



Hussaini Hanging Bridge, Pakistan

Abandon Hope

*I hope for nothing. I fear nothing.
I am free.*

Nikos Kazantzakis

THE EXPRESSION ‘ABANDON HOPE, All Ye Who Enter Here!’ first appeared in Dante’s fourteenth century narrative poem, *The Divine Comedy*, where it was inscribed on the gate at the entrance to Hell.

As they near the portal, Dante and his guide hear the anguished screams of the ‘Uncommitted.’ These are not the souls of people who committed acts of evil in life, but of those who took no sides: the many opportunists who are for neither good nor evil but only concerned with themselves.

Ironically, this obsession with one’s own self-interest is often the very thing that causes people so much suffering, causing them to feel inadequate just as they are and constantly seeking a better ‘future.’

Hoping for things to be better ‘someday’ keeps us bound to the present, but the key to change is not rejection of whatever exists in the present moment, but *acceptance* of it.

On its own, of course, acceptance will usually not bring the change we desire to see, but it is always the starting point, the thing that allows change to happen. (Even so, how often have you found that as soon as you stopped fretting about some petty annoyance, it suddenly disappeared?)

Upon this foundation of acceptance, we can build whatever house we wish, acting or not acting effortlessly in whatever way the situation requires. We come from a state of non-resistance and ease, free of struggle—a state we might even call *Grace*.

This acceptance extends, of course, to acceptance of our own—or of others’—non-acceptance, an obstacle upon which anyone who has practiced meditation has stumbled.

Meditation teaches that the way through distress and anxiety is not to reject them, but to simply notice them and then gently return to the practice. (After all, the inability to cast off discomfort is what brings most people to meditation in the first place.)

The spontaneous, ceaseless activities of the mind do not matter; all that matters is the degree of our attachment to them.

We can never lose our attachments by renouncing them, or by trying to purge them. But as we grow in acceptance and understanding of our true nature, we find our attachments, desires, and expectations imperceptibly diminishing, like the ocean tide washing over a sandcastle on the beach.

Perhaps the most difficult attachment of all to surrender is attachment to so-called ‘spiritual truths,’ and nowhere is the failure to understand the transformative power of Acceptance more glaring than in spiritual searching and the ‘spiritual teaching’ trade.

In order to develop and retain a following, most gurus and other spiritual teachers need to keep people searching, and the best way to do this is to promise them that when they get to the end of all their searching, they will encounter a rainbow of perfect bliss, eternal peace, and total contentment.

But this facile assurance is at best a misunderstanding and at worst a fraud, because it merely extends our habitual way of searching for happiness and fulfilment in the material world into the spiritual domain.

Just as acceptance of *what is* is the key to change, the key to finding happiness is, paradoxically, abandoning the search for it, and ‘hope’ is an obstacle to this realization.

‘Hope’ keeps us projecting happiness into some future time, never stepping out of the endless cycle of desire and disappointment.

Ultimately, what must be abandoned isn’t just the search for what spiritual teachers call ‘enlightenment,’ but the idea that there is someone there who is searching for it, and in doing so, who might someday attain it.

No *person* will ever get anything out of ‘enlightenment,’ because enlightenment is the realization that there is no person there to be enlightened, and that one’s sense of individuality is only a persuasive illusion.

Likewise, there can be no *progress* in this understanding—at least not in the usual sense we think of it—because that would imply, once again, that there is somewhere to get to, and someone who will get there.

There can be only a deepening of awareness, an increasingly greater realization of one’s true nature, and a corresponding, effortless way of being and acting that silently acknowledges this understanding.

This may be why Dante condemned the ‘Uncommitted’ to the portal rather than casting them into lower circles of Hell. Perhaps he understood that selfishness is born only out of ignorance—the natural, default state of most of humanity and the source of most its unhappiness.

People aware that they are nearing their death often find their ‘hope’ disappearing, replaced by a deep appreciation for the present moment and even the smallest gifts of life. But why wait until death is upon us to experience such freedom and bliss?

‘*Abandon hope, all ye who enter*’ into the spiritual life. There is no hope to cling to, no gate to enter, no train to catch, no platform to embark or disembark upon. For you are already at your destination.

As indeed, you have always been. ■