

Comments on Rev. Master Seikai's Article "The Practice of Patience"

By Steve Murray

RM Seikai's article "Kshanti: The Practice of Patience" was very helpful to me and resonated at a deep level. Reverend Master Jiyu wrote, "All-acceptance is the key to the gateless gate." I believe all-acceptance is very close to the practice of patience. The difference to me is that all-acceptance seems more formidable than patience. I can conceive of being gradually more patient in many situations in my life; all-acceptance seems to be a bigger, harder leap.

I see examples around and within me of the culture of impatience. There is, within me and in our society, uncertainty and fear when it comes to stillness and unstructured time. I know of friends that retired with enough money to live comfortably. Some of them feel restless without work and ask, "What will I do with the rest of my life?" I understand this fear quite well and would not have retired if I hadn't married. Retired folks have time to travel and time to volunteer to help others. And there is also time to be quiet and find a deeper understanding of the Buddha Refuge.

I have friends that are early adapters of the latest technology. They tell and show me about the latest 3D television technology and wireless devices that allow them to stay connected all the time, take and send photos anytime, anywhere. They warn me that I'm getting out of touch by not having a smart phone. They may have a valid point. I sometimes feel out of touch, that the world is passing me by and I am missing important new developments. At the same time I see the cost of being too connected. Two examples: people alone together, on the internet instead of talking to each other; shorter attention spans, jumping from one subject to the next.

There are those who are getting older but feel certain that there are foods, creams, treatments, and surgery that will stave off aging, hopefully indefinitely but at least for the next couple of years. There is nothing wrong with eating healthy food, exercising, and taking care of your skin. Problems arise when unrealistic expectations and judgments enter. Aging means that the body breaks down, hair greys, skin gets less elastic and wrinkles, and joints ache. The rate varies among people, but we can't expect to stop natural change. There is nothing bad or problematic about getting older. To paraphrase Dogen: "Youth and old age, as such, should not be avoided and they will cease to exist, for if you can understand that youth and old age are Nirvana itself, there is not only no necessity to avoid them but also nothing to search for that is called Nirvana."

Addressing our culture of impatience, RM Seikai writes, “Here’s where patience comes in.” The solution to these problems is not more effort, better research, new discoveries; the solution is the practice of patience. I was talking with a Christian friend about the problem of Medicare and rising medical costs. He said, and I readily agreed, “The underlying problem is facing and accepting death.” A big part of rising medical costs is the hope that, with new discoveries, we can put off death indefinitely. There is little recognition of the costs, both spiritual and financial, of this individualistic effort.

In my experience, impatience often boils down to my problem, not that of circumstances or of the world. The same is true with judging and anger. The practice of patience is, as RM Seikai writes, “turning the compassion inwards.” Beneath impatience with retirement boredom, falling behind the latest technology, or getting older is doubt, the doubt that fundamentally I don’t measure up. Somehow without the structure and rewards of work, or without the latest wireless device, or without my youth, I will find I am a worthless person, a burden to the world, a life wasted. The great reward of patience is the eventual understanding that these fears are delusions. Each life, healthy or ill, young or old, intelligent or dull, is uniquely valuable and equally capable of finding true peace.

This may seem glib, too simple to be true. It may be simple, but it is not easy. I was struck when RM Seikai wrote, “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.”

This valuable teaching can be expressed as,

- “There is no permanent self.” That is, the insights about the value of patience realized yesterday must be found and practiced anew today. And the mistakes of yesterday don’t hinder today’s practice (anicca is my friend).
- “Training is enlightenment.” That is, each day is new, free from both the delusions and the clarity of yesterday. Today, once again, there is a new self facing and dealing with ongoing karma that can mutate like a virus.
- “Training is endless.” That is, spiritual training is not like other human efforts. We spend years in school, get a degree, and we’re done; we save and buy a house and we own it. With endless training there is no time when it’s done and no thing to own. The other side of this coin is that we have all we need right now, as we are.

Thank you, Reverend Seikai, for the teaching and for being part of the Great Refuge of Buddha, Dharma and Sangha.