



THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING PATIENT

Why the cultivation of patience is essential for the development of consciousness – and how it can make us happier.

Andrew Marshall
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Patience, so it is said, is a virtue; but if we were to prioritise the development of personal qualities, patience may not be at the top of the list. After all, in terms of self-improvement, the need to be kinder, more compassionate and loving, or at least to be more considerate to others, may appear more pressing. Yet in a fast and busy world where almost everything seems to be done at a rapid pace, perhaps the cultivation of patience could bring some great benefits. So what is patience and what can it do for us?

Sometimes patience may be thought of as holding back. As if by some great effort of self-discipline, the urge to steam ahead is resisted. Like a space rocket whose engines have been fired but whose launch has to be restrained until the right moment, we bide our time, not giving in to the desire to speak or act. Someone may be talking to us, for example, and we are aching to say something ourselves, or perhaps even to walk away. Out of politeness, we bite our tongue or stay put, giving the impression that we are listening. That isn't patience. We have just put on a mask in an attempt to portray an image of paying attention – an image that is contrary to how we are feeling inside.¹ Alternatively, we

¹Wearing a mask is a term used to describe the human habit of acting in a way that belies our thoughts and feelings. Sometimes, it may be necessary to put on a mask – for example, in spite of feeling slightly amused, a parent may need to display displeasure in order to show that a child's misbehaviour is not being condoned. In practice, we all wear different masks according to

may not restrain ourselves at all and simply react to circumstances without regard for the outcome and the effect on others.

The self-discipline of stopping ourselves acting or speaking in a certain way may be necessary now but, as our consciousness develops, something else arises – recognition that there is never anything to be impatient about. Later, this may develop further into seeing everything as a reflection of oneself – and perhaps eventually to see that everything *is* oneself.

Real patience is a wonderful quality that is a manifestation of our boundless nature – a state of consciousness in which everything is seen as an unbounded field of appearances.

Science agrees that nothing is what it *appears* to be. Our likes and dislikes arise from what we *believe* things to be, as opposed to what they really are. Through endless conditioning, we believe things and people to be real and substantial and so impose our judgments on them – and, indeed, on ourselves – according to our beliefs and prejudices. When we feel impatience surging up in us, it is because we can only see part of the picture. To see the full picture requires the mind and emotions to be calm and clear. Meditation is very helpful in achieving this, as is reflection; sometimes life's circumstances can deeply change our view, too.

Generally, it takes a long time to develop one's consciousness so that boundlessness is experienced as a continuous state. It may take years before there is even a glimpse of it. But that doesn't mean that we have to wait until that happens for patience to develop in us.

circumstances. Some would argue that we should never do so; that view may be rather simplistic – perhaps it is better that we should act for the highest good, which at times may mean not giving expression to our views.

There is so much we can do to encourage a calmer state of mind from which a natural serenity begins to surface.

When impatience surges up in us, it means we have lost contact with both ourselves and the present moment. We are not accepting things as they are. It is even possible to convince ourselves that our impatient state of mind is beneficial, believing it is absolutely vital to get nine hundred and ninety nine things done before sundown. When we are like this, we may indeed be responsible for a great deal of physical activity – and use up a great deal of energy in the process – but we appreciate very little, because our sole concern is to finish one thing in order to move onto the next. It is a little like rushing through a meal, bolting down the main course so we can eat the dessert – and enjoying none of it.

To cultivate patience, we need to break the habit of rushing. Rushing is more of a mental state than a physical one. If we hurry, it is because the mind is in a hurry; conversely, when the mind is calm, the body will not rush here and there. The Zen master, Thich Nhat Hanh, suggests using phrases and short poems (*gathas*) to help slow the mind down – “If the car goes fast, then I go fast” is his reminder that our manner of driving reflects our state of mind, for example². Outer haste is a result of inner haste.

Two wonderful habits we can develop that eliminate haste and so encourage a patient nature are *acceptance* and *being fully present*.

Acceptance means that instead of rejecting or avoiding some of what life brings, we embrace everything, good or bad. We welcome and deal with the present rather

than try to escape. If the circumstances are pleasant, that’s easy, of course; but even if things seem dire, we can learn the skill of accepting things as they are. So often, changes arise in life that we would rather did not happen – illness, accident, bereavement, loss and so on. Rather than resent the new circumstances, we need to accept them and then, if necessary, deal with them. The same applies to the minor irritations of life – delay, obstructions and so on. If we can change the things that need to be changed, we should do so calmly; but we also need to learn when it is right to say, “That’s the way it is,” and to accept things as they are. We may then find we can see the situation far more clearly.

Being fully present is to bring our full awareness into the present moment. That means not thinking about the past or the future but being fully aware of ourselves, of our actions and whomever or whatever we are engaging with. No wandering mind, just fully aware. Whether we are talking, eating, walking, listening, driving, cleaning or just sitting, our mind is calm and our awareness is both clear and relaxed – in the present moment and nowhere else. This is the practice of mindfulness.

Those who study the internal martial art of t’ai chi know that both acceptance and being fully present are essential facets of their practice. Failing to accept or to yield produces resistance, resulting in stiffness. If the mind wanders, our t’ai chi is lost and, with it, our fluidity. This is a state of weakness rather than strength. T’ai chi can help cultivate the ultimate in patience and strength because its basis is in boundlessness, which is our true nature.

Impatience and non-acceptance have a negative effect and come from seeing ourselves as small and individual, with weaknesses to hide and protect. Strength

² *Present Moment, Wonderful Moment*, Thich Nhat Hanh, Parallax Press ISBN: 9781888375-61-9

comes from a positive state of mind and from having a wider view – of seeing ourselves as one with the whole cosmos and being inseparable from it.

Cultivating patience is enormously strengthening because it involves nurturing ourselves and our environment. With patience, we enter the flow of evolution, working with life rather than against it. Love, compassion and kindness are absolutely vital, but it is only by possessing patience that we can express them fully.

With patience, we naturally become more comfortable with ourselves and allow the rush of life to slow down. Perhaps it is as simple as knowing that sometimes it is okay to take our time, because the only time there ever is, is now. And, with that knowledge, we may also appreciate that others, too, may have to be allowed to take their time. There is no need to rush because there is only now; the present moment is all there is and is the only place we ever need to be. Not only understanding this but *living* it is one of the vital keys to unlocking the full potential of our consciousness.

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