it's unpleasant. You might even see the whole build-up from the unpleasant. And in the seeing, that's enough. We don't have to get so lost in all of that. But part of the problem is we don't like to come back to the unpleasant. That's the whole point of patience, and why I want to talk about that in a minute.

Our whole training is: if it's unpleasant, it shouldn't be happening, and I don't have to be here with it. All our training is to get away if it's unpleasant. If it's pleasant, all our training is to hang on, make it last, do it again. And desire can lead to the same kind of elaborate story that an unpleasant sound can. Strong, strong habit. Not inevitable.

Another example, and this is a little bit more subtle: someone experiencing a strong tension in the head. Happening a lot, throughout a lot of sittings. It's so easy to build that up into a whole thing: "This tension is unbearable. Eight more days of this. I'll never last eight more days. I'll never even last the rest of the sitting." And moving even from that into: "This tension is reflective of the way I relate to life, of the way I relate to myself. This tension is here because I am such an uptight, rigid person. I'm unloving. I'm harsh." And it can just go on and on and on until by the time—

someone's actually speaking about this experience in an interview, the tension in the head is barely acknowledged. It's mushroomed into a whole story of self-hatred or unworthiness or whatever. And the habits of our mind—they're really expert at picking the particular story that's really going to hook us, that's sort of hard to see through.

Now, somebody coughing is a lot easier than something that leads into our deep-rooted psychological

patterns. And I'm not saying the psychological patterns aren't true—they might be true—but what's actually happening in the moment is an experience of tension that's unpleasant. And if we can see that, that that's just what's happening, it does not have to mushroom into such a whole story. Sometimes when we notice we're really caught in some story, it's possible to bring the attention back to the trigger, to the bare experience that's going on. And it's amazing how that can cut through and bring us back into a balanced relationship to our experience.

I remember one time I was on a long retreat, doing walking meditation, and I thought I was very present—noticing thinking, noticing the sensations. I wasn't spacing out, so to speak. I was quite present. And then I started to notice that the thoughts were becoming very judgmental, very self-hating. They started to move into stories that dealt with the present, and then they started going backwards in time. When I realized I was back to the third grade and the horrible things I had done to other kids, and that proved what a worthless person I was, I said, wait a minute. I think I'm missing something in this experience.

I just stood there and opened up the field of attention. I said, well, what's going on now? And it was amazing, because what was going on that I hadn't noticed was a mild pain in my toe. That was all. It wasn't even a bad pain. But it was unpleasant, and I hadn't noticed it. And out of habit, I started to react to unpleasantness with aversion and resistance, and then my particular personality propensity was to take that anger and turn it inward. Someone else might turn it outward, or might go off into a different pattern altogether.

Nisargadatta Maharaj said once, "We miss the real by lack of attention, and we create the unreal by excess of imagination." What we're trying to do here is help us, moment by moment, to recognize the real in the whole range of its manifestations. Not to judge these habits of mind as bad—that's just falling into the same filter—but to understand how they work.

When unseen, these habits of reaction to pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral are what keeps our sense of separation going. It's what feeds and strengthens desire, fear, hatred, confusion. It keeps us looking elsewhere, looking outward, looking to another time, another place, another experience for freedom or peace. It keeps us from recognizing the potential for peace and freedom here and now, keeps us from noticing the essential purity and completeness that is here—here and now and always.

So our practice of mindful awareness, of simply and gently coming to connect with and recognize our experience—what's happening, without judgment, without agenda, without reaction—it opens us to another possibility altogether of how to be with our experience, which is to be fully present with things just as they are. It's simple, but so difficult to be in that place of open acceptance, moment by moment by moment.

And so we practice being with things just as they are. The different techniques—tuning into hearing, tuning into breath, tuning into sensations, emotions, whatever—that sense of waking up, "Oh, I've really

been spaced out," and coming back, it functions as one of my teachers described it: like a rattle with a two-year-old. A two-year-old is really locked onto something, screaming, having a tantrum, wanting something so badly. And on the other side of the room, you just shake a little rattle, and they just forget the whole story. They turn around and go, "Oh yeah, look at the rattle."

It's sort of like that. Each moment we can wake up and just connect. It doesn't even matter what we're connecting with—just connect with what is. It's like that rattle. It's simple. We don't have to do so much. We just have to stop our confused involvement.

As a little aside, speaking about the different techniques that we use as a rattle, I just wanted to say again that we've talked about beginning a sitting by staying with hearing, or maybe being with the breath, being with sensations. We wanted to emphasize that there is no one correct or right way that you're supposed to do it. For some people, beginning a sitting and opening to hearing, or using hearing as the rattle the whole time, is extremely helpful. Helpful means not that it's always pleasant, not that we're going to enjoy every minute. Helpful means it helps us stay alert, awake, and able to relate in a balanced way. For some people, that's not helpful, and moving right into a balanced and connected experience of the sensations of breathing is what's helpful.

For some people, beginning with breathing and then opening up to sensations in the body is what's helpful. We're offering different techniques, and I want to say: really look at your own experience. Not by whether you like it or not—that's got nothing to do with it—but whether it helps you come back over and over to reconnect with a sense of ease, connectedness, and clear seeing. And it's going to vary a lot. So don't set up some expectation that if you figure out the right way, then you'll always be open and connected and spacious. Sorry. Doesn't work like that.

One aspect of the non-deluded mind, an expression of the non-deluded mind, is this quality of patience. Patience is extremely important in this practice, this work that we're doing here together. I want to talk a little bit about patience and what I'm meaning by it, because I mean something quite specific.

Patience is an aspect of loving-kindness. We use the word mettā in Pali, which is a sense of very active connection with beings, with experience, that is limitless—not discriminating, not feeling loving-kindness for this person but not for that person because I don't like the way they act. A moment of loving-kindness is very spacious, very active, very connected. And patience has this quality.

I think patience gets a bad rap in our culture. In meditation too, people come and say, "Well, this horrible thing is happening and everything I've tried doesn't work, so I guess I'll have to be patient." It's like the last resort when nothing else works. This is not exactly what I'm referring to. We call it patience, but it's more like passive endurance: "Okay, I'm putting up with this until it goes away. I'm really cultivating patience." That's not patience. That's aversion—just masquerading in a mellower form.

There's another way we call it patience: "Okay, I know this is difficult. It's here. I've seen it. I've really

accepted it. I've really allowed it. Now I'll sort of detach and not really pay attention to it until it goes away." That's also not being patient.

Patience has the characteristic of acceptance and of spaciousness. And it's also an active connection and acceptance with whatever experience is arising. As the Dalai Lama spoke of the necessity for patience between human beings, what we can discover and cultivate here is the quality of patience within ourselves, with our own experience. It's a very powerful force.

Patience actively meets whatever experience is arising. It's not like looking at it from a distance and saying, "Okay, later we'll check it out." It's really opening to meet very directly and very fully, and it's accompanied by compassion. So if it's a difficult experience, that meeting has an open, non-judging quality that is really present for and okay with the difficulty, the unpleasantness in the situation.

Patience is also the same way we meet pleasant experiences. We tend to think of patience only with the unpleasant, but that same quality of open, active connection, non-judging, non-violent, is the same way patience meets pleasant experience and neutral experience—knowing it clearly, allowing it fully, but not reactive, not caught up in trying to make it different or trying to keep it from going away.

There's one other way that people often seem to get confused or mistake aversion for patience, and it's the use of this term "letting go"—which is used a lot. "I just have to let go of my attachment. I have to let go of my anger." I'm personally on a little crusade to change that particular expression, because over and over again people will be saying, "Well, this is going on, I just haven't been able to let go of it yet." And reading between the lines, what it means is: it's still here, it hasn't gone away, I haven't been able to get rid of it yet.

In the aspect of patience, if you could change "letting go" to "letting it be"—it's just totally okay that this experience is happening, really present with it, quite awake, and really okay when it goes. Because it will.

Everything does.

And one other aspect of patience that I found very interesting. I was reading a commentary on different aspects. We call the perfections of the Buddha different qualities that during all the many eons of bodhisattva-hood that Joseph talked about last night, he was cultivating—in the Theravada it's ten, in Mahayana it's six—ten different qualities, bringing them to perfection. And patience is one of them.

So I was reading this treatise about patience, and it said that the proximate cause, the immediate cause for patience to arise in our mind, is seeing things as they are. I really like that a lot, because so often we say or think, somehow subtly, that patience is passivity—that it doesn't act, that it doesn't really get how difficult things are in the world. But patience actually arises from seeing things as they are.

And I think that can come back to one of the things we see as they are—this aspect of impermanence. Our impatience arises from wanting things to be the way we think they should be: wanting all the difficulty to

go away, wanting the injustice to go away, wanting people to stop. Sometimes I just get crazy wanting people to stop doing such stupid, hateful things. Wondering when people can stop polluting, when people can stop torturing. It just can make me crazy. That's an aspect of impatience, and it's also an aspect of not seeing things the way they are—meaning that everything changes, and the way this life is in this realm, the samsara realm that Joseph spoke about last night, is a constant flux of beautiful and horrible.

Even if we look at nature, it's all a rhythm. This beautiful green time now; other times it's really dry and begging for rain. I understand, although I haven't been here, that in the winter it's just solid snow for months on end. Such different environments. The tides that come and go, the moon that waxes and wanes, the dead of winter, the bounty of summer.

And in our own personal experiences, I'm just beginning to get it at this point in my life—that life isn't just this linear process where things get better and better and better until then suddenly you die. In my twenties I'd think, okay, now when's it all going to get better? And you do whatever you do, you get married or whatever, you find the perfect job, and then everything is just sort of hunky-dory and you live the rest of your life. But I think I'm starting to get it. It's a constant flux. Sometimes some years are wonderful and happy and everything seems to be clicking along. And a couple of years later, it's like a year from hell. It's so easy to think, uh-oh, I blew it. What did I do wrong? And I'm just starting to know—hmm, it's been pretty good for a while. I wonder how it's going to change. Because it is going to change. And that's not necessarily bad. That's just how life is.

Working with this aspect of patience, with our mindful awareness, allows us to be just as open and present with all sides of life without trying to deny one—seeing the interrelatedness. As Thich Nhat Hanh talks about so often: Can you look at a rose and see the garbage that it goes into? Can you look at the garbage and see how it becomes compost to become the rose? Can you see that there are two sides and you can't separate them? You can't just have a rose and no garbage.

This is just a little image that stuck with me. A few years ago I was in Ulm in Germany, which is a town with a large cathedral that sort of dominates the town. We were just walking around and we looked at a store window—one of these with a door and then a big picture window on each side. We were looking in the first side and it was all statues of the Madonna and Mary and Jesus. Oh, a spiritual store. That's nice. We walked to the other side and it was all beer steins and guns. We said, oh, that's the other side of things. That's what it's like. And it is. That's what things are like.

If we struggle with it, instead of just seeing it as it is, there's so much more suffering. And it's worth it. It's really worth it to be willing to open to the unpleasant, the difficult, the so-called downside of things. To meet that with the same open acceptance we can meet the beautiful, the touching, the so-called positive.

Remember Joseph read last night from the Dalai Lama? He said that the Buddha taught that patience is the supreme means for transcending suffering. The supreme means for transcending suffering.

Not for pretending that it never happens, but for meeting difficult experience in a way that can transform that experience completely because it transforms our relationship to it.

Nisargadatta Maharaj said acceptance of pain takes you much deeper than pleasure does, because it—meaning acceptance of pain—ends the false sense of self by ending its habit of avoiding pain. By opening up and meeting with active, spacious acceptance the difficult experiences in our sitting, in our life, the effect... I continue to be amazed by the effect.

One aspect is that we find out we cannot shut down selectively. If we could just screen out all the pain and all the unpleasant experience, but be really open and connected to life and connected to other beings and just really be feeling alive—that would be great, right? We'd all do it. But it doesn't work that way.

I've noticed over and over again, when I start to feel really disconnected, self-involved, caught up or separate from other people, however that manifests, if I stop and look, I almost always see there's some kind of painful or difficult experience that I'm going through that I'm not actively meeting and accepting. And granted, sometimes there's so much difficulty and pain. We can certainly have such painful experiences in our childhood and in our present that we can't open to them right away, that we would be overwhelmed or drown. So I'm not trying to say it's simple—it's a process, little by little.

But what's so fascinating is that as soon as I say, "Oh yeah, I'm really feeling lonely right now. Can that be okay? Can I be really present with that?"—almost immediately the experience transforms and the sense of openness and connection comes back. Because if I shut down to my pain, I'm shut down to other people's pain. If I can open to difficulties in my experience, then I don't have to shut down in the face of somebody else's difficulties. It just seems to work like that. And so the acceptance, the active acceptance through patience of the difficult experiences that we have, can transform our relationship not only to ourselves but to others and the world.

A practice example: About a long time ago, ten years ago, I spent a year in Thailand as a nun practicing in different forest monasteries. And of course I had expectations and ideas of the experience I wanted, what I thought it would be like when I went. Of course, as you know, things are never the way we think they're going to be.

The first few months I was acutely physically uncomfortable. It was extremely hot, and I was in a temple in the city rather than out in the forest—not the idyllic forest setting I had imagined. I was staying in a little wooden hut with a tin roof. You have to wear all acrylic clothes and really long sleeves and this long robe over everything. So imagine it much, much hotter than it's been here in the middle of the day, a hundred percent humidity, wrapped up like this and sitting and cooking in this little tin shack. Aversion comes quite naturally to this particular set of conditions. So there was a lot of aversion.

And the insects—constant, constant. Bugs and scorpions and spiders, and the food wasn't agreeing with me. It just was going from bad to worse. And when I went out finally to the forest, tropical forests, they're

not quiet places. They're incredibly loud. I couldn't believe how loud this forest was—the bugs. I'd hear this huge thump on my tin roof and look out, and it would be a giant snake just sticking its head off the roof. And I was under a mango tree, so I'd be sitting, trying to be so peaceful in my meditation, and unripe mangoes would fall off onto the tin roof. It was like an explosion. Okay, calm, calm, calm—forgetting to include that in the meditation.

Well, I was really miserable until at one point—a little slow, I'd say two or three months in—I realized that what I was actually doing was cultivating aversion. We can cultivate patience, we can cultivate love, and we can cultivate aversion and greed. We do that a lot, actually. Whatever new thing was coming into my experience, I didn't even wait to meet it with any kind of openness. Aversion would spring up right away. Instant judgment.

Realizing that helped a lot, because I saw: Okay, this is how it is. And that came first, before the patience. This is how it is here in Thailand. I can leave, or I can adjust to it, or I can stay here and be miserable for the next year and a half. Those are my choices. And once I realized that, over just a month or so, my relationship to the experience changed completely. Obviously, the conditions didn't change.

But by the time I left, I was so happy and really peaceful. And it wasn't that I was in some kind of samādhi that was removing myself from experience either. I was just living a very normal day-to-day life, very simple life. And the simplicity had become so powerful.

What made the difference was that as I began to cultivate patience—just an active, open connection with the experience rather than resisting it all the time—it allowed the space to recognize something other. It allowed me not to be so caught up in my little story and to recognize the peacefulness that's accessible when we're not fighting, when we're not clinging. It was, really, one of the most wonderful times of my life. And I think if I hadn't noticed how caught up I was in aversion, I never would have been able to experience the other.

So that's just a small example, but it's one way that the attitude of patience can absolutely transform our experience, transform our life. It reveals that happiness and peace is absolutely not dependent on any particular set of circumstances or any particular situation.

There's one other way that I think patience can really help to open us up to the potential to recognize our true nature, the peace of our being. I want to read from Ajahn Sumedho, who is quite an inspiring man—an American who is a monk in the Thai Theravāda tradition and has a monastery in England. He's talking about patience:

"Buddha wisdom is very humbling because it knows that whatever arises passes away and is not self. So it knows that whatever condition of the body and mind arises, it is conditioned, and that whatever arises passes away. And it knows the unconditioned as the unconditioned."

The unconditioned could also be what we're calling the nature of mind, prajñā, true nature.

"But is knowing the unconditioned very interesting? Try to think about knowing the unconditioned. Would that be fascinating? You might think, 'I'd like to know God or Dhamma—it's going to be incredibly fascinating, something blissful and ecstatic.' So you look in your meditation for that kind of experience. You think that getting high is getting close. But the unconditioned is as interesting as the space in this room. Look at the space in this room. Is it very interesting? Is it very fascinating to look at? It's not to me. The space in this room is just like the space in the other room. The things in this room might be interesting or whatever—good, bad, ugly, beautiful—but the space, what is it? There's nothing you can really say or think about it. It has no quality except being spacious. And to be able to be really spacious, one has to be patient. As there is nothing one can grasp at, one recognizes space only by not clinging to the objects in the room. When you let go, when you stop your judgments, your criticisms, your evaluations of the people and the things in the room, you begin to experience the space of it. But that takes a lot of patience and humility."

I really love that paragraph because it's really what we're doing—learning how to stop our judgments and our abstractions and our clingings to all the people and the objects and the thoughts. And when that clinging isn't arising, it's possible to recognize the space. That's all. There's nothing we have to do or create.

Just one last thing I want to say about patience. The Dalai Lama said that many people think patience is a sign of weakness—that we'll put up with something, we won't really work to change it. But he says this is wrong. Actually, anger is a sign of weakness. Reactivity is a sign of weakness. With real, true patience and open acceptance, it's far from passive endurance or weakness or fear. It actually gives a strength and a courage to be with things and situations that we might have previously thought were unendurable—and to be in these situations in a way that isn't reactive, but that is more open and connected and seeing clearly than we could have ever imagined.

Far from passive or weak, the courage that comes from patience, that comes from mettā, from unlimited loving-kindness, lends a clear seeing—seeing things as they are—and a courage and strength to act in a way that's far more appropriate than when we're responding or reacting from anger. It is possible at times to do so and still not be withered or destroyed by such depths of suffering and pain as we might encounter in the world.

I want to close with an example of this.

It really touches me—a poem Thich Nhat Hanh wrote during the Vietnam War as a response to suffering and hatred and violence that would seem to be unendurable, from a heart that has opened to it and is clearly acting. It is a poem offering a way we can relate to seemingly unendurable suffering.

Promise me,
Promise me this day,
Promise me now,
While the sun is overhead

Exactly at its zenith,
Promise me:

Even as they strike you down
With a mountain of hate and violence,
Even as they step on you and crush you like a worm,
Even as they dismember and disembowel you,
Remember, brother,
Remember:
Man is not our enemy.

The only act worthy of you is compassion—
Invincible, limitless, unconditional.
Hatred will never let you face
The beast in man.

One day, when you face this beast alone,
With your courage intact,
Your eyes kind, untroubled,
Even as no one sees them,
Out of your smile will bloom a flower,
And those who love you
Will behold you
Across ten thousand worlds of birth and dying.

Alone again,
I will go on with bent head,
Knowing that love has become eternal.
On the long rough road,
The sun and the moon
Will continue to shine.

Let us sit for a moment.

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