

Blessings of a Patient Heart

By Tara Brach



My friend was late for our lunch date and I had nothing to do. My cell phone wasn't charged, I'd forgotten to bring a book and I'd already read the menu three times. Surrounded by people chatting and eating, I felt restless, anxious, irritated. After resisting the urge to write notes on a napkin. I wondered why I couldn't just settle down and relax. Why was sitting here so unpleasant? Even though I knew consciously that ticking items off my to-do list wouldn't make me a better, more loveable person, that didn't stop the plunge into my underlying fear of falling short—the sense that if I didn't get busy, something would go wrong.

When we look closely, we find that we pass a great deal of time within the mental frame of being “on our way to the next thing”—completing a task, getting to a meeting or even a meditation class. Experiencing the moment is not as important as relieving the stress we feel from unmet wants and gnawing fears. And when others interfere with our “progress,” our frustration fixates on them—the colleague who is late, the child who dawdles, the carpenter who was supposed to finish the job two weeks ago. We don't like the feelings that arise when we're forced to wait.

Yet, in life we have to wait—a lot. According to one study, the average person a year just waiting in line—and this doesn't count time in planes and cars waiting to “get there.” Waiting is stressful but inevitable. As long as we have wants and fears, we wait for fulfillment or relief. The big question in spiritual practice is, how do we react to biological and psychological stress? Do we think that having to wait and tolerate discomfort is a mistake, a glitch in the system?

The Buddha considered patience to be a “perfection of the heart,” one of the basic spiritual qualities that expresses our deepest nature. He recognized that feelings of discontent—wanting life to be different, fearing that something will go wrong—are universal, and taught that it's possible to cultivate patience in the midst of inherent dissatisfaction. Patience isn't the absence of strong emotions or the denial of unpleasantness, but rather the capacity to accept the tension and anxiety of stress. In Western psychology, the term “affect tolerance” refers to

the same ability. Even though we don't like the discomfort of unfulfilled desires or unresolved fears, patience allows us to proceed with tolerance, reasonable calm and care.

Rather than feeding it, I paused and asked myself “Is there really a problem? Is anything really wrong or missing right now?” As I let go of the restless thoughts, I began to notice what was happening inside. I was aware of tightness in my throat, anxiety, rapid breathing—but no problem. Nothing was wrong or missing. By the time my friend arrived, “waiting” had become a moment-to-moment presence. When I was no longer trying to get somewhere else, the impatience dissolved. I felt open, alive—and glad to see her.

When we move through the day intending to be patient, the enormity and pervasiveness of our impatience becomes striking. We experience how

restlessness puts us at war with many of life's moments. So the first step in cultivating patience is to set our intention. Then when we catch ourselves leaning into the future and wanting to move on to the next thing, we can choose to step out of our mental stories about what we're doing and where we're going. We can choose to explore the present moment instead. Here are some ways to support that intention.

Patience isn't the absence of strong emotions or the denial of unpleasantness, but rather the capacity to accept the tension and anxiety of stress.

- Regardless of what is happening, no matter how difficult, we can reflect that “this too will pass.” Realizing that experience is impermanent awakens our interest in the present moment, and helps us open to life, just as it is.
- We can ask ourselves “what really matters?” and remember that which we most value—love, compassion, intimacy, creativity—is found in wholehearted presence.
- We can reaffirm the bodhisattva's aspiration that this and all experience may serve awakening.

Patience as a perfection of the heart opens us to the mystery and beauty of this life. Rather than racing to the finish line—ultimately death—patience helps us to slow down. It helps us see the silhouette of the tree branches against the sky, hear the music of our child's voice, be intimate with the people we love. Then, not only do we show up for what's really happening, but others take comfort in us as we embody the openness and tenderness of patient presence. By releasing our attachment to having life be a certain way, we receive the blessings of the awareness that is already—and always—here.