

# Beyond Hope: Taking Refuge in What Is

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So, it's already almost June. Astonishing, isn't it? Time moves so quickly. I was trying to remember where we were the last time we met. Was it March? It certainly felt like a different climate, a different season. And we've all been cooking in the heat these last few days—some of us more than others.

What I've really been noticing in myself and in others are the many ways we respond to this. You may have noticed it in yourself as well. It's so hot, and immediately there's this pulling back from the unpleasantness of it. And that brings us back to what we were talking about last time: taking refuge in the changing nature of things. Paradoxically, taking refuge in change itself.

It's easy to talk about and much harder to do, especially with very simple things like heat, health, or anything else that changes.

I woke up yesterday with a sore throat and thought, "Oh good, I've got it." It's been going around here. And I've been noticing the mind's relationship to this. It's really quite humbling.

You know how it is when something like that happens. Or perhaps there's something wrong with one of your teeth. Suddenly, that becomes your entire experience. Never mind everything else that's going on—which is, after all, 99.99% of your experience. No, it's this. The sore throat. The tooth. The heat. Whatever it is.

This is the growing edge of taking refuge in what is.

It's really helpful and essential to notice that. Because most of our success in finding that refuge in the way things are hinges on our ability to surrender to what is. To allow things to be exactly as they are without resistance. Without trying to fix them or change them. Just paying attention.

"Oh, it's this right now." Or: "Oh, it's this right now, it's so hot. This is heat."

And yet we resist. That surrender is not easy.

Often—not always, but often—the reason we cannot surrender is quite specific. It is our inability, or perhaps our unwillingness, to rest with what is unpleasant. It is our resistance to the unpleasant and our attachment to the pleasant.

Often this comes with an almost obsessive focus on the unpleasant whenever it arises. That's what locks us into it. The mind keeps returning to that place of discomfort, thinking: "I wish this would change." Or "I hope this changes soon."

We can see this in our relationship to our bodies, to pain, to illness. It can become a real fixation. But it's just unpleasantness.

That realization is deeply humbling.

U Tejaniya has a wonderful way of talking about this. I'm paraphrasing because I couldn't find the exact quote, but he says something like:

*"We don't like even the slightest bit of unpleasantness. Do you think that's fair?"*

It's certainly not in accord with reality. I love the way he puts it. Samsara is simply this: there is pleasantness and there is unpleasantness. It's his way of saying, "Come on, get a grip." (Meaning: get over that resistance). Not harshly, but with humor. We can't force ourselves out of resistance, but we can hold it lightly. "Oh, I don't like this. I don't like it one bit."

What's interesting is that when we react to the unpleasant, even though intellectually we know that demanding reality be different from what it is is useless, the attention immediately locks onto the discomfort. The mind tightens around it. There it is. And we can't seem to let it go.

Trungpa Rinpoche called this "comfort orientation." It is a normal tendency of the untrained and unpurified mind, rooted in greed, aversion, and delusion. We seek comfort and try to escape discomfort. Think about what you do when unpleasantness arises. What do you do to distract yourself? To avoid or escape it? If you're more aversion-oriented, do you fixate on it and turn it into a problem that must be fixed? Or perhaps you do all of those things.

In English we have the phrase comfort food. You stand in front of the refrigerator, open the door, and think: "There must be something in here that will fix this." You try one thing. It doesn't work. You try another. Still no relief. Then you wander over to the cupboard. "Maybe I need something salty." So you find the chips. That doesn't work either. And all the while, internally, we're wandering around hoping for some relief. It's actually quite touching. Because all that's happening is this: we don't like the unpleasant. That's all.

One thing that's particularly interesting, and that many of us in the West don't even notice, is hope. We hope it changes. We hope things go back to the way they were.

Hope is usually in the background, unnoticed.

Sometimes it motivates wholesome actions. We take vitamin C. We rest. We visit the doctor. But often what sits behind those actions is: "I hope this changes quickly." Not simple self-care, but aversion to what is.

Facing the unpleasant requires a great deal of practice. Gentle practice. Because it runs against a lifetime of conditioning to avoid discomfort. Of course, we don't deliberately seek out unpleasant experiences. We're not going around touching hot stoves in order to become enlightened. This is much subtler. It's about coming to terms with the wish that things were different, with the hope that they will change.

There is a wonderful verse from Shantideva's Bodhicharyavatara, Chapter 7, Verse 2 about right effort:

*"Heroic perseverance means delight in virtue. Its opposite may be defined as laziness, an inclination toward unwholesome ways, despondency, and self-contempt."*

I think this is such an interesting spotlight on the quality of mind that wants something different. This isn't the kind of laziness we usually think of. We may not be physically lazy at all. We may work hard in our practice and in our lives. Shantideva is pointing to something much subtler: the mind that shrinks away from the unpleasant; the heart that refuses to connect with the unpleasant. He calls that laziness. That unwillingness to open. That quiet demand that life always be pleasant. That demand is often rooted in hope.

We want the heat to go away. We want our health back. We want things to return to how they were before.

I noticed it with my throat. And now with my sinuses. "Could I have my health back, please?" No. This is how things are right now. Okay, get over it. Not with harshness but with humor. "Oh yes, that's not what's

happening right now." Can I be with this unpleasantness? "Oh, but I don't want to." And there is so much kindness available in simply resting there. Recognizing that it's just that unrealistic wish. That unwillingness to open. We want things to become better. We want a better version of ourselves.

Even spiritual practice can become driven by this. We want Nibbana instead of what is here right now. Without realizing that Nibbana is precisely the complete surrender to the way things are. The willingness to open without resistance, without clinging, without demanding something else.

Our resistance to the unpleasant is the universal starting point of practice. We all begin there. It is not a personal flaw. Little by little, practice offers us a refuge deeper than the wishful thinking of hope, deeper than distraction. As we observe experience moment after moment, seeing the endless movement between pleasant and unpleasant, our understanding matures. The world is like this. Life is like this. There will always be pleasant and unpleasant experiences. And the movement between them.

Sometimes simply remembering that is enough. "Oh yes. Pleasant. Unpleasant." And the mind relaxes. Sometimes the fixation runs deeper and requires more careful practice. But it always begins with honestly letting in our relationship to the unpleasant.

Not with the false equanimity pretending we're okay with it when we're not. Not pretending the hope for change isn't there. Because pretending won't get us anywhere.

Watching hope is therefore a fascinating practice. Many of us grew up in cultures where hope is considered a virtue. In Christianity, hope is one of the cardinal virtues.

In Buddhism, however, hope is seen as a waste of time, as a subtle distraction from reality. That's quite a shift. Personally, I find that perspective incredibly useful because it forces us back to what is actually here instead of hoping for something that isn't here.

We don't get to hope for salvation in the future. Being saved from suffering and the way we create it, is our job now. And we are responsible for it. Not some external savior.

We create suffering—or not—in our relationship to the unpleasant. And once practice creates enough space, that relationship becomes a choice. That space between: "I don't like this." And "What am I going to do about it?" That is what practice develops. We notice: "I really don't like this." "I hope it changes soon." And then we recognize: "It's not in my control when it changes." Outer conditions are what they are. Now what? How do I want to respond? With hope? With continued resistance? Or with clear mature understanding? Things are as they are. How am I responding?

We're not in a hopeless place where we can't do anything to change our relationship to this. We're in a place of real agency here. So watch hope. Notice where there is genuine equanimity and where there is wishful thinking. Hope is a remarkable window into the clinging mind.

Notice how the mind pulls away from the unpleasant, on how it can fixate on wanting the pleasant back, or how it looks for pleasant distraction, or how we can be caught in doing something to fix the unpleasant. And as we all know, clinging is the root of suffering. Any number of ways we might be acting on that hope and that wishful thinking and that desire to distract. Just noticing the wanting, this is the practice moment to moment.

And not attacking yourself with a whip: "Thou shalt not..." Vouch out not. It's not a character flaw or something to beat out of yourself. Nor is it something to do perfectly. It's just like, oh, oh, well. See if you can just rest in that place of lightness, refraining from doing anything. And see what happens. It's so interesting. Because we're playing with the mind here.

The mind doesn't like the unpleasant. It hopes it'll change. It wants to do something to fix it. And we just sit there. What happens in the mind? Where does it go? What does it do? Notice the discomfort, the restlessness, or whatever reactivity comes up. It's kind of funny sometimes: "I have to do something".

Just watch it. Well, how about discomfort? And notice how you didn't die. I'm exaggerating for effect here. But sometimes it feels that way. It feels so uncomfortable to rest with this discomfort. See what happens if you can just sit there with it. And see if you can just relax into that unpleasantness. It's just unpleasant. It's no different from pleasant. It feels different, surely. And we prefer the pleasant. That's what makes it feel so different. But it's just unpleasant Vedana, unpleasant feeling tone.

Our whole culture demands that we avoid this. This is what feeds consumerism, what feeds capitalism, what feeds our whole economic system with all its flaws, get people to run towards the pleasant and away from the unpleasant. And you want more pleasant, more and more and more. This is a radical act. Stopping that in its tracks. It's like: "Oh, I'm just going to sit with this, it's a little unpleasant, oh, well." And it's not masochism by any means. Because it just opens to the other half of life. There's pleasant. There's unpleasant. And it's just an opening to the whole of the way things are. Rather than demanding only half half, a nice half, and forget the other half.

It's a little like physically stretching the body. You know how uncomfortable that could be? Stretch something that's tight, a muscle. You do it in the same way. You lean into it just a little bit. Not too much, you don't want to pull that muscle. But you just rest in that place of gentle discomfort. And you hold it. Not pushing in any way, but just holding that there. And then it releases. Or maybe it doesn't do that immediately, maybe it's a gradual thing.

And here what we're talking about, of course, is not physical discomfort or physical unpleasantness. But resting, not in the discomfort of the unpleasant, but in the discomfort of avoiding the unpleasant, the reactivity to the unpleasant. It's not about the sensation, it's about the reaction to it. That response of the mind, which is why I find it so much fun to play with the mind, to elicit that. You poke at it a little bit.

So finding that place of hope, "Oh, I hope this changes" - and resting there for a little bit without letting the mind go to any fixing, changing, doing, distracting. What can it be just to be not demanding the world be any different than it is? Just touching that and holding that pose internally, that mental pose as opposed to a physical one. Not with any demand. Not trying to overreach, because that'll cause the mind to snap into something even stronger by way of resistance. But just finding that place where you could be with it just enough.

And what you do when you open in this slow way, is you see how resilience grows. And how when you can find that place of rest there, and just be with it, it might be exquisitely unpleasant. The mind might be really fighting. But if there's that curiosity and that interest, suddenly we see how it goes away. That whole resistance just went away. Oh, that's very interesting isn't it? It's like where did that go? What was that about? I was taking that really seriously. Well, guess what? That's a choice and you just saw it.

So exploring rather than pushing, starting with just noticing and gradually, gradually feeling into the experience, familiarizing yourself with that mental discomfort, realizing that it's not going to kill you, getting comfortable with that edge, and then as it grows, gradually deepening with that.

And here we're working directly with the mind that clings, that's hanging on. It wants something. Or many layers of something, often it's a layer cake of clinging. And because this is deeply rooted, it takes time and patience, of course. And it does work, it really is very effective. Resting with subtle discomfort of hope, without following that, gives us space to understand, to let it all be what it is.

It's a place of wholeness. We're no longer just the part of the mind and heart that wants the pleasant, but embracing the totality of our experience, the pleasant and the unpleasant, embracing the totality of the world around us, the pleasant and the unpleasant. Without that mind wanting something different, running in the background unnoticed, hope is a tremendous window into the clinging mind.

And all of you know very well, clinging is the root of all suffering. And so whenever hope appears, it's like a small red flag: "I don't like this." "I want something else."

How wonderful to see that. How powerful. It guides us directly to the very place where we have to practice in that moment. It's like a little flashing light that says, "Clinging is here. Please look."

And what I find so wonderful about that little moment of hope is it's so light. It often runs as like an unacknowledged thing that we just don't even pay any attention to. We allow it because we were all raised with hope being a good thing. So, "Oh, I hope this changes and we don't let that in." But notice hope as instead that big flashing light says, "Slow down, pay attention. What's happening here?" What's actually happening here? And what do I want to do with it? Where do I want to go with this?

Finding that courage that Shantideva is talking about, that real heroic perseverance that goes in the opposite direction of that conditioning. When he speaks in that verse that I quoted of unwholesome ways, despondency and self-contemptive, that really speaks to me. Because when we're dwelling in hope, it's not like we might be even holding the precepts and you know, holding sila is something very precious. But dwelling and clinging is not awesome. And we need to own up to that. It's not useful, it's not unwardleading.

So, using hope as a window into that, that kind of level of unwholesomeness, you see how subtle it is. It's not gross. We're good people. We're not walking around harming other beings. He's not talking about this kind of thing. He's talking about something much more subtle. And then of course, I hope it changes or I don't like this, this little bit of unpleasantness. It can go to, oh, self-pity, I wish it weren't this way. Why did this have to happen to me, you know, blah, blah, blah, at despondency or self-pity? Or the self-judgment that comes in, I've been doing so much work and I just can't get anywhere in this practice. And I'm a bad person and self-contempt. Oh, I hope I, yeah, it's subtle, it's not, it's not something dramatic. It's just the way we hold the world and ourselves in it.

So this is a very deep and powerful place in the practice, as subtle as it is. So watch hope. Because it's such a powerful place of practice.

So I want to close with a quote I like a lot from Mingyur Rinpoche, who is such a joyful being. That was not by accident. He has done a lot of practice. And he still lives in the same world we do. The same wholesome, unwholesome possibilities. The same swings of pleasant and unpleasant. He says this:

*"Feeling divided from ourselves and the world around us is the deceptive narrative of the grasping mind. But we can learn to let go of false hopes that leave us yearning for ease in our bodies and in this world. We can move beyond our discontent. We can replace longing with love. When you love the world, the world loves you back."*

We can learn to let go of false hopes that leave us yearning for ease in our bodies and in this world. We can move beyond our discontent. We can replace longing with love. And when you love the world, it loves you back. It's true. So that is the way in. Learn to love even those false hopes, even this mind that's desperately trying to find a way out. Love that yearning, but don't act on it in unwholesome ways. Don't follow that hope, but embrace it with kindness. This is what gives us that clear seeing. That deepening ability to just rest with that. Love the totality of this, the pleasant and the unpleasant, not with love that is conventional, but with a metta attitude. It is open, friendly, interested, kind, total acceptance, that's that surrender. And then we're no longer divided from the world by our clinging mind, our hopeful mind. We're no longer struggling.

It's a wonderful place to practice. So play with it today. Go out in the heat and see what your mind does. Use that every bit of it for practice. Thank you, everybody, for your kind attention.