

**The Far-reaching Attitude of Patience – Part 1 of 4:
the Patience of Not Retaliating to Harm** (lightly edited transcript)
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Contents (click on heading to view text)

- The meaning of patience according to Buddhism.
- Disadvantages of anger
 - *Is anger beneficial?*
- The three kinds of patience
 - 1) *The patience of not retaliating to harm*
 - Another difference between Buddhism and psychology
 - Blaming others versus taking responsibility
 - Understanding the futility of praise and blame
 - Developing the ability to evaluate our own actions

The meaning of patience according to Buddhism.

Patience is the third of the six far-reaching attitudes. It is very important to have patience. It is important to understand the Buddhist definition because in America we usually think patience means repressing your anger and gluing on a plastic smile. That is not the meaning at all in Buddhism.

Rather, it is a mind that is able to remain undisturbed when facing harm or a mind that is able to bear pain or suffering without getting upset and angry. It is also a mind that is able to practice Dharma single-pointedly and bear the difficulties encountered in Dharma practice.

Disadvantages of anger

Patience counteracts anger. It is very important to counteract anger. Anger is one of the three poisons. It is called a 'poison' because it poisons others' and our own minds. Anger in some ways is very deadly. With attachment we may harm others, but we may also do things to make others happy out of attachment. With anger, we seldom do things to make others happy. While both attachment and anger poison our own mind, anger is very directly harmful to others. While attachment is not always directly harmful, it is sometimes more harmful indirectly.

Also, anger is what burns the roots of virtue or positive karma, the merit or positive potential that we have accumulated before. For this reason it is especially important to combat anger.

Attachment doesn't destroy the roots of virtue. It doesn't destroy the good karma.

What happens is we may generate good motivations, do good actions, accumulate good karma in our mindstream as a result of these actions, and dedicate it. But if we get angry later, the anger still impinges the ripening of the good karma. If we don't dedicate it, then the anger will really reek havoc. If we do dedicate it, the anger will still make a mess but it is like the difference between being in a hurricane with your windows boarded up and being in a hurricane without your windows boarded up. There is damage in both cases but to different degrees.

We dedicate the positive potential we accumulate to protect our virtue and to steer it in a good direction. But this is not sufficient. It is very important to refrain from getting angry afterwards. If we get angry, for example, at a powerful object of karma like the Triple Gem, our teacher, our parents, or the poor and the needy, or we get into a very big anger, then the anger can really block the ripening of the good karma.

We may have spent time going on retreats and sitting cross-legged, enduring the pain and so on, but a big anger can just destroy the positive potential accumulated from that and doesn't let it ripen. If it's a medium kind of anger, what it can do is, it postpones the ripening of the good karma, or the good karma

brings fewer positive results. Let's say the karma has the potential to bring many positive results, but with the anger, it only brings a few, or the results don't last very long, or they are not quite as nice as they would normally have been. We get all these disadvantages from anger.

[Audience: Inaudible]

I think what you are talking about, is being able to identify your emotions. Sometimes we are feeling different emotions. It is not only anger; it could be jealousy or pride or attachment, and it's only later that we are able to identify them. Once we are able to identify them, then we know what to do with them. Is that what you are talking about? When you have that self-awareness: "I knew something wasn't right, but now I know what it is that wasn't right."

Often, we are unaware of what our motivations are. We are unaware of what our emotions are. We act out of them and we still create the negative karma even though we didn't have the name for whatever it was that was motivating us at that particular moment. When we realize what it was, the thing to do then is to immediately generate regret for what we did.

That makes the force of the negativity less strong. For example, you may not have known that you were angry. You were picky or irritable but then you wound up blowing up at somebody. When you blew up, it's like: "Oh God, I was really angry after all," but still the harsh words were said out of anger. So it's something to be purified.

But the thing is, if we are able to generate regret immediately afterwards or even during the time when we are out of control, then it cuts the force of the negative karma. In addition, if we do the other three opponent powers as well, then that really helps to purify right away. I wish I could say it doesn't matter but...

This is why the practice of mindfulness is so important. If we are mindful, we will be able to identify what is going on in our mind sooner rather than later. Not being mindful is a big problem. So often we are just not aware and we act, and half an hour later, or a day later, a year later, or ten years later, we finally figure out what it was that was motivating us. But if we fine-tune our mindfulness then it becomes easier.

[Audience: Inaudible]

So you have been noticing those small angers and it is more in the form of being annoyed or irritation. It's like you are bugged and it comes and it goes. So the thing is, if we can take note of that and notice the kinds of situations that it comes in, then when we are in those situations, we pay attention, and it becomes easier to prevent it from arising in the future.

If you notice that you frequently get irritated when people brush against you, then, the next time you are about to enter into a crowded elevator, you say: "Okay, I am really going to try and generate love while I am standing in this elevator because I know otherwise I have the tendency to get irritated."

It's just becoming aware like that and making sure that those little annoyances don't keep growing and growing, because they do sometimes.

[Audience: Inaudible]

It's very true. Some people have more problems with objects than with people. I have noticed in talking with people that some people find that they get angry more often at friends than at strangers. Other people find that they get angry more often at strangers than at friends. We are all different. Some people are going to be very hurt when a friend criticizes them but let it go when a stranger does, but for another person, it is going to be the exact opposite.

[Audience:] You find that you are getting upset about something and you say: "Okay I am getting upset, but I am going to let it go." But something is still there, so you go to the person and you talk it over with them and work it out. Is it preferable to have that exchange where you go and talk to the person or to not be bugged in the first place?

Well, I think for our own peace of mind, not getting bugged is the best thing. But the thing is, if something

is sticking, then it is good to work with our mind or work with the other person, or do both and somehow resolve it.

But before you go and talk to the person, it's very important to just sit and be aware of exactly how angry we are and see if we can mellow our anger a little bit, so that at least the energy isn't too strong. If we make a firm determination that we don't want to explode over this before we go talk to the other person, then if they don't respond favorably, at least we are a little bit prepared for that. Whereas, if we run to them while we are still angry, and if we are not careful with what we say and they are not careful with what they say then...

[Audience: Inaudible]

I think that is dependent on how people interpret different things. There could or could not be a big difference. I have noticed in a lot of my talking with various psychologists and mediators about this, that we definitely have a difference of opinion. There is definitely a difference of opinion and I have had them get quite angry with me about it. [laughter]

Whether you are a Buddhist or a psychologist, I think what is important is not to judge yourself as bad when you get angry. In other words, not getting angry with yourself for being angry, because as soon as we get judgmental with ourselves and mad at ourselves for being angry, then we just get stuck completely.

Then, not only do we not resolve the anger, but we also have this other muck on top of it and everything kind of makes a mess. I think that is an important point. From a Buddhist viewpoint, if you notice you are angry, think: "Okay, there is anger there. That doesn't mean that I am a bad person. It doesn't mean that I am evil. It doesn't mean that mommy and daddy are going to hit me." Just break that whole pattern of thought.

Is anger beneficial?

And then where Buddhism differs from psychology is, a Buddhist would say: "Okay I am not going to feel guilty about it, but is anger something that benefits me? Is it something that I want to cultivate?" A Buddhist would look at that and say: "Well, it makes me upset. I don't communicate well with other people. I have a lot of regret about what I say and what I do afterwards. I create negative karma that causes me to have a lower rebirth. Anger puts more obscurations on my mind so that I have more to purify and I am further away from liberation and enlightenment. It also increases the ego grasping." Having made the analysis, you say: "Well, no, there is no benefit in getting angry, so I don't want this to be something that I nurture and increase."

Now, a therapist or a mediator might look at anger and say: "Well, there is something very good about anger. It gives me lots of energy, and then I can correct wrongs. There are injustices in society. If I am angry, then I'll correct these injustices." Or "There is abuse in my family. If I am angry, I'll correct the abuse." Or "Somebody is taking advantage of me. If I am angry, then I will stop them from doing that."

Now what a Buddhist would say in reply to that is that anger isn't the only motivation that is necessary in order to correct things that are unfair, unjust or abusive. In other words, you can have other motivations that make you act and intercede in harmful situations. It doesn't need to be something like anger. It can be clarity. It can be wisdom. It can be compassion. They can be very powerful assertive things that make you act in an intervening way to stop a situation. Anger isn't necessary in those situations. That would be a Buddhist approach.

Somebody who is a sports fan will say that anger is necessary because then it makes you beat the other team. In reply, a Buddhist would say: "What use is it beating the other team? So what?"

"Well I might get another \$2 million if I beat the other team."

So what? From a Buddhist viewpoint does that help sentient beings? Does it give you a good rebirth? Does it get you closer to liberation and enlightenment? No! Then it's useless.

So, there is definitely a difference here.

[Audience:] But I have heard His Holiness mention before that anger can be beneficial.

The first time I heard His Holiness say that, I thought: “Hmm, His Holiness has been talking with psychologists.” [laughter] I think maybe it was a result of talking to some people, but it was also giving anger a very specific meaning. When he said that anger might be okay, it wasn’t in the same sense as what the psychologist meant. What he meant was if you are a bodhisattva and out of bodhicitta, you do an action out of anger, like the story of the Buddha, who, in a previous life as a bodhisattva, saw that there was one person who was going to kill 499 other people. Out of compassion, he decided to take that one person’s life. But he had compassion for both the victims and the perpetrator.

Here, the causal motivation was compassion but the temporal motivation at the time the bodhisattva did the action was anger; it was to destroy that person. Because compassion is the causal motivation, as the general big motivation for the action, it overrode the negative temporal motivation and it came out as something positive.

So I think when His Holiness is saying that anger can sometimes be good, it is in that kind of context that he is talking about. This is my interpretation.

[Audience: Inaudible]

When we realize that we are sentient beings and that whole situation stinks, then we are going to try and do something about it. When we see that the sources of suffering are the ignorance, anger and attachment, then we are going to try and remedy them in some ways. The anger comes very spontaneously for us because we are so incredibly habituated with it. “I like this.” “I don’t want that.” “It should be this way. It shouldn’t be that way.” We are so habituated that these thoughts just come so naturally. It’s not something to feel guilty about. But, on the other hand, if we can change our mind so that we don’t always have to be like that, it sure would be nice. I would really like to be free of my mind that is like this: “I want this.” “I don’t want that.” “Why don’t you do it this way?” “Why don’t you do it that way?” It just drives me nuts!

[Audience: Inaudible]

Let me answer this question in a broader way instead of just talking about the anger. When we talk about karma in general, there are different kinds of karma. When you have the motivation to do an action and you actually do it, then the karma is very heavy. When you have the motivation but you haven’t actually done it, then the karma is lighter. In a dream there is the anger and maybe the motivation, but even in a dream if you killed somebody, you didn’t actually kill anybody, so there wasn’t the action. You don’t get the karma of killing because you didn’t actually kill anybody in the dream. But I think the anger definitely makes an imprint. When you have a dream with a lot of anger, when you wake up, you can feel it; you are in a bad mood usually when you wake up. Or you feel, “Good, I got that guy!” [laughter] So, I think there is some imprint from it.

We are talking about whether anger has advantages. One thing that many psychologists say is that anger is good because it is how you heal yourself. They say that if there were some things that happened in your life, then it’s good to get angry and good to let that anger out, like screaming in an empty field or beating pillows or something like that.

Again from a Buddhist point of view, we would say: “You can’t heal your anger if you don’t recognize it is there.” If there is anger that has been suppressed or repressed, it is important to recognize it. But the way to release it isn’t by beating the pillow or screaming in the field. That may release the physical energy and the adrenaline rush and it may prevent you from beating up a person at that particular time, so it’s definitely better than beating somebody up. But from a Buddhist point of view, acting out the anger physically sets that habit. Then, you have to do it again when you get angry. You have to yell again and you have to beat the pillow again. The danger in that is what happens if you are not near an empty field or you are not near your pillows? The habit of acting out the anger may be so entrenched that you may have to take it out on somebody.

I think it’s important to understand that when we say that is not a good technique to release the anger, we are not saying that you should repress the anger and stuff it in. It is important to understand that because often in psychology, either you repress it or you express it and there is no middle ground

between those two. Whereas in Buddhism what we are doing is, we don't want to repress it because it will still be there. If you express it, it will still be there too. The adrenaline may have gone away but the imprint of the anger is still there. What we really have to do, is try and transform that anger and look at the situation in a different way so that the anger just evaporates.

[Audience:] What about dissipating anger through exercise?

That releases the physical energy of the anger but again, it is not doing anything to counteract the habit of getting angry. It's definitely better than taking it out on a person and I think that exercise is very good, I am all for it. But what I am saying is that, that will not completely stop the anger. It's just a way to release the physical energy behind it at that particular moment. We still have to come back and work with our minds. We are stuck with it, folks! There is no pill to take to get rid of these things from the root.

[Audience: Inaudible]

But again is anger the only motivation that you need to act in that situation? This is what I saw real clearly as a Vietnam-war protester. One time when I was sitting there protesting for peace, somebody picked up a brick and threw it at the other party, and I went: "Hold on!"

When you generate anger, your mind becomes so similar to the mind of the person whom you are protesting against, because it is based on this whole thing of "me." There is a very strong feeling of me and the other party has to stop what they are doing. There is this me-them split in it.

I don't think anger is necessarily the only emotion we can have to stop things like that. This is where I think we have to see the force of compassion. Compassion does not mean being wimpy. Here in the West, we often think that having love, compassion and patience means that you will be wimpy. We often think that not having attachment and ambition means that you are indecisive and you are just like a blob of jelly or something. But that is not the case at all.

My teachers, for example, are incredibly decisive. They know what they want and what they don't want. They are very clear about their values and they will definitely stand up for what they think is right to do and discuss things with you. But the motivation for doing that is coming from a motivation of loving-kindness and compassion, not a motivation of wanting to destroy somebody else or their values, or something like that.

[Audience: Inaudible]

You are supposed to do it with compassion. I think debating is a very skillful way to help young people to use their physical energy in a good direction. They can jump around and yell and scream, but it is all involved in the Dharma. Now, I am not saying that they never get angry or proud. If they are ordinary sentient beings, that surely may come up. Their debate teacher will remind them that they are not doing this just to win the debate, so that they can be master monk or something like that. But what any individual is doing, who knows?

[Audience: Inaudible]

Well, especially in Dharma discussions and things, we have to be really careful, because it is so easy for ego to sneak in. Then it becomes not a thing of wanting to understand or help the other person. It becomes, "I want to win because I am me," and then we are back where we started. You could be talking about politics; it's the same as talking about Dharma at that point, in terms of the motivation.

The three kinds of patience

The first kind of patience is the patience of not retaliating. That's when somebody harms us but we do not retaliate.

The second kind of patience is the patience of enduring suffering. When we are sick or we face misfortune, we avoid getting angry with that. We are able to be relaxed and patient through that. In other words, we are not talking so much about a thing that is harming us, but we are talking about just a bad

situation.

The third kind of patience is the patience to definitely practice the Dharma. This means being willing to go through the difficulties of practicing Dharma, like coming to teachings on nights when the roads are slippery. There is some difficulty, some problem, but there is patience to do it. This patience also includes having the courage to look at your own mind, being able to meditate on impermanence, being able to meditate on emptiness, being able to start to let go of some of your rigid concepts. It takes a lot of patience to do that because sometimes the mind recoils and says: "Uh-huh I am not going to do this."

1) The patience of not retaliating to harm

I want to go back to the first kind of patience – the patience of not retaliating. That's the big one. When things happen, when people harm us, we get upset. When I use the word 'anger' here, it covers a whole range of emotions. It can mean something small like being bugged or irritated or annoyed. It can also mean being judgmental or critical or outraged or hostile or holding grudges or out-and-out rage and hatred. When I use the word 'anger' I am using it in a generic way for this whole range of emotions.

They all have the common quality of exaggerating the bad qualities of something or projecting bad qualities that aren't there. Due to the exaggeration, we want to either escape from it or strike back at it because we can't endure the situation.

It may start out as irritation, but if we aren't careful then it may build up and we become critical and judgmental, and then it may build up further and we are outraged or enraged, which then results in us holding a grudge. So, there can be a continuum of emotions in any specific situation if we don't take care of what happens with the initial anger.

Another difference between Buddhism and psychology

Before I go further into this, I want to highlight another difference between Buddhism and psychology. I think this is very important, or at least somehow for me it was quite meaningful. The Buddhist idea of personality is that we are a composite of many different mental factors. Some of these mental factors are constructive ones, like faith, concentration, wisdom and kindness. Some of the mental factors are more harmful ones, like jealousy, pride and anger.

We are a composite of an incredible number of different mental factors. At one moment, one mental factor may come up, and in the next moment another mental factor that completely contradicts the first one may come up with regard to the same object.

One moment we are loving, the next moment we are hating. One moment we rejoice, the next we are jealous. One moment we are humble, the next we are proud. So we are composed of all these different mental factors. They don't all agree with each other and they come up at different times. When they come up, they are in manifest form. When they are not in manifest form, then we have the potential or what we say the seed of the affliction [['affliction' is the translation that Ven. Chodron now uses in place of 'disturbing attitude'](#)] in our mind.

Right now, for example, I am not manifestly angry. But I could become angry soon. Why? Because the potential still exists in my mind. I have the seed of anger in my mind because I haven't removed that seed yet. I haven't realized emptiness. This view is slightly different from that in psychology. Psychology talks about a repressed emotion. It says the emotion is there. It is manifest. It is just repressed, but it's still there, very solid. Whereas from the Buddhist point of view, it is not manifest. There is just the potential. There is just the seed.

Of course, the seed can be quite dangerous. But it is not like you are angry twenty-four hours a day under the surface. Sometimes, it may be that some people have manifest anger but they are not aware that they have manifest anger. Like the situations that we were talking about, where you don't realize that you are upset until after you have said something. If you look back, you see that you have been upset for half an hour.

Blaming others versus taking responsibility

[[Teachings lost due to change of tape.](#)]

...In our society, we take so much delight in blaming our problems on somebody else. Like what you said about all the lawsuits. We lack any kind of patience for the fact that other people might make mistakes. If you leave here tonight and you slip on the stairs, you are going to sue me. [laughter] Our society has so little patience for anything.

[Audience: Inaudible]

Well it's hard to say because any situation is a dependently arising situation. I think that in our pop culture we have two extremes. One is to blame our problems on somebody else. The other is to blame the problem on ourselves in the name of taking responsibility for it.

A lot of people do not understand what taking responsibility means and when it becomes self-blame. I think any situation that happens is a dependently arising situation. It happens because of many different causes and conditions – some of it comes from this side and some of it comes from that side and so on. In a lawsuit, what we are trying to say is, one factor is more important than the others. Or that the other factors don't exist; only this one exists. But any situation arises in dependence on many different factors. The thing about taking responsibility is to recognize what our share of it was and not take more and not take less.

This is important, because when we take responsibility for things that are not our responsibility, then we start feeling guilty. And when we don't take responsibility for things that are our responsibility, then we will blame somebody else. Whenever there is a conflict, it's usually: "I did something. The other person did something." There might be a whole bunch of other things involved.

The more I think about it, the more I feel that we really have to go beyond this whole blaming habit. As soon as our mind wants to find one factor to blame as the major cause, that it is due to just this factor and not any other factor, then we get so stuck and our mind becomes so tight. I think we really have to do something about this tendency to want to blame either somebody else or ourselves. We should replace it with: "Well, this is a dependently arising situation. Let us look at all the things that are happening here."

[Audience: Inaudible]

Except our legal system isn't usually done with a lot of compassion. I think it would be very different if you had people in the legal system who would deal with situations with a compassionate attitude. When you feel you have been victimized, you take it to court, you send the other guy to jail, and you feel you got your fair justice. But in actual fact it doesn't undo the harm you received.

What it is, is it is rejoicing in somebody else experiencing pain. This, from a Buddhist viewpoint, is a negative motivation – rejoicing in somebody else's pain. Whereas if it is done with an attitude of, "Well, somebody harmed me. I don't want this person to create more negative karma for themselves or harm somebody else by doing this, so I am going to activate the legal system to prevent these from happening." It is a completely different thing when it is done out of compassion like this.

We have to be very careful. It is often so easy for us to rejoice in somebody else's harm, or to wish somebody harm, especially when we read the news. It's very easy for that to happen. That is why I think compassion for the victim and the perpetrator is really the key, and not just putting the blame on one or the other. Really having compassion for both.

Thich Nhat Hanh exemplifies that so much especially when he does retreats of Vietnam vets. What he does is just so incredible.

Understanding the futility of praise and blame

With the patience of not retaliating, there are many techniques for dealing with the anger. I am going to review a lot of the things from Working with Anger but before I get into that, I will read you this sentence that I found in my notes, because I think there is something really powerful about it:

"By understanding the futility of praise and blame in this and future lives, don't get angry when you are insulted."

When I thought about it – ‘the futility of praise and blame’ – and really thought about it, to me this phrase is very powerful, because so much of our anger is revolving around praise and blame. We get angry when somebody blames us, but the blame is linked to the praise, because the more attached we are to the praise, the angrier we get when we don’t get it, or the angrier we get when we get the blame instead.

If we want to get rid of the aversion to blame but want to remain attached to praise, then we are fighting a losing battle, because they are so closely linked. That mind that is just so attached to what others say and think about me: “What other people say about me and what other people think about me is so important!” I think that is a real dilemma for us.

You could do a whole analytic meditation on this one sentence – ‘the futility of praise and blame in this and future lives’. Think: “What good does praise do me? What benefit does praise give me? It doesn’t give me more money. It doesn’t give me a longer life. It doesn’t give me a good rebirth. It doesn’t give me more merit or more wisdom. It doesn’t make me closer to liberation and enlightenment.

Praise doesn’t really do a whole lot for me when I try to think about its concrete benefit. It makes me feel good, but in terms of bringing any concrete benefit, there isn’t any.” But then the mind says: “Well, if I get praised, I might get more money.” But then again, what good does the money do you in the long term?

[Audience:] When others praise us, it reinforces our self-esteem.

But then the question is, if it’s valid in the context of self-esteem, why are we giving the power of our self-esteem to somebody else to determine? Then it is not self-esteem anymore; it is other’s esteem, isn’t it?

If we are very attached to praise, then when somebody doesn’t give it to us when we are expecting it, what happens to us? Like those times when you are just waiting for somebody to tell you that you look good, or tell you ‘thank you’ for something that you did or tell you how kind and thoughtful you are, but they don’t give it. We will be so miserable. And in this case, they didn’t even criticize us; it is just that they didn’t give us what we thought we deserved. If they had criticized us, then we will be off on the moon! [laughter]

Developing the ability to evaluate our own actions

It is a difficult thing. I think that comes because we haven’t developed the ability to evaluate our own actions. We are very dependent on what other people think to determine whether we are right or wrong or good or bad, or to determine whether our action is beneficial or not beneficial.

If we had more self-reflection and we were able to look at our own actions and say: “Yeah, that was a kind thing. I recognize that as kind. It doesn’t matter to me whether other people recognize it. I recognize that was a kind thing, I rejoice in that and I dedicate the merit,” then we can leave it at that. We are not waiting for the recognition.

Similarly, if we made a mistake, we can acknowledge our mistake. If somebody else points it out, we don’t have to get so upset about it because we are able to acknowledge it ourselves and recognize that it’s completely okay to make mistakes, in the sense that it doesn’t mean that we are bad and evil people.

It is good if we improve, but we don’t have to sit there feeling so guilty and getting into a lot of self-blame. We often lose this ability of self-reflection and then we get so confused, “Oh, did I do the right thing?” We get very confused about our actions if we don’t get the kind of feedback that we expected. I think it’s very important to do this meditation every evening where we look back at our actions and learn to develop the ability to evaluate ourselves. And also develop some practice in feeling okay about making some mistakes. “Yes, other people noticed it. Yes, I made the mistake. But it’s not the end of the world.”

[Audience: Inaudible]

Then I would say don’t wait until the evening. Do it a little bit earlier. Or you could even review periodically during the day – stop for a couple of minutes and kind of review what has happened. Take a census and check up what is going on.

Recognize that sometimes it is very hard to evaluate our own actions. We don't know what our motivation is. We think we have one motivation but we realize later that we have another one. That's going to happen, but develop some kind of gentleness with ourselves so that whether we praise or blame ourselves, we don't take it so seriously, and whether others praise or blame us, we don't take it so seriously.

That doesn't mean that we disregard other people's feedback. I think it's good to listen to others' feedback and deal with the situation, but what we are talking about here is to avoid being attached to the good feedback and averse to the bad feedback.

Let's do some meditation on that.

This teaching is based on the *Lamrim* or *The Gradual Path to Enlightenment*. Please refer to the following web-page for its outline and other transcripts or to listen to the audio recording of these talks: <http://www.thubtenchodron.org/GradualPathToEnlightenment/outline.html>