

Resilience as a training

Ayya Virañani

Transcription of an online Dhammatalk, September 27th 2026

Thank you for your practice, everybody. And I hope you thank yourself for your practice. It's easy to take it for granted. This is just something we do, but it's important in this world. Today I want to speak around a theme that I've been developing in our morning sessions this month, and expand on it a little bit. Hopefully there'll be time for some sharing and some questions at the end. I want to speak about **resilience as a training**. What is that? We know how we do it: we just practice. But sometimes it can help to understand what's happening in the practice, to have some clarity about how these simple moments of returning really do make a difference in this world.

We're drawn to the teachings. We hear the teachings of freedom from suffering. The Buddha spoke very clearly about that being the goal, the heartwood of his teachings, the end of the path. There's a sutta in the *Majjhima Nikāya*, the sutta on the simile of the heartwood, where the Buddha says that, in the end, it's not gain, honor or renown. It's not even the rewards of concentration or insight. The heartwood of this holy life is the complete liberation of mind. So we hear about that liberation of mind. And of course we're drawn to it: freedom from suffering. Complete freedom from suffering. Wow. I want to be like that when I grow up, we say to ourselves. And then the mind makes a leap. For many people, I know myself, freedom from suffering means suffering will never arise for us. That's not what the Buddha is talking about. What he's talking about is complete freedom from distress on account of the way things are in this world. It doesn't mean we'll never have pain, illness or death. It doesn't mean people around us will not have pain, illness or death. It doesn't mean things in this world will get any less messy. But it means the mind is not shaken by that, and can receive and accept that, and act and speak in this body, in this world, in a profoundly kind and wise way. That's what it leads to.

When we first get a hint that this is where this is going, instead of just, you know, no suffering at all, the mind can really get shaken by the practice itself. It's like, "Oh, what am I signing up for?" But it's too late. We've already started. We have to keep going. I don't know if any of you have had this feeling, or been in this place. It's like, "Oh God, what was I getting into? What was I thinking? This is really hard." Because we might want out of this messy world. But the practice drives us deeper and deeper into it: more wholeheartedly, more challenged, more open. Buckle up, everybody. I hope you have your internal seatbelts nearby. Because what we are developing here is a profound and really complete **resilience**. This is a modern word. It doesn't appear in the Buddhist texts. But it captures exactly what we're doing. We're developing a way of being with what is so that we can remain wise, kind and balanced. And we're developing a habit—all those internal skills, habits plural, all those internal skills that allow that, that foster that.

It's the development of deepening wisdom that understands things are out of our control, that the only thing we have agency about is this present moment and how we respond to it, and what seeds we're planting in our karmic stream. Next metaphor, but you get it. The past is gone. Dwelling on it only causes pain. How about the future? Well, who knows what the next moment will bring? It could be that some asteroid will hit us in the next twenty minutes. We don't know. Or some horrible earthquake, or some disaster might befall us. Or some crazy person in the world with too much power and money does something horrible that affects us all. This is happening every day. Just look at the news. This is the world we live in. Now what?

I've been reflecting a lot about things that I threw out when I was young, things that I dismissed as, "I'm not interested in that." I've taken up rereading Stoicism, because the Stoics did this. It's not just Buddhism that teaches us how to be resilient. Marcus Aurelius' *Meditations* are all about accepting the world as messy and realizing what you can do something about, and doing that rather than dwelling on what you

can't do anything about. This is the Serenity Prayer in Alcoholics Anonymous. It's attributed to St. Francis, but I suspect it's modern. It's the same thing. However we get resilience, it doesn't have to be Buddhist. It's useful. And all of these tools revolve around developing what we in Buddhism speak of as the **pāramī's**.

The **pāramī's** are the essence of our daily-life practice. The monks and the art teachers in Burma—remember, U Pandita used to say to people, they'd be on a retreat for a while, "Okay, now you practice for a month. Now go out and polish your **pāramī's**. Come back and practice again in a year." Meaning: okay, intensive practice is wonderful, and you have to do it. But in daily life, practice looks different. And we polish these **pāramī's** in order to develop the space in the heart and mind that allows us to be with what is, and that little pause before we react. And it widens that space. They widen that space when we develop the **pāramī's**. All of them together help give us the space that allows us to be here, now, completely.

Take a deep breath. The Buddha said we wake up in this fathom-long body. A fathom is an old English measurement, about six feet, two meters. If you're Dutch, maybe you're two meters tall. The rest of us are a bit shorter. But yeah, roughly two meters, plus or minus. We wake up in this thing. We can't jump out of it. We can't jump out of the world, much as we'd like to, into some wonderful place where things are a little easier. Nor does the practice take us to a place where difficulty never arises. It's so easy to forget this, and to forget about polishing the **pāramī's**, or to emphasize one or two of them to the exclusion of the others, because they're easier and we think, "Oh, I do this and it'll fix everything."

So, for example, in Burma people go to great effort to make large donations to monks and nuns. Wealthy people particularly give these lavish donations. Ariya was telling me the other day of a donation that was made in Chanmyay Myaing to honor the death of Sayadaw U Janaka. It was mind-boggling. It was huge. When she told me, I just looked at her like she had three heads. I was like, "What? Sure you had your math right?" She said, "Yeah." So wealthy people make these immense donations, trying to enlarge their **dāna** **pāramī**, and never mind the other **pāramī's** - the **mettā**, the wisdom, all the rest. They spend the rest of their life doing incredible things, some of them in Burma anyway. But, "I make this big donation. It'll make everything better."

U Pandita had a very clear message for people like that, and he was powerful enough so he could say it without any worry that they'd throw him into prison. A friend of mine, a nun who lived at Panditarama, told me this story of these wealthy donors coming to dedicate a building that they'd offered, a big building. They made this huge donation. And so, pouring the water, doing the dedication of merit, and then the Sayadaw gives his Dhamma talk. And his first words were: "**You know, you can't get away with it.**" And then he proceeded to talk about **kamma**, meaning what we do each moment counts. And it's not just that you can't fix that by polishing one **pāramī**. You have to polish them all, each one of them together. All of them together. Polish each one of them, but all of them together.

The first one is **dāna**, and so people in Burma do a lot of that, hoping they'll get at least a good rebirth. But then there's **sīla**, ethical conduct, and **renunciation**, and **wisdom**, and **calm**, and **concentration**, and **kindness**, and all the rest. This crowd of **pāramī's**. And I'm not going to talk about each of them singly. I urge you to go look them up and put them on your wall, put them on your refrigerator. Learn them. Take one each day. Because this world demands that we have that resilience. And resilience is simply a combination of at least eight of these **pāramī's** together. It's the ability to rest with what is without being shaken, without being thrown into that well of despair or reactivity that this world and our conditioning can create. It's the ability to rest with what is without being overwhelmed by it. And it's a maturity of understanding that doesn't demand things be the way we want them to be.

Like, I wish that sun weren't suddenly coming out from behind the curtain I put up to keep it out. But there it is. So that's a simple example. This is where the Stoics and the Buddha come together, because it is what it is. **Now what?** Now what can I do? I could get up and fix that, but I won't. It would break the train of thought, it would break the concentration and everything here. I mean, it would just be disruptive. So I lean into the shadow. That's a very simple example. Things are the way they are. So we have the wisdom to understand that.

This is the understanding of **dukkha** that the practice drives us into, that we don't like. It's like, "Oh, I wanted freedom from suffering, but here it is. And I have to be with this." "Excuse me? What? No." But we've started, as I've said, and we have to keep going. So clarity. It brings us to clarity about the nature of reality. We have to be mindful each moment to really let this in. So we have **wisdom**, we have **mindfulness**, both of these pāramī's. And because it's so challenging, we need **patience**, we need **kindness**, **mettā**, and patience. Those two are essential for ourselves and each other. Being patient with ourselves is where we begin.

Yeah, okay. So we've been practicing for forty years and we're still—never mind. It is the way it is. Deep breath. **Now what? Now what?** What karmic seeds are we planting? Is there resistance to that? Are we judging ourselves? Are we dwelling in too much expectation? Are we forcing? Or what's going on there? Kindness. Kindness. Patience. And it requires **resolve** in that moment, especially to be patient. Not following those negative thoughts about ourselves and each other.

This is where the training is essential, because when we create a habit of inclining to these, as opposed to indulging in whatever habits we come into this life with, it keeps us safe from the dark places in this mind right here. Because the world's going to be dark out there. We can't control other people. There are differences in the way we all are, and differences in all of our priorities, and there are always going to be people who are greedy and power-hungry and misuse those things in this world. That's **saṃsāra**. That's this human realm. Okay. Now what?

And there are going to be places inside us that are greedy and power-hungry. I think of those bad habits. In the same way, they're greedy for my energy, and there's no stopping them once I give in to that. It can never have enough. So, okay, starve that. And it's hard at first to have that resolve. Until—and here's the thing with resolve—it begins to bear fruit. You begin to see results. Please, please, please, I beg each and every one of you to pay attention to those results and give them their proper place.

This is where we lose resolve and fall into doubt. "Oh yeah, I had that. Yeah, I had that moment of balance, but you know what?" We keep obsessing about what's wrong and pick at it, like picking at a scab. Excuse me for that gross metaphor, but it's a good one. Because you know how kids are: they pick at scabs. Even as adults, we tend to do this. I have this deep old habit of picking at scabs. I don't know why. And I have—I was reflecting about this this morning because I have a burn on my hand and it's scabbed over and it's beginning to peel, and I had to put something on top of it to keep the other fingers from messing with it, pulling it off. Just stop.

So do whatever you need to do to stop picking that internal scab. You might need an internal support of some sort, the external bandage. Because when we pick at it, it only makes it worse. It only keeps that wound alive. It's not that we deny that that's there or pretend everything's fine, but we're protecting ourselves. **Mettā, patience**—these are profound protections. **Wisdom** is a protection. So to remember, moment to moment to moment, when the mind goes there, and to be patient with that.

So: clarity, kindness, resolve, balance. This is **equanimity**. This is the last of the pāramī's, but it's one that we bring to fruition in its baby stages right at the beginning of the practice. We have to have basic balance to be here, to have that moment to pause and be with. This deepens with the practice. At first, not so clearly, not so obviously, but it deepens exponentially as the wisdom deepens, as the mettā deepens.

At first, we have to remember it and we paste it on top of, as an intellectual thing. It's like, "Oh yeah, I remember things are the way they are. Can I be balanced with this?" Actually, that's intellectual, but it's useful. Please don't just discount that. That's the bandage. It's like, "Oh yeah, balance. I have to incline to that." That's an inclination to developing that as an experience. So it's not unhelpful to remember things intellectually. Just don't stop there. That's the main thing.

And ease and contentment with what is. This is a combination of both **wisdom and calm**. Things are changing all the time, and often in directions we can't stand, we hate. The number of times I have thought in the last—even just the last twenty-four hours—about AI. In a really, like, "Oh, I hate it with the strength

of a thousand suns." But it is this way. This thing exists in the world. I don't have to like it. It's a profound change that I wish weren't happening.

I bring to mind in these moments, actually, Analayo. Analayo says, "**Keep calmly knowing change.**" That combination of calm and mindfulness is what allows us to rest with ease. So cultivating a calmness of mind. Noticing when the mind is getting all kind of distressed, melodramatic. These moments when we—in many of you have heard me use this metaphor, and I like it so much—when we begin to sing in aria, as though we were in La Scala. Yeah, you know: "Poor me. Oh, the world's in a terrible state." When we get dramatic about our inner experience or the outer world, that's not calm. That's a big drama.

If you want drama, go to the opera. It's beautiful. I can—I used to love it. Or, you know, go to Netflix if you want drama. Cultivating drama inside is never useful. **Calmly knowing change.** It's not as satisfying to the ego. The ego loves that drama. But what we're weaning ourselves off, especially from the internal drama, is our involvement with it from a place of ownership.

It wouldn't be hard to be with change if it weren't for the fact that we like what we like, we want what we want, and we want to control that. Change is not controllable. This is something I will be talking about in the city retreat. It's coming up very soon. Wouldn't it be nice if we could control change? But, you know, you can't. You can't control your inner environment. You can't control your outer environment. Don't go to a drama about that. "Oh well, that's just the way the world is." This is a mature understanding that doesn't go to drama about this. Just know it calmly. "Oh, there it is again. I don't like it. Okay, what can I do?" And if there's nothing you can do, well, just be with it.

The Buddha was such a powerful teacher in this way, encouraging us to grow up and not be like two-year-olds. Because let's face it, I don't know about you, but I know about me. I've got a very well-developed tantrum generator inside. I can do tantrums like anyone. "I don't want it! How could they? No, no, no, no, no!" That's not calm. That's not wisdom. You see how these pāramī's—they all work together?

Holding it lightly. Sadly, humor is not one of the pāramī's. It should be, I think. Holding it lightly is so important. This is what allows us to rest calmly with what is. When we see a drama building, or one is already built because we have a habit of drama—

And then there's everybody's least favorite pāramī. And it's early on in the list. It's the third one: **letting go, renunciation.**

Oh well. This is woven through all of them, because we need to let go to do even the first pāramī, let alone all the rest. Letting go runs through. It's the golden thread through the whole of the teachings.

And we hate it. We absolutely hate it. We want freedom without letting go. It's so funny. It's like, "I want freedom of mind, but I don't want to have to let go of you." Right? Okay. Yeah. Isn't that exactly what old children have to do when they grow up? And this is how we grow up spiritually.

The heartwood that I began with illustrates some of those goodies that meditation can give us. As a monk, you know, monks in Burma who are renowned—gain, honor and renown—I mean, they're treated like princes. Letting go of that. Letting go of the goodies and the practice that concentration can bring. Not resting there. Not dwelling with just being quiet. Letting go of whatever wisdom we already have as a place to stop. Because until we're arahants, we have to keep practicing.

So not being content with whatever wisdom you have. "Okay, I have a little wisdom." That's good, in keeping the practice going. For the rest of our lives is what it takes. By now you know it's not a quick fix, and it's not about one experience or one insight, no matter how profound. Even a moment of stream-entry, as important as it is, is not that big a deal in the big picture. So never mind that. Even stream-enterers—and those people—you have to keep practicing. It's not somewhere to rest, or to say, "Okay, I've got it now. I can relax." No, we can't. So sorry. We have to keep polishing these pāramī's.

And the pāramī's that we polish in our daily lives, in these short moments many times in our practice, they will make us more and more and more resilient. And who knows where that goes? Other people in the world may not have so much resilience. It's not a societal value. And in fact, younger people, in my experience, tend to have less resilience than older generations. Because you can get what you want. You know, you just take this phone and you go, "do, do, do," and you get information instantly. You get whatever you want on Amazon instantly. Well, you might have to wait twenty-four hours for it to come to your door. But people demand other people treat them a certain way. Well, the world isn't gonna do that.

And it's up to us to model that. We can't control other people. What we can control is ourselves, and we can model that. So thank you, everybody. I know you're doing this. Keep doing it. I wanted to offer these reflections for your encouragement, to affirm what you're doing as right, to please keep going. Because the world's not gonna get any less messy. And it's up to us to develop this here—this heart, this mind—this freedom from reactivity, this profound inner balance that is freedom from suffering.

Not freedom from misfortune, pain, illness, death, bad people. Those will always be. But freedom from our own reactivity about it. And the freedom to act in the world from that place. Keep going, everybody. Thank you. So that's what I wanted to share.



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