

Thinking About Hope

And the question of transmission

by Robert Norris

The background for this piece is Pema Chödrön's inquiry into hopelessness and death, *When Things Fall Apart*, ch.7, and was prompted by the following lines from a newsletter by Christopher Titmuss, insightmeditation.org, 1 Jan 2020: "Practice to be free from living in fear and hope. Worries and anxieties about the Earth and its inhabitants have nothing to do with love of the Earth but only with our reactions. Fears about the future for ourselves and future generations obstruct action. Hope serves as a form of avoidance and leads to disappointment. It is action that counts. Hope and fear consumes energy needed for action."

Hope is a teaching. A teacher knows that language must meet its audience where they are ripe to be met—and perhaps offer some appropriate degree of challenge where they are not. It goes without saying that the language of expansiveness and possibility does not serve us well when our life is coming unstuck. But then neither does the invitation to abandon hope when life is quickening in our veins like healing after sickness.

When I sit at my computer working, a part of me is more often than not preoccupied with digestion, levels of tiredness, concerns about the eyes and a nagging worry about the possible need for glasses (not to mention the long-term effects of glasses on the health of the eyes), and the chafing about what this might entail for my sense of who I am, rather as if glasses were a symbol of defeat; then the financial implications of going to the eye-doctor and all the concurrent worries about bills unpaid, debts, letters from the credit recovery office, rent, and all that *that* suggests to my sense of who I am, my human and professional worth. There is the comparison of the current moment with all its discomfitures major and minor with an ideal moment in the future when I will have it all sorted out, when I will have achieved the ideal diet, degree of fitness, the level of inner peace required to be able to sit here at the computer hammering out the very same words I am hammering out now—only in a kind of super-performative mental and spiritual state that will allow me to place these words in some high-powered publication before the month is out.

But is this, this suffering, really what I should be thinking about when I think about hope? Is this not just a trance of repetition, habit, a series of dynamically related thought patterns that occupy most of my mind most of the time, day in day out, one small piece in the vast puzzle of self-affirming identity that swirls and coalesces around this con-tract (*cum-trahere*), this coming together, at once reduction and agreement, that goes by the name of Robert?

We don't speak of hope when we inhabit a psycho-physiological nightmare. Sleep deprivation is a case in point. We lose sleep and slowly contract into a

state of dysfunction, and eventually death. We close down. If we restore our capacity for sleep, we experience the opposite effect, we open to possibility, and life once more becomes a benign and rich experience. Hope is galvanizing; it is a physiological gauge of health. As long as we perceive a sense of possibility, unfolding potential, we live, we might say, hopefully. To blame hope for suffering is tantamount to blaming life itself for all the bad things that we are doing to ourselves, each other and the planet. Hope is the garden where vision can flourish; we its gardeners. It is not the drought. We can fail in our duty, we can be ignorant in the art of stewardship. Either way, it is what we have to work with. Perhaps—perhaps—if we learned to appreciate all the good moments big and small that we experience in our day-to-day existence, we might just come to realize that we are more proficient at this, whatever ‘this’ is, than we give ourselves credit for.

A sufferer has no hope: their loss of hope is the essence of their suffering. I shall never forget the day my father lost hope. I had taken him to the hospital for the results of his latest scan. After a five-year struggle with cancer, with all the pain and indignities of at best only generally sympathetic doctors, chemotherapy and surgical operations to remove half of his lower jaw, he was still hoping against physical and moral disfigurement for a sign that there would be a sequel in the narrative. But truth came in black and white on the x-ray screen: the cancer had entered the brain. There was nothing more to do, and for my father it was a death sentence.

When one is truly down, the only appropriate action *is* to take stock of the shit. Any talk of maybes and what-ifs is just a perilous distraction. At this stage, the language is about the shit, not the beauty of the world. Everything revolves around the attention given to it, ‘texture, color and shape’.¹ But this is only the beginning. In the healing process, this is the stage where we climb into the sleeping bag with our hypothermic companion, our suffering soul, in an attempt, however far-fetched it may seem, to instil some small degree of warmth into their body. We are not commenting on the wonders of snow-capped peaks as we do so, unless it is to remind them, while we hold them, of the possibility of recovery—when hope of recovery still exists. Because that is precisely what hope is: warmth, when all else is cold. Once the process starts, however, and the flow gathers strength again, *do we, the suffering soul, continue to focus our language on the texture, colour and shape of the shit? Or do we begin to lift our eyes again to a world of possibilities, to the magic invitation of life, to hope?*

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The problem of hope seems to be the problem of all cultural transmissions: it starts with a translation. A famous, revered and widely respected (also by this writer) author establishes a substantive connection between hope and fear because in the language of another culture, a culture and a language she has devoted her life to, the two words have become one concept, and a

¹ Chödrön, P., *When Things Fall Apart* (Harper Collins; London, 1997)

meme is born which will outlive you and I.

I do not speak Tibetan; I am ignorant of the philology of *rewa* and *dokpa*, the Tibetan words for hope and fear; I have no sense of what a Tibetan person really understands, deep down, when these two words are uttered, just as I am ignorant of what happened when they merged to form *redok*, hope-fear, a portmanteau that leaves me feeling suspicious precisely because it is a portmanteau, like *motel* or *brunch*; I am ignorant of how the understanding of the lay Tibetan, the man or woman in the street, would differ from that of a *rin-poche*; I am ignorant of when the words first entered into use in the tradition, thanks to whom and why; of whether they are in fact words used in the teachings, or whether they are taken from some kind of Tibetan Urban Dictionary. In short, to base a teaching upon a translation into English of words that belong to an ancient and sacred Asian language appears to me to be misguided, primarily because in the West the understanding of hope, and of the experience of being human, is rooted in an ideal not of contentment, but redemption. The story of Sharon Salzburg confronting the Dalai Lama with the question of self-hate is characteristically clear on this point—characteristically, that is, for the supremely limpid Dalai Lama, for whom the very notion of the human person hating itself was simply alien. Clearly a notion that is not translatable into the language that gave us *rewa*, *dokpa* and *redok*.

How can a language that speaks of hope and fear *not* understand self-hate? Unless it is that Tibetans experience hope and fear in ways that are fundamentally different from our own. If it exists at all, what is this substantive connection between hope and fear? The dysfunctional hope described in the canon of western writings on Buddhist teachings seems rather to denote wishful thinking, fancifulness, or delusion.

It is not my intention to set one side of the hope-argument against the other, unless it be to make the point that an invitation to ‘practice to be free from living in hope and fear’ may appear duplicitous to the Western mind. At very best, it evokes a kind of neutrality of the emotions which, to a language and culture rooted in Shakespeare, appears antithetical to personality. The truth—my truth, at any rate, given my Italian schooling—is that, even after years of exposure to the Buddha’s teachings, the wording contained in the instruction to be free from living in hope is evocative more of the inscription above the gateway to Hell in the opening of Canto III of Dante’s *Inferno* than the freedom to act for the easing of suffering in the world:

*Per me si va nella città dolente,
Per me si va ne l'eterno dolore,
Per me si va tra la perduta gente.*

*Giustizia mosse il mio alto fattore;
Fecemi la divina podestate,
La somma sapienza e 'l primo amore.*

Dinanzi a me non fuor cose create

*Se non etterne, e io etterna duro.
Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'entrate.*²

Hell in Dante, and the tradition he espoused, is where the damned neither have nor can have hope (*Inf.*, V, 45). The hectoring message above its portal reverberates through modern European civilization like the tolling of a great bell. Harrowingly revisited in the title of a 2002 LA Times article on gang violence in the Boyle Heights neighbourhood of Los Angeles, 'A Lethal Absence of Hope' by Father Gregory J. Boyle, and more recently by Jason Farrell, Home Editor for Sky News, in an interview with LBC about his milestone investigation into the exploitation of children by London drug-gangs, *County Lines*, in which he uses the same phrase to characterize a tragic spiralling of young lives into psychological and physical slavery, its memetic endurance through the centuries of European and American experience is hard to ignore. Especially when compounded—for those of us who have visited Auschwitz—with the visual memory of that other diabolical gateway with its own chilling inscription. As Father Boyle writes, 'gang violence is always about something else. The trick, of course, is to find the "something else"'. It is not a problem that can be solved by attacking the symptoms, in other words, but by looking for the causes. One contact he quotes, "Houdini of the hardwood" and Boston Celtics coach Bob Cousy, offers him a simple clue as to the way forward: "Kids join gangs when they've been denied their hope." Not something for the institutions to deal with, as Father Boyle reflects, but for the local community with its capillary reach into the lives of individual people. Hope is no mere policy needing to be implemented by the LAPD.

The transcendent in the Buddhist teaching is of paramount importance, a point clearly argued by Thanissaro Bikkhu in his article 'All About Change', when he writes that the context of the teachings on change, namely ultimate happiness that is resistant to change, is the necessary framework in which to view all teachings on change, and therefore also hope. Because, he asks, 'How can we find genuine hope in the prospect of positive change if we can't fully rest in the results when they arrive? Aren't we just setting ourselves up for disappointment?'³ It is in the understanding of transcendence, therefore, that we are being asked to rewire our cultural habits and stereoty-

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Through me you enter the city of lamentation,
Through me you meet eternal pain,
Through me you go among the forsaken people.

Justice moved my sublime maker;
Divine will made me,
Supreme wisdom and primal love.

Before me no thing was made
That was not eternal, and I eternal endure.
Abandon all hope ye who enter here.

—translation mine

³ <https://www.dhammadata.org/books/PurityOfHeart/Section0008.html>

pes, including our views about hope. But the problem remains one of how to transmit the message to the ‘foot soldier’, so to speak, to the man or woman doing their best to navigate life’s wondrous waters. After all, hope is a quality not of transcendent experience at all, but of experience-in-the-world. To be beyond it is to be beyond everything—and life, as we know, will be lived regardless.

Writes Emily Dickinson:

“Hope” is the thing with feathers—
That perches in the soul—
And sings the tune without the words—
And never stops—at all—⁴

To dismiss hope as an ‘unuseful’ concept is therefore to dismiss something that is naturally uplifting for the human person, *something, as Dickinson appears to intimate, that is not even a product of the human psyche*. To dismiss it is ultimately meaningless unless we are tying our observations to specific contexts and making the appropriate distinctions that already exist in our own languages first. We could just as easily enter into a debate around the metaphysics of drinking coffee, or going to the toilet. There are healthy and unhealthy ways of doing both, and in a self-help perspective considerable amounts of energy would be expended in telling others what to do and not to do, how to consume and void, how not to, without reference to the specific instances in which the intended lessons are to be learned. It goes without saying that here we are not talking about the self-help industry; but there are times, such as when my understanding of the world is summarily dismissed as ‘unuseful’ on the grounds that it is European, and therefore by definition both short-sighted and narrow-minded, when the line between self-help and genuine spiritual teaching can feel too fine for comfort.

Hope is four letters, two verticals and two circles, articulating an out-breath followed by a diphthong ending in U—in *kotodama* the principle that holds space together through cosmic breath.⁵ Because hope *is* breath, *spiritus*, an expansion of spirit towards celebration and well-being. It can be lost, of course. The risk goes with the territory. But to dismiss it through fear of disappointment sounds a lot like a common Buddhist hang-up. Tell a story of survival, of beauty wrested from the teeth of suffering, of the purest kind of selfless service, and you are telling the story of hope. There is no need to name it; it need only be expressed, practiced. To name it is to write a poem whose verse is used to tell the world, “this is a poem.” Just get on with the business of life, and wonder at the beauty in the distinction between dragonfly and damselfly.

Because that is what hope is: the human story—nothing more, nothing less.

⁴ Franklin, R. W. (ed.), *The Poems of Emily Dickinson* (Harvard University Press; Cambridge, 1999)

⁵ Gleeson, W., *The Spiritual Foundations of Aikido* (Bear & Co; Rochester, 1995)