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The Answer to Anger & Aggression is Patience

by Pema Chödrön



Bill Viola, *The Locked Garden*, 2000
Color video depicted on two freestanding hinged LCD flat panels
Video Installation, Photo: Kim Perre

We can suppress anger and aggression or act it out, either way making things worse for ourselves and others. Or we can practice patience: wait, experience the anger and investigate its nature. Pema Chödrön takes us step by step through this powerful practice.

The Buddhist teachings tell us that patience is the antidote to anger and aggression. When we feel aggression in all its many forms—resentment, bitterness, being very critical, complaining and so forth—we can apply the different practices we’ve been given and all the good advice we’ve heard and given to other people. But those often don’t seem to help us. That’s why this teaching about patience caught my interest a few years ago, because it’s so hard to know what to do when one feels anger and aggression.

I thought, if patience is the antidote to aggression, maybe I’ll just try that. In the process I learned a lot about what patience is and about what it isn’t. I would like to share with you what I’ve learned, to encourage you to find out for yourself how patience works with aggression.

To begin with, I learned about patience and the cessation of suffering. It’s said that patience is a way to de-escalate aggression. I’m thinking here of aggression as synonymous with pain. When we’re feeling aggressive—and in some sense this would apply to any strong feeling—there’s an enormous

pregnant quality that pulls us in the direction of wanting to get some resolution. It hurts so much to feel the aggression that we want it to be resolved.

So what do we usually do? We do exactly what is going to escalate the aggression and the suffering. We strike out; we hit back. Something hurts our feelings, and initially there is some softness there—if you’re fast, you can catch it—but usually you don’t even realize there is any softness. You find yourself in the middle of a hot, noisy, pulsating, wanting-to-just-get-even-with-someone state of mind: it has a very hard quality to it. With your words or your actions, in order to escape the pain of aggression, you create more aggression and pain.

At that point, patience means getting smart: you stop and wait. You also have to shut up, because if you say anything it’s going to come out aggressive, even if you say, “I love you.”

Once, when I was very angry at a colleague of mine, I called him on the telephone. I can’t even remember now what I was angry about, but at the time I couldn’t sleep because I was so furious. I tried meditating with my anger and working with it and doing practices with it, but nothing helped, so I just got up in the middle of the night and called him. When he answered the phone, all I said was, “Hi, Yeshe.” But he immediately asked, “Did I do something wrong?” I thought I would very sweetly cover over what I was really feeling and say something pleasant about all the bad things he had done, whatever they were. But just by the tone of my greeting to him, he knew. That’s what it’s like with aggression: you can’t speak because everyone will feel the vibes. No matter what is coming out of your mouth, it’s like you’re sitting on top of a keg of dynamite and it’s vibrating.

Patience has a lot to do with getting smart at that point and just waiting: not speaking or doing anything. On the other hand, it also means being completely and totally honest with yourself about the fact that you’re furious. You’re not suppressing anything—patience has nothing to do with suppression. In fact, it has everything to do with a

gentle, honest relationship with yourself. If you wait and don't feed your discursive thought, you can be honest about the fact that you're angry. But at the same time you can continue to let go of the internal dialogue. In that dialogue you are blaming and criticizing, and then probably feeling guilty and beating yourself up for doing that. It's torturous, because you feel bad about being so angry at the same time that you really are extremely angry, and you can't drop it. It's painful to experience such awful confusion. Still, you just wait and remain patient with your confusion and the pain that comes with it.

Patience has a quality of enormous honesty in it, but it also has a quality of not escalating things, allowing a lot of space for the other person to speak, for the other person to express themselves, while you don't react, even though inside you are reacting. You let the words go and just be there.

This suggests the fearlessness that goes with patience. If you practice the kind of patience that leads to the de-escalation of aggression and the cessation of suffering, you will be cultivating enormous courage. You will really get to know anger and how it breeds violent words and actions. You will see the whole thing without acting it out. When you practice patience, you're not repressing anger, you're just sitting there with it—going cold turkey with the aggression. As a result, you really get to know the energy of anger and you also get to know where it leads, even without going there. You've expressed your anger so many times, you know where it will lead. The desire to say something mean, to gossip or slander, to complain—to just somehow get rid of that aggression—is like a tidal wave. But you realize that such actions don't get rid of the aggression; they escalate it. So instead you're patient, patient with yourself.

Developing patience and fearlessness means learning to sit still with the edginess of the energy. It's like sitting on a wild horse, or on a wild tiger that could eat you up. There's a limerick to that effect: "There was a young lady of Niger, who smiled as she rode on a tiger. They came back from the ride with the lady inside and the smile on the face of the tiger." Sitting with your discomfort feels like riding on that tiger, because it's so frightening.

When we examine this process we learn something very interesting: there is no resolution. The resolution that human beings seek comes from a

tremendous misunderstanding. We think we can resolve everything! When we human beings feel powerful energy, we tend to be extremely uncomfortable until things are resolved in some kind of secure and comforting way, either on the side of yes or the side of no. Or the side of right or the side of wrong. Or the side of anything at all that we can hold on to.

But the practice we're doing gives us nothing to hold on to. Actually, the teachings themselves give us nothing to hold on to. In working with patience and fearlessness, we learn to be patient with the fact that we're human beings, that everyone who is born and dies from the beginning of time until the end of time is naturally going to want some kind of resolution to this edgy, moody energy. And there isn't any. The only resolution is temporary and just causes more suffering. We discover that as a matter of fact joy and happiness, peace, harmony and being at home with yourself and your world come from sitting still with the moodiness of the energy until it rises, dwells and passes away. The energy never resolves itself into something solid.

So all the while, we stay in the middle of the energy. The path of touching in on the inherent softness of the genuine heart is to sit still and be patient with that kind of energy. We don't have to criticize ourselves when we fail, even for a moment, because we're just completely typical human beings; the only thing that's unique about us is that we're brave enough to go into these things more deeply and explore beneath our surface reaction of trying to get solid ground under our feet.

Patience is an enormously wonderful and supportive and even magical practice. It's a way of completely changing the fundamental human habit of trying to resolve things by going either to the right or the left, calling things right or calling things wrong. It's the way to develop courage, the way to find out what life is really about.

Patience is also not ignoring. In fact, patience and curiosity go together. You wonder, Who am I? Who am I at the level of my neurotic patterns? Who am I at the level beyond birth and death? If you wish to look into the nature of your own being, you need to be inquisitive. The path is a journey of investigation, beginning to look more deeply at what's going on. The teachings give us a lot of suggestions about what we can look for, and the practices give us a lot of suggestions on how to look. Patience is one extremely helpful suggestion.

Aggression, on the other hand, prevents us from looking: it puts a tight lid on our curiosity. Aggression is an energy that is determined to resolve the situation into a hard, solid, fixed pattern in which somebody wins and somebody loses.

When you begin to investigate, you notice, for one thing, that whenever there is pain of any kind—the pain of aggression, grieving, loss, irritation, resentment, jealousy, indigestion, physical pain—if you really look into that, you can find out for yourself that behind the pain there is always something we are attached to. There is always something we're holding on to.

I say that with such confidence, but you have to find out for yourself whether this is really true. You can read about it: the first thing the Buddha ever taught was the truth that suffering comes from attachment. That's in the books. But when you discover it yourself, it goes a little deeper right away.

As soon as you discover that behind your pain is something you're holding on to, you are at a place that you will frequently experience on the spiritual path. After a while it seems like almost every moment of your life you're there, at a point where you realize you actually have a choice. You have a choice whether to open or close, whether to hold on or let go, whether to harden or soften.

That choice is presented to you again and again and again. For instance, you're feeling pain, you look deeply into it, and you notice that there's something very hard you're holding on to. And then you have a choice: you can let go of it, which basically means you connect with the softness behind all that hardness. Perhaps each one of us has made the discovery that behind all the hardness of resistance, stress, aggression and jealousy, there is enormous softness that we're trying to cover over. Aggression usually begins when someone hurts our feelings. The first response is very soft, but before we even notice what we're doing, we harden. So we can either let go and connect with that softness or we can continue to hold on, which means that the suffering will continue.

It requires enormous patience even to be curious enough to look, to investigate. And then when you realize you have a choice, and that there's actually something there that you're attached to, it requires great patience to keep going into it. Because you will want to go into denial, to shut down. You're going to say to yourself, "I don't want to see this."

You'll be afraid, because even if you're starting to get close to it, the thought of letting go is usually very frightening. You may feel that you're going to die, or that something is going to die. And you will be right. If you let go, something will die. But it's something that needs to die and you will benefit greatly from its death.

On the other hand, sometimes it's easy to let go. If you make this journey of looking to see if there's something you're holding on to, often it's going to be just a little thing. Once when I was stuck with something huge, Trungpa Rinpoche gave me some advice. He said, "It's too big; you can't let go of it yet, so practice with the little ones. Just start noticing all the little ways you hold when it's actually pretty easy and just get the hang of letting go."

That was extremely good advice. You don't have to do the big one, because usually you can't. It's too threatening. It may even be too harsh to let go right then and there, on the spot. But even with small things, you may—perhaps just intellectually—begin to see that letting go can bring a sense of enormous relief, relaxation and connection with the softness and tenderness of the genuine heart. True joy comes from that.

You can also see that holding on increases the pain, but that doesn't mean you're going to be able to let go, because there's a lot at stake. What's at stake is your whole sense of who you are, your whole identity. You're beginning to move into the territory of egolessness, the insubstantial nature of oneself—and of everything, for that matter. Theoretical, philosophical, distant-sounding teachings can get pretty real when you're beginning to have an inkling of what they're actually talking about.

It takes a lot of patience not to beat up on yourself for being a failure at letting go. But if you apply patience to the fact that you can't let go, somehow that helps you to do it. Patience with the fact that you can't let go helps you to get to the point of letting go gradually—at a very sane and loving speed, at the speed that your basic wisdom allows you to move. It's a big moment even to get to the point where you realize you have a choice. Patience is what you need at that point to just wait and soften, to sit with the restlessness and edginess and discomfort of the energy.

I've come to find that patience has a lot of humor and playfulness in it. It's a misunderstanding

to think of it as endurance, as in, “Just grin and bear it.” Endurance involves some kind of repression or trying to live up to somebody else’s standards of perfection. Instead, you find you have to be pretty patient with what you see as your own imperfections. Patience is a kind of synonym for loving-kindness, because the speed of loving-kindness can be extremely slow. You are developing patience and loving-kindness for your own imperfections, for your own limitations, for not living up to your own high ideals. There’s a slogan someone once came up with that I like: “Lower your standards and relax as it is.” That’s patience.

One of the Indian Buddhist teacher Atisha’s slogans says, “Whichever of the two occurs, be patient.” It means that if a painful situation occurs, be patient, and if a pleasant situation occurs, be patient. This is an interesting point in terms of patience and the cessation of suffering, patience and fearlessness, and patience and curiosity. We are actually jumping all the time: whether it’s pain or pleasure, we want resolution. So if we’re really happy and something is great, we could also be patient then, in terms of not just filling up the space, going a million miles an hour—impulse buying, impulse speaking, impulse acting.

I’d like to stress that one of the things you most have to be patient with is, “Oops, I did it again!” There’s a slogan that says, “One at the beginning and one at the end.” That means that when you wake up in the morning you make your resolve, and at the end of the day you review, with a caring and gentle attitude, how you have done. Our normal resolve is to say something like, “I am going to be patient today,” or some other such set-up (as someone put it, we plan our next failure). Instead of setting yourself up, you can say, “Today, I’m going to try to the best of my ability to be patient.” And then in the evening you can look back over the whole day with loving-kindness and not beat yourself up. You’re patient with the fact that when you review your day, or even the last forty minutes, you discover, “I’ve talked and filled up all the

space, just like I’ve done all my life, as long as I can remember. I was aggressive with the same style of aggression that I’ve used as long as I can remember. I got carried away with irritation exactly the same way that I have for the last...” If you’re twenty years old, it’s been twenty years that you’ve been doing it that way; if you’re seventy-five years old, it’s seventy-five years that you’ve been doing it that way. You see this and you say, “Give me a break!”

The path of developing loving-kindness and compassion is to be patient with the fact that you’re human and that you make these mistakes. That’s more important than getting it right. It seems to work only if you’re aspiring to give yourself a break, to lighten up, as you practice developing patience and other qualities such as generosity, discipline and insight. As with the rest of the teachings, you can’t win and you can’t lose. You don’t get to just say, “Well, since I am never able to do it, I’m not going to try.” You are never able to do it and still you try. And, interestingly enough, that adds up to something; it adds up to loving-kindness for yourself and for others. You look out your eyes and you see yourself wherever you go. You see all these people who are losing it, just like you do. Then, you see all these people who catch themselves and give you the gift of fearlessness. You say, “Oh wow, what a brave one—he or she caught themselves.” You begin to appreciate even the slightest gesture of bravery on the part of others because you know it’s not easy, and that inspires you tremendously. That’s how we can really help each other.

Pema Chödrön** was ordained in 1974 as a nun in the Kagyu lineage of Tibetan Buddhism and in 1985 became director of Gampo Abbey, the first Tibetan Buddhist monastery in the West. She has gone on to become one of the West’s most prominent teachers of the Mahayana path. Her many popular books include **The Places That Scare You, When Things Fall Apart, and Start Where You Are.