

# Patience (2 of 5) Gentle Perseverance

August 30, 2021

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

action, doing, step-by-step, meditation, continuity, mindfulness

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Hello, and welcome to the continuation of our series on patience. Today's topic is another form of patience. I call it gentle perseverance. Perseverance is when we take small ongoing steps. It is a step-by-step engagement, involvement, or doing. Gentle means to do it without strain, strife, or resistance – just simple steps to keep going.

It is sometimes helpful to appreciate that in the Buddha's teaching, action was extremely important. His teachings are sometimes called a teaching of action, which means a variety of different things. One thing it means is that it is not a passive practice. The lesson for a lot of modern Western practitioners who are over-striving, overdoing, over-analyzing, or over-critical of themselves is to let things be. This not doing is a powerful and useful medicine.

For the Buddha, there is an element in which the practice is always an activity of a little bit of doing, but a doing which is an undoing. It is a doing that is an undoing of stress, strain, tension, criticism, and striving. Sitting in meditation, mindfulness can be experienced as a non-doing – just allowing awareness to be there. Even that is a very subtle doing. Chances are we have to keep coming back to allowing, to receiving, to being, and that is the doing. That is the action. It is a very simple action in practice.

In today's meditation, the action I suggested is every time you exhale, notice if you're thinking. And if it's easy enough, let go of those thoughts. There is always something to notice, wake up to, or be present for. We try to be here for the next thing and the next thing. There is always some engagement, effort, or work that is involved. As we get familiar with mindfulness, that work is often better than the alternative – the mind spinning off.

There is this amazing capacity we have for gentle perseverance, to keep doing the practice. In other situations in life, this perseverance of doing it over and over or being willing to fail and then starting over again can be a huge strength. It can be a huge support for a wise, good life. Gentle perseverance is useful in so many areas of life.

In our practice, gentle perseverance is not looking for the big, dramatic experiences in meditation. It is being content and patient with a simple, ongoing practice, moment by moment. We show up and are mindful, present of this, here now.

On a larger scale, gentle perseverance could be meditating every day. No matter what is happening, we sit down every day to meditate. Even if it is nothing more than getting into your meditation posture for a minute every day. There is the gentle perseverance of touching into this wonderful repository or special place where attention, calm, and settledness exist. We keep doing that. Gentle perseverance and practice are represented or enacted in small steps. It is the small things we do – being a bit more attentive, more present, and coming back more often.

The small, little steps can make a huge difference in the future. Consider two parallel lines that go on forever. If one line is nudged the tiniest bit to the side, initially the lines would not seem to be separating from each other. Over time, the distance between them becomes greater and greater. Making small changes and keeping up with these small changes over time can make a huge difference in our life. It can transform our lives in beneficial ways.

Gentle perseverance means not giving up, not being discouraged, or maybe being discouraged but having the patience to do it anyway. This very much applies to meditation practice. Maybe that is the place where it is easiest or the most ideal place to practice gentle perseverance. We keep showing up to sit, to meditate. We show up and are present for this moment. We keep coming back to the breath – to this breath, and this breath.

Sometimes we have all these issues, problems, or difficult things that happen in our lives. There is something about the continuity, the ballast, the grounding, or the sense of stability of just being with the breath. Being with the breath through it all allows so many things to settle. It allows us to not get wrapped up in other things or be reactive to other things. That is not to deny anything – it is just gentle perseverance with the breathing.

There is a gentle perseverance of being mindful, attentive, and recognizing: “Well, this happening, this is happening. My mind is afraid; there is fear.” This simple recognition by just naming what is happening allows the feeling and sensing to occur more fully. With simple mindfulness, we find that we are not wrapped up, caught, or impacted as fully by fear, anxiety, desire, or whatever it might be. Just keep steadily recognizing that this is what is happening, this is what is happening.

Gentle perseverance in Buddhist practice can take many forms. It could be a gentle perseverance of not giving in to anger. One act of wise speech moment after moment: “I am not going to say this now. I am not going to say this now, not now, not now.” It can be much harder for the mind to cooperate and participate when we make big commitments to big ideas such as saying: “I am no longer going to be angry. I am no longer going to say mean things to anyone ever again.”

It is the moment-by-moment steps that really count the most. “I am not saying that mean word, nope, nope.” As strong desire arises, gentle perseverance meets it. Moment by moment we persevere: “Nope, nope, I am not getting into that. I know what happens. This is not healthy for me or good for others, nope, nope.” Gentle perseverance means repeating it over and over again until something settles – the whole thing shifts.

It is not a big struggle. It is not meant to be a big wrestling match. It is little steps, moment by moment – now, now, now. So be patient. If we are doing things that are useful, healthy, appropriate, and necessary, then we persevere. We do not resist, procrastinate, or give up. It is a gentle steadiness of just showing up.

The word “gentle,” for me, implies that it doesn’t require heroic effort or even strong effort. We just move in that direction. We don’t hesitate or give up. We just take a small movement in that direction and keep doing it, keep doing it.

Certainly in Buddhist practice and meditation practice, gentle perseverance carries the day. Most likely any other effort that you make will be agitating and not really sustainable in the long term. Gentle perseverance may be sustainable and engaging. It may be self-rewarding. Over time, we may see a huge difference in our lives, as it begins to shift that line a little bit. Maybe we don’t see it in one day, one week, or one month, but the gentle perseverance and gentle continuity of just doing and doing can be revolutionary in one’s life.

What we persevere in depends on the context we are in. It might be gentle forgiveness, kindness, compassion, or whatever is needed. We gently keep doing it. We don’t succumb or collapse into states of mind, thoughts, and ideas that are not really helpful for us.

Finally, I’ll say that the continuity and perseverance of distracted, aversive, selfish, victim thoughts or desires also have an effect over time. Slowly and perceptively the parallel lines move in a different direction – maybe a direction that is not so useful. It is very helpful to be careful with what the mind does regularly and continuously over time. It can have a big effect on our minds over time.

Once we have a sense of what practices cultivate a wise and wholesome way of living, then we practice with gentle perseverance. We take gentle steps. Step by ordinary step and ordinary movements in the direction of what is wholesome and good. It can be done, and it can make a huge difference.

So thank you very much. Tomorrow, we will look at patience under insult. This is much more difficult, but it has tremendous benefits.