Kshanti: The Practice of Patience

By Rev. Master Seikai

There is great merit in the practice of patience; this has always been so, but perhaps it is even more true in 21st century America, and this is why I think so. During my lifetime there has been a profound shift in American society towards instant gratification. Whereas people formerly were more willing to work hard to achieve their goals, realizing that important things in life take time, now people are much less patient with respect to such things. It is as if Americans have come to think of a good education, a career, a high standard of living, and a big house full of many, many things is something that is owed us by society at large.

The way the world works, we are conditioned to think that we are lacking, that we need to own lots of nice things and to have lots of pleasant experiences. That sense of lack carries with it an underlying fear of not getting what we want, and a subtle but persistent desperation to achieve our many goals, to get what we want, thus arriving at a happy state of being. The poet Henry David Thoreau wrote: "Most men lead lives of quiet desperation"; this is what he was talking about. He made this observation well over a century ago when life was not lived anywhere near the breakneck pace at which it is lived today. The telephone, the radio, the television, the automobile and the airplane were still things of the future.

The desire for instant gratification is reflected in just about every aspect of life. Driving only gets faster and more reckless, and the idea of defensive driving seems almost lost. Road rage, aggressive driving, and speeding have become normal. I was involved in an accident in which the driver behind me smashed into my car because he was talking on his cell phone and not watching the road. In the work place, multi-tasking has also become normal and expected of employees. Time pressure, economic pressure, manpower pressure add up to people doing two things (or more) at once. How well can you do more than one thing at a time? In order to have the patience to do one thing, and do it well with full awareness, you must ask yourself this question. And then of course there is the personal computer, on which I type these words. The computer is an amazing tool which has reduced the time to a small fraction of what it formerly took to produce the printed word in any form. This evolution has had the unintended side-effect of raising our collective expectations regarding how long it takes to do things, and our collective ability to allow things to take as long as they take seems to have been eroded.

Here's where patience comes in. Its close ally is mindfulness, so close that they are almost indistinguishable. If we are going to cultivate patience, the way to do it is to practice meditation on a daily basis. Impatience is a product of the mind; the desire for good things to happen, desire to get where we want to go, desire to be with who we want to be with, desire to get things done. Desires, in and of themselves, may or may not be harmful to us, but the minute we add impatience into the mix, there is always suffering. Given that these things all arise in the mind, we are able to do something about them by cultivating mental discipline. The mental discipline of meditation is sitting still, letting things be as they are in the present moment of awareness. The mind is good at presenting us with hundreds of options of things that we want; the discipline is to look at all the options and let go of them one at a time. This practice increases patience.

The Buddha had much to say about patience. Clearly, he considered it to be an important aspect of practice as a Buddhist, whether monk or lay person. On one occasion, when he and his attendant Ananda entered a village to beg for alms, the villagers hurled insults at them. Ananda encouraged the Buddha to leave the village for some place more conducive to their begging, but the Buddha refused, saying: Patiently shall I endure abuse as the elephant in battle endures the arrow sent from the bow; for the world is ill-natured.*

There is a lot going on in this brief account. For one thing, the Buddha didn't just hop it to

some other place, he took it as an opportunity to practice patient forbearance. He was also teaching the villagers by virtue of his tolerance of their behavior, which can be a very powerful example to those who are able to see it. And he also says matter-of-factly that the world is ill-natured. This last comment is extremely valuable to remember, as is it a reminder that we should not expect it to be otherwise. The world does not owe any of us a living, or any special treatment—it is a rough-and-tumble place to live. For this reason, as well as our own propensity for chasing desires endlessly, the hedonic treadmill so to speak, we need to practice patience. There is no deliverance from the cycle of desire, gratification, increasing desire, frustration, anger and rage without it.

This brings us to looking at the addiction cycle with which most people are afflicted in one way or another. Most people have been smokers or tried drugs, or been heavy drinkers or alcoholics at one time or another. Everyone knows what it is like to satisfy a craving such as the craving for nicotine by smoking a cigarette. Pretty soon that satisfaction wears off and the addictive craving starts up again. You get increasingly nervous until you are able to step outside and have a smoke. It can be this way with any powerful stimulant—sex, alcohol, computer games, fast driving, and being showered with praise and attention: fame. They all have their addictive cycle; they all are the means by which people generate suffering for themselves.

Those who are able to free themselves from the grosser kinds of addiction, whether by means of meditation or some other discipline which takes a bigger place in their lives than the addiction, will still have subtler forms of addiction to come to terms with. Instant gratification runs deep in human beings. So, learning to practice patience while sitting at a stoplight or waiting in line at a store becomes an important thing to learn. We all have to wait, in the doctor's office, in lines, wherever we happen to be and, most importantly, in our own minds. We want good things to happen to us spiritually, but they don't just happen right away as soon as we would like them to—we have to be patient.

It may take a while, but it is possible to teach yourself to be truly patient in your own mind. Really sitting still, watching the parade of desires float by and not getting caught up in them isn't easy, it takes serious mental discipline, but it is also truly liberating, and this is what we are looking for in Buddhist practice. To just sit there and be content may be un-American, but it is far, far more satisfying than running on the hedonistic treadmill, which goes nowhere. Deep patience opens a door into a deeper reality, the reality of seeing things as they truly are.

When I began monastic training, I had many expectations about what I would get out of it, or what changes would take place in me as a result of my new way of life. They happened alright, but on the whole the primary change was that I saw far more clearly what I needed to do about myself, and I witnessed ever more clearly my deep pain as a human being. My addiction was judging—both other people and myself—and it was a difficult habit to kick. My Master's advice to "love yourself when you criticize yourself" had a revolutionary impact on my life and my training. I put it into practice, a practice which inherently took a lot of patience; I am not easy on myself, my default thought pattern is to blame myself for things that go wrong. This practice of patiently turning compassion inwards on myself has never diminished in importance over the course of more than 30 years. However much I have practiced it, it is as if every day, when I wake up in the morning, I'm back at square one: I must pour oceans of compassion inwards lest I make my own life miserable.

Patience is the number one antidote to anger, that universal cause of conflict in the world. When things do not go our way we get angry, we blame people, we vent on all the injustices around us. There is no end in sight, no solution to human disharmony and conflict so long as people are mired in anger and are unwilling to be patient with each other. But on the other hand, it is amazing how chronically difficult situations can actually be resolved by means of patience: patiently listening to what the other party has to say, even if it is offensive at first, begins to turn the tide of anger. We have to learn to get past the flash points where previously some word or action brought up rage or panic or disgust in us, learn to allow these powerful human emotions to

come to the surface without immediately acting on them. Patience gives us the internal space not to immediately react to the things that set us off. And for those who are internalizers, patience is the means of allowing bottled up emotions to work their way to the surface of the mind, allow ourselves to feel those emotions fully, acknowledge their existence and then let them go.

It's a sad comment on the human condition to note that religion is one of the main progenitors of conflict in the world, which is to say that for much of humankind, religion is not doing its job of creating better human beings. Rather, blinded by the idealism that "my religion is the true religion" or "God wants things to be this way…" religious fanatics create disharmony among people and conflict, fanning hatred and intolerance, raising the level of political instability in the world. As a Buddhist, one cannot do a thing about what any other religion teaches or the way adherents of other world religions behave—but we can practice patience. Patience, forbearance and tolerance make the world a better place, and are the tools we have to allow the waves of anger and hatred to calm down. Even if we just practice this with the people in our own lives we make a difference in the world as a whole—everyone in the world is interconnected through an immense web of human relationships.

Idealism is the most subtle of addictions. The addictive quality of an ideal lies in its very attractiveness, that we want things to be better than they are now, that we want to achieve an ideal state, either as individuals or as a society, which would represent a big improvement over our current one, and that our way of thinking will be the ticket to achieving that happy goal. Usually there is a little bit of impatience in the mix as well: the sooner things change the way I want them to, the better. Learning to recognize that little twist of impatience in ourselves, or recognizing that little bit of insistence that things should be the way I want them to be, frees us to let go of the addictive aspect of idealism. It is still possible to have ideals without insisting on them, without forcing them, without imposing them on other people—but it requires considerable maturity to sit still enough with our ideals so that they do not become problematic and another source of suffering.

It is best to recall that "human life is impermanent and flows away as does water down a mountain." It is also subject to constant change, but the changes which do come about aren't necessarily the ones that we would like to see happen. So in the end, we have to train ourselves to accept change simply as a law of the universe which is not answerable to our personal will.

Here is an exercise in *kshanti*: when you have prepared food for a meal, and put it on the table where you will eat, first recite the Five Thoughts, which is the meal-time verse. Then wait one full minute before eating, and just observe your impulse to begin eating, which is a very strong conditioned reflex. Take a moment to contemplate food—that living things have given their lives so that you can eat and continue to live, and that however appetizing it may be at this moment, soon it will pass through your digestive system and be foul smelling. This is actually the nature of all created things, and it is an important aspect of Buddhist teaching to contemplate the impermanence of things. But at the same time it makes it possible to be grateful for food, and the many small requisites of life that we habitually take for granted.

In our ridiculously speeded-up, impatient world, the only way people can really make it better is through the application of genuinely spiritual values and practices. Seeing beyond the greed to possess and experience, and the fear that we will be denied the things we crave, practicing patience is one of the key ingredients to living a sane life and learning to be content with the way things already are.