

Expectation, Aspiration and Hope

Bhante Bodhidhamma · Bhante's Essays · 3 min read

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Expectation what suffering there is in that! The self likes to be in control. It likes to know what's going to happen. It needs to feel safe, secure. And there, of course, lies its underbelly of weakness. We expect the summers to be sunny. We expect a pay rise. We expect to go on holiday. We expect friends to help us. Mothers expect babies. And we expect spiritual progress from our practice. The list is forever. Expectation assumes, presumes, takes for granted. It's a manifestation of arrogance.

Expectation is bound to fail us one way or another for it projects an ideal, a concrete goal on the future whose parameters we don't know. We simply don't know what is going to happen. So when our expectation fails to materialise we are disappointed, depressed by it. Suddenly my job's gone. Did I really expect it to last for the whole of my life especially these days? Did I really expect not to fall ill? Did I really expect this relationship to last for ever? Unfortunately, if our expectation does come mainly to manifest, then, of course, we told you so! I knew it was going to happen! But that just increases our sense of being in control, being able to predict. More pride, more hubris and then the fall. Consider the dictators of the last century. The tragic-comic figure of Saddam Hussein. A life that rests on expectation is forever falling into ditches.

The Bodhisatta also sat dejected by the road. All the practice, all the mortifications he had done, all had been of no avail. Then on the seat of his awakening beneath the Bodhi tree, the arrogance manifested. Mara comes with his hoards. Who was he to sit there and find the end of suffering? Only by virtue of his generosity, that he was doing it also for the benefit of others, was the Great Doubt dispelled. Lucky for us!

Consider how many times we've been disappointed in our lives. Such is the measure of expectation. Enough of expectation, then!

Aspiration is a lovely word. Its root is the same as respiration. It's ethereal. Aspiration does not expect, assume, presume. It does not have a success time or finishing date. Yet it espouses beautiful aims and objectives. It has a nobility, a dignity about it. One aspires to produce art, to assist others, to shape the future. An artist, a nurse, a politician (no cynicism please!). And of course one aspires to be liberated, to be awakened.

Aspiration does not presume fulfilment, does not presume on others. It is simply a movement in the mind, a desire for the wise, the beautiful and the virtuous. An inclination towards a goal. And that's how the Buddha expressed it. We should . And so aspiration

gathers all the necessary qualities and support to move in that direction.

Aspiration is humble. Not the false humility of a prideful self. A cover to prevent the humiliation of failure in others eyes. Genuine humility is that groundedness that comes with seeing life not as success and failure, but as trial and error. If things dont work out, well, at least I know what is not for me. It clarifies future action. Many westerners join the Sangha with great commitment and faith, only to find it is not the right lifestyle for them. Their time in the order will not have been wasted.

Hope, I am using here in a special way. It is usually a humbler word than expectation.

It expresses an uncertainty, a hesitation. It is often a well-wishing, a prayer. But here I am pointing to something more certain. To a Dhamma joy. It is a quality of mudita often translated as sympathetic joy, but this misses the point of joy in oneself, such as the joy that comes from knowing we live virtuous lives.

Here hope is the joy of knowing there is a future arrival, a completion, as when the doctor tells us that the illness will pass. This hope in future liberation comes even when we become intellectually convinced of the Path. Everything seems to make sense. Life is profoundly meaningful. There will be a fulfilment. But this hope is poor hope compared to the joyful hope that arises in someone who, through the practice, begins to experience the path and sees clearly how it leads out of delusion into the light of wisdom, out of the quagmire of suffering and dissatisfaction into the meadows of happiness and contentment. How deeper

then is the soft joy of hope in someone who has entered the Path, the Stream-enterer, the One Who Knows by direct experience the bliss of Nibbana! Such hope of future liberation is unwavering, undilutable. They know that some day they will join the legion of arahants. Their hope will meld into the contentment and happiness of one who has lived the Holy Life and reached the true goal.

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