



*Lonely Waiting, Ahmed Kheder (arabartforsale.com)*

## Your Greatest Treasure

*I have just three things to teach: simplicity, patience, compassion. These three are your greatest treasures.*

Lao Tzu

**T**HE FABLED TAOIST PHILOSOPHER Zhuangzi (Chuang-tzu) was a man of many talents. Most known for the book that bears his name (along with Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching*, one of the founding texts of Taoism), he was also an expert artist and calligrapher.

It is said that one day the king visited Zhuangzi and asked him to draw a crab. Zhuangzi replied that to do so would require five years time, a house in the country, and 12 servants. Surprisingly, the king agreed.

Five years passed, and the king returned asking about his crab, but Zhuangzi had not yet begun the drawing, telling him that it would require another five years to prepare.

An unusually patient man, the king once again agreed. Another five years passed, and when the king again returned, Zhuangzi took up his brush and with a single stroke, drew a crab. But not just an ordinary crab—the most beautiful crab the world had ever seen.

Buddhism teaches that patience is one of the four sublime mental states perfected in an enlightened person, an act of compassion towards oneself that gives rise to equanimity.

Equanimity is defined as mental calmness, composure, and an inability to be perturbed, even in a difficult situation. Equanimity can be critical when one is faced with a difficult decision, as its absence can often make a bad situation much worse. (A Chinese proverb stresses the importance of patience in a crisis, saying, “One moment of patience may ward off great disaster. One moment of impatience may ruin a whole life.”)

It's important, however, to practice the art of being patient in more ordinary, everyday circumstances, because the more it becomes a part of our natural way of being in the world, the easier it will be to call it forth in a situation in which it could be crucial.

To most people in our modern, fast-paced world, patience does not come easily, and their ability to gracefully tolerate delays, difficulties, or suffering without getting angry or upset can seem very limited.

Something as ordinary as being stuck in traffic can cause some people to lapse into frustration, anger, or even 'road rage,' despite knowing it won't change the situation and in fact, will likely make it worse.

Fortunately, Buddhism has developed a number of different practices over its 2,500 year history which can guide us in learning how to exercise much greater patience.

The first and most important is learning how to become more aware of our emotions, so we can identify impatience when it first appears and head it off at the outset.

It's easy to become blinded to the fact that we are feeling anxious or agitated unless we have practiced the ability to stand apart from our emotions, rather than allowing ourselves to become identified with them.

While most stressful situations are far from life-threatening, they can nonetheless be perceived as existential threats by our fragile ego, which seeks to maintain the illusion of always being fully in control.

Ironically, of course, the effort to regain control of a situation which is not within our power to change can make us feel even more irritated and stressful. This actually reduces our ability to become assertive and take control of the situation, so the first step in learning to be patient must always be regaining firm control over our emotions.

Practicing mindfulness with our emotions doesn't mean going into battle with them, but is more like a mother tending to a crying baby: Her mere presence comforts it, and similarly, all we need do to calm our unruly mind is be fully present with whatever sensations arise from it, without reacting to them. (Deep breathing and focusing on the breath can often be helpful in this process.)

Of course, exercising patience doesn't mean putting up with an intolerable situation, and once we have regained our equanimity we should ask ourselves if there is anything we can do to change our circumstances.

This is, in fact, always the case, because even if we can't change the situation (for example, taking another route when stuck in traffic), we can still make the wait more pleasant (by chatting with a companion, listening to some music, or perhaps simply finding some humor in our predicament.)

Buddhism also teaches that conditions are always changing, and we may often find that ironically, once we have accepted the situation, it will change to something better.

Ideally, however, we should welcome whatever disturbs our natural, inner peace, viewing it as an opportunity to practice patience and mindfulness. (The Sanskrit word *kshanti*, meaning *forbearance* or *forgiveness*, refers to an ever-expanding capacity to accept and transform whatever painful conditions we should encounter, expressing gratitude and compassion for the situation or person as our teacher.)

We can't be patient with others if we are impatient with ourselves, and although we cannot control others, we have ultimate control over our own minds. As the Buddhist poet Shantideva wrote, "Rather than trying to cover the whole world in leather, why not simply cover your own two feet?" ■