

# The Paradox of Hope

February 6, 2007 by [lifeshifting](#)

Do you ever feel like life works like a pendulum? You swing one way for a while...up, up, up...(or down, down, down!) and then, inevitably you find yourself and your life swinging back in equal measure in the opposite direction? No wonder it is so difficult to find a solid place to stand! I often find that when I write about a theme or principle of life-shifting in this blog, that within a short period of time the universe usually compels me to contemplate, read, or re-discover the opposite end of whatever spectrum I happened to be hanging out on. Go figure.

In this instance, having recently written about the power of hope and peak experiences, I suppose it was inevitable that I would stumble across the equally profound and essential dark underbelly of those topics: hopelessness and despair. Why would that have to happen you might ask? Well, in the context of the “life-shifting” approach to transformation and renewal, we have to acknowledge that hopelessness and despair — and depression, grief, and loss as well — are the cornerstones on which renewal, joy, and peak experience of any kind are usually built. It is one of the great ironies, and deep paradoxes of life, but true: hope is built on a foundation of hopelessness.

Let me explain. Just as I was completing my blog entry about the “audacity” of hope, I happened upon a favorite book that I hadn’t looked at for a while,

**When Things Fall Apart: Heartfelt Advice for Difficult Times**, by [Pema Chodron](#).

Pema is a wonderful Buddhist writer and teacher, who is especially talented at taking esoteric concepts and themes from the Eastern tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, also known as “The Dharma,” and applying them in a succinct and user-friendly manner to life in the West. Her voice is compassionate and her ideas in the context of dealing with life’s trials and tribulations, are, for the most part practical and inspiring. Some of what she says, however, feels radical and can be quite unnerving. Take hope for instance, she doesn’t buy it.

Hope, according to Pema, is a false idol, a cover-up for fear and a resistance to truth. She says, quite bluntly, that we must “give up hoping that there is somewhere better to be, that there is someone better to be, otherwise we will never relax with where we are or who we are, right now.” Sounds reasonable until you realize that she means it full-on: we should embrace hopelessness, not hope. Hopelessness, by which she means a totally and complete surrender to the truth of impermanence, change, groundlessness, and ultimately, death. In the context of the Buddhist tradition, everything else is a form of denial, a cover-up for unexpressed fear. And so with hope.

Is this really the case? How can we believe in “life-shifting”, in self-renewal and re-birth, if we let go of all hope for “something better”? This is a difficult place to land, emotionally, intellectually, spiritually. In some ways, the intersection of hope (West) and hopelessness (East) divides the cultural construct of two different worldviews. Yet, the ironic twist is that in the end the Eastern perspective of hopelessness may be more

hopeful. Here in the West, what I observe in my clients (and sometimes in myself) is a tendency to hold so tight to our fantasy of happiness and achievement and success, that we live in misery with the absolute unattainability of our endless aspirations. We wallow in lack...and sometimes drown in despair. My sense of the view that Pema is advocating cuts through the despair and surrenders to a deeper truth, that we are not in control.

But all is not lost. My view is this: hope is a valid experience and a uniquely human attribute. It is a gift available to us at any moment, but its price is hopelessness. We must let go of our self-centered belief that we are actually going to get somewhere, achieve something, or, in fact, single-handedly change the world. These are all fantasies of the ego. The crucial turning point is, to use the cliché, “letting go and letting God”. Yet, this doesn’t have to leave us bereft, lost, or alone. Consider for a moment, the sun, our sun. We know that it is but one of a billion stars just like it in a billion galaxies that fan across the dark recesses of space, yet the sun is hardly unimportant: it gives us life. It makes a difference, AND SO DO WE. What about our amazing ability to experience consciousness, to feel hopeful in the face of certain death, to derive MEANING from the beauty of a single flower? We are co-creators in the dance we call “reality”. Without us, the sun is a burning ball of gas; with us, the sun fuels the cells that bring beauty, passion, love and joy to the world. We may be mere drops of water in the vast sea of the universe, yet we are also the divine craftspeople of a world that matters.

Ultimately, we may have no idea why we are here or what it all means. From Pema’s perspective, only by staring directly into the mystical face of this deep truth, can we begin to relax, lighten up, even chuckle about the absurdity of it all...and allow the next moment to unfold unencumbered by our fantasy or need. In that moment of spacious unknowing, we are free...to live...to create...and to behold joy. To my mind, a rather *hopeful* perspective.

What do you think? I’m hoping for a solution!!!