

## HOPE IN THE MIDST OF SUFFERING: A BUDDHIST PERSPECTIVE

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*This paper is based on an interfaith panel I was on from June 17, 2016 at the Society for Pastoral Theology conference. Each of the five panel participants read papers written by the two keynote speakers.<sup>1</sup> The first paper, written by Joretta L. Marshall, was called Collaborating Hope: Joining the In-Between Spaces, and the second, written by John Caputo, was called Hoping Against Hope: The Possibility of the Impossible. I enjoyed reading both papers, and found many correlations between the theologies written in these papers and my own understanding and practice of Buddhism. I was asked to give some reflections on “hope” from the Buddhist perspective. What I say here about hope is based on my own worldview, study, and practice. Know that my understanding may change, and my perspective does not necessarily reflect Buddhism as a whole, although it may reflect the whole.*

I was raised Catholic in a white middle-class family and culture in Watertown, CT. I attended Catholic school until I was in 13 and converted to Buddhism in my early 30s. As a young adult, I studied as a fine artist (a painter) and was ordained as a Zen priest in 2010. I am currently in residence at the Zen Center of Los Angeles, training with other lay and ordained Zen students to be in community with one another. I also trained as an interfaith hospital chaplain, and am a professor of Buddhist Chaplaincy at the University of the West (UWest). UWest was founded in a Taiwanese tradition of Humanistic Buddhism under Master Hsing Yun.<sup>2</sup> All of these trainings and educational experiences inform my understanding of hope. Today, I will present a few perspectives on hope. However, it is important to realize that there are as many perspectives as there are people, possibly infinite perspectives continuously changing throughout all space and time.

In Buddhism there is a hope that we will continuously practice turning toward suffering, as opposed to turning away.<sup>3</sup> As we turn toward whatever is happening in the moment, whether this is fear, anger, sadness, or joy, we are facing whatever is happening; we are letting go of any desire for what is happening to be different. This is a practice of seeing whatever is happening in one’s life as it is. I see this “as is” practice to be correlated with the Second Noble Truth. In Buddhism, there are Four Noble Truths: 1) life is suffering; 2) there is a cause of suffering; 3) there is an end to suffering; and 4) the end to suffering is the Eight-Fold Path.<sup>4</sup> The Second Noble Truth states that there is a cause of suffering. This cause is *tanha*, which is often translated

as thirst, craving, or desire. It is a thirst, craving, or desire for things to be different from what they actually are. This inability to see reality “as is” is delusion. Delusion is when we see ourselves as separate. So it is important to note that wanting, desiring, or even hoping for whatever is happening to be different is actually causing suffering, rather than alleviating it, because we are separating from what is happening. One kind of hope is a desire for what is happening to be different.

Another kind of hope in Buddhism is a willingness to go into the spaces in-between. Marshall writes that “hope itself is born in the in-between spaces of relationality, beingness, chaos, pain, and a desire to flourish.” My Dharma teacher Roshi Egyoku Nakao<sup>5</sup> describes this in-between space as wild. Here, she writes *The Blessing of the Wild Space*:

When you arrive at the wild space,  
May you simply be, breathe, and listen – nothing more.

May the wild space be a threshold  
Beyond your habitual tendencies –  
The need to understand or control,  
The fear of self-doubt,

The thicket of opinion and belief –  
May the wild space hold you to its bosom.

May the wild space bestow silence  
And unknowing upon you –  
May these faithful companions  
Reveal the mysterious and subtle presences of life.  
When the unexpected is distressing,  
May you receive it as the gift that awakens

May the wild space be a refuge  
Where the untamed heart awaits you –  
Where the unseen and unformed dance  
To the wisdom of their own darkness.  
Life wounds and heals of itself –  
May wholeness and unity be your heartbeat

Go! Go! to the wild space –  
May the tree shelter and the earth sustain you  
May your journey be blessed.

When I am able to go to this wild space, I am able to see another view of hope, a view beyond the material world. I see this as an aspiration or vow. Perhaps, it is even belief. A belief that there is something that goes beyond my idea of self and other. I say it is a belief because I do not actually know what is there, and/or if it is different from the reality that is right here. John Caputo sees this as a place where the impossible is possible. He writes: “Hope calls for courage, not only the “moral” virtue of courage, one of the four hinges of the world, but a deeper *ontological* courage, a deeper affirmation of being, which Tillich calls the courage to be, a

virtue of the unhinged, like people who expose themselves to deadly viruses in order to stop their spread.”

When I was ordained, I took the bodhisattvas vows – these are impossible vows to fulfill – vows to serve numberless being, to put an end to my delusions, to enter everything, and to live an enlightened life for the sake of others. My vows go beyond this lifetime. They go beyond my abilities, ideas, concepts, and thinking. The last line in the Heart Sutra<sup>6</sup> refers to going beyond and transcending – the line reads “*gate gate paragate parasamgate*,” which can be translated as “gone, gone, gone beyond, altogether gone beyond to the other shore.” What have we gone beyond? We have gone beyond suffering, duality, and any notion of a separate fixed self, completely forgetting self.

Roshi Egyoku describes the practice of turning toward what is happening as a practice of leaning in. This way of leaning into pain and suffering requires a certain amount of faith. In Buddhism, faith is often equated with confidence or trust. For me, this practice of leaning into pain and suffering with confidence has developed slowly over time. Through the practice of repeatedly facing my pain and suffering in meditation over and over and over, I have gained confidence in my ability and strength, as well as faith in the Buddha-Dharma (i.e., Buddhist teachings/scriptures). In this way, faith or trust is hope.

There is a Buddhist parable about a raft that talks about having faith in the Buddha-Dharma.<sup>7</sup> The raft is Buddha-Dharma. A raft is a vehicle that takes you from one shore across a body of water to another. As you are building confidence in your spiritual practice, ability, and strength, you can find comfort, safety, and support in the raft during your journey. Here, the raft is a kind of surrogate; a hope or trust that insight will be attained. This is hope in Buddhist teachings and practice. Once the other shore is reached, there is no need to hold onto the raft. In other words, once true insight has occurred, there is no need to hold onto the literal teachings, words, or experience(s) of others because the raft has naturally become you.

This is not to say that the Buddhist teachings are to be used as a way to escape or skip over any suffering that is happening all around us. We live in this world together with many other sentient beings. To not see the suffering that occurs from the reality of our impermanence, illnesses, and death, as well as from our inherent greed and hatred, is called ignorance. Ignorance is separating ourselves from the suffering of the world. Roshi Joan Halifax writes and teaches about being “with” dying. Her book *Being with Dying*<sup>8</sup> is written for caregivers. In chaplaincy, we are taught to *be with* the person who is dying, to give up our fixed ideas about how we think they should die or what it means to die a “good death.”

And what about this earth? How are we being in relationship to our dying planet? Our mother earth *is* dying. What does it mean to *be with* this dying planet? It is difficult to see our earth dying “as is,” without guilt or blame. I gave a Dharma talk on “hope in the midst of suffering” at the Ocean Moon Sangha in Santa Monica prior to the conference panel. After the talk, a young man commented, “I read that 2000 years from now the earth will have eradicated all remnants of human existence...this gives me hope.” I am still taken by his comment – we all need to think about how important we actually are here. Marshall offers us an invitation to think together “about what it might mean to be pastoral theologians in a world besieged by ecological disaster, hate-filled religious rhetoric, structures of racism and heterosexism

that kill spirit and body, and frightened and complacent beings who remain silent in the middle of very troubling times.” This is what we are all living in together, right now. How are we taking responsibility? How am I? How are you?

Thich Nhất Hạnh writes, “Hope is important because it can make the present moment less difficult to bear. If we believe that tomorrow will be better, we can bear a hardship today.”<sup>9</sup> As a Zen student, I sit in meditation for long periods of time. Sometimes the pain that arises in my body seems insufferable, my mind cannot bear it, my body cannot endure it, my heart grows weak, and I pray and plead for it to be over. My teacher said to me, next time that happens, *sit right there*. I told her, honestly, I am not sure I can. I desire to go beyond this, and I hate myself for wanting to get out of here. My suffering increases as I face this inner wall. I become like a snake confined to a tub, a monkey trapped in a cage, a goose stuck in a bottle. When this happens, the only thing that gets me through is knowing that the meditation bell will soon ring and this period will soon be over, and I will be walking. I can then return to the next period of seated meditation, and try all over again. This is a third kind of hope.

I do not want to give the impression that Buddhism is a practice of inaction, merely an interior practice that only happens on a meditation cushion. The Zen Peacemakers teach The Three Tenets: 1) not knowing; 2) bearing witness; and 3) taking action in every aspect of our lives. Right here, we enter every situation giving up fixed ideas about ourselves and the universe, we bear witness to the joy and suffering of the world, and we take actions that arise from not knowing and bearing witness.<sup>10</sup>

When I was in college in Baltimore, I rode my bike to work one day. As I was locking my bike to a street sign, a young man came over and tried to yank it away from me. He pulled the bike toward him, I pulled back, and he pulled it again harder. Our eyes met. He was stronger than me. I felt afraid. Suddenly a very small woman yelled from across the street: “*What are you doing?! You can’t just take someone else’s bike! That is not okay!*” To my surprise, the young man backed away, bowing his body, repeating: “I’m sorry ma’am, I’m so sorry ma’am.” I will never forget this moment. She mothered him – and it worked! I hope my Buddhist practice will continue to cultivate the voice inside of me that will speak out. I hope that when I see another being taken advantage of, harmed, or hurt, I will have the courage to speak up, to not be a silent bystander and stand there dumbstruck. This is my final perspective of hope for today – a prayer that each of us will be able to do this for each other.

The Eight-Fold Path of Buddhism is combined into a Three-Fold Training. The Three-Fold Training consists of meditation, precept, and insight. I see this Three-Fold Training as the embodiment of Buddha-Dharma, a wild space where we practice having implicit trust in each moment, hoping for the courage to take the right action for the benefit of all beings.

## NOTES

- 1 Society for Pastoral Theology 2016 Annual Study Conference  
<http://www.societyforpastoraltheology.org/images/SPT-Information-Page.pdf>
- 2 Guruge, *Humanistic Buddhism*.
- 3 Moon, *Not Turning Away*; Shikpo et al., *Never Turn Away*.

- 4 Walpola, *What the Buddha Taught*.
- 5 Zen Center of Los Angeles. <http://zcla.org/Teachers/RoshiEgyoku.php>
- 6 Pine, *The Heart Sutra*.
- 7 Soseki and Kirchner, *Dialogues in a Dream*, 157.
- 8 Halifax, Joan. 2008. *Being with dying: cultivating compassion and fearlessness in the presence of death*. Boston: Shambhala.
- 9 Hahn and Kotler, *Peace is Every Step*.
- 10 Zen Peacemaker Order. <http://zenpeacemakers.org/three-tenets/>

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