

Living in Peace by Letting Go of All Our Expectations

Our anxiety does not come from thinking about the future but from wanting to control it.

Kahlil Gibron

Do you live every day of your life in peace, love and joy or do you - like me - spend a lot of your time feeling either at least a little anxious or at least somewhat irritated with the world?

Gloria and I have just returned from running our second retreat in Assisi. The theme of our retreat was 'Finding Inner Peace' so I have naturally been thinking a lot about this topic recently. I have come to the conclusion that one of the key practices we need to adopt if we long to spend more and more of our time in peace, love and joy is the practice of letting go of all of our expectations about how our life should be and how our world should be.

So in this month's message I am going to explore with you the practice of 'letting go' of all our egoic expectations and judgements about how our life should unfold.

First of all, it is crucial to begin to notice how much pain we cause ourselves by insisting that all our endless expectations about our life must be met in full. For example, maybe we go on holiday to a wonderful place that we have visited many times before and quite understandably we expect that place to be just as we left it. But when we get there, we notice that things have changed. Our favourite restaurant has closed down. The beach seems far more crowded than in the past. Our hotel has changed hands and the breakfast is not nearly as good as it was the last time we visited.

Naturally, we start to feel really disappointed but then we just cannot let go of that disappointment and start to become really irritated with all the unwanted changes to our favourite holiday destination to the extent that our irritation basically ruins our holiday.

Or let us think of another example of how our inner peace is so easily shattered. We go to lunch with an old friend with whom we have always shared similar political views. During lunch, it becomes clear that our friend, whom we have

not seen for a year or two, has moved her political allegiance from our side to the other side. We feel so shocked and even betrayed that we begin to wonder whether we should cut off all contact with her. On our way home, we start to feel really angry and sad that our friend could suddenly betray the political cause that we both fought so valiantly for in the past.

Now in both the instances above, most individuals would feel fully justified in feeling extremely upset that their expectations of a wonderful holiday or lunch with a dear old friend and political ally had been so abruptly shattered. However, if we are really committed to finding, and then keeping, a deep sense of unshakeable inner peace, we need to begin to challenge the widely held view that all our pain and suffering in life is primarily caused by the world around us letting us down over and over again.

We just need to pause from time to time to ask ourselves: Is the world really disturbing my inner peace right now or am I disturbing my own peace of mind by refusing to let go of my expectations of how life should be at the moment? So my favourite restaurant has suddenly closed. Maybe I could see that as a wonderful opportunity to widen my horizons and find a brand new wonderful restaurant to visit and enjoy? My dear old friend from my university days no longer shares my political views. Maybe we could find some other common ground to talk about over lunch so that our long-standing friendship is not ruined by just one unexpected area of conflict?

Now I am not suggesting that letting go of all our endless expectations about how our life should turn out is always as easy as finding a new restaurant in our favourite holiday destination. For example, if we expect to live for many more years with our beloved partner and then one day they have a sudden heart attack and leave us for good, of course, we are going to be beyond heartbroken for quite some time.

However, if we are ever to find any kind of contentment with life in the future, at some point we do need to begin to let go of insisting that we can never be happy again without our beloved partner at our side. We need to begin to open up to the possibility that whilst we were making plans to spend our later years with our partner, the universe had other plans for the two of us. Once we accept this, we may even find that totally unexpected little moments of joy begin to

creep back into our awareness and new opportunities for leading a truly fulfilling life in old age starting to come our way.

So this month, maybe you could just notice when you are upset that a particular expectation of yours has not been met and then maybe, just maybe, you could think about letting that expectation go. Learning to let go of all my own endless expectations about how my own life should unfold has certainly helped me to spend at least a little more time these days dwelling in deep inner peace, love and joy.

For example, when we arrived in Assisi the other week, I felt really unwell because I had a bad chest infection. Of course, I initially felt really disappointed and anxious about being so unwell when paying guests were about to arrive on our retreat. But then I kept practising letting go of insisting that I had to feel better, and although having a really bad cough for several days and nights was definitely no fun, I did finally manage to find some real inner peace in the midst of my disappointment.

I just kept surrendering into what I was experiencing moment to moment and reassuring myself that it was all meant to be. I then received a beautiful healing from one of the participants on our retreat that helped me to release an early childhood trauma. So looking back on being so ill in Assisi, I can now see how the universe was actually being kind to me rather than cruel.

I will conclude this message with a wonderful teaching from Anthony De Mello. He insisted that the quickest way to dwelling in peace and happiness 24/7 is to drop all our attachments to having the world turn out just the way we think we want it to be.

De Mello urged us to see that insisting that we cannot be happy without a particular person or thing in our life is exactly what causes virtually all of our fear and anger with the world.

If you learn to enjoy the scent of a thousand flowers you will not cling to one or suffer when you cannot get it. If you have a thousand favourite dishes the loss of one will go unnoticed and leave your happiness unimpaired. But it is precisely your attachments that prevent

*you from developing a wider and more varied taste for people and things. (Anthony De Mello *The Way to Love*)*

If you do only one thing for your own well-being this month, please pause from time to time to contemplate on what Anthony De Mello is saying about how we can dwell more or less permanently in perfect inner peace and happiness as long as we just let go of our attachment to life being exactly how we think it should be in the past, present or future.

Peggy Foster
October 2023