

Dawn Scott

*The Steadying Power of Patience*

Part 4: “Patience as Acceptance of Truth”

July 24, 2021



Hello, and welcome to this fourth and final part of our exploration of the steadying power of patience. We'll be looking at this third facet of patience, or *khanti parami*, patience as accepting truth.

When we call on patience to help us accept the truth, it helps our heart to mature in relationship to three integral aspects of our lives. These three truths are talked about as the three marks of existence, but I like to think of them as just the truths of our lives.

The first aspect is *anicca*, a Pali word translated as impermanence. I like to think of it as the in-flux, inconstant, flowing process nature of our moment-to-moment experience. It has an aliveness because it's constantly shifting and moving.

And the second mark of existence, the second truth, is *dukkha*. Sometimes it's translated as suffering, pain, challenges. But it's also the fact that life can feel pretty groundless because there isn't anything that can actually give us the satisfaction that we know is possible, nothing that can actually yield the peace that our hearts long for.

And then there's the third mark of existence, the third truth: *anatta*, not-self, the ungovernability of life.

The Buddha highlighted the truth of inconstancy because it actually serves *anicca*. He highlighted inconstancy, this in flux process nature of life, first because it serves as a gateway, an opening into directly experiencing and knowing *dukkha*, this unsatisfactoriness, and *anatta*, not-self.

Patience shores up our heart so that we can be intimate with these three truths without losing our balance, without becoming unhinged. What's common to all three aspects of patience that we've been exploring—patience as forbearance, patience as gentle perseverance, and now patience as accepting truth—is that we're training in nonreactivity. We're training in nonreactivity so that we can learn to be with and relate wisely to what is. Just this past year and a half has shown us what a tender and vulnerable thing it is to be human.

All our hearts long for is happiness, some stability, some peace, some sense of rest and ease. And when I think about this, sometimes I'm reminded of the words of Ajahn Sucitto, which he wrote in his book on the paramis. He says, "After all, no one likes suffering. And we're all in this together, wanting peace and harmony."

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Our lives are uncertain and unpredictable. In other words, there's dukkha, again, this Pali word meaning stress, pain, suffering, irritation, not getting what we want, being separated from what we want, being separated from those that we love and what we love.

The dukkha that we experience in our lives is directly related to impermanence. Dukkha grows out of the soil of impermanence.

I want to share a reflection on impermanence from monastic and scholar Bhikkhu Bodhi. He says, "The mark of impermanence comes to manifestation in our inescapable mortality, our condition of being bound to aging, sickness, and death, of possessing a body that is subject to being worn and rubbed away to dissolution and disintegration."

What I'm about to share with you is just my opinion. The heart longs for peace and harmony. But it's coupled with this vulnerability of being alive, i.e., coupled with dukkha, and this can feel so untenable. We feel that we can't bear the dissonance between these two things, the dissonance between wanting peace, stability, and ease and being right in the middle of dukkha and impermanence, the changing nature of things.

And this wish for peace and harmony coupled with the vulnerability of life can feel so untenable that out of the building blocks of our moment-to-moment experience, we create a self. We create a self that provides some sense of stability, some agency, and some ground. But even the sense of self that can feel so solid at times is just a construction of our own making. And the not-self nature of our being has its roots in this inconstancy, this impermanence, this anicca.

Bhikkhu Bodhi continues, "The Buddha's teaching discloses the radical impermanence uncovered only by sustained attention to experience in its living immediacy: the fact that all the constituents of our being, bodily and mental, are in constant process, arising and passing away in rapid succession from moment to moment without any persistent underlying substance."

We create this sense of self, but in reality, we are a process, nothing stagnant, nothing permanent, nothing constant. Every sound, every smell, every taste, every touch, every thought, every sight is an arising that persists as change. It's existing, but it's changing as it has its life, and then it dissolves and passes away.

You can experience this now in the sound of my voice. It arises, it persists as change, and then it passes away. There is nothing in our experience for which this is not true. We are a process, nothing constant.

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There's no being at the center of this process that is controlling or that ultimately owns the heart-mind-body stream because if there were a being at the center who could control this heart-mind-body process, wouldn't we stop, say, the aging process?

The Buddha points this out in a sutta called the *Anattalakkhana Sutta*. He says, "Form is not self." When the Buddha is talking about form, he's talking about the body, its five physical sense organs (eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and the body itself), and its objects (sights, sounds, smells, tastes, sensations of the body, and the rest of the physical world). That's what he means by form. But for now, as I read the sutta, when you hear the word "form," just substitute in the word "body." We can think of form as body to start to grok what he's talking about.

The Buddha goes on to say, "Were form self, then this form would not lead to affliction. And one could have it of form, 'Let my form be thus, let my form not be thus.'" He's saying if the body were self, if there were some entity at the center of this heart-mind-body process that could control this changing nature, then the body wouldn't age or get injured because the entity at the center of the process would intervene on aging, would intervene on illness, and would perhaps even try to keep us alive.

The Buddha goes on to say, "And since form is not self, so it leads to affliction, and none can have it of form, 'Let my form be thus, let my form not be thus.'" The truth of our lives is a lot for the heart and mind to take in.

I'm reminded of a teaching that Joseph Goldstein gave, where he reminds us that awakening happens in stages because the immensity of the truth of our lives is so much to take in. We can't take it in all at once. And we do it in stages, hence the stages of awakening. It's a lot for the heart and mind to take in these truths, so whether we're in deep retreat or in our daily lives, it can feel quite overwhelming to directly experience impermanence, dukkha, and not-self.

And there is nothing wrong with this wish for peace and stability. There is nothing wrong with our longing for stability and ease and contentment. This wish for peace, as we named earlier, when related to wisely, can be a noble aspiration, the gentle perseverance that we were talking about.

The gold at the center of our aspirations and our longings has a nobility, and there is nothing wrong with our wish for peace and contentment. It's beautiful that our heart longs for these things. The trouble starts when our heart-mind starts casting about looking for stability, peace, and contentment in those experiences that don't actually yield stability, peace, and contentment due to impermanence, dukkha, and the not-self nature of experience.



Dukkha exists. That's a truth.

Impermanence, the in flux, changing, inconstant nature of things, is a fact of our lives.

Things ultimately are uncontrollable, ungovernable, arising due to various conditions and circumstances and events coming together, influencing them, and resulting in some outcome. Even saying "outcome" makes it sound too static. It's not an outcome—it's a happening that persists as change and then passes away.

Dukkha, unsatisfactoriness; anicca, impermanence, inconstancy; anatta, this lack of governability are facts of our lives. And when life is going well, we're cool with it. But when our expectations are actually different from what life serves up, then we react. There are our expectations, and then there is what arises in our life—say, a global pandemic. There's a gap between the two, and we fill that gap with our reactivity.

We become impatient, irritable, despondent: Why me? When is this going to end? You can hear this in a quote by Ajahn Sucitto. It's as if our heart is saying it shouldn't be this way. There shouldn't be any suffering. And it's in that moment that we call on the power of patience as acceptance. Patience actually helps our heart grow in its capacity. The heart has this deep and wide capacity to live into these truths without reactivity.

I want to share some practices with you on how to develop patience. There are two preliminary practices followed by five additional practices that are inspired by Ajahn Sucitto and Venerable Analayo.

The first preliminary practice is just cultivating mindfulness throughout the day. We can associate mindfulness with being aware of a particular object or a particular experience.

What I love about cultivating mindfulness in our daily lives is that it's embodied. It's as if mindfulness, awareness, *sati* can actually fill the body with this knowing presence. There's an acronym for this embodied mindfulness or awareness that relates its characteristics: SAP. I learned this from Venerable Analayo.

S stands for soft, open, receptive awareness, perhaps even spacious.

The A is for awake. This embodied mindfulness is nimble, alive, alert, and bright, filled with curiosity and a wish to know our moment-to-moment experience.

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And then P stands for presence, a very receptive, knowing presence.

That's the first preliminary practice, cultivating this embodied mindfulness in our daily lives. You can play with this now as you're listening. You can feel the body, feel the feet touching the ground at the same time as you can hear my voice and take in this information. Perhaps you feel the coldness in your hands. That's the first preliminary practice, embodied mindfulness.

Another aspect of mindfulness awareness is that it's non-interfering. This mindfulness is non-interfering, and it alerts us or lets us know when reactivity is present or absent. When it's absent, we want to allow this to sink into the heart-mind and get a felt sense of what the heart-mind and the body actually feel like when there's an absence of reactivity and then allow ourselves to enjoy this beneficial state, because it's this beneficial state that will allow us to let go of clinging and all the things that result in us resisting the truth of our lives.

Remember how good it feels to live without reactivity. We bring mindfulness to what the heart and mind actually feel like when there's an absence of reactivity.

Mindfulness also lets us know when reactivity is present. This is where the five additional practices come into play. Mindfulness lets us know when reactivity is present, and we just draw a line around that suffering. We draw a line around that reactivity, we summon patience, and we make a commitment not to cause harm. We make a commitment not to allow the reactivity in our heart and our mind to reach the boundaries of our heart and start to flood into our words and our actions.

The second step is we remember that we can be free from reactivity, that we are using the circumstances and the conditions of our lives to awaken. We don't need to go on long retreat, although long retreat is a really beneficial and wonderful experience that can help us get a taste of states of freedom that can be so onward leading. There's nothing wrong with going into long retreat. It's a beautiful thing. We can wake up right in our daily lives, right here, right now. When reactivity arises, we can use the reactivity as a means for moving towards our wishes for liberation.

A third practice investigation: we start to bring a very playful, curious attitude to our reactivity: "What is this?" An almost childlike quality. Notice I didn't say childish, but childlike quality. It's the sense of wonder, the sense of play. And I know you might think, "It's not possible when I'm reactive to bring in this curiosity, this playfulness."

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But it is actually possible. I remember once I was at work, and I was walking back from lunch to my desk. My mind was thinking about something, and I could see the hindrance arising. Actually, I didn't see it arising—I woke up in the middle of the hindrance. It was such a celebratory moment: "There's a hindrance in your mind!"

And that was such a different experience and orientation for me. Before, that would have been bad news to see. But it's possible to relate to the reactivity in our hearts and minds with this curiosity and playfulness, like "What does this have to teach me today?"

Then we start to bring some curiosity and investigation: What does the reactivity actually feel like in the body? What are some emotions that are present? What is the constellation of thoughts that are at play that are the result of the reactivity in the heart-mind?

In the fourth step, we start to look at the conditions that actually give rise to the reactivity and the suffering: Where was my attention? What was my energy like? Was it really low? Was there a ton of energy? Was there a loss of mindfulness? What was happening externally? As things were occurring externally, how was my heart-mind engaging?

What was arising internally? What was the feeling tone that preceded the arising of the reactivity? What did I have for lunch? How much sleep did I get the night before? Am I simply a little more vulnerable today due to the stressors of life, like a global pandemic and the racial reckoning that's happening here in the United States?

Something to keep in mind is that we don't need to identify with the reactivity. It's not personal. And by looking at our reactivity with this curiosity, this investigation of looking at the conditions that gave rise to this, we see that it's not personal: "I'm just a little more vulnerable today," "I didn't get a lot of sleep," or "There was the loss of mindfulness."

We see that it's not our fault. It's just the play of conditions coming together, giving rise to reactivity. We do want to take responsibility, and we take responsibility for the reactivity in our minds by drawing a line around the reactivity, making a commitment to nonharming, remembering that we can be free within the conditions of our lives, and bringing in this investigation and playful curiosity.

There's no need to create an identity around our reactivity. We gather information through this investigation process, curiosity, and play. In that process, we draw out the hook, as Ajahn Sucitto says. We see, "Well, how did I get hooked? Oh, yeah, my attention went to that crazy situation

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with my family," or "Wow, this reactivity arose, and there was a lot of exuberance in my heart and mind."

And then you start to look at the conditions that will lead out of this reactivity. Sometimes just bringing mindfulness to the reactivity can help it abate. It just vanishes right before your eyes.

You can bring in the brahma-viharas of friendliness; compassion; sympathetic joy, celebrating another person's good fortune or having gratitude, appreciating the blessings of our lives; and equanimity.

Sometimes recollecting that our time here is finite and we are going to die can wake us right out of our reactivity. It breaks the spell, and we wake up and think, "OK, I only have so much time. I don't want to waste it on this reactivity."

Sometimes it can be taking in the good. Gratitude is a way of helping reactivity in our minds to dissipate.

Another beautiful practice is taking a moment to recall what the heart-mind or the body feel like when there's an absence of reactivity, when there are wholesome mind states present. This can help our heart-mind to let go of the reactivity of its own volition.

It's not something that we will. It's not something that we try to make happen. Be careful with this practice—with all of these practices, we're not trying to make these things happen. We're not trying to will the reactivity away.

We bring in other conditions. We see: Does this help the reactivity to abate? Does it help to mitigate it? Does it actually start to thin the reactivity?

These are just a few practices for developing and cultivating khanti parami, complete patience. To summarize, we can cultivate embodied mindfulness. With that mindfulness, we can notice when the heart-mind is free of reactivity. That mindfulness can also let us know when reactivity is present.

We then draw a line around the reactivity. We make a commitment not to cause harm. We recollect that we can be free even within the conditions of the reactivity because we're using it as a means to live into our aspirations, live into what it is that our heart longs to embody in this life.

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We start to investigate the reactivity. We get curious about the conditions that led to the reactivity, and there's no need to identify with them. And then we draw out the hook, ways of mitigating the reactivity: what are the conditions that lead to the abatement of the reactivity?

Thank you so much for your practice, and may the practice and power of patience be a benevolent, steadying force in your life. May it connect you to your highest aspirations and your deepest longings. May it bless your heart and that of others when you summon patience out of compassion in service of freedom. May the practice and power of patience be a condition for your full, unadulterated awakening.