

Patience (1 of 6) Staying True Under Stress

August 23, 2021

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

khanti, *kṣānti*, meditation, impatience, stress, calm, settled

Gil Fronsdal

This week, I would like to spend our time reflecting on and thinking about patience. The Pali word for patience is *khanti*; *kṣānti* in Sanskrit. *Khanti* is a really rich word, as rich, perhaps, as the word “patience.” It is multifaceted and relevant at the very beginning of Buddhist practice. If you don’t learn patience quickly, meditation is going to be much harder than it needs to be. Patience also characterizes some of the deepest insights. In some of the deepest places to abide and dwell in meditation, there is something called *khanti* (patience). So, there are many forms of patience, and I’ll talk about different ones over these five days.

Patience is needed not because it’s just a virtue – we always practice it because it’s good to do. Rather, patience is a response or a practice to things that are challenging. When we get reactive in ways that are unhealthy for us and others, patience is sometimes a better response than anger, resentment, being stressed, or getting tense around what’s happening. So to have a capacity for patience, where we value it and understand how it enhances us and brings out the best in us, as opposed to patience that dampens us down, represses us, or adds stress to the system rather than free it.

There will be five different themes on patience. Today is going to be about patience, which is staying true to ourselves, under stress. Tomorrow will be about gentle perseverance under difficulties and challenges. Wednesday will be about patience under insult. When things happen in life – how people treat us – what is it to be patient with insults? Thursday will be about forgiveness when insulted – how that can be done in a healthy way.

Friday will be about the deepest form of patience, and the word *khanti* is used for this. I’ll talk about whether the word “patience” is the right word in English or not. This theme has to do with a certain very deep patience with some of the deepest truths and insights that we can touch into through Buddhist practice. It sounds wonderful to have deep insights and realizations, but some of them are challenging to have. So to develop patience around these things that are phenomenally true but are challenging. For example, we can have insight and realization, at some point, of the possibility of not clinging to anything, but then we end up clinging a lot. This idea of letting go, to really not cling, can be frightening. And so, to be patient, to be accepting, to have some kind of healthy tolerance for this truth that clinging is not worthwhile.

Today, the topic is being true under stress, and in my mind, I’m thinking about people who have some kind of ongoing spiritual practice, like meditation. At some point, we start having access to or start experiencing a way of being that feels truer than being greedy, hateful, tense, afraid, or lost in fantasy spinning around in our thoughts. When the thoughts quiet down and we feel more connected to ourselves, more settled on ourselves – not ahead of or behind ourselves, not carrying the weight of the world on our shoulders – then we can feel like: “Oh, now I’m more myself. I’m more alive. I’m more connected. There’s something here that feels true and honest.” So we can connect to that honesty, to that true way of being.

Maybe I’m talking a little in grand terms, but it could just be that meditation helps us be a little calmer and that feels right. Being a little calmer feels better than being agitated. This can become a reference point for a way of being that feels healthy and desirable.

To be patient, for people who have access to that, is to stay true to it in stressful situations. There’s an infinite number of situations we might find ourselves in that are stressful. It could be the most mundane. It could be that we’re late for the dentist, and so we feel we have to rush, be anxious, and worry. But, we know that when we rush around and worry, we actually lose touch with what’s true and real about ourselves, and is a valuable way of being. So, to be patient is to not give in to that rush, not give in to the thoughts of worry that are spinning stories. So, to be patient with ourselves is to stay true to what we know is there.

For people who don't have access to some way of being that feels right or better or satisfying, then patience might seem like just an obligation. It feels like work: "Now I have to work with being patient also." That can be kind of a drag because it's imposing a certain kind of virtue on top of us.

But, if we know a valuable way of being that's healthy and good, then to be patient is not to give that up easily. To not easily succumb to any strong movements of impatience that might be there – the temptation to be angry, the temptation to be worried, the temptation to want things to be different. We let go of impatience so that we can stay closer to what we feel is valuable and easeful.

Sometimes this idea of patience has less to do with a way of being patient, and more with letting go of the forces of impatience so that we can be something that feels innately healthy and good. Not to hold on to it, not to construct something, but to let go into something deeper that we have.

This is an exercise that goes along with what I'm saying today. You might want to meditate a little longer so you can do this exercise. It doesn't have to be long – a ten-minute meditation. When you finish your meditation, if you're a little calmer or more settled, more connected, than you were before, then get up from that meditation and stay very carefully attentive to when you begin losing that calm, losing that settledness. And when you do, stop in your tracks, maybe even close your eyes, and check in with yourself and see what just happened here. Did anything happen that was a symptom of impatience? And maybe, could you come back? Since it happened just a few moments ago that you started to get tense or hurried, can you settle back into a place of calm or settledness? That is what I call being true under stress.

There might be good reasons to start hurrying, rushing, and getting tense. But that's not necessarily the best thing to do, even if the reasons are there. The result of being stressed and reactive is we are less wise; we're less involved, more forgetful, and more likely to make mistakes. When we stay calm and do things carefully the first time, it's actually more efficient and we don't have to redo things.

So today, try this exercise when you come out of meditation. Notice when you begin losing some settledness or calm, and then see: What would it be like to be patient? What would it be like to be true to yourself under stress?

This is the first type of patience: staying true under stress. As we go through these five different kinds of patience, I hope that it is a journey for all of us into a deeper and deeper dimension of these parts of our lives. Thank you, and I look forward to being here tomorrow.