

The Power of Patience

By Laoshi Laurince McElroy

I'm sure my mother was not the only one who repeated more than one time as she was fulfilling her motherly duties, "Patience is a virtue." It seems, however, these days, that the words carry little weight for many. As I have said on the mat and in the room, we seem to live in a microwave society — we want what we want and we want it now. Instead of exalting the journey, we seem to have become a people forever fixated on skipping the journey altogether. With this mindset, much is lost.

I find myself thinking of one of my favorite *Temple Stories*. The story that comes to mind is *Easier Not Always Better*. It tells the tale of a sage who brings his water up from a well hand over hand. When a young man suggests he use a pulley to save time and effort, the old man chastises him and explains:

Were I to use a device like this, my mind would congratulate itself on being so clever, and then I would quit putting my heart into what I was doing. ... If I don't put my heart and whole body into my work, my work will become joyless. And how, then, do you think the water would taste?

One would have to admit that the purpose of the water is to quench the thirst and that there is a certain logic in making such a thing happen sooner rather than later. Let the words of the sage roll over in your mind a bit: "If I don't put my heart and whole body into my work ... how, then, do you think the water would taste?" I remember a hand pump well on my maternal grandmother's property. Both the water from the hand pump well and the modern electronic well came from the same underground spring. Which do you suppose tasted better?

It is through time and patience that the journey unfolds and the true destination is revealed. The one that we see is seldom — if ever — the destination at which we arrive. The thirst might be quenched, but does the water have any flavor? The choreography might be there, but does the movement have any meaning?

Modern conveniences — even before the immediacy of the mobile phone and the internet — have created a general mindset of skipping all the hard work. Without process, there is no progress.

When I directed plays, I buried myself in research. I read other plays from the same playwright and books about him or her. I dug through magazine and newspaper archives for reviews of past productions. I looked through dictionaries and encyclopedias to understand each and every word of dialogue on the page. With highlighter in hand, I read all the materials and compiled notes on what I had read. All this information stayed with me for the weeks of rehearsal into production, and even for years after the final curtain call was taken. When someone today asks me a question and I find the answer using my iPhone, the new information is gone almost as quickly as it appeared. I didn't work for it and it does not stick.

Much like my days in the theatre, the approach that I have taken and continue to take with learning and teaching the art of T'ai Chi Ch'uan with Water Tiger is reflected in our words: "Exalting the Journey". It is not now nor has it ever been about the choreography of the forms. It is not now nor has it ever been about what is next. It is now and has always been about understanding the meaning of the movement — the shape and purpose of the posture. It is now and has always been about what is right in front of us — the current moment and the current movement.



By now, if you know Water Tiger, you know *chi ku* (eat bitter). This is an adage found throughout the Chinese Martial Arts. In two simple words, it carries with it deep meaning. There are no shortcuts. There is no easy path on the journey. We must be willing to eat the bitter — to struggle, to sweat, to fail — before we can be met with success and find the sweet. I have said it before and I will say it again: It is when steel is heated in fire and pounded with hammer on stone — and after much sweat — that the beauty and the strength of the blade are formed.

Cultivating patience on the mat and in the room hones our ability to bring patience into the other aspects of our life. When we are able to embrace the current struggle we face with adding a rotation to *Rails*, a new posture in our current form, playing right instead of left, etc., we will be better able to sit back in times of turmoil and find the correct response instead of the first that rises to the surface of our emotional mind. As the words of the Chinese proverb remind us: “If you are patient in one moment of anger, you will escape a hundred days of sorrow.”

So, patience is a virtue because it opens up the door to understanding, it allows us to find the pathway to success, and it guides us away from rash words and actions. I don't think you'll ever hear anyone say the same things about haste. Speed is for popcorn and frozen food, not for a better self.

