

Retreat 1
Jon Yaffe – Sitagu Buddha Vihara – Dec., 2016

Dharma Talk – On Expectations

Around this time of the year, I like to give a talk on Planning Mind and Expectations. The reason I say ‘this time of the year’ is that as householders we often find ourselves heavily engaged, shall we say, with the doings of the season. My original version of this talk was called [read in a loudly stressed and agitated voice] “The Holidays Are Coming! The Holidays Are Coming!”

The other thing going on – not across the season but this very day – is of course that Khemanandi and I are finally offering our first day retreat here at the vihara, and for many of you this is your very first retreat. So here too, on a tighter time line and most likely on a more personal level, you probably have some expectations cooking. It might be helpful to talk about expectations in both settings.

Let’s begin by looking at the holidays, a time when planning and expectations often become powerful factors in our lives, factors which if handled unskillfully can lead to various degrees of suffering.

Let me share a recent personal experience with you, by way of example.

A bit before Thanksgiving last year, my younger son Stephen and his rather large family, then numbering something like 9.5 (with my DIL pregnant with # ten!), announced plans to drive down from Lansing Michigan to McKinney, just north of Dallas, to be with my DIL’s parents (who live there) over Thanksgiving. This would be their first contact with any of their parents since returning from two years in Germany, where he served in the Army; so I was positive they’d follow-through on the trip, even though it’s a terribly long drive with nine people jammed into a van. Becky and I decided to drive up there, and so canceled our plans to be with friends here, and made reservations to stay in a hotel for two nights (since my son’s family would easily take up all guest space at my DIL’s parents’). So sure was I that they’d come – so solidified were my expectations - that I cleverly saved 15% on the hotel room by pre-paying in full for a non-refundable reservation! How clever was I! (Can you see where this going? Well at the time I could not!)

But these expectations, firm as they might be, fell through. They decided at the last minute that the drive would be too burdensome (which was probably a good call), and I didn't get to visit with them, didn't get to visit with my DIL's folks and got no use at all from my roughly \$200 room purchase.

Needless to say, I commenced to suffer, both loss and disappointment! I not only suffered over Thanksgiving, I suffered days before I was even to have left to go up there.

Basically, when I learned an event that was planned for days in the future would not pan out, I suffered immediately from a sense of loss and disappointment – about something that wasn't even scheduled to happen yet. All that actually happened was *nothing*; the same nothing that would have occurred had I never planned anything to begin with. And I could grieve that nothing even before its occurrence, and thus non-occurrence, was to occur. Isn't that interesting?

If we allow ourselves to become strongly identified with expectations, and plans fall apart, we can react as if we've suffered an actual loss, and we can go through some or all the stages of grieving: denial, negotiating, anger, depression, and only finally real acceptance.

OR we can approach planning and expectations skillfully, by which I mean we still plan, but we recognize a plan is just a plan, not a guaranteed contract with the universe, and we form expectations, but we recognize them as just expectations, nothing less but nothing more.

And if we find ourselves flipping between the skillful reflection and unskillful reactivity, we can use mindfulness to discern which is present now, and now, and now. The very mindfulness that allows us to discern when unwholesome or unskillful thoughts are arising or are fully established frees us from the chain of conditioning that sustain them.

In the holiday season personal, cultural and economic causes and conditions converge to form, and catch many of us in, a perfect storm of conditioning.

For most of us the holiday season has one or more powerful arcs that tend to sweep us up, starting as early as Halloween and carrying through New Year. Here is a short list suggesting the kinds of things that sweep us up.

- Expectations, both our own and those of others we hope to please – or resist pleasing – followed by fulfillment and/or disappointment
- Stress – emotional, financial, etc. - followed by release and/or collapse and, hopefully, recovery
- Effort followed by relaxation and/or exhaustion
- And Binging – on food, family, entertainment, etc. – which may be followed by various forms of purging, withdrawal, remorse and so forth.

What did I miss? Feel free to add to the list.

Here's a reasonably skillful way to look at all this: the idea is that same five hindrances that challenge our meditation sittings can color our participation in the holidays –

- craving for and clinging to whatever we find pleasant
- aversion and ill will toward whatever we find unpleasant
- disturbances in our energy level manifesting as agitation, excitement, restlessness and remorse, on the one hand, or exhaustion and zoning-out – sloth and torpor – on the other
- and finally we can experience undermining qualities of uncertainty (doubts about our self, suspicion of the intentions of others, cynicism about the commercialization or religiosity of the holidays in general, etc.)

The same skills we cultivate to dissipate the hindrances when we are on the cushion are equally helpful when these arise elsewhere. On the cushion, off the cushion, ultimately it's all life.

In addition to expectations about the external pressures the holidays give rise to, we also have expectations about how we will approach and handle them, and about how our practice – our meditation, our understanding of the Dharma, and the wisdom we have internalized from these – will affect, or be affected by them.

- If our practice is not well-established, or if currently we keep it separate from our “regular” daily life
 - We may form the intention to maintain our practice, as a useful or even vital “time-out” from the busy-ness of the holidays
 - Or, we may have thoughts about how the demands of the holidays will impede or completely crowd-out our practice
 - Or, we may think that trying to sustain our practice through the holidays will just be one more stress added to the pile, and so we may consciously decide to set our practice aside for a time, to make things easier. Either of these last two may lead to the arising of resentments.

- If our practice is more fully established, and we are committed to integrating it into our “regular” daily life, we may have thoughts about how our practice will protect us from any or all of the challenges we foresee.
 - We may think of the Dharma as an impenetrable shield, that we can rely on to prevent anything from triggering conditioned patterns of reactivity (I call this “My mother-in-law won’t push my buttons *this* time mind!”)
 - Or, more skillfully, we may think of the Dharma as providing a set of tools, with which our reactivity can be handled more skillfully than has been true in the past. This is what I was talking about earlier, when I spoke of mindfulness being helpful in general, and mentioned that we may have acquired specific skills in our sitting practice for working through the hindrances.

It’s tempting to assert that some of these are far superior to others, and *in general* that may be true. But the main purpose of this talk is to help normalize the entire range of experiences that might arise during the Holidays, or of course in general. You are not necessarily a good person if things go smoothly, nor are you necessarily a bad person if things prove difficult.

What’s very likely is that there will be moments of great pleasure, and ease, when things for a time go more smoothly than you imagined; and that there will be moments of great displeasure and difficulty, when things for a time are

worse; with lots of mild moments, of normalcy or even tedium, in between. Life holds everything, so why not the Holidays.

This variability, which is one aspect of the impermanence that characterizes all conditioned phenomena, is true not only for what happens around and to us, it's true of our reacting and responding as well. No matter how ardent our practice, our wisdom and skillfulness will always be at least a little variable from moment to moment. So hopefully, each of us will try to be sure we keep some compassion in our tool kit – for ourselves as well as for others.

The holidays are coming, the holidays are coming; so reflect on your expectations. Know that they are just expectations, general thoughts that cannot be fully true, accurate or complete. Hold them as lightly as you can, and stay as mindful as you can. Be aware of clinging and non-clinging as they come and go.

May you enjoy the holidays.

So let's turn now to our retreat today. Why are you here, and what do you think will happen?

Unlike the holidays, which annually come to get us ready or not, you've all chosen to be here today. Good for you! And I hope it will indeed be good for you.

I have a recording at home, of a complete retreat led by my first teacher, Matt Flickstein. He begins the first session by saying "Why are you here?" The first time I heard him say that a highly conditioned voice in my head spoke up, saying "He's on to you!" Like I didn't deserve to be there (and when I say there, I mean listening in my my car), because I somehow wasn't worthy. We all show carrying stories about ourselves, don't we?

But what he was intending, perhaps not realizing how neurotic some of those listening might be, was to invite everyone to consider how positive and wholesome and aspirational their intentions were; or in your case *ARE*.

Granted, there are longer retreats out there, but you are committing an entire precious weekend day to ... what? Sitting, walking, sitting, walking... What? Did any of you have difficulty explaining the attraction to friends or family?

This morning we took the refuges – in Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha – and some of you are here seeking just that – *refuge* from ... what? The holidays,

work, family, the News, perhaps from your own reactive or exhausted mind ... basically from the stress of life. Some quiet, some refuge.

You are willing to give yourself this gift. And you deserve credit for that, and for looking for this gift by seeking inward, to settle and relax and purify the mind – *your* the mind. You could have looked for refuge at the movies, or at a football game, in a spa, or even a bar, but instead you decided to look within. Good call!

Some of you hope to go further, to deepen your practice, to refine your skill as a meditator; perhaps develop new skills, achieve a new and deeper understanding of the mind; how best to become concentrated, how best to work with and through whatever hindrances and wandering habits this still-unawakened mind may bring forth, how best to find insight into the nature of experience and learn to work skillfully with whatever arises. We can see this as an extension of refuge, maybe call it the “refuge of wisdom”; but it brings not just respite but confidence; confidence we can use when the retreat ends and we return to engaging with the world, when we dance with life.

What are your expectations? Are you planning for your mind to behave well all day? Are you looking for a blinding white light? Our only promise as leaders is to be here with you all day and do our best to be helpful. And I hope *you* make no demands on the day, other than to be here and do your best; to be mindful and present and curious. Let the day bring what it brings. One last thought: whatever effort and dedication you muster, may you also have an abundance of compassion.

If it turns out that you don't need it, save it for another day. But if your mind at any point stumbles or bucks or wanders away, be gentle with that mind. It doesn't yet know how to do better, not consistently; so have some of that compassion for the poor thing. If your thoughts drift into remorse for the past, frustration for an unpleasant now, or doubts or fears about the future, be compassionate with the mind suffering such thoughts. The world may be a mess, your mind may be a mess; be gentle and caring. It can only help.

We are not awakened being as of yet, and we will not awaken gracefully if shaken or abused.

Put down those expectations, try not to pick up any judgments along the way. Let's just see what happens.