

Dharmette: Expectations

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on July 6, 2016

One of the areas of the mind that is interesting to give attention to is how the mind is capable of having expectations. Expectations are believing that something is going to happen and then waiting for it to happen. There are many kinds of expectations that people can have. We can expect things to go wrong or come out badly, or we can expect that things will turn out the way we want them to be, and to be looking forward to it and anticipating it in a nice way. The problem with expectations is that sometimes if we really want a certain outcome and it doesn't happen, then we can be very disappointed. There can be a lot of grief.

It's a common phenomenon for people to have an expectation of an outcome in meditation – to go on retreat and have an expectation of an outcome, and be disappointed that it didn't turn out the way that they wanted. And when we are living through the lens of expectation, it limits us, like having blinders on. It limits our ability to really see what is happening. Everything is measured through what is supposed to be happening. And sometimes a meditation retreat has all kinds of blessings and wonderful things can unfold, but we don't

see them because we're so focused on our narrow little window of expectation, of what's supposed to happen, or what we want to happen, or what we believe should happen.

A common instruction when you meditate or go on meditation retreats is to not have any expectations, but rather to trust the process – to show up and be mindful of what is, and to let it show itself: to be with what is going happen, rather than expecting anything in particular. I think that's a useful thing for life in general – to be very careful with expectations and our attachment to them, because sometimes expectations can really derail us and cause problems.

Another place that expectations can be problematic is if we expect people to behave in undesirable ways – for example, someone treated us badly today, so we expect them to treat us badly, and so we're kind of prejudiced in our approach to them and don't give them the benefit of the doubt, or see where they are now. Or they have treated us well yesterday, and so we expect that now. We're tuned to getting more of the same, and, who knows, maybe they have a headache today and they just don't have the bandwidth to notice that we're alive, but we've got this expectation. The fact that now they don't treat us nicely stands out and is highlighted; it becomes much more of a big deal. We can go through life with a lot of expectations, a lot of beliefs about what

should happen, what is going to happen, and it can trip us up quite a bit.

So, is the solution to have no expectations at all? I don't think that is realistic. There are simple, innocent expectations that are predictions. I expect can be the same as I predict, as when there's a seventy percent chance it will be sunny tomorrow, and so you expect it to be sunny. In your mind, you've translated it as predicting.

The important thing for people who do mindfulness practice is to be able to see expectations as they operate: to recognize them, identify them, and learn to recognize if we're attached to them. And if there's an over-involvement in expectation, does this put blinders on us? Are we depending on things to work out a certain way? Are we resisting certain outcomes? What is our relationship to it?

To see it is very important because it's probably not possible to live without expectations. But here's an approach to life that can make things a lot easier. I think for people who practice mindfulness or being really present here and now, we have expectations for sure, but we should expect anything – anything at all. Expect the unexpected to happen.

You'll leave here after this sitting, and you could be

driving your car and you get a flat tire: “Oh, of course!” [laughs] Expect anything – of course! You sit and meditate, and your mind has a mind of its own; it picks up thoughts, concerns and emotions, and the body aches in ways you’ve never ached before, so you say “Of course.” You expect anything.

If you can expect anything, then it lets a certain kind of ease into your mind. Then maybe you’re not resisting, or depending on a particular thing, but rather you’re expecting anything. It’s a kind of openness and relaxation, a willingness to receive into your own awareness what is actually happening. Then we can decide what to do about it or how to respond to it.

But the genesis, the beginning, is the place where our responses and actions to the world occur – in how we receive things into our awareness. If our attention can stay relaxed and open, then we can receive whatever is happening in a way that enables us to be much more effective in coming up with a response to deal with it. So, when you sit to meditate, I encourage you to expect everything and anything – just whatever happens. Let it be, “Oh, this too.”

Of course, you can’t plan what’s going to happen. More could happen than you could ever think about, but just have a blank check to expect everything and anything. So whatever comes, it’s “Oh, ok,” and then continue

from there in the wisest way you can, depending on what it is. Use your mind's capacity to have expectations to expect well. And you expect well if you expect anything.

Thank you.