

## *Caught in a Thorn Bush*

*June 13, 2023*

There are two kinds of patience: what you might call *passive* patience and *active* patience.

Passive patience is when you have to wait for something, or you have to put up with something. You're on the receiving end. The Buddha talks about being patient with pain and being patient with harsh words from other people. But there's also the patience that comes when you simply have to wait for something, and it's going to take a while—so you learn how to endure it.

Active patience is when you have a task that's going to take time and energy, and you're able to stick with it all the way through.

Now, as a meditator, you're going to have to learn how to develop both kinds of patience. On the one hand, there are hardships you're going to have to put up with: things happening in your mind that you can't get a handle on yet, things in the situation outside that you can't change. You learn how to not get worked up about these things.

You may notice when you start thinking about them, there'll be a reaction in the body. Well, notice that reaction; that reaction is a large part of what makes things hard to endure. It's one of the reasons why we practice breath meditation: learning how to disperse any tension or tightness in the spot where we're focused. You get used to the fact that when you focus on something, it disperses. And you can use that ability to help you endure a lot of things that you couldn't endure otherwise.

As for active patience on the path: This is when you learn how to talk to yourself to keep yourself going. The question often comes up, "How do we combine two of the teachings that the Buddha said are really important, patience on the one hand, and the combination of heedfulness and *samvega* on the other?"

*Samvega* is sometimes translated as *urgency*. But it's not so much urgency, it's more literally a sense of *terror*: seeing that you're in a dangerous spot. You've been born into this world with all kinds of crazy people. The people in positions of power think war might be a good thing, and what are you going to do about it? There are people who have all kinds of agendas that are very harmful. We live in a world that has lots of natural disasters, some coming from the world itself, some coming from outside.

I was reading a while back about a gamma-ray burst that apparently hit the Earth many millions of years ago, wiping out life for a long time, and there's no

guarantee that another one couldn't come at any time. So you do what you can, while you can—right now.

But if you get in too much of a rush, you're going to mess up the job. It's like getting a piece of clothing caught in a thorn bush: If you try to pull the cloth quickly out of the thorns, you end up with a cloth that's ripped to pieces. You have to very patiently remove the cloth from each thorn, one at a time, until finally the cloth is free.

So think of that image as you're practicing. Your mind has a lot of thorns. All your defilements, all your hindrances—and they're thorns that stick in different directions. It's not the case that you can simply lift the cloth off the thorns and it goes. You lift in one direction, and you get it ripped on one thorn. You lift it in another direction, you get it ripped on another thorn. So you have to very carefully work it apart—work it one by one by one.

There's a famous passage from the book *Gifts He Left Behind* by Luang Pu Dune, where the King comes to see Luang Pu Dune and asks him, "Which defilement should be dealt with first?" And Luang Pu Dune says, "Whichever defilement comes up first, deal with that one."

In other words, there's no clear road map as to which defilement you have to deal with at any one time—they don't come in a nice neat little row. Sometimes they come rushing at you all at once. Sometimes they're gross defilements, followed by refined defilements, followed by more gross ones. So you deal with the one that's right there, and you try to do it as best you can.

This is where it's good to think of the four bases for success: success in doing detailed work, with a sense of urgency, but also with a sense of patience, because each of the bases for success has to be done in a balanced way. We are, after all, on a middle way here, and that requires a lot of discernment.

If we were on a path that involved a lot of extremes—say, just do without anything, any pleasure at all—there are people who could probably do that. It wouldn't take much thought or discernment, they would just ram through the practice. But here we have a practice in which you have to deal with pleasures and pains, deal with getting the mind calm, collected, and yet active and discerning: asking questions, and then putting the questions aside for the time being, and then asking them again.

If this were just a matter of *thinking* your way to awakening or *pushing* your way to awakening, it would be easy. But the actual path here requires a combination of thinking, observing, pushing; thinking, observing, pushing, and that requires discernment. And that can come only with time and persistence, which is where the active patience comes in.

The Buddha's image is of a goldsmith working with a piece of gold: Sometimes he puts it in the fire; sometimes he takes it out and blows on it; sometimes he simply looks at it. Putting it into the fire is an image for effort; blowing on it is an image for concentration; and looking at it is an image for equanimity.

Working with the gold requires a balance of all three: If you simply left it in the fire, it would burn up. If you simply looked at it, nothing would happen. If you blew on it, nothing would happen. And it's the same with the mind.

It requires a combination of skills and the ability to balance those bases of success. As the Buddha said, you want your desire—which is the first of the bases for success—not to be too active and not to be too lax.

One way of guaranteeing that is to focus it on causes. If you simply sit here saying, "I wish my mind were quiet, I wish my mind were quiet," it's not going to happen.

What are the causes to make it happen? You focus on the breath. If the mind wanders off, you bring it right back. If it wanders off again, you bring it back again. This is where the patience comes in; in that no matter how many times it wanders off, you don't get upset—you simply, very matter-of-factly bring it back.

As for persistence: You stick with it—again, and again. Like the cloth in the thorns: Say there are a hundred thorns, you don't say, "Well, I'll work patiently on fifty, and then rip the rest." You have to work on each one, one at a time. And you can't wait for the cloth to suddenly get free on its own. So you stick with the work.

And you focus on each step. This is why we focus on one breath at a time. That way, you get used to focusing on what's right there, and dealing with what's right there as well as you can.

This is where the other two bases for success come in: your intent and your ability to analyze things. The intent is when you give it your full attention: "So, it's this thorn?" Okay, you focus on this thorn. And you may notice as you focus on this thorn that you have to be very careful not to pull the cloth in such a way that it tears on other thorns.

So, there are some complexities in the path, but you deal with them step by step, one step at a time. Try to keep your mind calm, paying full attention and evaluating how it's going. That's what the fourth base for success is: *Vimamsā* is the Pali. I've seen it translated lots of different ways: your powers of discrimination; your powers of analysis. Ajaan Lee has a nice translation, which is "circumspection"—you check all around, look at the issue from many angles. As I said with the thorns, you may notice that you have to pull the cloth in one direction to get it off this thorn, pull it another to get it off another thorn. If you

pull it too hard, you may rip it on another thorn someplace else. So you look all around, evaluate what you're doing, but keep at it.

All of these qualities, ideally, should work together. As they're given in the list, it sounds like concentration could either be based simply on desire or on persistence or on intent or on circumspection, but it's more a question of which one is the most dominant of the four. They *all* have to be there for the work to succeed.

So, there is an urgency to get the cloth out from the thorns, but you can't be in a rush, because you may spoil the work. Which is why the Buddha has you focus on each breath, one at a time, each issue coming up in the mind, one at a time.

Don't think about how long the path has been or how much longer it's going to be, because you really don't know how much longer it's going to be. When awakening comes, it's a surprise. You do the things you've been doing over and over and over again, and all of a sudden they click in a way that they haven't clicked before.

When the pattern is laid out, you get the mind still, and then in that stillness you look for any disturbance—and here we're not talking about disturbances coming from outside, they're disturbances from within the mind itself—deal with whatever disturbances you can detect. As you get more and more still, you can begin to detect disturbances you didn't even notice as disturbances before, but they were right here all along.

It's just that your sensitivities get improved. This is the part of the path that's gradual. But then, when there's an insight that opens things up, that's when it gets sudden. You never know when the sudden part is going to happen, so anticipating how much longer it's going to be is basically an exercise in ignorance.

And as for how long it has been going on already, as the Buddha said, it's been going on for who knows how many eons. So, when you think about the fact that you've been meditating for a couple years, actually, you don't know how long you've been meditating. You may have been meditating for a bit, lots of different bits in the past, and then dropped it, tried it again, dropped it again. So the best way to avoid that kind of back and forth is to just say, "Well, I don't know what happened in the past, but I do know I'm going to stick with it right now, and then with the next right now, and the next right now."

When you wonder what kind of perfections you have to fall back on, well, you can see the perfection right here as you stick with right now—that's what's going to make all the difference. So keep your focus sharp and clear right here, and it'll enable you to take the cloth away from the thorns one thorn at a time, and be

able to detect some thorns you might not have seen otherwise. That's where the active patience comes in.

The passive patience is where you start getting thoughts that say, "This is getting slow. I don't know when I'm going to be able to finish this." Okay, you endure those thoughts, but you don't put up with them. In other words, you endure them in the sense that you don't let them get you disturbed—just brush them aside, don't take them seriously, and keep focusing on the work at hand.