

Patience and the heavenly messengers: Aging, Illness and Death

Serving as a volunteer chaplain in a hospital, offers me the opportunity to witness the parami of patience. I am inspired by the grace, patience, tolerance, wisdom and resolve of those to whom I meet. A while back, I visited a young patient who injured herself gardening (of all things), whose wound was being attended to, but for some unknown reason, was not healing as quickly as anticipated. At the time of our visit, she had been in the hospital over four months. Her acceptance of the truth of her situation, and her ability to tolerate the unknown of her body's difficult healing process, was striking and inspiring. This young patient, who had never been in the hospital before, was displaying two of the three aspects of patience; patient perseverance and acceptance of truth. Her seeming ease with the truth of her situation, reminded me of Frank Ostaseski's description of the Fourth Invitation: "Find a Place of Rest in the Middle of Things." (From Frank Ostaseski's book on The Five Invitations.) This patient had somehow found a place of rest, of wise use of her energy and effort, of refuge IN the wait-and-see process. It was an honor to witness this display of Grace.

Patience and the art of letting go

Patience also involves the art and skill of letting go. One of my favorite quotes from a dear friend, Gene, is; "Practice the art of not forcing." Just reading this line brings ease and softness to my mind/body/heart. When I sense into the art of not forcing, I am able to infuse some space into the moment, into the difficult situation. I remember the important teaching that every step along the path IS the path. My mind steadies, even if just for a moment, which is all I am required to attend to. With this steady mind, I can apply just enough energy and effort to still the reptilian brain's urge to react versus respond to what is in front of me. Patience allows us the ability to suspend judgement just long enough for bits of clarity and wisdom to arise, so an appropriate response can be offered. This is the drip by drip practice of patience.

Patience and the hindrance of restlessness.

When we are impatient we are restless for things to be different from the way they actually are. We become irritable, irritated and probably irritating to others too. We blame other people and situations for interrupting our peace and ease. We don't see how we have contributed to our own suffering. We become hyper-focused on how we wish things to be and cannot accept the way things are. Restlessness clouds our clarity; ".....like the wind churning up the pond's surface; no reflection is possible until the wind calms down." (From Unhindered, by Gil Fronsdal)

I love Ajahn Sumedho's below description of his experience practicing patience as it relates to restlessness.

"When I first went to Wat Pah Pong, I couldn't understand Lao. And in those days Ajahn Chah was at his peak and giving three-hour *desanas* every evening. He could go on and on and on, and everybody loved him – he was a very good speaker, very humorous and everybody enjoyed his talks. But if you couldn't understand Lao . . . !

I'd be sitting there thinking, 'When's he going to stop, I'm wasting my time.' I'd be really angry, thinking, I've had enough, I'm leaving.' But I couldn't get enough nerve to leave, so I would just sit there thinking – 'I'll go to another monastery. I've had enough of this; I'm not going to put up with this.' And then he would look at me – he had the most radiant smile – and he'd say, 'Are you all right?' And suddenly all the anger that had been accumulating for that three hours would completely drop away.

That's interesting, isn't it? After sitting there fuming for three hours, it can just go. So I vowed that my practice would be patience, and that during this time I would develop patience. I'd come to all the talks and sit through all of them as long as I could physically stand it. I determined not to miss them, or try to get out of them, and just practice patience."

I love this story for many reasons. One, it teaches me the practice of patience is connected to the unconditioned. When we are patient, we have no need for things to be different from the way they are. Yes, we

may have a preference, but we are at ease with not having our preference met. In this way, our ability to be patient is not contingent on our outside circumstances. This story also reminds me of the power of connection and how it can transform us instantly. It seems when Ajahn Chah smiled and asked, "Are you all right?", there was a connection and care expressed between the two. Impatience evaporated in an instant. The truth of impermanence is always with us. Our minds attach to views and opinions and then in an instant, the heart can override the thinking mind through connection. This has happened to me numerous times when I have been impatient with someone in my mind, and then when I meet up and see the person, my heart transforms my impatience, effortlessly softens it, allowing a resolution between myself and the other to more easily flow.

https://www.abhayagiri.org/media/books/sumedho_the_way_it_is.pdf
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The Practice of Patience

Although I sometimes find acronyms lacking in creativity, I do find them useful mnemonic devices. In my experience, the actual practice of patience, involves several components.

P: The P, can represent perseverance, a wholesome quality required in the practice of patience.

A: The A, can represent attitude. This translates into the question we often are encouraged to pose, What is my attitude or relationship to what's happening right now?

T: The T, can represent tolerance. Tolerance is sometimes where we start as we begin our practice of patience. It serves as a step toward the fully realized patience.

I: The I, can represent investigation, curiosity. Investigation can help us see more clearly the root cause of our impatience.

E: The E, can stand for empathy. The experience of being impatient includes suffering, discomfort and unease. Offering empathy to our own hearts as well as others brings softness and space to the moment.

N: The N, can represent non-reactivity which is a wholesome force needed to consider an appropriate response.

C: The C, can represent careful consideration which includes mindfulness as well as considering our situation from various viewpoints.

E: Last, but absolutely not least, the practice of patience leads us closer to Equanimity. Equanimity of one of the fruits of the practice of patience.

Practice: This week, when you notice yourself becoming impatient, see if you can recall some of the components of how to practice patience listed in the above acronym or come up with your own version based on your experience. What helped you move along the spectrum from impatient toward patient? What hindered you?

Practice: During sitting meditation, at a time of unpleasant or what seems like uninteresting experience, focus on bringing the quality of patience to it. Notice any resistance to the experience and consciously bring the quality of patient kindness into the experience.

Reflection: Acceptance of the truth of the way things are: Are there things which you are not willing to look at, to be honest about? Are there some things you believe are true which you resist? When can acceptance of the truth help you to be more at peace? Acceptance of the truth sometimes takes the form of surrendering to the inevitable. Have you ever found peace through such surrender? We invite you to write your reflections on this and/or talk to a friend about same.