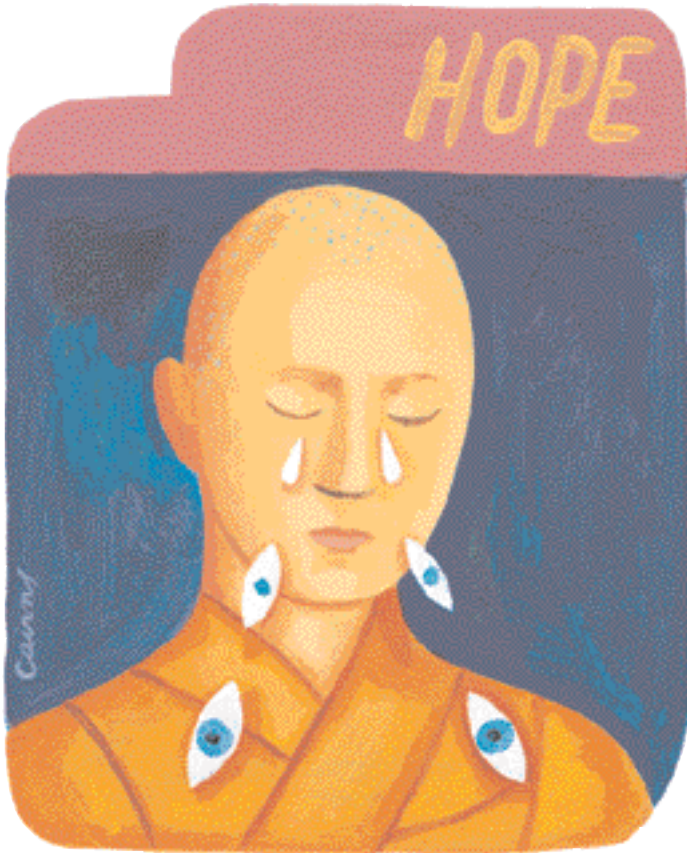


Disappointment is Hell

Hatha yoga offers an opportunity to practice mindfulness and find freedom from suffering.



SOMETIMES THINGS REALLY don't work out very well. It's true, isn't it? You come to yoga class in desperate need of a calming, restorative experience, and what you get is a teacher who is distracted and confused. Or, you come to class after work with a racing mind, looking forward to doing a dozen Sun Salutations, only to discover every time you move your lower back hurts. Then there are all your hopes about what yoga will do for you, but it turns out your physical limitations are more intractable than you thought, your discipline to establish a home practice hasn't materialized, or you keep injuring yourself. It's all so disappointing—and that's just your yoga!

Life is even worse. You finally get what you want in your career, or in a relationship or a lifestyle, but there

are still all these problems that you had assumed would go away “if only” this or that happened. Or you gradually realize that the thing you always wanted is never going to happen—having a child or a loving spouse, making peace with a difficult parent, finding creative expression, or getting economic freedom. It's not that there aren't lots of good times too, it's just that the disappointments can loom so large.

In becoming an adult you learned how to cope with disappointment, or else you wouldn't be able to function at all. Yet, the conundrum remains: If you've learned to live with disappointments, then why does it still take so much of your energy to cope? Why do you get sad, depressed, worried, irritated, moody, anxious, grumpy, lethargic, or nonresponsive, not just every once in a while but many times in the course of a day or a week, sometimes in small ways, sometimes big? Where is the yoga in all of this reactivity?

Dante & the Dharma

RECENTLY I WAS IN yoga class with my teacher, Tony Briggs, when he admonished the students for having too much hope in their poses. “Stop trying to get something out of yoga!” he exclaimed, “Just do the pose!” He then asked the class if anyone remembered what was inscribed on the portal above the gate to hell in Dante's *Divine Comedy*. He glanced over at me so I replied, “Abandon all hope you who enter here.” Tony then said it was the same in yoga and exhorted the students to remove the hope from their poses.

Tony was making a subtle but important point, one that I frequently make in Dharma talks when teaching meditation: Hope can often be false hope, disguised refusal to be with things just as they are in the moment. When you reject the moment that is arising just because it is unpleasant, you are rejecting the only moment you have in which to be alive, the only moment in which you can feel and act. If you are lost in disappointment about the future or the past, you are not fully and authentically present in the moment.

This relates to what the Buddha taught about living with disappointment. He said that we experience everything in terms of the Eight Worldly Concerns:

gain and loss, praise and blame, pleasure and pain, happiness and unhappiness. We of course want gain, praise, pleasure, and happiness. But the Buddha referred to them as the “terrible twins” because each always arrives with its opposite. One cannot be open to praise and not receive blame. One cannot experience pleasure and not feel pain. This is the nature of the reality that we know.

The Buddha taught that it was the denial of this truth that is the cause of all suffering. You cling to your desire for the positive in life while being filled with aversion to the negative events that occur. Yet despite all your efforts, you don’t get many of the things you want, or they don’t continue to satisfy you, or they go away. This is the Buddha’s first noble truth: the existence of *dukkha*, a feeling of unsatisfactoriness which accompanies every experience in which we are identified with our needs.

Your hatha yoga practice offers an opportunity to be free of this identification. You can observe your mind wanting your body to be able to do something, then see how you identify with that desire and become frustrated and disappointed when the body can’t do it. None of that desire and identifying actually helps you do yoga, thus my teacher’s admonishment to abandon hope.

When Dante first sees those famous words above the gate to hell, he is very alarmed and asks Virgil, who is his guide through hell, what they mean. Virgil answers that they mean to abandon distrust and cowardliness. It would be great if life proceeded from one moment of perfect happiness to the next, but for most of us, this is not the case. So, just as Dante did, we must proceed by another path, the path through our personal hell, where we encounter moments of pain and feelings of loss and confusion. Given that this is so, you can either live in denial of the truth of your experience or obsess on your pains and disappointments. Or you can consciously accept, even embrace, life not working out and trust that in doing so you will discover meaning in your life.

If you choose to consciously embrace

pain and loss as your teachers, life itself is not disappointing; it is a series of moments to practice being with life as it is. To do so is to make life your yoga practice. When disappointment occurs the practice is to realize, “Ah, I’m lost in disappointment. I’ve confused myself with a desire and so identified with it that it is causing me to suffer.” It is not that the physical or emotional pain that accompanies disappointment is unreal; of course pain hurts. But pain arises, has a certain duration, and then passes. Disappointment has a chimerical quality because our minds refuse to accept what is; therefore, we relive the disappointment over and over again, never noticing after the initial experience that it is only a memory we are re-experiencing, much like watching old movie reruns.

Three Aspects of Disappointment

IF YOU LOOK closely at disappointment, you will notice that it is usually comprised of three aspects. The first aspect is the anticipation of disappointment. This happens when we imagine some situation which might happen but hasn’t yet, but we experience the disappointment as though it had already occurred. The second aspect is that moment when the disappointment arises, and we must somehow live through it. The third is living with the after-effects of lingering disappointment.

Dealing with the first aspect of disappointment, anticipation, is actually the easiest way to be a better yogi. One of my meditation teachers, Jack Kornfield, loves to quote Mark Twain saying, “Some of my biggest disappointments never happened.” This is true for everyone. When you start to worry about a possible event in the future, watch how you contract into fear. You can see that the fear has no purpose, and it often makes that which you fear more likely to occur.

A certain amount of anxiety in the external world is appropriate, yes. If you’re not careful, you may drive off the road, or if someone is threatening you, you need to be alert. But the constant fear in your mind does not serve your survival, and it’s imprisoning. It feeds on itself such that you

become habituated to living in a perpetual state of disappointment just because you have fear of disappointment. A good yogi will heed Dante’s words and lay down the distrust of life and simply meet whatever happens with the best of intentions, determined to hold true to one’s values.

The question then becomes: How do you work with major disappointment when it arises? The first thing you can do is consciously note it. In vipassana meditation, we practice noting the breath and sounds as they arise, which trains the mind to be able to cope under much more difficult circumstances.

As they say in the military, when great pressure arises you don’t rise to the challenge, you fall to your level of training. If you have not practiced staying present and withstanding the emotional pull of small disappointments, you get swept away in the emotional waves of a big disappointment and lose perspective.

If you can stay present when something disappointing occurs, the next response is to open fully to the experience. Don’t deny it, don’t push it away, but realize, “Ah, this is disappointment. What does it taste like? Where is it in my body? Is the feeling expanding or contracting?” Open to the experience of disappointment so that you can accept it and let it pass through your mind and heart. Then you can go on with your life’s journey and not be frozen in place by your pain. What the Buddha taught was to see the emptiness of the experience, to see how in our pain and confusion we cling to that which is not lasting; by contracting into our disappointment, we create our own unhappiness.

Learning to work with the lingering after-effects of a big disappointment is a yoga practice in itself. I once heard another of my meditation teachers, Joseph Goldstein, speaking to a yogi who had just lost a loved one and was asking for help in understanding how to cope. Joseph made a very important distinction between sorrow (pain) and grief (disappointment). “Sorrow is a natural response to loss,” he said, “But grief is an unwillingness to accept what is.” I was struck by just how true this is.

Lingering disappointment comes about because there is a tendency to transform your loss into a story instead of accepting it as an event. This is not in itself such a problem, but there are usually two errors which arise with the story-making.

First is the creation of a false identity, a you that is solid and never-changing which is continually reinforced by the story. Just by observing yourself closely, you can see that this isn't true and that your ego is really comprised of a group of personalities which are constantly changing.

The second error is that the story-making can create the illusion that your loss is a fresh event when it is actually something that has passed. These two errors combine to lock you into a ghost-like state in which there is no freedom. The Buddha taught that you have to actively work to see through these errors and to realize that there is no continuing, unchanging person and no experience that is still happening.

Maybe you had a disappointment in your childhood that you've carried around for decades—perhaps it was the way you were raised or something harmful that shaped your life. Maybe your disappointment is more recent—loss of a loved one, a failed relationship, or a major disease. No matter how disappointing or horrible it was, it is over now. Like a tree that grows on the side of a mountain and is bent and shaped by heavy winds, you have been formed as you now are by this and other events of your life. Let the experience go, allow it to have its death in the flow of time, for it is a natural part of time. Allow its death to be the fertilizer for what you cultivate in the life that it has left you.

All spiritual traditions honor the fruits that grow from conscious acceptance of great pain and disappointment—compassion for all suffering, patience for unskillful acts of your own or others, and, most of all, loving-kindness for the fragility and the mysteriousness of this which we call life. It is in living with this conscious acceptance that the hell of disappointment is transformed into the

celebration of life. There is no need for hope, for all that is to be honored and cherished is here, now, brilliantly reflected in the quality of your conscious, choiceless attention. ■

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