

Patience & Change

Wednesday morning in India, around 6:30 am. The heat won't settle in for another few hours. The cool air blowing back my hair as I scooter home from the yoga shala is a glorious momentary respite. I watch the dust form hazy halos around the streetlights, suspended in humidity. You don't notice it except at these edge times, when the softer light reveals a gauzy veil over everything. It blurs edges, making this hour feel a little ethereal, not of this world. Who knew pollution could be so magical?

When I come inside, my new roommate, just arrived five hours ago, is already awake. It is her first time here. After a few pleasantries, I report my bad news. There is no money.

Welcome to India.

Overnight, in a move to stomp out corruption, the Prime Minister has discontinued all Rs 500 and 1000 bills. The banks and ATMs have closed to recalibrate, the money changers don't have rates to offer, and no cash to give even if they did. There is no way for a newly arrived traveler to start her cash flow.

We respond as makes the most sense - with breakfast.

We stroll up to a favorite local breakfast stall, fondly known as the Idly Man. The Idly Man makes idly, fluffy steamed rice dumplings served with spicy coconut chutney. He serves them up out on metal plates, and foreign yoga students and locals alike flock about, perching on benches and curbs for breakfast outside his unassuming tea stall. Across the street, cows laze in an open field while local boys play cricket. One of the street puppies has figured out that foreigners have soft hearts. She immediately approaches us as we sit to eat, staring up at the two white girls with all the pathos she can muster.

The Idly Man is a specialist at the top of his game. We eat with the appreciative silence that accompanies excellent food, going back for one more to sop up the last of the chutney. Fully fed, we can start to figure out this money situation. This is how we do things here. There is always a problem to be solved. May as well eat first.

At home, we learn that in two days I will be able to change what cash I have into legal tender. We also learn that Donald Trump won the presidency. The yoga cafe two doors down from us is taking the old notes. They pay their taxes and have nothing to worry about. They will be able to exchange them. We linger there over lunch, American after American finding and joining us, all the way through dinner. The news from home has sidelined us, as if some dystopian alternate universe has temporarily crashed into ours and will surely right itself soon. Somehow, our feet led all of our dazed, shocked brains here. We cry and talk and stare at each other, asking again and again the question, the eternal question: "What do we do now?"

We have a lot of time to ponder it over the next few days, over hours spent waiting in bank lines. It takes me three tries at different banks to get my last 1500 rupees changed. Later, I'll stand in line for forty-five minutes at an ATM to take out my allowed 2000 rupees in cash per day, enough to last me around a week. Friends left with large amounts of old notes recruit me to exchange in their name, trying to circumvent the limits to get all of their notes exchanged into smaller bills. So much time waiting for change gives one a lot of time to think.

I start to think about acceptance. Everyone approaches this with a different kind of acceptance. Some wait to see if the exchange limits will rise, biding their time hoping the situation will remedy itself. This seems to be the least effective method. It's a kind of non-acceptance, really, this pretending that there will be an easy way later. Others get clever. One of my friends sweet talks local vendors into taking his old bills by promising to spend large amounts of money. The vegetable man on the corner rarely deals in 500 rupee increments. He doesn't have too many to change, and will gladly accept my friend's in exchange for a big sale - one my friend knows he would have made anyway.

Others simply get patient. They block off the morning to go from bank to bank, waiting in line after line. They group together to make the wait less monotonous, meeting to hydrate with fresh, machete-cut green coconuts before starting the day's expeditions. It is slow going, but it gets done. All it requires is the equanimity to stick things out.

The patient get the change they need. They are not inactive. They are not meek in their acceptance of the situation. They are simply determined and undeterred. Patience is powerful.

Every time I come here, I find ways to practice patience. I am learning, slowly, lesson by lesson, how to stay steady. Don't let the little things trip you up. Acknowledge the problem, yes. But don't forget to go eat breakfast.

When I get home, patience will be my super power. I am strengthening it to hold me unshakeable against the impending storm. There is a long, slow battle at hand. Active patience, the willingness to do what needs to be done, knowing that it is not going to be quick going, is going to be key. Don't lose your cool standing in line. Band together to make it easier. Take care of yourself - don't go in hungry or dehydrated. Use your energy well. Don't you dare leave that line just because it's suddenly slow going.

Otherwise you'll never get any change.