

Why Patience Pays Off

by Viral Mehta

As a kid, patience was not my thing. In fifth grade, when Mr. Gardner asked a question, my hand would often shoot up in enthusiasm. After giving me a few opportunities, he would try to give other students a chance. My hand, though, would remain in the air, and after some time, I'd impatiently start waving it around; at some point, that move got dubbed, "The Viral." Then, there was the time I enrolled in drumming classes. I was excited to jam, but all we were allowed to do in the first class was practice one beat over and over again. I never went back.

I would've done terribly in the Stanford Marshmallow Experiment. In this classic study, researchers gave children a choice between one marshmallow right away, or two later. The results showed that those who could wait 15 minutes ended up scoring 210 points higher on the SAT. Break down the word patience and it actually traces back to the Latin "pati," which means "to suffer, endure." This is the popular interpretation, and one that leaves us in awe of stories like that of the frail, landless Indian farmer who painstakingly moved a mountain. This man chiseled away solo for 22 years, until he finally created a 1 km long, 16-ft-wide, passage connecting his village to vital resources like hospitals. So clearly, delaying gratification or bearing up under pain have their benefits. But a deeper exploration of patience goes beyond risk and reward. Cultivating patience keeps us from being stuck to preconceived notions, and helps us let go of our fixation on outcomes. We come to accept that we don't always or immediately know what is best, and learn to recognize that our reality is in constant flux. Patience elevates our understanding of deeper truths and helps us transcend our limited views. And therein lies its virtue.

Consider this powerful quote by Lao Tzu: "Do you have the patience to wait until your mud settles, and the water is clear? Can you remain unmoving until the right action arises by itself?" We might think of "waiting" as taking time, but it's actually less about clock time and more about inner space. Of course, there are moments when our immediate gut-level response to a situation is a flash of intuition that can be trusted, moments when it's crystal clear what needs to be done. But at other times, an experience stirs up some of that inner mud, and at those times, patience engages us in the process of becoming still. An unclear mind, one in which right action isn't obvious, isn't a "bad" thing. Wisdom, after all, develops at the edges of our understanding. Our fundamental questions can frustrate us, or create a positive sense of wonder and possibility. The challenge is to develop enough stillness to allow the questions to pose themselves without judgment. This is where patience comes in. Needing answers isn't the point -- patience is in finding value in the questions, in and of themselves. The root word for question, after all, is "quest," and so this spirit of adventure is embedded within true questioning.

That's not to say that answers aren't important. They do come, but often not the ones we'd expect, and often ones that open up to even deeper questions. In this way, those moments of fuzziness, when dealt with patiently, become opportunities to turn our boundaries into edges of exploration. When we think we know, we expect to find a solution in the direction in which we are looking; when we don't know where to look, we

remain open to all directions. But remaining open and "unmoving," as Lao Tzu suggests, isn't about being passive or lacking conviction. There's lots of committed activity happening beneath the surface -- it takes great effort and discipline to remain alert to what's happening within. This sharp alertness awakens us to the power of the subtle: the mental seeds we sow become the roots of our skillful words and actions. And it is patience which creates that inner space. First, the mud -- our unexamined reactions and habituated patterns of interpretation -- rises to the surface, but then eventually it settles. Our view clears. We find that those initial, rigid interpretations relax and a multiplicity of perspectives emerge. We start to see in a way that is more real, more whole, more true, and we become more free to consciously choose our actions.

Through it all, the journey of patience is rooted in knowing that our current reality inevitably gives way to change. But change won't always happen when we think it should, and patience with ourselves comes from accepting that there are things we can control and things we can't. And though we must make diligent efforts to keep pushing the boundaries of our awareness and to deepen our ability to rest comfortably in the present moment, how fast we develop isn't up to us. That same fifth grader who couldn't wait to blurt out answers, now sees the value of meeting questions with a heart of patience. Patience, then, is a kind withholding of judgment and of conclusion, a valiant invitation for our evolution to unfold just as it needs to.