Six Conditions of Hope: a talk by David Gee

David Gee's inquiry into hope started from a conversation with an activist friend who was experiencing burnout, and led to an inquiry into what it is about hope that makes work possible, and what about its absence, hopelessness, makes work impossible. David's investigation has taken him around the UK interviewing frontline workers, and the results of his research are shortly to be published as a book (see his Hope's Work *website). The following is a write-up of notes taken during David's talk, organised by the* Mindfulness and Social Change Network *(9 Apr 2020), complemented with additional input from me with links for further reading.*

There is a close connection between hope and crisis. Crisis etymologically relates to an idea of coming to a decision at a critical point of change in a context of pressure. In this perspective, hope, and questions about hope, come very much into their own.

In a recent long-read for *The Guardian*, Rebecca Solnit refers to the early medical sense of the Ancient Greek word, *krisis*, first attested in Hippocras, as the point in the progression of a disease at which the final prognosis is indeterminate, when, as we say, the disease (or fate) 'hangs in the balance.' Further associated meanings are worth noting here. Derived from the Indo-European root, **skar-* (cf. Skr. *apaskaras*, 'excrement, waste', among other things), 'crisis' may also be related to an idea of di-*scer*-nment between good and bad, right and wrong, which we find in the cognates 'critical', 'criticise', 'critic', and, not coincidentally, in the title of T.S. Eliot's poetry review, *The Criterion* (1922-1939), which had the purpose of spotting emerging talent, and sorting good from bad poetry. Discernment and selection were its mission statement, already stated in the title.

Crisis is therefore adversity, and the impossibility of predicting outcomes; but also potential, and the faculty of thoughtful decision-making. It occasions reflection on the choices we make and the kind of vision we have for ourselves and our position or role in the world.

This etymological detour highlights the full significance of the word crisis as a complex experience in which David Gee's two complementary, mutually dependent conditions of world-as-promise and world-as-tragedy are deeply 'involved' in one another. It also stands as an illustration of how impoverished, even deceptive, language becomes when it is made the tool of click-driven journalism, or shallow translation.

David here gives a tentative definition of hope as a feeling for what is worth living for (discernment) and the determination to live it (committed choice), as distinct from optimism, which is defined as an uncritical faith in the future. Useful here may be C.S. Lewis'

observation that we are always projecting images of ourselves into the future and playing catch-up with ourselves. This is antithetical to authentic vision (cf. Pali, dassana).

The question of what it is about hopefulness that makes hopeful living possible in times of crisis leads to discussion of the six conditions of hope, which David presents not as a fixed taxonomy, but rather as an organic synthesis of conversations with thirty-five frontline workers about what it is about hope that allows them to keep working.

The first condition is **aliveness**, the condition of being alive to events in the world and responding to crisis at a feeling level in such a way that one is engaged in and with what is going on. Its opposite, hopelessness, implies a disengagement from the events of the world, and is signalled by distancing language (THEY are, IT is wrong/at fault/to be blamed). It indicates an inability to cope or respond appropriately to events as they unfold, as suggested (my interpretation, not mentioned by David Gee) by the case of Cllr Sheila Oakes, Mayor of Heanor, and her recent comments about Boris Johnson.

The second condition is the **feeling of promise**, the sense that we live in an abundant and enriching world, a place of beauty and opportunity, a gift that has an animating quality and inspires caringness. This benign worldview can easily get lost in the obverse sense of tragedy, which leads to the third condition of hope, a **readiness to face the world as a place where tragedy occurs**, a necessary ingredient in an authentic vision informed by hope rather than optimism.

A thread running through the entire talk is the theme of mindfulness (Pali, *sati*), and David brings it in here with a reflection on the capacity to witness problems rather than shying away from them as a key aspect of mindfulness meditation. This relates to the first factor in the Noble Eightfold Path, Right Understanding, or View (*Sammaditthi*), in the practice of which we develop the skill of looking into adversity and gaining insights from it that make a difference (Titmuss, C., *Light on Enlightenment*). *Sammaditthi* is the first step on the Noble Eightfold Path which makes the other steps (Intention, Speech, Action, Livelihood, Effort, Mindfulness, *Samadhi*) possible.

It is here, too, that a crucial point of tension around the question of hope arises, as hinted at by some participants in the webinar in both plenary and breakout sessions. In certain meditative states, the question of hopefulness becomes redundant, and other qualities tend to emerge, such as compassion. In this light, from the perspective of the teachings on the Noble Eightfold Path, whose trajectory is towards *samadhi*, the state of peace, equanimity and contentment, hope has often been characterised as an 'unuseful' concept.

One celebrated articulation of this view is in chapter 7, on 'Hopelessness and Death,' in Pema Chödrön's bestselling *When Things*

Fall Apart (1997). Thanissaro Bhikku, 'All About Change,' asks "How can we find genuine hope in the prospect of positive change if we can't fully rest in the results when they arrive? Aren't we just setting ourselves up for disappointment?" Margaret Wheatley, 'Beyond Hope and Fear'(2009), characterises the life of most of us as a 'wild ride' between hope and fear: "Motivated by hope, but then confronted by failure, we become depressed and demoralized. Life becomes meaningless; we despair of changing things for the better. At such a time, we learn the price of hope."

Another participant, whose experience has involved twenty-five years of working with refugees, observes that refugees almost inevitably express a hopeful outlook. She suggests that part of the reason for this is that they live day-to-day, non-judgmentally. David responds to this and other comments by making the point that it is possible to 'over-privilege' the element of choice, especially when it comes to hope: for many, hope is survival, an imperative, something, one Libyan refugee is quoted as saying, that "you make every day." In this sense, therefore, hope is work.

As such, hope is very much of-the-world, not beyond-the-world, and it is in the quick of living that one must come to terms with it and the questions or challenges it raises. Hope may not be relevant to *samadhi*, but it is very much a part of our journey towards *samadhi*, or, in a different cultural context, redemption.

The fourth condition of hope is a **sense of the impermanent**, the capacity to view everything, including the power structures which are frequently experienced as a brick wall that stands in the way of affirmative flux, hence as an attritional force that undermines hopeful action and leads those who care about the plight of the planet to burnout, as existing within an 'ecology of change.'

Impermanence (Pali *anicca*) is, of course, the foundation of the Buddha's teaching (see here for a succinct guide to the concepts of impermanence and the Four Truths of the Noble Ones by Ven. Bhikku Bodhi). Through its internalisation, the future ceases to be something we seek to grasp, control or manipulate. Consequently, our **commitment**, the fifth condition of hope, is to what has worth in the present and merits our compassionate attention without consideration for future outcomes.

Lastly, the sixth condition, **solidarity**, is where our work and experience come to be properly contextualised within the framework of the co-dependency of all things. Our work cannot exist in a vacuum, and therefore neither can hope. This aspect of hope is translated by one participant as the collective responsibility which is the natural culmination of a process described by the six conditions of hope, and which began with individual agency, the aliveness of the person.

Without everything, we are nothing, and in a mindfulness perspective this brings us to the Third Jewel, *sangha* (cf. Thich Nhat Hanh on *sangha*). Through a deep appreciation of the condition of community we come to the teachings on emptiness (Pali *sunna*), famously contained within the *Heart Sutra* of the Mahayana tradition ("Form is emptiness; emptiness is form"). Community is the basis for all action, it is the condition out of which all other conditions arise.

As a framework of reference, mindfulness is referred to throughout the talk as providing insight into and guidance for the practice of hope as a form of fieldcraft for troubled times. Rebecca Solnit's question, a burning question for most of us right now, is what Covid-19 is making possible. She touches on numerous positive changes that have already taken place, social changes once thought impossible, as well as some that occurred as a result of the 2008 financial collapse. But of course the situation is critical, and the jury is still out on what future holds.

At a time when the press, yet again, is selling an arbitrary view of events that is unmindful of the role played by language in shaping culture, and therefore outcomes—a view that overwhelmingly condones the interests of today's military-industrial democracies—mindful hope is presented here as a powerful antidote to the reactionary forces that will inevitably want to draw us back into the financially profitable status quo of before, a status quo that, far from shielding us from the tragedy, has proved itself to be an amplifier of the effects of the coronavirus pandemic.

In other words, as one participant points out, a virus is no villain. It is nature doing what nature does, and through the practice of mindfulness we can prevent the spread of a discourse in which connection, assembly, communication, touch and collaboration become sources of fear and danger against which we are to be summarily vaccinated.