

Bearing with Life: Khanti Pāramī

Excerpt from *“Parami – Ways to Cross Life’s Floods”* Ajhan Succito (2012)

The Buddha famously declared khanti (patience) to be the supreme purification practice. He was playing on the Vedic term tapas, which signifies the taking on of an austere or ascetic practice such as fasting or mortifying the body in order to cleanse the mind of passions and attachments. But the Buddha pointed not to physical asceticism — which he frequently spoke against — but of the restraint of holding the heart still in the presence of its suffering until it lets go of the ways in which it creates that suffering. That is, the mind/heart (citta) habitually creates suffering and stress through reacting to, holding onto or getting caught up with what life throws at us.

One of the traditional chanted recitations in Buddhism refers to the Buddha’s own confrontation with the demon host of Mara. The Buddha overcame Mara through practicing khanti. He overcame the forces of delusion, anger, fear, aversion, and greed through practicing patience, not through blaming anyone, ignoring those forces or running away from them. So, when you’re stuck in a traffic jam, anxious for resolution to a crisis or beset with a migraine, it’s good to remember that the Buddha was here too and found a way through. In an age where one is encouraged not to wait but to go faster, not to accept but to be more demanding, this pāramī may be the one you use most frequently to cross the floods.

Acceptance Without Expectation

Patience deals with checking emotional reactions, but it’s not a denial of emotional intelligence. Patience has the gut-knowledge that recognizes that a problem or a pain is not something to run away from, get flustered by or be self-pitying about. It has the wisdom to know that we have to prioritize the steps through which we can resolve suffering. But the first thing to do is to not react — to not rage, despair or mentally proliferate.

Our first effort is to draw a line around the suffering, take a step back and know ‘that’s that.’ Then there’s the effort to recollect that we can be free of the suffering:

that we can let go; we don't have to take suffering in and adopt it as final, real and solid. After that initial recollection we have the encouragement to investigate, and then to draw out the hook that snags our hearts on the rough stuff of life. All this takes patience.

Patience holds us present with the suffering in a spacious way, encouraging the mind to open. And an open mind both feels more peaceful in itself, and more readily sees into the cause of its suffering.

Patience is not a numbing resignation to the difficulties of life; it doesn't mean that suffering is all right. Nor does it mean putting up with something until it goes away. The practice of patience means bearing with dukkha without the expectation that it will go away. In its perfection, patience means giving up any kind of deadline, so the mind is serene and equanimous. But if patience isn't pure yet (and it takes time to develop patience!), the mind still feels pushy or defensive. Impure patience is the attitude: 'Just hold on and eventually things will get better; I'll get my own way in the end if I'm patient enough.' This approach can temporarily block or blunt the edge of suffering, but it doesn't deal with the resistance or the desire that is suffering's root.

Pure patience is the kind of acceptance that acknowledges the presence of something without adding anything to it or covering it up. It is supported by the insight that when one's mind stops fidgeting, whining and blaming, then suffering can be understood. It is this suffering that stirs up hatred and greed and despair, and it is through practicing the Dhamma, or Way, of liberation that its energy and emotional current can be stopped.

Reactivity isn't the truth of the mind; it's a conditioned reflex, and it's not self. Because of that, suffering can be undone, and when it is, the mind is free. Therefore, all conditioned reflexes have to be understood as unreliable and dependent on causes and conditions. They're not to be adopted as real and solid. Yet they do happen! Although we can intellectually understand that holding on, expecting things to be satisfying or feeling cheated are immature responses, in order to undo these attitudes, we must first be patient with them. Rather than adopt more miserable reactions — 'Why isn't it working? Why did you let me down? I shouldn't complain. Why is it like this?' the practice is to bear with the waves of turbulence.

The world, including our own bodies and emotions, is unsatisfying and a bit of a mess. But the practice does urge us to cross over it all. And this requires us to grow stronger and broader rather than hide or run away. Then the process of bearing with the suffering is not a punishment but a voyage of growth.

Ten Paramis

Generosity — Dāna

Morality — Sīla

Renunciation — Nekkhamma

Discernment or Wisdom — Paññā

Energy — Viriya

Patience — Khanti

Truthfulness — Sacca

Resolve — Adhitthāna

Kindness — Mettā

Equanimity — Upekkhā