

## Aspiration & Expectation

One of the main places we often get confused is in not differentiating between our aspiration and our expectations. Everyone has expectations when they start practice—often centering around the hope of becoming calm and peaceful. My expectation, and what drove me for many years, was that practice would help me become free from my fears. Reflect for a moment: What were some of your expectations in practice when you began?

When we think about aspiration we usually think about something more lofty than a personal expectation—a higher calling. Yet, the question might arise: Isn't our aspiration to wake up, or to be free, just another way of trying to fulfill our expectations that practice will take away our difficulties, and consequently make us feel better? This is an important question, and the best way to answer it is to look inside at our own experience.

Sometimes it's difficult to tell what exactly is driving us. Is it the small mind that just wants to feel better, or something deeper inside us, or some mixture of the two? Certainly the two are often intertwined, but there is one clue to help us see who's who in our little mental zoo. The clue: being driven by expectations will almost always lead to disappointment. Why? Because it is not based on what life is, but on what we want life to be. For example, expectation, which is based in the mind, is often rooted in the ego-driven ambition to feel different, namely calm or free from fear.

Interestingly, practice will often, in part, meet these expectations, and thereby reinforce them. But then when practice doesn't meet our expectations, that is, when we don't get what we want, we experience disappointment. Having the expectation that we can be free of our problems can even lead to discouragement and depression, because it ignores the fact that life will never stop testing us with difficulties. Yet, our disappointment, whether in the form of sadness, anger, self-pity, bitterness or whatever, is like a red flag. It is telling us to look more closely at ourselves—at what we're up to.

What we'll see is that our expectations were an exact set-up for our disappointment. This is why it's important to recognize where we're caught in our expectations, or to being entitled to have life be some particular way. To find out what are expectations are, when we experience disappointment, we just have to ask: how is this experience supposed to be? And then



### February Sesshin

Applications are being accepted for the three-day February Sesshin, 2/17–2/20. The Sesshin starts on a Friday evening and ends mid-day on Monday, which is Presidents' Day.

### 2017 Zen Center Board Members

Bob Posert  
Angela Milana  
Fred Conway  
June Cressy  
Chuck Sweet  
Kevin Berg  
Jennifer Kugel

### Announcements

### Sesshin Application

Click [here](#) to see this newsletter online.

what? We simply pause and feel what's there.

Actually, having expectations is very normal, and not necessarily problematic, as long as we eventually see them for what they are. What's problematic is when our expectations are more like demands, or requirements—rather than simply preferences. When we demand, or require, life, or people, to be a particular way, it will very often lead to suffering.

While expectation is based in the mind, we can say that aspiration is based in the heart, or in our essential nature. Aspiration has been described as our true nature striving to reveal itself. In other words, it can be seen as an inherent movement toward who we truly are, like an acorn becoming an oak tree.

Conversely, the efforts of expectation are often characterized by ambition, neediness and fear. The effort of aspiration is softer, not as driven by results as by the inner impulse to live more genuinely. When I'm sitting, it occasionally hits me that what I most deeply want—what I have wanted ever since I began the path of meditation many years ago—is to simply dwell in the heart of awareness, and to live from that place. More than anything, this includes living from kindness and gratitude, and from love.

To me, this is what it means to live from aspiration, to live most authentically. It's not about getting somewhere or becoming someone else—it's about becoming who we most truly are. Unfortunately, when expectations become dominant, our aspiration tends to get dwarfed. Remember, the small mind of the ego wants what it wants—often based in the desire for comfort and security—and it speaks with a louder voice than the softer voice of aspiration.

But, over time, particularly as we learn to be more inwardly quiet and open, we can hear the more deeply compelling message of our aspiration. One of the reasons we ask each of you to state your aspiration before you sit and when you come into daisan is so that the voice of aspiration can go deeper.

As I said earlier, often aspiration and expectation intertwine and sometimes it may be hard to know who's who in our internal zoo. It is rarely black or white, one or the other. Yet an important part of the practice life is to continually feed the part of us that wants to wake up. Whether it's through meditation, going to retreats, prayer, reading, being in nature—we have to use whatever we can to nourish the aspiration that urges us to realize our true nature.

In the last four years, since my kidney cancer surgery, it has been somewhat of an intense roller coaster ride. There has been a constant back and forth: from getting caught in my expectation that I could be in control—with the consequent disappointment that I could hardly control anything—to remembering my aspiration to use each of the many disappointments as my path.

Sometimes, when the physical discomfort is intense, or

*When I'm sitting, it occasionally hits me that what I most deeply want—what I have wanted ever since I began the path of meditation many years ago—is to simply dwell in the heart of awareness, and to live from that place.*

seemingly unending, it is extremely difficult to drop the expectation that things will go as I want them to. But certainly some of the time, when things are hard but not overwhelming, I can remember to breathe into the center of the chest and extend the wish for healing into the body. This is an act of aspiration, and in many instances it has brought a degree of equanimity.

There were also instances where it didn't bring equanimity, and that's the real test of the depth of our aspiration. When life is simply hard—and I mean objectively hard—with little relief from our practice, do we slip into the small mind of doubt and get discouraged? Or do we persevere anyway, knowing that we have little control, but nonetheless being willing to take the ride? This is a very interesting place in practice, and, as I discovered, at times there may be very little clarity. But as I've also discovered, it's almost always possible to return to the breath into the heart, and say "Hello" to whatever is on our plate—regardless of where it leads.

I recently came across a Japanese saying which sums up what we most need to remember: "Seven times fall down; eight times get up." It's the eight times getting up that is our aspiration.

*Ezra Bayda*