

## Patience

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Certain attitudes or mental qualities support meditation practice and provide a rich soil in which the seeds of mindfulness can flourish. By purposefully cultivating these qualities, we are actually tilling the soil of our own mind and ensuring that it can serve as a source of clarity, compassion and right action in our lives.

These inner qualities which support meditation practice cannot be imposed, legislated, or decreed. They can only be cultivated, and this only when you have reached the point where your inner motivation is strong enough to want to cease contributing to your own suffering and confusion and perhaps to that of others. It amounts to behaving ethically – a sorely maligned concept in many circles.

On the radio, I heard someone define ethics as “obedience to the unenforceable.” Not bad. You do it for inner reasons, not because someone is keeping score, or because you might be punished if you break the rules and get caught. You are marching to the beat of your own drummer. It is an inner hearing you are attending to, just as it is an inner soil that is being tilled for the cultivation of mindfulness. But you cannot have harmony without a commitment to ethical behavior. It's the fence that keeps out the goats that will eat all the young shoots in your garden.

I see patience as one of these fundamental ethical attitudes. If you cultivate patience, you almost can't help cultivating mindfulness, and your meditation practice will gradually become richer and more mature. After all, if you really aren't trying to get anywhere else in this moment, patience takes care of itself. It is a remembering that things unfold in their own time.

The seasons cannot be hurried. Spring comes, the grass grows by itself. Being in a hurry usually doesn't help, and it can create a great deal of suffering-sometimes in us, sometimes in those who have to be around us.

Patience is an ever present alternative to the mind's endemic restlessness and impatience. Scratch the surface of impatience and what you will find lying beneath it, subtly or not so subtly, is anger. It's the strong energy of not wanting things to be the way they are and blaming someone (often yourself) or something for it. This doesn't mean you can't hurry when you have to. It is possible even to hurry patiently, mindfully, moving fast because you have chosen to.

From the perspective of patience, things happen because other things happen. Nothing is separate and isolated. There is no absolute, end-of-the-line, the-buck-stops-here root cause. If someone hits you with a stick, you don't get angry at the stick or at the arm that swung it; you get angry at the person attached to the arm. But if you look a little deeper, you can't find a satisfactory root cause or place for your anger even in the person, who literally doesn't know what he is doing and is therefore out of his mind at that moment. Where should the blame lie, or the punishment? Maybe we should be angry at the person's parents for the abuse they may have showered on a defenseless child. Or maybe at the world for its lack of compassion. But what is the world? Are you not a part of that world? Do not you yourself have angry impulses and under some conditions find yourself in touch with violent, even murderous impulses?

Peace, and a willingness to be patient in the face of provocation and suffering, can only come about through the inner cultivation of compassion, a compassion that is not limited to friends, but is felt equally for those who, out of ignorance and often seen as evil, may cause you and those you love to suffer.

The degree of selfless compassion is based on what Buddhists call “right mindfulness” and “right understanding.” It doesn’t just spring up spontaneously. It needs to be practiced, cultivated. It’s not that feelings of anger don’t arise. It’s that the anger can be used, worked with, harnessed so that its energies can nourish patience, compassion, harmony, and wisdom in ourselves and perhaps in others as well.

In taking up meditation, we are cultivating the quality of patience every time we stop and sit and become aware of the flow of our own breathing. And this invitation to ourselves to be more open, more in touch, more patient with our moments naturally extends itself to other times in our lives as well. We know that things unfold according to their own nature. We can remember to let our lives unfold in the same way. We don’t have to let our anxieties and our desire for certain results dominate the quality of the moment, even when things are painful. When we have to push, we push. When we have to pull, we pull. But we know when not to push too, and when not to pull.

Through it all, we attempt to bring balance to the present moment, understanding that in patience lies wisdom, knowing that what will come next will be determined in large measure by how we are not. This is helpful to keep in mind when we get impatient in our meditation practice, or when we get frustrated, impatient, and angry in our lives.