
LIFE LESSONS

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Expect only from yourself!

There are certain lessons I have learnt over the years and which I try to follow. I call these my 7 commandments. In the last issue, we discussed the first commandment – “Be happy always, no matter what! Don’t let events (good or bad) disturb your state of bliss.” We often do more harm to ourselves by dwelling on people’s words than the words themselves, or losing our sleep when things don’t go the way we want them to. The only thing to guard is our state of bliss. Thus, we need to practice and perfect the art of being happy by drawing happiness from within.

Today, I want to share with you my second commandment – **“Have 0 expectations from every other person in the world, and 100% from yourself. When you don’t expect, you’ll never be unhappy and everything you get is a bonus.”**

Whenever we do something for someone, knowingly or unknowingly, we start expecting the person to do something for us or to behave or not behave in a certain manner. The closer the person is to us, and the more we invest in a relationship, the greater the expectation we have. Many a times, we find ourselves getting hurt when the person we had done so much for does not live up to our expectation. In our eyes, either the person didn’t pay back or didn’t pay back to the extent that we expected the person to.

The fault, I realized, lies not with the person but with us. We always get what we deserve – it’s just that the source might not be the same as where we are expecting it to come from. If we start accepting people for who they are rather than who we want them to be, we’ll realize that life often gets much simpler – both for the person and for ourselves. That is the key to happiness – being at peace with ourselves and the world.

Wanting to change another person is a totally futile exercise, and yet this is what we often try to do. The following words are inscribed on a tomb in Westminster Abbey, “When I was young and free and my imagination had no limits, I dreamt of changing the world. As I grew older and wiser, I discovered the world would not change, so I shortened my sights somewhat and decided to change only my country. But it, too, seemed immovable. As I grew into my twilight years, in one last desperate attempt, I settled for changing my family, those closest to me, but alas, they would have none of it. And now, as I lie on my deathbed, I suddenly realize: If I had only changed myself first, then by example I would have changed my family. From their inspiration and encouragement, I would then have been able to better my country, and who knows, I may have even changed the world.” Kabir, the fifteenth century mystic, wrote in one of his couplets,

“I set out to look for the bad one, yet I couldn’t find anyone who was bad. When I searched within myself, I found that there was no one worse than I”. Thus, he calls for self-introspection and focusing on changing our perceptions rather than the people we live, interact and work with. The key is to be in peace with “the way each person is” rather than “how we think the person should be”.

John F Kennedy famously said, “Ask not what your country can do for you - ask what you can do for your country.” The same applies to our relationships as well. We ought not to ask what each person can do for us or “What’s in it for me?” The right question to ask is what we can do for the person. How can we be useful? What can we do to help someone else? When the expectation is only from ourselves, whatever we get from anyone else becomes a bonus.

Getting rid of expectations also frees us from dependency. A bird feeds its young and takes care of it. Once it learns to fly, the bird lets it go. Yet, we, as parents, hold a great deal of expectations from our children, and often get pained in the process. Same is true for other relationships.

When we expect only from ourselves, we will be more empowered to give in our best to everything that we do. Working for work’s sake without any expectation of reward or outcome is a central message from the Bhagavad Gita and the key to happiness. When we have given our best, it doesn’t really matter what the outcome is. The outcome then becomes incidental.

There is a Sanskrit prayer that is a great source of strength to me: “Tvameva mata cha pita tvameva, tvameva bandhu cha sakha tvameva, tvameva vidya dravinam tvameva, tvameva sarvam mama deva deva.” The prayer is secular in nature and means that “You are my mother, you are my father, you are my relative, and you are my friend. You are knowledge and you are wealth. You are everything to me, O my Lord!” The prayer reminds us to expect only from ourselves and from God, while minimizing our expectations from each person we love and interact with.

Of course, totally eliminating our expectations from others may be difficult, but we can work towards minimizing them. This way, our peace of mind won’t be held ransom to what someone does or doesn’t do for us. With minimal expectations from others, we are only focused on the way we can contribute and everything we get becomes a bonus!

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