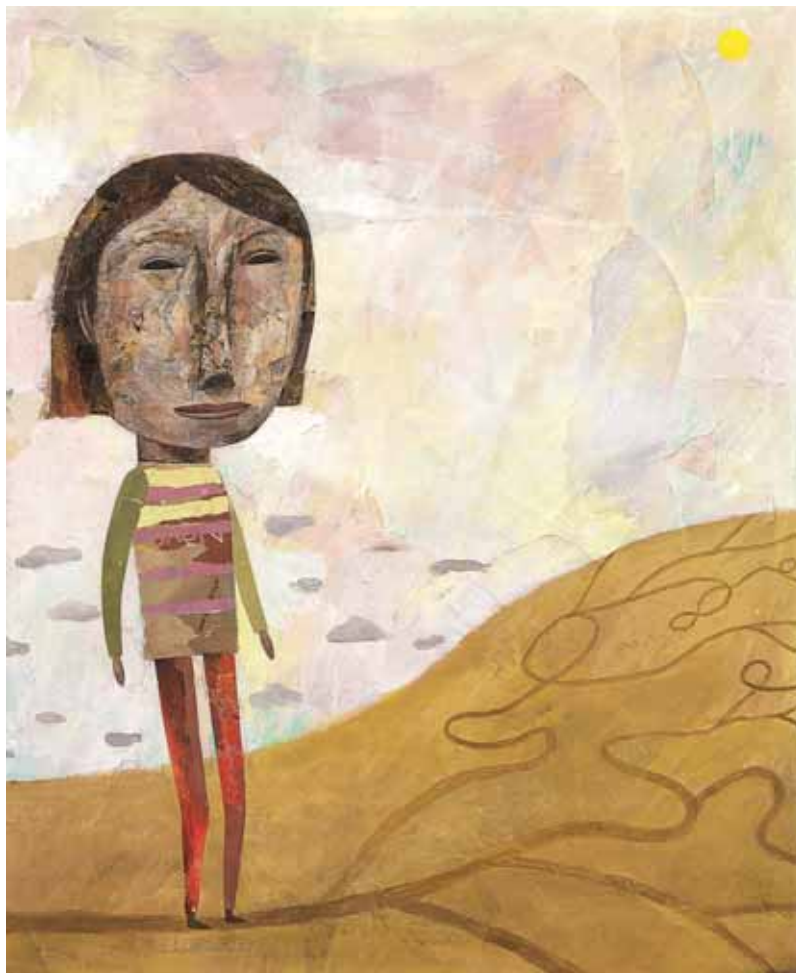


The Tyranny of Expectations

Opening to possibilities is empowering; falling into expectations is crippling. Recognize the difference and free yourself. By Phillip Moffitt



Sarah (not her real name) began by relating her good news: “Well, I landed that new job I applied for, and my husband and I got through the crisis I told you about.” Her voice, however, was surprisingly rueful, as if she were reporting that life was worse than before. I felt a wave of happiness for her, but before I could say so, she went on to complain about the new job and her relationship.

Sarah is a participant in a weekly vipassana meditation class I conduct. We spend a lot of time in the class trying to understand how we create much of our own suffering by getting caught in an endless cycle of desire and attachment. Sarah was certainly exhibiting how suffering arises. What had recently seemed to be the key to her happiness—if only she could get the job and stop quarreling with her spouse, then life would be

great—was now a source of dissatisfaction. Our discussion revealed that she repeatedly experienced being disappointed whenever she actually got what she sought. In response, she would create new expectations, and the cycle would repeat itself.

Without noticing it, you too may be suffering from the myriad ways in which expectations can undermine your life. I call it the tyranny of expectations. They plague your daily life, causing you to be irritable, disappointed, and disillusioned. Many times they lead you to say unkind words, act unskillfully, or make poor decisions. Expectations are so insidious that you can persist in maintaining them even after you have clear evidence that they are unfounded.

What is most amazing is that despite the suffering caused by your expectations, you hardly notice them most of the time. Sure, there may be a few big ones you are somewhat aware of, but even so, you only sort of notice them; you do not act to free yourself from their tyranny. Plus, there are countless smaller ones you never notice at all. It is only when you feel acute disappointment that you have any awareness of having been possessed by expectations. But for each of these moments of acute disappointment, you’ve experienced many hours of dissatisfaction, impatience, and tension that you never realized arose from your expectations.

Expectations turn up in many forms—from what we expect of ourselves to what others expect of us and we of them. You may have high, low, or even negative expectations. You also have large expectations and thousands of small expectations that arise in your life every day. Your large expectations have their own unique expression but are the result of the common strivings every human undergoes. As you learn to free yourself from these larger expectations, you can start to notice the smaller ones and not allow them to define your daily experience. You may expect that certain efforts will yield desired results, or believe you can be in control of your life, or be totally convinced that the so-called good life must have particular components. You may be enslaved by your expectations of what defines a good marriage, a good person, or success. More than likely, you expect to behave in a manner you know is right, and

you expect to be treated similarly. Left unnoticed, these expectations become all-powerful. Just think of the amount of suffering—yours and the suffering of others—that comes from these unrecognized expectations; it is a call for mindfulness and for choosing not to be defined by expectations.

Free Yourself from Expectations

As I travel throughout the United States teaching meditation retreats, the yogis perk up whenever I bring up the possibility of finding freedom from expectations, for something unacknowledged is being brought into their consciousness. When I ask if there is anyone who has not suffered from the tyranny of expectations, their response is always laughter. So you can let go of any shame or inferiority you might feel because you have a lot of failed expectations.

The good news is that you do not have to continue to suffer from the tyranny of expectations. It is one of the most troublesome areas of life, yet it is also changeable. Even a little effort makes a huge difference. But first you must penetrate the nature of expectations, observe how they manifest themselves in your life, and be able to access another way of approaching the future.

Expectations are almost always the result of what in Buddhism is called “wanting mind.” This wanting mind is driven by desire, aversion, and anxiety; it creates an illusion of solidity and control in a world that is constantly changing and unfolds independently of how we believe it should. Knowing this, how do you proceed? How can you free yourself from expectations? In mindfulness meditation, the method I teach, you always start with what is true in the present moment. You use discernment to know what is true, but you do not fall into judgment, which is yet another form of expectation and one of the most tyrannical.

Look for Possibilities

One distinction is critical for you to understand if you are to work with expectations: the difference between expectations and possibilities. Expectations

assume a certain result and are future-based. They actually narrow your options, retard your imagination, and blind you to possibilities. They create pressure in your life and hold your present sense of well-being hostage to a future that may or may not happen. Expectations create rigidity in your life and cause you to react impulsively to any perceived threat to that future you believe you deserve.

When you are controlled by your expectations, you are living a contingent life; you cannot be free in the present moment. You cannot be happy with a beautiful sunset or with a moment of warmth between you and another; instead, every experience is interpreted in the context of an expected future. Can you feel how enslaving this is to you? It would be one thing if in fact you could control the future, but is

When you let your expectations control you, you are living a contingent life; you cannot be free in the present moment.

that the case? I suspect not. To deny the truth of life is a fool’s errand and is costly to your well-being.

In contrast to expectations, possibilities are based in the present moment, where you’re alive to the mystery of life. You live as fully as you can in the present moment based on your values, which reflect your preferences for the future, but you do not assume that the future will come to pass, because you realize that the future is unknown. Being open to possibilities acknowledges that what you may think you want changes with time, or that there is another future that will bring you equal or more happiness, or that the future may turn bleak, or that you may die before any future can unfold. Real joy, then, is that which is available to you right now.

Living a life that is open to possibilities is more like a request, a prayer, or an act of witnessing your faith in life. Your well-being is not contingent on the future. Your mind is open and inspired in

this moment. You therefore have more access to imagination and intuition. Your mind is clear and less reactive, and you make better decisions. You respond rather than react to life as it unfolds.

This ability to respond to change rather than react to it is the primary distinction I have observed between those who feel free and those who are caught in the suffering of life. You may often find yourself reacting to the behavior of others or to changes in your circumstances and never realize it is because you were expecting others or your life to be a certain way. When you react this way, you are opting not for the mind of possibility but for the mind of expectation, and you are left disappointed, hurt, lost, angry, or defeated.

Expect to Stumble

In freeing yourself from expectations, you are likely to encounter a number of challenges. You may be one of those people who say they have no expectations, in either their daily life or their spiritual life.

I find in those who make such claims a strong presence of denial, which is usually rooted in past disappointments and fear of failing to have expectations met. Huge expectations are often hidden in-

Are you able to feel the freedom that exists in being able to respond rather than react when life goes other than how you had planned?

side, accompanied by an inflated sense of “If I can’t have what I want, I don’t want anything.” You are just giving up on yourself when you feel this way.

When you are not real with yourself, it is impossible to be authentic with others. When you are in denial of the existence of your expectations, you limit the possibility of actively participating in the truth of your life in every moment and preclude accessing the power of the love of those close to you. It can sound so hip

or advanced to lay claim to being beyond expectations, but if you look closely, you will see that what you are really doing is denying yourself access to possibilities.

Many people struggle to overcome negative expectations in their life. Beth (not her real name), who attends the weekly meditation session I lead, complained for a couple of years about how inadequate her meditation practice was and how she never made any progress. She bemoaned her inability to concentrate and criticized herself for repeatedly getting lost. Her self-appraisal was very sincere, and her face reflected tremendous pain. She was disheartened but felt she was being honest with herself.

I, on the other hand, thought her practice was going great. I repeatedly told Beth this and pointed out to her that she was suffering from having expectations about what a good practice should look and feel like.

She was never relieved by my words, but she kept up her practice, coming almost every Sunday to *sangha*. Then, just

as she was making a major transition in her life, retiring from her job to pursue her spiritual interests full-time, one of her daughters became ill with a life-threatening disease. This required Beth to completely abandon her own plans and move to another city to care for her daughter full-time. I did not see her for several months, then one day she returned to meditation class, her face aglow. “My practice saved me!” she exclaimed. “I was calm, mindful. I did not fall into resentment or anger.” She paused and then continued, “I was just there for my daughter. I was compassionate toward myself and her. I want you to let everyone in the class know.” The very difficulties of her life had revealed the true strength of her practice, in contrast to her expectations about what a strong practice felt like.

When Beth’s plans were derailed and an expectation of a happy, exciting time transformed itself into the reality of a time of concern and stress, she was able to respond with equanimity. Her practice served her, and she was able to do exactly

what life called for in the moment. She was able to let go of her goal of enjoying a happy adventure wandering in spiritual study. She thought life was going one way, but it went another. That was all there was to it. Do you see how this can apply to your own life? It is not that you must avoid making plans or moving toward goals; it is that you don’t become defined by those expectations or attached to the outcome.

Can you feel the freedom that exists in being able to respond rather than react when life goes other than how you had planned? It doesn’t mean that you won’t unconsciously create expectations over and over again—no one is expecting you to be perfect (which in itself is just another expectation!). Until you are enlightened, you will repeatedly fall into expectations. But the reason to practice being mindful of expectations and compassionate with yourself when you feel yourself caught in them is so that you acquire the skill to let go of them. You may have expectations, but you are not tyrannized by them. This is

freedom from expectations. It is what vipassana teacher Sharon Salzberg describes as “just starting over.” When you realize you are creating expectations or are caught in them, you see them for the suffering they represent and you just start over in that very moment, as best as you are able.

Beware of Spiritual Expectations

On meditation retreats, I often work with yogis and their expectations. They will come to me for an interview and announce that they have had a “good sitting” or a “bad sitting,” when they really are referring to the level of serenity or mindfulness they experienced. Likewise, yogis will come to a retreat or a meditation class with the expectation that it will pick up where the last one ended or that it will be better than the previous one. This is the delusion of expectations based on false notions of progress. Such expectations assume that you know what it is you are seeking, that pleasantness and lack of struggle characterize “getting there,” when in reality, just the opposite is true at certain points. It is often

not serenity that is needed by a student but the ability to stay present when the mind is caught in a storm. It is not hard to be clear when things are calm, but if you work diligently with mindfulness and compassion when things are difficult, you are in the vital training for your tumultuous daily life.

Part of doing mindfulness practice is letting go of expectations in your practice, which can be found in self-judgments, concepts, and impatience. Recently, a yogi described to me in detail a mind-altering experience he underwent at a long-term meditation retreat. To his amazement, he entered into this experience during a sitting time, which he had already labeled as bad. Ironically, it was just as he was saying this to himself that the experience began and then lasted for many days. Why did it happen in that moment and not another? It was because he let go of expectations, he relaxed, he started from where he was rather than staying stuck in his ideas about meditation. I have seen this time and time again. I don't mean to minimize this yogi's previous effort. He had diligently worked toward his goal, which created the proper causes and conditions so that when he let go of expectations, he was capable of entering an altered state of mind.

It is very easy and very dangerous to get caught in expectations that might be called "spiritual materialism," such as wanting to have special experiences, to receive a sign that guarantees you are on the right path, or to enter altered states of mind. You may expect to be rewarded in life because you are a good person. You may secretly desire recognition for your good works or for being a dedicated student. You may feel it is unfair that you should suffer from a lack of material comforts when you have been so faithful. You may desire certain powers of mind to control outcomes, to manifest your will, or you may feel that God owes you for being faithful. These are all examples of the delusion that can be created by expectations, and they can tyrannize your life.

All of us have to be alert to these expectations sneaking into our minds. When you discover one, the proper response is not to judge yourself but rather to laugh at yourself with compassion. The Buddha

himself was repeatedly visited by a deity he called Mara, who would tempt him with such expectations. His only response was to say, "I see you, Mara," and it is said that Mara would eventually slink away in defeat.

Sometimes students confuse expectations with self-discipline. They will sincerely ask, "If there are no expectations, why should I apply great effort?" I like this question, because it helps clarify the difference between living out of your values and living for results. The Buddha continually warned us not to be attached to any specific outcome, yet he also stressed the importance of making an effort and sacrifices, of living a life of moral discipline. Right effort is part of his eightfold path. The difference is in what you control. You have the power to

There is nothing to be gained from a mind filled with expectation, but there is much to be gained by living out of your values.

choose your level of effort; you can learn from experience how to improve it and how to be balanced in what is skillful and what is not. But you cannot control the result of your actions. As painful as it is to admit, oftentimes you cannot even know if the results are truly positive or negative just because initially they appear to be one or the other.

Live in the Now

The stories of most of our great spiritual teachers are not about ease and glory, or about having all of their expectations met; rather, they're about patience, endurance, sacrifice, and unconditional love. This is not to say that extreme pain and harsh self-denial are to be considered inevitable, for that would be yet another expectation, a negative one! Instead, the call is to be in the present moment whether or not the situation meets your expectations.

To truly be in the moment, to not be defined by expectation, requires mindful

clarity; a heart conditioned by love, compassion, and empathetic joy for others; and equanimity that allows you to receive life however it unfolds. This may seem like an inconceivable challenge, but it can be your goal, your beacon through the fog of your life. Most important, it can inspire and orient you in how to live in the moment. You simply lay aside your expectations as best as you are able.

You may be surprised when you discover how much choice you have in letting go of expectations. As you have seen, there is nothing to be gained from a mind filled with expectation. But there is much to be gained by living out of your values with real effort and discipline. When you do this, you are showing up for what you value and discovering a sense of joy and ease that is independent of the conditions in your life.

When you practice staying in the "sacred now," the future will take care of itself as well as is possible. My teacher the Venerable Ajahn Sumedho calls this "trusting your practice." It is an acknowledgment that you cannot know the mysteries of how life unfolds or even if a certain outcome that seems desirable would, if it occurred, truly be beneficial. At the same time, it is a declaration that you can attune yourself to that which is loving and benevolent in life. What else would you choose to align yourself with? Do these values not offer the best prospects for any possible future?

I often end a meditation retreat with a poem by the 12th-century Persian poet Hafiz, called "The Sun Never Says."

"Even / After all this time, / The sun never says to the earth, / "You owe Me." / Look at what happens / With a love like that, / It lights the whole sky."

This is the power of giving to life without the burden of expectations. ■

Phillip Moffitt is a member of the Spirit Rock Teachers' Council in Woodacre, California, and teaches vipassana meditation at Yoga Center of Marin in Corte Madera, California. He leads vipassana meditation retreats nationally, and in 2005 will offer vipassana training for yoga instructors. For more info on Moffitt's retreat schedule, visit www.lifebalance.org.