

DEPRESSION, THE CHILD OF DISAPPOINTMENT
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As they say, "disappointment is the salt of life," and the big disappointments in life can be, indeed, earth-shaking, but they sometimes can serve as a wake-up call. However, the steady rain of quiet disappointments has less to recommend itself and potentially is even more dangerous to our mental health.

With the big disappointments, and I have had a few, the best advice I have given myself is not to add insult to injury. It is bad enough that I have been disappointed, that I took a turn life gave me in a hard way, but it is much worse if then I add to that perceived injury the insult of following it with endless regret and, worst of all, bitterness. Bitterness is a real life killer.

The slam-dunk of a major disappointment is one thing, but the subtle undermining of our self-confidence brought on by the endless underscoring of what happened to us is so much worse. In other words, the karma of a kick in the face from the outside world is one thing, but the karma accumulation we add to that event by endlessly reviewing and underlining what happened add up to far more karma than the original event, not to mention the bitterness.

Perhaps we cannot avoid what life brings us in the way of disappointment, but how we take it and what we do with it is very much up to us. If I think about it for even a short time it is usually clear to me that it is best not to throw good luck after bad and further invest my life in regretting what happened to me. Best to just suck it up and walk on. That is my view.

And these little slights and subtle disappointments can leach more from life than their big brothers. They literally will eat us alive, if we let them. And again, it is up to us. And this has been, for me, a tough lesson to learn.

It did not take me too long to grasp from the Buddhists that expectations are never our friend. They cause us to hope on the future rather than to depend on the present. But that word "hope" is another whole thing entirely. I was raised on hopes and dreams, so learning about the failure of hope to really help, took a long, long time to digest.

It was this very clear admonition, repeated by so many great siddhas, in the Buddhist cannon that finally got my attention and led to my taking the warning on hopes (and fears) more seriously. It reads:

"Don't Prolong the Past,
Don't Invite the Future."

I knew at first read of that phrase that it held something important for me because it struck at the heart before I could ignore it. Not prolonging the past, well, that much I could figure out. Don't dwell on the past, overmuch. I get it.

But this phrase about not inviting the future, not having hope. That was against my beliefs. I have been a great fan of hope, and an even greater dreamer. I have dreamed, my friends!

But gradually, like creeping age, I became aware that almost all of my minor (daily and endless)

disappointments came from expectations and, yes, from my hopes, each and every one.

If I looked closely I could see that I would even have a tiny time of mourning over every disappointment, and my days can be full of them. And they can be linked, one-to-one, like a string of firecrackers going off one after another, each sucking some sense from whatever life energy I have that day. What began as a fresh "me" when the sun came up each morning was too soon hamstrung by a series of quiet disappointments, like gradually letting the air out of my tires. Pretty soon I was deflated and often was not even aware enough to know why.

I should also mention that depression is the step-child of disappointment.

So beware of these small disappointments, because how we take them is really up to us, and they can eat away at our confidence and sense of wellbeing like a mental cancer. But I have learned, or at least am learning.

I am learning, through awareness training, to catch disappointments early-on, when they first peek their gnarly little heads into my life causing me to go into reaction.

And reaction is the keyword here, how I react to what I perceive as disappointing. Of course that is all based on hope and expectations, my hopes, my expectations. When the Buddhists tell me that hope and fear are not my friends, they are speaking of our reactions, not that we are to have no dreams or hopes. It is our reactions that we can control.

The Buddhists go on to point out that if we will work on becoming more aware, we can catch ourselves in moments of disappointment and actually observe our reaction, watch the energy running out of our life through expectations that are not met or biases that must be acknowledged.

And this awareness approach can serve all sizes of disappointment, from the big ones on down to those that barely get our attention, but still function without fail.

Let me give you an example. Not long ago I got a phone call in the night from someone who was touched by something I wrote and who was in collaboration with others who probably share my same training and view. She told me she would be contacting me that night by email and invited me to come and visit their group, etc. This was dharma-related, so that is my favorite stuff, and many of you know.

Of course, I was thrilled with the idea of speaking with these folks, in particular because it was on subjects of the greatest interest to me. Well, that email (and any other kind of feedback) never came. What a great opportunity (perfectly made) for me to practice what I am preaching here about disappointment, and I did.

Of course, I have thought about the call a few times, but not as I would have years ago, where I would deeply have regretted the proximity to having hopes fulfilled, and then dashed. That idea.

Instead, I just note it, and put it on hold. We have to trust in our own karma and fate. Our own will come to us, as I am reminded of this great poem by John Burroughs, called "Waiting," which I will post here

WAITING

SERENE, I fold my hands and wait,
Nor care for wind, or tide, or sea;
I rave no more 'gainst time or fate,
For, lo! my own shall come to me.

I stay my haste, I make delays,
For what avails this eager pace?
I stand amid the eternal ways,
And what is mine shall know my face.

Asleep, awake, by night or day,
The friends I seek are seeking me;
No wind can drive my bark astray,
Nor change the tide of destiny.

What matter if I stand alone?
I wait with joy the coming years;
My heart shall reap where it has sown,
And garner up its fruit of tears.

The waters know their own and draw
The brook that springs in yonder height;
So flows the good with equal law
Unto the soul of pure delight.

The stars come nightly to the sky;
The tidal wave unto the sea;
Nor time, nor space, nor deep, nor high,
Can keep my own away from me.

-- John Burroughs

P.S. That poem says a lot.



[Now for this photo. It could be titled "Good Things Come to Those Who Wait," and they did. As I was passing by, I saw that Mr. Toad, here relaxing in a spring pond, was more than just a little interested in the spectacle that was taking place before him, a group of friends amassing in front of him on the aquatic vegetation.

It was not long before he joined them, and I am afraid any photos I might post would be X-rated.]