

3. PERFECTION OF PATIENCE (*KSHANTI*)

Patience is demonstrated by a mind which does not become agitated. The perfection of patience has three divisions.

The first is a kind of patience that is not disturbed by the harm done to us by others. It is a mental attitude which precludes reacting to harm or abuse from other people. For example, even though someone hurts us physically, insults us or takes a very negative attitude towards us, we remain unaffected and calm. This is because we realize that if we respond otherwise, this will only cause more trouble for everyone concerned.

We need to cultivate such an attitude throughout the course of our lives because we will often encounter such circumstances. When we come up against a potentially explosive situation, by keeping in mind that any hostile reaction on our part will only produce suffering, we apply patience and keep calm. If we do so, the result will be peace and happiness within our own minds. Although someone may badly harm us or harbor very unkind thoughts, if we remain unmoved this will gradually lessen his hatred and calm him down. If we do not practice patience and instead react negatively towards such a person, our suffering will only get worse. In many scriptures, patience is compared to armor. In previous times soldiers wore suits of armor to protect themselves from the weapons of their enemies. If, in the same way, we arm ourselves with patience, then no matter what attitudes or reactions others have to us, we will be well protected and our mental peace will stay undisturbed.

The next aspect of patience is the patience which voluntarily accepts suffering. This refers to situations in which we are up against difficulties and hardships. Rather than becoming discouraged when these arise and complaining about them, we should apply patience and voluntarily accept hardships by realizing that such suffering results from previous actions motivated by self-cherishing. Instead of blaming others, we should feel glad to have the opportunity of experiencing the maturation of a karmic imprint. This type of patience is especially necessary when we are engaged in an intensive dharma practice because at such times we often have to contend with difficulties, such as a lack of material resources. If we are practicing dharma and others react unfavorably to this and disturb us, we must exercise patience at such a time and remain steadfast. But if instead of being patient and understanding we react unkindly with remarks such as, 'why don't you mind your own business', this is not in keeping with the spirit of dharma practice and will only create trouble.

These last two kinds of patience, not reacting to harm from others and the acceptance of suffering, are very important. We will find them necessary throughout our lives because such trying circumstances constantly occur. If we try to prevent everyone from harming us or other people, we will find this impossible. But if instead we protect our own minds we will not be harmed by others no matter how they treat us. This is illustrated by Shantideva, a great Indian master, with an example: if in order to protect our feet from being hurt by stones or thorns we wanted to cover the Earth with leather, this would be impossible. But if we wear stout leather shoes, our feet will be protected wherever we walk. In the same way, just as we cannot go up to each and every person and persuade them to refrain from abusing and harming others, if we practice inner patience, other peoples' actions will not harm us and our peace of mind will never be destroyed.

The next type of patience is that which is needed in order to think deeply on all the points of dharma teachings. This means that we should apply ourselves to reflecting on the profound and subtle points of dharma, no matter how difficult this may be, and make a sincere and thorough effort to understand them. And when we are engaged in a process of analysis and contemplation, we must not allow our minds to be distracted by disturbances. This kind of patience can only be acquired after we have developed our mind to some degree. It cannot be developed from the very beginning of our practice.

Beneficial Effects

The progress and development of one's meditation and the attainment of concentration are in fact impossible without the practice of moral discipline. Patience is referred to as the finest of ornaments. Worldly jewelry and ornaments are a very superficial sort of adornment; for what may be considered beautiful and ornamental in one country may be considered quite humorous by people elsewhere. But if someone is adorned with the ornament of patience, wherever he goes he will be considered handsome. He will be respected and praised by many. Because patience is a truly beautiful ornament, the result of habitual patience is a pleasing and beautiful appearance. As I have said before, we often have to face, both mentally and physically, difficult circumstances. When this happens, the best way to relieve unhappiness is by being patient. For example, when we are suffering physically and mentally, if we systematically respond by patient acceptance, the power of this practice will lessen mental suffering and the resulting mental peace and happiness will also help to overcome our physical pain.

Among the many delusions, one of the heaviest is hatred. The strongest antidote for hatred is patience. When the fire of hatred blazes within our mind, it is the cool waters of patience that can put it out. It is also like armor which can protect us from the harsh words, accusations and criticism of others. With these examples, you will be able to think of many good qualities of practicing patience and see how very beneficial it is.