

## Practice as Capacity Building

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Warm greetings on this Sunday. I would like to talk a little bit about patience, or use that as a topic to talk about something which might even be more important. That is how Buddhist practice—one of its functions—is to develop our capacities, to cultivate and develop our abilities, the native, natural abilities we have, so that we have a greater capacity for being present, for discomfort and challenges, and a greater capacity to be at peace when things around us are difficult, not at peace. So patience is part of this task. We have a capacity for patience, and we can develop it.

The Pāli word for patience is *khanti*, and it's a rich word with many connotations that may be greater than the English word patience. It sometimes has an association with openness, a willingness to be present for experience, an openness to be present for whatever is happening, including what's difficult. It also has the connotations of some kind of healthy, deep acceptance of what is true, even if what is true is difficult or challenging to some of our cherished attachments. There's a *khanti*, a patience, a willingness and acceptance that is willing to work with us, stay present, and find our way. That's a capacity. Those capacities of openness, willingness, patience are, as I said, capacities that can be developed.

I have the impression, speaking very generally, that many people don't have enough appreciation for delayed gratification, or that they want results from their meditation, from the Buddhist practice—they want good results rather than developing inner strengths. Sometimes people are searching for some experience of peace, bliss, or happiness, and there are all kinds of ways we can fall into experiences of peace and happiness that don't necessarily involve developing ourselves, cultivating, strengthening capacities that we have. If we always need to find refuge in places that are peaceful and quiet and still, we might be able to relax and feel nice and good in those safe places, but it hasn't helped us to feel at ease or feel

a certain kind of inner peace as we go into situations that are challenging and maybe even sometimes threatening. To only retreat into some kind of inner peace is not so helpful in a big picture. In the bigger picture, especially of the Buddhist path, what we really want to do is develop our capacity to be present for what is difficult for us, present for our suffering and challenges, so we can go through them and find our way with them, not so we skirt around them or avoid them or hide from them.

This goes along with the principle that we have a greater capacity, greater ability to have mastery of our own mind, to adjust our minds, to change our minds, to work with our mind than we might have with changing the world or the circumstance around us. If we think that we always have to change the circumstances around us to feel good, to feel safe, then we're always going to be outwardly directed and constantly needing to change and fix things. It also can set up a kind of unfortunate tension between us and the world. If we have to change the world so that we're safe, then the world has to accommodate us, and we have to assert ourselves. Or there has to be a push and a pull. Of course that's appropriate at times, but if that's all we know how to do, then we actually make ourselves less safe, because we always need to have the world change for us.

Buddhist practice is about developing an inner safety, inner strength, and inner capacity to be present. This capacity—Buddhism is a capacity-building practice—and that needs some delayed gratification. It takes time to develop ourselves. It takes time to develop strengths of all kinds of different forms. It takes time to expand the capabilities we have, so they become strengths. As we do so, our relationship to the world around us shifts and changes.

There's a little story from my book, *The Monastery Within*, and the abbess once instructed the younger monks and nuns with the following: If a fly lands on the back of an ant, it's a big burden for the ant. If a fly lands on the back of an elephant, it is a very small thing for the elephant. You will have many challenges in life. It's up to you whether you face them like an ant or an elephant. This ability to develop ourselves so that there is a kind of something as a large capacity, and that largeness of our capacity to be patient, to be present, to be mindful, to let go, to be non-reactive, to be generous—all these are capacities—or to be equanimous.

As those become stronger, then we're not pushed around by the events in the world and what people say and what people do so much. We carry our peace with us, and we take our choice with us. As we develop our capacities, we discover we have more choice to choose mastery of our own minds, our own hearts, as opposed to giving away the power we have over our own minds to others based on what they say or what they do. We just kind of, you know, put

out to wash out to sea with the slightest little insult or difficulty that happens around us. So slowly, slowly develop capacity. It does involve some letting go.

I'll tell two stories: one about letting go that develops capacity, and one—no, it won't. Well, I'll give one and then read a little poem. There's a famous Zen story that has to do with a scholar, someone who's an erudite scholar of Buddhism, spent decades studying Buddhist texts, knows the ins and outs of Buddhist philosophy, and goes to visit a Zen master, and wants to ask questions of the Zen master, or be in a debate or discussion about these erudite ideas and opinions about what Buddhism is. The Zen master says, "Come, let's have tea first." The Zen master gets the tea ready, makes the tea, offers the scholar a cup, and then starts pouring tea into the cup. When the water gets to the top of the rim of the cup, the Zen master keeps pouring a little of the water in, so it starts spilling over the top. The scholar says, "Stop. It's already full. It won't take any more tea." The Zen master stops pouring tea and says, "Well, in the same way, you're so full of yourself, full of your ideas, that there's no space to take more of a teaching, more understanding of what I have to teach."

Sometimes we have to let go of our ideas, our thoughts or projections, or our stories that get in the way of our ability to be patient. The very reason maybe we can't be patient is because we're caught up in the swirl of these predictive stories of what will happen or what. As we develop these capacities, like we become an elephant rather than an ant, I wanted to read this wonderful—I'm not sure if it's a poem. It's either by this wonderful Zen master that I studied with in Japan named Shōdō Harada Rōshi, or it's by his student, Hōgen Bays. I apologize; I don't know which one it is. The form I have I associate with the teacher, Harada Rōshi.

In this passing moment, karma ripens and all things come to be.

I vow to choose what is.

If there is a cost, I choose to pay.

If there is a need, I choose to give.

If there is pain, I choose to feel.

If there is sorrow, I choose to grieve.

When burning, I choose heat.

When calm, I choose peace.

When starving, I choose hunger.

When happy, I choose joy.

Whoever I encounter, I choose to meet.

When I shoulder, I choose to bear.

When it is my death, I choose to die.

Where this takes me, I choose to go.

Being with what is, I respond to what is.

This certainly seems like this willingness to respond to what is, and be present, and kind of meet what is in such a full way. That's a testament of capacity, a testament of having cultivated one's strengths and abilities, and nurtured enough letting go so that our strengths are not inhibited or held in check by our fears, our anxieties, our angers, our desires. To cultivate and develop these capacities so we can face our challenges. It's an old teaching that you should spend time with people who don't try to protect you from the challenges of life, but spend time with people who appropriately encourage you to face the challenges, to be present for what's difficult in your life, because sooner or later things will be difficult. Sooner or later, a Buddhist practice will bring you into places of letting go and facing places where the usual orientation, stability, ways in which we hold to safety are no longer available, and some people will retract and pull away and won't take the path all the way. But to cultivate our ability, slowly, steadily, to develop strength that holds us present, allows us to be there, present. So there's strength.

One of the strengths that meditators develop is the strength of being still, not moving in the middle of whatever is happening in meditation. Sometimes there can be a lot of restlessness. There can be fear. There can be anger. There can be strong desire. There can be a lot of agitation. There's something very significant about not giving into it physically, not getting up and pacing and running around, or not giving up in the meditation. Also not collapsing—the idea in meditation is to neither lapse nor retract, nor get up and run away, but to sit still in the middle of it, ideally sitting in some kind of a posture that does express a little bit of strength and confidence. Over time, we're developing a confidence, a physical strength, a physical ability to be able to stay present for all kinds of difficult energies that course through us. That's short, but anything that's cultivated is cultivated gradually by repetition.

People who don't have a capacity for delayed gratification, who are expecting instant results, to have instant enlightenment or instant peace, or to really have a wonderful experience of meditation, sometimes shortchange themselves in this gradual, slow cultivation, development of these strengths—of confidence, of strength, of being able to sit still and not move, of letting go of the forces inside of us to react and to run away or to move or collapse, especially the idea of collapsing. The wonderful thing about meditation is that it can be a place where we can feel the sorrow, the challenges, the grief, the angers we have, the difficulties we have, but to do it uprightly, with a sort of dignified, confident posture. We might feel like it's overwhelming, like just too much, and we should collapse. But while we're meditating, the dedication is never collapse, unless it's impossible not to, but to really stay there. That develops a capacity to be present. It's not rejecting the difficulty or the strong feelings. It's actually building the ability—more room and space inside—to hold them.

Over time, we're developing this ability to hold more difficult things. If you meditate every day, the wonderful thing about that is, then sooner or later your whole life goes through that. Days which are good, days which are difficult, days which are joyous, days which are sorrowful—they all get processed. They all have their chance to be experienced in meditation practice. In doing so, we're developing this greater and greater capacity to be with a range of experiences, a range of what's happening for us. In doing so, we're cultivating ourselves. We're expanding our capacity. Eventually, maybe our capacity becomes so big and so huge that most things that come along don't agitate us—not because we're aloof from them or distant from them. Maybe we can feel them even better than we did before, because when there's a lot of reactivity and swirls of stories and ideas and judgments, that's kind of a veil between us and ourselves in our story. But as we get quieter and stiller, and less reactive, and less swept away in the stories and judgments and commentary of what's happening, then

we're actually more present to be there. Maybe there's greater and greater capacity to hold it.

At some point, what we come to appreciate is, or kind of identify with, is the strength we have, the capacities we have, more than what our experience is—the experiences that come and go as we go through our life. That gives a ballast to our life, that gives stability to our life, because then we're not so easily swayed and pushed around and impacted by the vagaries of life, the ups and downs in life that are huge. I don't want to dismiss or diminish how huge the challenges we can have are. But, you know, we learn to choose. We learn to choose an attitude. We learn not to give away our freedom. If someone criticizes us, or treats us as somehow being inferior, we participate. If we start feeling inferior because of that, then we are participating. We are actually choosing it ourselves. To let other people have that kind of influence on us so that we are choosing to go along with it is really sad.

This ability to master our minds, see our minds, what it's doing, is one of the great skills of mindfulness meditation, of Buddhist practice. There is a kind of self-mastery we develop so that we can choose how we are. We can develop an ability to be present more widely. Then we have, hopefully, with our wisdom and ability to respond appropriately. We're not here just to be patient with things and accept things, and that's the end of the story. I hope we're here also to make the world a better place, and to stand up and speak up when necessary, and to change this world for the better, and to speak up against injustice when we encounter it. We don't want to just simply be patient with injustice in the world. But we want to have developed patience so that we are not coming from a reactive place, a place where our capacity for difficulty has been diminished. Rather, we want to come from a place where capacity is extended, so that a wonderful level of ease or peace or non-clinging—anyhow, we then respond and act in the world.

I came across recently a quote by Viktor Frankl, who wrote the book *Man's Search for Meaning*, and he spent time in the German concentration camps in World War Two. A lot of his philosophy, and that he developed in his teachings, he developed because he was inspired by the people in the camps who, he said, chose not to choose to respond to each thing with a mastery, with not giving up, not abandoning their autonomy or their ability to choose what they do with their minds, their hearts, with their speech. Somehow they would always choose not to collapse, but rather many of them chose to help and support the other prisoners. So this ability to develop capacities—and I probably have said this enough now—but I just want to really, as I finish this talk, underscore that a very important part of Buddhist practice is cultivation. It's called, in Pāli, *bhāvanā*, and it's sometimes the word for practice in English.

We might say, "I have a spiritual practice." The word *bhāvanā* is also sometimes used for the word for meditation. But literally what it means is cultivation or development.

The idea is we're cultivating something and developing something. For some people, this is an exhausting idea. For some people, it's a difficult one, because if it kind of gets entangled with ideas—I'm not good enough, and I have to prove myself, or I have to now strain and try to get something beyond the present moment—then it can be quite a burden. But cultivating the ability to be patient, cultivating the ability to be open, cultivating the ability to be willing to experience what is here—this is one thing to cultivate and develop that goes along with not trying to change the world, not trying to change ourselves. Hopefully, you don't get so entangled with the cultivation part, because what we're cultivating is the capacity to be present for what is. That is in some ways the ultimate capacity we're developing in Buddhism, and hopefully it'll support us at times of difficulty and times of joy. Sometimes the capacity to hold joy is more difficult than the capacity to hold suffering. Both forms of holding, both forms of being present for without being caught in it, lead to wisdom and to freedom.

So may you cultivate and develop your native capacities, so your capacities grow and support you. May you become like an elephant. Or maybe you have another animal, big, strong animal, that you prefer to be your model. So thank you very much.