

Hope

January 3, 2022

I heard something very strange the other day, someone saying that Buddhism had no word for “hope.” Well, we do have the word for hope. In fact, we have two. There’s the verb, *paṭikaṅkhati*: to hope, to expect. “When the mind is defiled, a bad destination can be hoped for. When the mind is undefiled, a good destination can be hoped for.” Then there’s the noun, *āsā*, which also means hope, as when you place your hopes on something. In addition, the Pali language has ways of formulating injunctions where you express a hope: “May this happen, may this not happen.” In fact, the whole purpose of the teaching is to give rise to hope that, whatever you’re suffering from, there is a way out of that suffering and there’s a way to put a total end to all suffering.

So as we practice, we nurture our hopes, simply that we have to be very careful about where we place our hopes. You read the news nowadays, and it all seems to be intended to make you feel hopeless and helpless. Things going on in the world that you can’t control: That seems to be the emphasis of the message. We have to realize it’s driving home a point that the Buddha made a long time ago: Genuine hope lies in here, in the potentials you have within you. Ajaan Lee would point out many times that we human beings have lots of potentials inside, both in the body and in the mind, that we don’t make good use of, we don’t take advantage of them.

So as you sit down to meditate, ask yourself: What do you hope for? Some desires will come up as you think about it. Look at your desires and see if they’re in line with the Dhamma and if they’re in line with where the Buddha said true hope lies. Hope lies right here in this fathom-long body, as he called it, with its perceptions and intellect. That’s where the potentials lie.

In the body, of course, the first thing we’ve got is the breath. You can explore the breathing. There’s a lot more to the breath than just in and out. Try to notice, when it comes in, how does it come in? What are your subconscious actions around bringing the breath in? Do you have to tense up a part of the body? All too often, we tense up in our joints, in our extremities. It’s almost as if they act as a fulcrum so that the breath energy could be brought in, but remind yourself the breath energy is actually already there in the body. The air outside is what you bring in, but the breath energy is what flows inside and it doesn’t require any tension.

So start with the fingers and work your way up, to relax the tension. I've noticed that the outline of the body, especially the outline of the hands, is a good place to start to relax and to keep things relaxed as you breathe in, as you breathe out. Then do the whole outline of the arm. Start with the feet, up through the outline, around the legs, up around the torso, in the head. Then go through the inside. Try to get deeper and deeper as you work in. You'll have a much more comfortable place to stay that way.

In this way, you're using your intellect and the body at the same time. The intellect asks the right questions and gives you ideas. You're using your perceptions. What is your perception of what's necessary for the breath to come in? What's necessary for the breath to go out? Do you have to push it out? Actually, you don't really have to push it out. It'll go out on its own. The question is simply: At what rate do you allow it to go out? To what extent do you want to change the rhythm to counteract any imbalance there may be in the body? Sometimes the body gets in a vicious cycle. You breathe in a weird way and it sets up patterns of tension that make you breathe continually in weirder ways. So it's good to learn how to break the cycle.

I found, back when I had migraines, that I'd get into a cycle of breathing where it felt really constricted. The more I allowed it to be constricted, to avoid disturbing the pain, the worse it got. The only way to break out was to breathe in a way that was actually painful. Expand my abdomen as much as possible to the point where the abdomen felt painful. Doing that for a couple of minutes would reset everything. When you have migraines, you start getting afraid of the pain and you breathe in ways that go around the pain so as not to disturb it. If you disturb the pain, it seems to make it worse, but what actually happens is that you get more and more tied up inside.

This is where the Thai ajaans' image of having a knife is good to use as well. Wherever there are bands of tension—like rubber bands around your head, rubber bands around your body—think of a knife, cutting through, cutting through. Any thoughts that connect like bands around your mind: Cut those through as well. Remind yourself that your awareness is larger than your thoughts, and you can step outside.

What happens all too often is that when you're in a thought, it's like being in a colored bubble. Everywhere you look, it's the color of the bubble. But if you step outside, pop the bubble, you realize that not everything has to be colored by the bubble. In the same way, centering your attention on the breath in the body is a good way of stepping out of your thoughts. Or you can think of having a sense of

the breath energy around the body—a cocoon that surrounds the body. Think of your awareness being sensitive to that all around.

I know people who say they can see people's auras, and the quality of the aura will tell them what kind of pains the person is having, what that person's mind state is like, what that person's physical state is like. So think of the energy surrounding you and think of it being turned into a healthy energy and it's there to support you. It's there to nourish you.

These are ways of exploring the potentials in the body. You realize that your experience of the body, sitting right here in the present moment, is not just a given. It does come to some extent from your past actions, but it's also shaped by your present intentions and your present understanding. If you change the intentions and change the understanding, you can stimulate these potentials.

The same, of course, with the mind: The mind can be changed. It may seem to have a tendency to make up its mind to do one thing and then do something else. Learn how to notice that and not get frustrated but, of course, don't give in. Simply just drop whatever it is that distracted you, come back, and if the thought comes back, then you drop it again. Even if you spend the whole hour repeatedly dropping a distraction, don't think that it was not a productive meditation. The fact that you're not willing to give in to that unskillful thought means that you're creating new habits.

In the Buddha's terms, you're bending the mind in a new direction. You're trying to bend it, like a tree. The image the Buddha has is of a tree that leans to the east. When you cut it, it's going to fall down to the east. In the same way, you want a mind that, when it gets cut, will fall in the right direction. When you finally cut your attachments, the mind will head toward peace. That's what you want, that's what you hope for. It's not an empty hope, because you've been working in that direction—inclining the mind toward peace, toward the direction you want.

So don't think that you're stuck where you are or that you have to stay stuck where you are, and that the path is one of learning how to be content with being stuck with where you are. You have to realize there are potentials here, and a lot of potentials have not yet been developed, but you can develop them. You can train the mind to think in new ways. You can train the body to breathe in new ways. And there lies the hope. You don't have to get a different body; you don't have to get a different mind. The potentials for the path are here inside you, in the body and mind you've already got. We listen to the Dhamma to get some idea what the potentials are: how to nourish them, how to incline the mind and the body in the direction we want them to go.

So this is a very hopeful teaching. It's a lot more hopeful than teachings that would ask us to place our hope on someday there might be true peace in the world, someday there might be true equality, someday there might be justice. Those are all good things to work for as a gift to the world. You work in that direction, but the world has its way of saying No and it can say No very forcefully.

But as for the potentials you have inside here, remind yourself that this is *your* territory. As long as you're here in the body, you've got this territory that nobody else can know. And, of course, how your mind feels from within is something nobody else can know, too. Even people who can read your mind can see it only from an outside perspective, but you're the one who can explore what possibilities there are here from inside, and benefit from them. Always keep in mind the Buddha's words that are meant to give you hope.