

GATSAL

TEACHING

The Perfection of Patience

by
Jetsunma
Tenzin Palmo

The third Paramita is known in Sanskrit as kshanti and in English as patience or tolerance. Since this is one of the factors needed for the attainment of enlightenment, the issue of patience is a very important one for bringing the Dharma into our daily lives. However in order to cultivate patience there needs to be something that irritates us! If we are always surrounded by kind and loving people who do and say what we would want them to do and say, then that's very nice. But we don't learn anything. In fact since it's easy to be loving towards people who are lovable, it would be easy for us to think that we are much nicer than we really are. So we need people in our life who create problems for us, who irritate and upset us because these are challenging us to learn how to be patient. Thus Shantideva advises us that instead of seeing someone who upsets us, abuses us or causes trouble as being an enemy, we should realise that this is our genuine spiritual friend because this is the person who can teach us how to be patient.

He gives the famous example that the earth is covered with sharp stones and thistles, so when we walk we are always hurting our feet. What to do? Are we going to carpet the whole earth with leather? Of course we take a piece of leather and wear it under the soles of our feet as sandals and shoes. In this way we can walk anywhere without hurting ourselves. Likewise we cannot expect the whole world to turn around and be exactly how we want it to be, but what we can change is our own inner attitude. The good news is we can change: our characters, they are not chiselled in stone. We can change but no one else can change us, we have to change ourselves.

So the point is that we are here in samsara, which by its nature is difficult and unsatisfactory, and we are here to learn. We are not here just to have a good time, whereby anybody who opposes us and spoils our pleasure is a bad person. Or we think that we are bad people because we have become irritated and upset so then we are angry with ourselves. This does not help anything. This present lifetime and the character that we have, this is our working material. It's like clay we have to form and what we create is up to us. During our lives we have the opportunity to develop. We mustn't be complacent, thinking: "Oh, this is the way I am and nothing will ever change!"

This human world is considered to be very special because we do not have all the unrelenting sufferings of the lower realms nor the unceasing pleasures of the celestial worlds. Here, in the human realm, we have a balance of difficulties and also pleasures.

So this is the area where we have the greatest possibility of making advances on the spiritual path. And often it is the difficulties and the problems that we have in our life that are our opportunity to develop and to grow. So therefore this lifetime is called the gymnasium of the soul. We go to a gymnasium if we want to develop strong muscles and keep our bodies trim and in good shape. A gymnasium is full of machines which are designed to challenge our muscles. They're meant to be difficult. By pushing ourselves and working with the equipment, our weak flabby muscles become strong. So likewise in our lifetime, when things are difficult, the problems that we have: our inner problems dealing with our personality, the outer problems dealing with our situation and other people, these are our spiritual gymnasium in which we work and exercise. So therefore whatever are our personal inner and outer problems, if we say 'difficulties and obstacles', they are difficulties and obstacles. But if we say 'challenges and opportunities', then they become challenges and opportunities.

So what do we do with anger? The first thing to remember is that our irritations and upsets can be a means for us to develop patience and understanding. Now most of us have certain situations in which we find ourselves becoming easily upset or irritated or know certain people who naturally annoy us and press our buttons. So we can focus on someone who is a particular problem for us and use that person as a means for transforming the situation simply by changing our attitude. In other words, instead of thinking: "This person is a problem and a difficulty", we can think instead that this person is my greatest spiritual friend and my teacher of patience! If we can do this, then immediately the whole dynamic of the relationship changes.

This doesn't mean that if one is in an abusive situation or is being cheated or harmed either psychologically or physically, that one has to just allow that to happen. In such circumstances one doesn't have to be the victim, one can rise above that and with compassion extricate oneself firmly from such a situation. However negative and difficult someone may appear to be, this behaviour depends on prior causes and conditions many of which were outside their control. We should also remember that even the most awful person has some redeeming features and we all are inherently immaculate in our innate wisdom and compassion. We have just gotten somewhat obscured along the way.

But for many of us, the real cause of our anger and irritation is not something external but is directed in towards

ourselves. Although many people find themselves being angry and irritable with others, the real cause is that they feel angry inside themselves, towards themselves. So it's also important to make friends first with ourselves. Tibetan Buddhism in particular talks a lot about the self-cherishing mind and how we must destroy this self-cherishing attitude. There are many texts instructing us to make ourselves the lowest of the low while lifting up others. How in every way we should think of ourselves as nothing and everyone else as the most important. This teaching works very well for someone with a great sense of self-importance, who is selfish, and only thinking about themselves and how wonderful they are. For that kind of person who has a lot of inner arrogance and high self-esteem in a negative sense, then indeed to put others first is very important.

But for people who already have very low self-esteem, who don't like themselves, who are constantly criticising themselves and undermining their own good qualities then, if misunderstood, this can be a dangerous doctrine. Because if we are already fragile and hurting inside, then to flagellate and beat ourselves doesn't heal us. So what we need to do in that case, is to go back to the very basic teachings of the Buddha. In the Sutra on Loving-kindness the Buddha directs us in a meditation on loving-kindness – towards those whom one loves, towards those whom one feels indifferent, and finally towards those that one feels antipathy for. But first of all we send loving-kindness to ourselves and we wish ourselves to be well and happy and free from suffering, because if we are not at peace within ourselves, if we are not friends with ourselves, then we cannot deeply be at peace and friends with others.

So it's very important first of all to deal with our own mind & heart, to deal with whatever negativities are in our mind. We all have negativities, we all have faults. If we didn't have faults, we would already be a Buddha and we wouldn't need the Dharma. We do need the Dharma because we have faults and we have problems inside ourselves which need to be dealt with and resolved. Therefore as part of our practice we need to really acknowledge and see clearly what are our weak points, where are our negativities and to recognize those. But instead of feeling angry with ourselves or guilty and upset, we have patience. We accept that we have these faults. Accepting that we have faults doesn't mean condoning them. It doesn't mean we think: "Okay, I'm an angry person and that's okay." It means we think: "Ah, I'm an angry person, so this is where I have to work the hardest." In this way, our biggest obstacles become our greatest opportunities.

At the same time we must also acknowledge what is good within us, because all of us have positive things as well as negative. If we only think about the negative aspects, what is wrong in us, and we don't consider what is right with us, then we become very unbalanced and depressed. So since in our minds we are always talking to ourselves, then we should pay attention to that voice. What is that voice telling us about ourselves the whole time? If we are always putting ourselves down, telling ourselves that we're stupid, that we're failures, that we never can succeed, that nobody likes us, that we are awful people and we're totally useless - then no wonder we feel disempowered and depressed! But what would we think of a companion who was endlessly criticising us and pointing out our faults and never said anything nice to us? Would we think that there was a friend?

So therefore it's very important that along with pulling up the weeds of our faults, we also cultivate the flowers of our good qualities. We should appreciate all that is good in us and encourage that to grow more. If we overlook and neglect the goodness in

ourselves and we only think of the negative, then this undercuts all our spiritual efforts. It is important to realise that the goodness in us is a reflection of our true nature; the negative in us is just like the passing clouds, it's not our true nature. So we shouldn't zero in only on what is wrong. We really have to encourage ourselves with what is right. The ego doesn't die by being beaten into submission. Endlessly thinking: "Oh, I am a weak and evil sinner" and flagellating ourselves doesn't work. All that happens is that the ego becomes tight and resentful, but it doesn't die. If you beat a dog, then he can become very afraid but he is also angry. If we want a well trained-dog or a well-trained mind, then we have to be kind and encourage the belief in its own capabilities.

The Tibetan translation for the word bodhisattva, which means basically "enlightened being", is changchub sempah. Now pahwo means something heroic. So it's like you become a spiritual hero. We have to be very brave on the bodhisattva path. It means somebody very courageous. Shantideva says that there is a big difference between pride and arrogance, which of course is negative - and self-confidence. Self-confidence is essential on the path. The first time that I met the 16th Karmapa when I was about twenty-two or twenty-three years old, he said to me after a very short time, "Your main problem is that you don't believe in yourself. If you don't believe in yourself, who will believe in you?" And this is the problem for so many of us that we don't really believe in ourselves. We don't believe in our potential for change, for the ability to develop, for the capacity to realise, and so we undermine ourselves the whole time because we don't really believe in our essential Buddha nature. So therefore there is the sense of low self-esteem and anger towards ourselves because we are not how we would like to be. We have a picture of what we would like to be, then we see what we are and the discrepancy makes us angry with ourselves.

So this is why it's so important to realise that our biggest obstacles are our greatest opportunities. There is no excuse for us. We have to work. If we go to a gymnasium, then a personal trainer will look at us and he will see what are our weak parts and that's what he will start training on. If our arms are strong, but our legs are weak, he will put us training our legs. Then we get really strong legs!

At J.F. Kennedy Airport in New York, there used to be a big notice, a quotation by Benjamin Franklin which said: "The best way to overcome your enemies is to make them your friends." Presumably many Americans must have read that, including politicians. Yet it's so true! If we say enemy, it's an enemy. If we say spiritual friend it's a spiritual friend.

So this is also patience that difficult circumstances which come to us are our opportunities to learn. Because this is samsara, and samsara is like an ocean. An ocean has waves and waves go up and waves go down. So we should not be surprised when sometimes things are okay and sometimes things are difficult. What we need is a certain level of equanimity towards the difficulties and the good times. We need to cultivate that sense of inner impartiality and courage so that whatever comes, we can deal with it.

One time I saw a tee shirt in Malaysia and it had a design of big waves and on top of the waves was a surfboard and on top of the surfboard was a figure sitting in meditation. The slogan said: "Riding the waves of life, be mindful, be happy." As I said we are not in this world just to have a good time. We are in this world to develop and to recognise our true nature. This takes both patience and effort.