

Wise Hope in Social Engagement



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Photo by Olivier Adam.

A good part of my life has been spent relating to situations that might be deemed hopeless—as an anti-war activist and civil rights worker in the nineteen sixties and as a caregiver of dying people and teacher of clinicians in conventional medical centers for fifty years. I also worked as a volunteer with death row inmates for six years, continue to

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refugees who have no status, anywhere. Ending gender violence and feminism have also been a lifelong commitment.

You could ask, why work in such hopeless situations? Why care about ending the direct and structural violence of war or injustice, as violence seems to be a constant in our world? Why have hope for people who are dying, when death is inevitable; why work with those who are on death row... redemption is unlikely; or serve refugees fleeing from genocide, and no country seems to want these men, women, and children? Why work for women's rights, women's education, women's voices in the political and religious arenas? What does it mean to hope in our fraught world?

I have long been troubled by the notion of hope. It just did not seem very Buddhist to hope. The Zen master Shunryu Suzuki Roshi once said that life is “like stepping onto a boat which is about to sail out to sea and sink.” That certainly brings conventional hope up short! But some time ago, in part because of the work of social critic Rebecca Solnit and her powerful book *Hope in the Dark*, and in discoveries through my practice life and service life, I am opening to another view of hope—what I am calling “wise hope.”

As Buddhists, we know that ordinary hope is based in desire, wanting an outcome that could well be different from what might actually happen. To make matters worse, not getting what we hoped for

is often experienced as a misfortune. If we look deeply, we realize that anyone who is conventionally hopeful has an expectation that always hovers in the background, the shadow of fear that one's wishes will not be fulfilled. Ordinary hope then is a form of suffering. This kind of hope is a nemesis and a partner with fear.

We might ask then: what more specifically is hope? Let's begin by saying what hope is not: hope is not the belief that everything will turn out well. People die. Populations die out. Civilizations die. Planets die. Stars die. Recalling the words of Suzuki Roshi, the boat is going to sink! If we look, we see the evidence of suffering, of injustice, of futility, of desolation, of harm, of ending all around us, and even within us. But we have to understand that hope is not a story based on optimism, that everything will be ok. Optimists imagine that everything will turn out positively. I consider this point of view dangerous; being an optimist means one doesn't have to bother; one doesn't have to act. Also, if things don't turn out well, cynicism or futility often follow. Hope of course is also opposed to the narrative that everything is getting worse, the position that pessimists take. Pessimists take refuge in depressive apathy or apathy driven by cynicism. And, as we might expect, both optimists and pessimists are excused from engagement.

So, what is it to be hopeful and not optimistic? The American novelist Barbara Kingsolver explains it

this way: “I have been thinking a lot lately about the difference between being optimistic and being hopeful. I would say that I’m a hopeful person, although not necessarily optimistic. Here’s how I would describe it. The pessimist would say, ‘It’s going to be a terrible winter; we’re all going to die.’ The optimist would say, ‘Oh, it’ll be all right; I don’t think it’ll be that bad. The hopeful person would say, ‘Maybe someone will still be alive in February, so I’m going to put some potatoes in the root cellar just in case.’ ... Hope isa mode of resistance.... a gift I can try to cultivate.”

If we look at hope through the lens of Buddhism, we discover that wise hope is born of radical uncertainty, rooted in the unknown and the unknowable. How could we ever know what is really going to happen?! Wise hope requires that we open ourselves to what we do not know, what we cannot know; that we open ourselves to being surprised, perpetually surprised. In fact, wise hope appears through the spaciousness of radical uncertainty, and this is the space in which we can engage, what socially engaged Buddhist Joanna Macy calls “active hope,” the engaged expression of wise hope.

It’s when we discern courageously, and at the same time realize we don’t know what will happen that wise hope comes alive. In the midst of improbability and possibility is where the imperative to act rises up. Wise hope is not seeing

things unrealistically but rather seeing things as they are, including the truth of impermanence.... as well as the truth of suffering—both its existence and the possibility of its transformation, for better or for worse.

Through another Buddhist lens, we can see that wise hope reflects the understanding that what we do matters, even though how and when it may matter, who and what it may impact, are not things we can really know beforehand. As Rebecca Solnit points out, truly, we cannot know what will unfold from our actions now or in the future; yet we can trust that things will change; they always do. And I know from the point of view of the vows we receive as Buddhists, our actions, how we live, what we care about, what we care for, and how we care really do matter all the same.

Yet often we become paralyzed by the belief that there is nothing to hope for—that our patient's cancer diagnosis is a one-way street with no exit, that our political situation is beyond repair, that the abuse of women has always been the case and will always be the case, that there is no way out of our climate crisis. We might feel that nothing makes sense anymore, or that we have no power and there's no reason to act.

I often say that there should be just two words over the door of our Zen temple in Santa Fe: *Show up!* One might ask why would I want these words over the door of our temple, when

despair, defeatism, cynicism, skepticism, and the apathy of forgetting are fed by the corroding effect of conventional hopelessness. Yes, suffering is present. We cannot deny it. There are over 68 million refugees in the world today; only eleven countries are free from conflict; climate change is turning forests into deserts. Suicide rates for children are up. Violence toward women is increasing. Many feel no connection to religion or spirituality, and countless people are deeply alienated and take refuge in their digital devices. We also see that economic injustice is driving people into greater and greater poverty. Racism and sexism remain rampant. Our medical system is deeply challenged. Globalization and neo-liberalism are putting the planet at great risk.

The peacemaker Daniel Berrigan once remarked “One cannot level one’s moral lance at every evil in the universe. There are just too many of them. But you can do something; and the difference between doing something and doing nothing is everything.” Berrigan understood that wise hope doesn’t mean denying the realities that we are confronted with today. It means facing them, addressing them, and remembering what else is present, like the shifts in our values that move us to address suffering right now. Seven hundred years ago, in Japan, Zen Master Keizan wrote: “Do not find fault with the present.” He invites us to see it, not flee it!

Returning to the difference between hope and

optimism and why hope makes sense in our fraught world, the Czech statesman Václav Havel said, “Hope is definitely not the same thing as optimism. It is not the conviction that something will turn out well but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it turns out.” For many of us, it is an imperative to march for peace, to work for the ending of nuclear proliferation, to put pressure on the US government to re-sign the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. It makes sense to shelter the homeless, including those fleeing from war and climate devastation; it makes sense to support compassion and care in medicine in spite of the increasing presence of technology that stands between patients and clinicians. It makes sense to educate girls and vote for women. It makes sense to sit with dying people, take care of our elders, feed the hungry, love and educate our children. In truth, we can’t know how things will turn out, but we can trust that there will be movement, there will be change. And something deep inside us affirms what is good and right to do. So we move forward in our day and sit at the bedside of the dying grandmother or teach that third grade class of kids from the poor neighborhood. We bear witness to the young woman who wants to take her life. We hold our CEO’s and politicians accountable. Barbara Kingsolver put potatoes in her root cellar, as we recall. It is exactly at this point of not knowing where our vows come alive..... in the midst of seeming futility or meaninglessness.

The American Benedictine nun and social activist Sister Joan Chittiser writes:

“Everywhere I looked, hope existed – but only as some kind of green shoot in the midst of struggle. It was a theological concept, not a spiritual practice. Hope, I began to realize, was not a state of life. It was ...a gift of life.”

This gift of life that I have called “wise hope” is rooted in our vows and is what Zen Master Dogen means when he admonishes us to “give life to life,” even if it’s just one dying person at a time, one refugee at a time, one prisoner at a time, one abused woman at a time, one life at a time, one ecosystem at a time.

As Buddhists, we share a common aspiration to awaken from our own confusion, from greed, and from anger in order to free others from suffering. For many of us, this aspiration is not a “small self” improvement program. The Bodhisattva Vows at the heart of the Mahayana tradition are, if nothing else, a powerful expression of radical, active, and wise hope and hope against all odds. This kind of hope is free of desire, free from any attachment to outcome; it is a species of hope that is victorious over fear. What else could be the case as we chant: *Creations are numberless, I vow to free them. Delusions are inexhaustible, I vow to transform them. Reality is boundless, I vow to*

*perceive it. The awakened way is unsurpassable, I
vow to embody it.*

Our journey through life is one of peril and possibility—and sometimes both at once. How can we stand on the threshold between suffering and freedom, between futility and hope and remain informed by both worlds? With our penchant for dualities, humans tend to identify either with the terrible truth of suffering or with freedom from suffering. But I believe that excluding any part of the larger landscape of our lives reduces the territory of our understanding. This includes the complex landscape of hope and futility.

When I began my work in the end-of-life care field nearly fifty years ago, dying in Western culture was often considered a failure of medicine, and certainly a failure of life. At the time, I did not even consider hope as anything relevant. What motivated me to do the work was that it felt like an imperative to do the best I could to address the deficits of compassion that I witnessed in modern medicine and to serve those who were suffering, including dying patients, family caregivers, and clinicians.

At the same time, I could not be attached to any outcome, as I intuitively knew that futility might paralyze me, but I had to face futility in any case. I learned that I had to do my best by moving away from the story that working for peace, justice, or an equitable and compassionate society, including

medical culture, would turn out well, was too big a job, or was hopeless. I had to “just show up” and do what I felt was morally aligned with my values, my principles, my commitments, regardless of what might happen. Much later, I came to understand that this work was an outcome of the gift of wise hope, springing from not-knowing and as well from the sense of meaning it gave my life.

I also somehow understood that being with dying was sacred work. For most people, confronting death brings into focus existential dimensions of our lives. I knew that I too was mortal; I too would face my death one day; I too would confront loss and sorrow. What happened was that I was unwittingly drawn into the strong current of the end-of-life care field without having the conscious intention to do this work. I only knew that I had to turn toward and serve dying people, because it felt aligned with who I was and who I was learning to be.

In Zen, this is what I believe is called “living by vow.” I have come to understand that wise hope is in fact living by vow, the great and embracing vow of the Bodhisattvas, and I realized that wise hope is a powerful expression of fundamental integrity and respect.

As my Zen practice matured over the years, I came to understand that living by vow reflects our ability to be guided by our deepest values, to be conscientious, and to connect to who we really are.

Living by vow also points to our capacity for moral sensitivity, our ability to identify morally relevant features in our interaction with others, in how we choose to live our lives, and in the organizations in which we work and those whom we serve. Living by vow also reflects our capacity for insight and our ability to manifest moral nerve to deal with issues of harm, no matter how egregious or seemingly insignificant.

I came to see that our vows are a grammar of values reflected in our attitudes, in our thoughts, and in how we are in the world. The promises and commitments reflected in wise hope are fundamentally about how we are with each other and ourselves, how we connect, and how we meet the world. Practicing our vows, embodying them reflect our integrity and help give us ballast and meaning as we confront the inner and outer storms of being human. And what we come to realize is that our vows are a bigger landscape than most of us realize, and they support integrity in our lives and protect our world and give hope gravity and momentum.

The most powerful vows are those that point us toward living a larger identity, of being Buddha, of being a Buddha now. These vows support us in recognizing impermanence, interdependence, unselfishness, courage, compassion, and wisdom. I believe that these kinds of vows are essential practices that support integrity and the

development of moral character, and they are the fuel of wise hope.

Living by vow fueled by the spirit of wise hope shines through the decisions that we make every day of our lives. Our vows are strengthened and actualized through the medium of wise hope. If wise hope is not present, we might be afraid to take a stand and choose to ignore or back away from situations of harm. We might be in denial or willfully ignorant over the suffering experienced by others when transgressive situations arise. We might be morally apathetic, or paralyzed by futility, or live in a bubble of privilege and be blind to suffering. But if we aren't trapped by these defenses, we might step forward and meet harm with the determination to end suffering, even when our actions might appear futile; and we do so without a "gaining idea," to quote Suzuki Roshi. We can also remember that Barbara Kingsolver said that hope is a form of resistance, and by using the word resistance, I believe that she means being resistant to apathy.

I have learned from my long experience of being with dying, working in the prison system, and being a feminist for fifty years that what keeps us upright in our aspirations and vows is our moral nerve, the courage to stand in principles of goodness and non-harming. What keeps our integrity on track is our moral sensitivity, our ability to see the contours of reality that make harm and futility visible and also


point past suffering to a larger and deeper identity. We need both a strong back and a soft front, lived equanimity and compassion, to keep ourselves aligned with our values and abiding in the strength of wise hope.

We also need to have the kind of heart that is wide enough to accept rejection, criticism, disparagement, anger, and blame, if our views, aspirations, and actions are against the mainstream and what we do is seen by others as without meaning or even a threat to the social order of the day. Furthermore, it is important to remember that our vows support us in staying aligned with our deepest values and remind us of who we really are.

Sitting with a dying person or a dying planet, we show up. We all know that indifference kills. In service to peace, in service to non-violence, in service to life, we live by vow, and we live in the embrace of wise hope.

Syndicated from www.upaya.org. Upaya Zen Center is a socially engaged Buddhist center in Santa Fe, New Mexico. Roshi Joan Halifax, Abbot is the Founder of Upaya Zen Center and an author, and social activist.

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2 Past Reflections



On Nov 29, 2021 **Elza** wrote:



the most simple but yet the most complicated topic written and explained in such beautiful words. Than you very much

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On Nov 15, 2021 **Wendy** wrote:



Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen

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