

Patience

November, 2002 - Ven. Thanissaro Bhikkhu

We're an impatient society. Everything has to be done *fast*, the results have to come *fast*, or else we lose interest quickly. It's because we're so impatient that we don't understand what patience is all about. When we're told to be patient, many times we think it's a sign that we shouldn't care about the results, that we don't have to be so committed to the practice, that we can let things take their course whenever they want to. We think that patience means a lack of resolution, a lack of dedication, that you're carefree and indifferent about when things are going to come together, when the results are going to show.

That's not what patience means. Patience means sticking with the *causes* of your practice, no matter how long it takes to get the results. In other words, you're resolute in doing the practice, you stick with it, you stay with it, slow and steady.

Khanti, the Pali word we often translate as patience, also means *endurance*. It means that you stick with things even when they take a long time to show results. You don't get frustrated. You remind yourself: This a path that takes time. After all, we're unlearning a lot of habits that we've been indulging for who knows how long. So it only stands to reason that it's going to take time to unlearn those habits. The only way to unlearn them is to actually stick with the practice, to be resolute in what you're doing. This firm resolution is what's going to make the difference.

Ajaan Thate talks about being patient like farmers. Those of you who've never lived on a farm, even you know that farmers don't have an easy life. They work hard, especially in Thailand, where they don't have a lot of labor-saving devices. When the time comes to do what needs to be done, they have to do it quickly. In other words, when the rice grains are ready, you have to harvest them quickly before the mice get to them. You have to take care of them quickly, winnow the rice quickly before any late season rain comes to spoil it. So it's not a matter of being slow or casual, this patience of a farmer. The patience of a farmer is the sort that knows you can't plant the rice today and expect to have the grains ripened tomorrow. It's going to take time, and during that time it's going to require work.

Fortunately for farmers, they have experience. They know from previous years how long it takes. We, however, don't have that kind of experience. We're working on something new, developing new habits in the mind. Sometimes we read the passages in the Satipatthana Sutta about how you can gain Awakening in seven days if you're really dedicated, and we come away with unrealistic ideas about how quickly we should see results in order to deem our practice successful. This is not to say that it's not possible, but just that most of the people who could get results in seven days have already gotten results and gone to nibbana. That leaves the rest of us here muddling along — which doesn't mean we should be any less dedicated in our practice. We should just realize that it's going to take time.

Good things always take time. The trees with the most solid heartwood are the ones that take the longest to grow. So we do the practice, focusing on what we're doing, rather than getting into an internal dialogue about when the results are going to come, what they're going to be like, and how we can speed up the practice. Many times our efforts to speed things up actually get in the way. Our practice is pretty simple. Stay with the breath, allow the mind to settle in with the breath, be friends with the breath. Allow the breath to open up and get more and more gentle, more and more porous, so your awareness can seep into the breath. That's all you have to do.

Of course, we want to add things on top of that to make the results come faster, but the things we add on top get in the way. So try to keep things simple. Just stay with the breath. If the mind is going to get into any dialogue, engage in a dialogue about how the breath feels right now, reminding yourself to stay with breath, catching the mind when it's going to slip off. There's a lot of work to do, even when you try to keep it simple, just keeping the mind with the breath. As for whether the results are coming as quickly as you'd like or, when they come, whether they're going to stay as long as you'd like: That's going to depend on what you're doing right here with the breath. Our desire to have the results come, our desire to have them stay, is not going to keep them here. The actual doing of the practice is what will make the difference.

There's a passage in the texts where the Buddha talks about a hen incubating her eggs. Whether or not the hen has a desire for the eggs to hatch, they're going to develop. Whether or not she has a little dialogue about how quickly she wants them to come, and why aren't they coming any faster than this, all those little questions that she probably doesn't have the brain to ask... Our problem is that we do have brains that ask those questions and they get in the way. If you're going to ask questions, ask questions about what you're doing

right now. "Is that you wandering off? Where are you going? Are you looking for trouble? Or are you staying right here?" That's all you have to ask. Just be really consistent and resolute in sticking with what you know you have to do.

If you find yourself flagging, learn how to give yourself pep talks, encouraging yourself along the way. Do what you can to keep the mind right here as consistently and steadily as possible. Consistency is what builds up momentum. Although we'd like momentum to build up fast, sometimes our minds are pretty massive, and the massive minds are the ones that take time to accelerate. So try to streamline things as much as you can. Stay focused. Stay resolute in what you're doing.

As for the results, that's what you're patient about. Don't allow yourself to be patient or tolerant about vagrant thoughts that will pull you away from the breath. Patience relates to the process of causality in the sense that you can't push the results to appear unless the causes are right. Sometimes the causes take a while to come together. But you can rest assured that when they do they'll bring the results, without your having to concoct a lot of preconceived notions about them.

When they do come, don't abandon the causes. When the mind finally does get a sense that it's settling in, feeling comfortable, don't leave the breath to focus on the comfort. The comfort's there, you can think of it spreading through the body, but spread it through the body by means of the breath. If you abandon the breath, it's like letting the foundation of a house rot away. You like the house, it's a comfortable place, but if you don't look after the foundation you'll soon have no place to stay.

So the focus should always be on the causes, and you should apply yourself to the causes with as much commitment and resolution as you can muster. Let go of your thoughts about how long you've been practicing, what the results used to be in the past. Focus on what you're doing, totally on what you're doing, *right now*.