

To Be Free From



M a r g a r e t W h e a t l e y

I have never questioned, as a Buddhist, how active I should be in the world. I suppose because I came at this from the other direction: I was already active in a world that was breaking my heart. I became Buddhist so that I could stay in this world and allow my heart to keep breaking.

I work in many different places where people are suffering. These people live in third world countries, confronting a future that is no future. Or they live in modern organizations, confronting the loss of self and meaning. I used to differentiate, believing those who suffer from poverty and disease deserve more support than those whining in comfortable offices. But Pema Chödrön dissolved my distinctions when she explained, “Suffering is suffering.”

This is true.

Today as I write this, Robert Kennedy Jr. is speaking just down the road before several hundred people, all of whom care about this world. He will talk to them about environmental issues. About vaccinations containing mercury that have led to a huge increase in childhood autism, clear cause and effect denied by authorities. In his gestures and demeanor, he will remind them of his father, that passionate strident voice striving to awaken our anger about poverty and the forgotten. People will leave incensed, inspired, frustrated. I have been to many of these events and given speeches myself that activate these emotions. The anger rises and stirs us awake, we speak out, we protest, we rage and rally. And then, when nothing changes, we deflate, feeling weak, powerless, and sickened by our own anger.

Later this day in October, CNN broadcasts former President Clinton’s Global Initiative Summit—dozens of powerful leaders from around the world gathered by him to create change in the world. So many brilliant, passionate people speaking from the depth of their clarity. I can’t listen to another summit. Or panel. Or speech. We don’t need one more session where we sit, adamant in our positions, blaming the other. Because we already know what to do. The solutions we need are already here. Why can’t we use what we know works? Where is the courage to stop doing what is destroying so many? As the show continues (CNN gives them an hour), I am back in a familiar place—pulsating with anger and frustration.

I became Buddhist so I could see this insanity and not go insane.

Many years ago, I learned to bear witness, to stand with those enduring great harm. To do nothing but be there, listening. I was in South Africa a number of times as people learned

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how to live together as a free nation. When there, I would hear experiences of such horror, and of such forgiveness, that some nights I couldn't sleep, tossed and turned by these stories, forced to reconsider human nature. I didn't want to hear one more horror. But I reasoned with myself to become a good listener. If they had experienced it, I told myself, the least I could do was listen.

How do I bear witness to the unbearable?

Why are people so deliberately cruel?

How do I not bring more rage into the world?

This is why I became Buddhist. To be free from these and many other cries.

Four Freedoms

Buddhists relish enumerated concepts. Everything has a number in front of it, collections of concepts from three to 84,000. Here is my own addition. I could call these "Four Freedoms," because practicing these I feel free to walk into difficult places, even free to remain sane. But truly, I think of them more gratefully as, "thank-god-I-know-these." The four I have learned from my Buddhist practice are to be hopeless, groundless, empty, and fearless.

1. Free from Hope

I was listening to the most eloquent speaker I'd ever heard, a man who has worked in the United Nations for years, first on issues of children, now on issues of HIV/AIDS. With images that took us to heartbreak, he described the fate of children in this world. He described the legions of child soldiers, the children enslaved in industry, the millions orphaned by AIDS, nine year olds struggling as heads of household to keep their siblings together. Everywhere children learning only to be silent, craven, or brutal.

This is what he confronts each day. At the very end, he stated quietly: "This is a world that does not care about its children."

Someone in the audience asked him how did he sustain himself, as day-to-day he looked such horror in the face? He replied: "It's increasingly difficult to keep my anger under control. It's eating away at me. I don't know how much longer I can continue this work."

I practice to avoid descending with him into anger, fear, sorrow, and illness. My new faith frees me from the awful question, "Why would a loving God allow this to happen?" No longer seeking explanation, I can stay in this world of escalating inhumanity.

After all, what other species is so stupid as to stop caring for its children?

"Beyond hope and fear" is a frequent teaching in Buddhism. Dante admonished Christians condemned to hell, "Abandon all hope, ye who enter here." But we all need to abandon hope. Hope plays hell with us, the siren call of accomplishment, the seduction of success. We can change the world. We can make a difference. If only we work hard enough. If only we get more resources. If only... If we... If we...

"Hope plays hell with us, the siren call of accomplishment, the seduction of success."

Thomas Merton, a Christian mystic, counseled a friend: “Do not depend on the hope of results... you may have to face the fact that your work will be apparently worthless and even achieve no result at all, if not perhaps results opposite to what you expect. As you get used to this idea, you start more and more to concentrate not on the results, but on the value, the rightness, the truth of the work itself. ... you gradually struggle less and less for an idea and more and more for specific people In the end, it is the reality of personal relationship that saves everything.”

I often read Merton’s letter to groups. Nobody wants to hear it. It’s not the usual career advice: Your work will be worthless, achieve no results, or even create results contrary to what you want. Oh my God.

People are terrified of hopelessness. They ask: What will motivate me if there’s no hope? Why would I try to do anything if it won’t work? Deprived of hope they anticipate only endless hours of depression. For a worthless life.

Their questions introduce a key problem with hope. It never enters a room without fear at its side. If you hope to accomplish something, you also are afraid that you will fail. What if our actions don’t work? What if we can’t save the world? What if we truly are powerless? Oh my God.

I gave up saving the world about three years ago. It was more difficult than letting go of a love relationship. I felt I was condemning the world to its bitter end. Some of my colleagues were critical, even frightened by my decision. How could I be so irresponsible? If we give up on the world, what will happen? They still refuse to resign as savior (especially the younger ones). I watch them force their failing spirits and tired bodies back into action one more time, wanting vehemence to give them vigor.

I didn’t give up saving the world to protect my health. I gave it up to discover what I’m supposed to be doing—how best to help. Beyond hope and fear, freed from success or failure, I’m learning what right action feels like. Its clarity, its energy. I still get angry, enraged, and frustrated. But now I know to retreat, to not be driven to action by these emotions. I don’t do anything until I have relocated myself beyond hope and fear. Then I can act, rightly. I hope.

And Merton spoke truthfully. Outcomes don’t matter. People do. Can we be kind, loving, generous, even as everything caves in?

Beyond hope and fear, this question I can answer. My answer is yes.

2. Free from Safety

The flags are flying at half-mast. Again.

This one drapes across the highway as I drive toward it.

It’s over-sized, the type of flag that became popular
when patriotism needed to be more visible.

It suffocates the road, limp, lifeless.

Wind attempts to lift its spirit but
the flag refuses so
laden with sorrow.

“Beyond hope and fear,
freed from success or
failure, I’m learning what
right action feels like.”

This flag is for Katrina.

I remember another massive flag that
flared out defiantly in the fierce wind after 9/11.

The world I see will soon be lost in lifeless flags.

We are only at the beginning.

Last night I threw out a salt container that still had some salt in it.
I wanted to clear space in my crowded cabinet.
As I tossed it in the garbage, it came to me. There will
come such scarcity that even those few grains will be treasure.
I still threw it out, but vowed to remember this night.

Now, how do I live whole-heartedly?

Every time a flag gets lowered, I tell myself:

This is what it feels like as a culture dies.
This is what it feels like in the age of destruction.
This is what groundless feels like.
Don't grasp for ground.
Don't grasp.

Groundlessness has to be learned.

I am teaching myself with these terrifying mantras.

3. Free from Self

Nothing remains the same.

Nothing has solid lasting form.

Nothing is as it appears.

Nothing means what I think it means.

Nothing that grabs my attention will remain.

If I let it.

Nothing exists by itself.

Nothing has independent identity.

Nothing I am means what I think I mean.

Nothing I cling to is real.

Nothing to protect, defend, prefer.

Whew

4. Free from Fear

Fearless

Trickster sage prankster magician

Fearless

Acting out
crazy wisdom

Fearless

The lion's roar
the dragon's soar

Lift off.

Beyond hope and fear

no ground
no base

soaring, roaring

Wings flared wide

free

no hope

no self

no safety

Fearless

Up here the world looks lovely

Spacious, welcoming, open

grateful for gifts that only appear as

risk, bravery, foolishness
on the ground.

Fearless

Speak out
act out

make love

do nothing

there's nothing else to do.

Soar sweet dragon beyond beyond

Fearless

True love.

Coda

The course of true love never runs smooth.

True love never runs.

Yet here I am, again restrained from flight by the terrible gravity of events. It doesn't matter what day it is. Natural catastrophes, manmade disasters, greed, violence—the senselessness doesn't cease. Every day we undo the future. (A Chilean poet created this new verb, to undo-the-future. We need new terms, she said, to describe what we're really doing with our actions.) Another new descriptor appears on the evening news: "disastered out." The commentator asks whether we are so overwhelmed with the world that we can't take it anymore, we can't give anymore.

Confronted by so much turmoil and tragedy, how can we help but grasp for ground anywhere we can find it? How, with so much horror, could we ever give up hope?

I have a colleague, famous in my circles, who has decided his legacy is to make life better for billions of people. He plans to create leadership programs for eliminating poverty, creating health, literacy, and prosperous communities. He repeatedly stresses that it is only billions served that will satisfy him. He knows, as I do, that the solutions we need are already here. He is investing his money and his last passion in making sure that we learn these solutions and apply them everywhere. He will save the world.

I sit there exposed, naked in hopelessness. The longer his energy and optimism fill the room, the more I doubt myself. Have I done right to stop dreaming, to surrender my visions? Have I done right to treat this world as illusion? Is it true that nothing I see means what I think it means? Am I bringing any good to the world selfless, hopeless, groundless? Or is he right? Can we still save the world? Oh my God.

I want to flee in self-defense from these questions. But they only hold me to this troubled earth. Really, there is only one question.

Where do I find the winds of fearlessness?

For this, I know the answer.

Retreat. Relocate. Beyond hope and fear. True love.

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"Where do I find the winds of fearlessness?"

Myron Kellner-Rogers (1996), *Turning to One Another* (2002), and *Finding Our Way: Leadership for an Uncertain Time* (2005). She has been on the faculty of the Shambhala Institute's Authentic Leadership Summer Programs since 2001 and will give a talk on Fearlessness at the 2006 program.