

The Qualities of Spiritual Maturity, Part 3: Patience

Quality #3: Patience

Patience, like kindness, is a quality that characterizes the spiritual life from beginning to end. But it too takes on different nuances as one gets some years under one's belt and begins settling in for the long run.

Patience, as the direct antidote to anger, is a crucial part of a practitioner's foundational efforts to gain control over the worst manifestations of the mental afflictions. Anger is particularly harmful and hard to restrain. It consists of the intention to hurt another (verbally or physically) and therefore is karmically especially harmful to perpetrator. And it is hard to curb in part because we are so habituated to it and have justified it all our lives ("I couldn't help it! And plus she deserved it!"), and in part because we are encouraged to express anger freely by certain factions of the psychological and therapeutical communities ("Be open and honest! Share your true feelings! Don't bottle them up!"). While it is true that repressing a strong emotion like anger is not the best method for dealing with it, giving it free rein only reinforces the tendency to let loose again in the future.

As the *Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life* states, "There's no evil like anger, and there's no austerity like patience." If we are to overcome this powerful affliction, we cannot coddle it, make excuses for it, and continually let it have its way with us. We must recognize it for what it is – our detestable enemy, totally destructive to our happiness and peace of mind – and we must work not to repress it but to thoroughly uproot it. Patience is the only remedy, but as the *Guide* points out it's exceedingly difficult to exercise forbearance in the face of a truly irritating person. We underestimate the power of anger and our reluctance to remain imperturbable at our own peril.

Having made strong efforts over the course of years, perhaps decades, to overcome anger and the other major mental afflictions – greed, pride, envy, and the rest – we may get discouraged to find that we are still at least occasionally subject to them. We may even get upset at our failure to overcome anger and the other negative emotions we have worked so long and hard to eradicate.

Getting angry at anger itself helps us ju jitsu the power of anger in order to vanquish it. But getting angry at ourselves for getting angry does not help, and when it occurs it requires a more comprehensive evolution of patience.

Spiritual maturity entails not only developing patience with others but also with ourselves – with our failures and back-sliding and with our (seemingly always too slow) rate of spiritual progress and development. Patience will keep us going as the years pass by and we find ourselves – perhaps unexpectedly and disappointedly – still pretty much ourselves.

In the spiritual life, we all have the tendency to hope that *something big will happen*, that we'll have a major breakthrough or a life-changing mystical experience – and pretty soon! We shift the craving and grasping we used to apply to worldly things and attainments to the spiritual realm and then experience a new-and-improved form of frustration and dissatisfaction.

A seasoned practitioner begins to realize that at the heart of the spiritual life is not the continual striving for future attainments or the perpetually unfinished task of “self-improvement.” Rather, the essence of the spiritual quest is to obtain the deep peace that comes with total acceptance and true contentment.

Patience fades imperceptibly into tranquility. One begins to understand that the means and the ends cannot be different, that to “reach” the goal we simply must practice it – here and now. As Jack Kornfield writes in relation to patience, “In the deepest way it understands that what we seek is what we are, and it is always here.”

At the end of his modern spiritual classic, *A Path With Heart*, Jack Kornfield reviews ten qualities that he thinks characterize someone who has “come of age” in their spiritual life. The ten traits Kornfield identifies have inspired me to write down some of my own thoughts about each of them.

The topic of contentment is treated in a section entitled “Dropping What ‘Should Be’ for ‘What Is’” found in Chapter Nine of my new book, *A Spiritual Renegade’s Guide to the Good Life*. To order your copy, click here: <http://goo.gl/MlINq>