

Pain & Patience

February 2, 2015

When the Buddha gave his first summary of the teaching in the Ovada Patimokkha, the first point was about patient endurance. It's a part of the practice that most of us don't like. As Ajaan Maha Boowa used to say, people keep coming to him and ask, "What's a quick and easy way to develop patience?" And he'd say, "You develop patience through patience." You have to accept the fact that it's not going to be quick and it's not going to be easy. But still, you *can* make it easier for yourself, if you're discerning. If simple patience on its own could take people to awakening, as Ajaan Chah once pointed out, all the chickens in the world would have been awakened before human beings, because they can sit very patiently on their eggs for long hours.

There's patience in sitting with pain, either physical pain or mental pain. But you also have to ask yourself questions: "What am I doing to contribute to this?" After all, that's what the first noble truth is all about—what we're adding to the situation that's making it painful for the mind. This relates to the Buddha's own story of how he gained awakening. He didn't have a teacher—there was nobody to give him Dhamma talks. He had to explore everything on his own. And his exploration was this: He'd find that he was suffering from something and so he'd ask himself, "What am I doing that's causing that suffering? And why do I do it? Why don't I give it up?"

So looking for what you're doing that's adding an unnecessary burden: That's what makes patience easier—and makes it productive. If you don't ask those questions, then everything just goes past, and the suffering just stays there and it's totally pointless. The important point is that you ask the questions: "Here's a pain in the body, here's something painful in the mind, what in here is unnecessary?" And specifically: "What am I doing that's unnecessary? Which of my actions are contributing to this?"

As the Buddha once said, our primary reaction to pain is twofold—one, we're bewildered by it; and two, we search for someone who knows a way or two to get out of the pain. Of course, the bewilderment leads to ignorance, which usually

creates more pain, so that we search for a way out in the wrong way or with the wrong people. As little children we get used to having other people take the pain away for us. As we grow up, we develop the bad habit of looking for someone else to take care of the pain. And if nobody is paying attention to us, we just add some more pain on until it becomes obvious that we're suffering, and we hope somebody will notice and have some compassion for us. This works up to a point. Then it reaches a point where other people don't want to help any more. So you're thrown back on yourself. And of course ultimately you're the only one who can cure the problem for yourself anyhow. So what you want is someone who can teach you how to cure the problem for yourself. That's what the Buddha's four noble truths are all about.

The Buddha was unique in his time in that he focused on the question of pain, suffering, stress—that's what the word *dukkha* is—as the main issue in his teaching. And it's interesting that he never tried to define it. He didn't try to pin it down. You see some of the commentaries where they try to define *dukkha* based on etymology. It's either the hub of a wheel that's not quite on right or it's a bad space. But those explanations don't really help. The Buddha's way of dealing with pain was to list all the different ways in which pain manifests itself, and then point out the handle you can get on all of them.

In every case where pain is weighing down the mind, it's because of clinging—that's the activity of the mind that causes the mind pain. Of course, there are causes for physical pain out there, but the fact that there's pain in the body that weighs on the mind, the weight on the mind comes from your own clinging. And you're clinging to five different activities—any one of the aggregates: form—the way you create the sense of your body, inhabit the sense of your body; feeling—feeling tones of pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain; perceptions, the labels you put on things, either words or images; fabrications—the thoughts you create around things; and then finally, consciousness, which is aware of all these things.

These are all activities you're engaged in. And they're all the things that make the pain weigh on the mind. So regardless of what your pain is or how you experience it, the Buddha is not so much concerned with defining it as with pointing out the aspect of the pain you can focus on that can help you get past it.

Again, it comes down to the question, “What am I doing? How am I relating to this in a way that’s harmful?”

Now, to see this, you have to be willing to sit with it. That’s what patience is for. You can’t expect to have one brief moment of pain and then suddenly gain great insight into it. You have to sit with it for long enough so that the mind starts showing its true stripes—the stories it tells itself about the pain, the complaints, the thrashing around. You look for that. And then you ask yourself, “Why? Why am I doing this?” It’s kind of like a talking cure—you have to get something out of the mind, some statement, some admission: “I’m holding on to this because of that old habit, which seemed to work some time, way in the past, and I’ve kept that habit around, but here it is, stabbing me. Do I need it anymore?” The mind might reply, “I like it.” It’s like a menagerie you’ve raised. But look at what you’ve got in your menagerie—you’ve got some lions and tigers, and every now then they get in a foul mood and turn around and bite you. So do you want to keep feeding them? Or have you had enough?

As you sit patiently with the pain and ask questions about it, you can find your way out. This is why we sit in meditation, doing it again and again and again, and sitting long enough so that when pain comes up, you can observe it, you can see what your mind is going to do to complain. And as long as there’s at least part of you that’s not willing to go along, the part that—as with the Buddha—says, “Why am I doing this? Haven’t I had enough?” you keep watching it. See what the mind has to say. It’ll have a lot of excuses and a lot of ways of justifying its habits to itself, and there will be a kind of of-course-ness to its statements, and you have to learn how to question that.

Ajaan Maha Boowa gives a good set of questions to start with. As you’re sitting with pain, you ask yourself, “Is the pain the same thing as the part of the body that’s pained?” And there will be a part of the mind that says, “Yeah, there’s a pain right there in the knee, there’s a pain right there in the hips. The knee’s pained; the hips are pained.” But you ask yourself, “Is the pain the same sort of thing as the body?” The pain is a feeling tone; the body is just the elements. Feeling tones aren’t elements. So how can they possibly be the same? Can you see the distinction? In this way, the of-course-ness of the mind’s answer begins to seem not so of-course after all. It actually starts appearing fairly arbitrary. The same

principle applies to your awareness: There's a feeling tone and there's your awareness. Is the feeling tone the same thing as the awareness? Awareness is aware; feeling tones are not aware—they're just something there. Can you see this distinction?

Now, this requires that you get the mind really quiet, so that it can see these things. There's a part of the mind that keeps complaining, "This is unpleasant, this is taking too long." Realize that that's part of the problem right there—the voice that wants to push things and get them over with. You have to learn which members of your menagerie are actually helpful to you now and which ones are causing problems. If they're causing problems, why are you feeding them? Send them off! These are not animals that have to be cared for. They're animals that once you stop feeding them, they just go away, they disappear, that's it.

So try to develop the attitude that you're up for learning to be patient, and you're willing to put in some time. That willingness is what makes all the difference. And what pushes you in that direction? Well, the fact that if you don't develop that willingness, you're just going to have to keep suffering the pain, over and over again. So which are you willing to do? As the Buddha said in his first statement in the Ovada Patimokkha, patience endurance is the foremost austerity—it's the austerity that forces you to look at these things carefully. If you keep running away, they'll chase you, like your shadow. If you turn around and look at them carefully, you can start sorting things out.

So as the Buddha said, with the four noble truths, you've got to learn how to comprehend your suffering, comprehend your pain. That means developing all the qualities you can muster to sit with it. This is why we develop right concentration, so that there's at least some sense of well-being in the mind as you look for the pain. In other words, once you accept the pain and accept that it's something that you really do want to see through, okay, then muster the willingness to develop all the qualities of mind—the concentration and the mindfulness—that can strengthen your patience.

And then start asking some of those questions: "What am I doing here that's unnecessary, that's adding to the pain? And how can I stop?" It's in the questioning that you learn how to burn these things away. The patience on its

own doesn't do it. But we do need to develop a lot more patience than we already have.