

# Don't Turn Away

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<https://brightanddark.net/dont-turn-away/>

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If you have a Zen practice you'll already have a pretty strong sense of the value and productivity of difficulty. And especially of sticking with what is difficult. Of not turning away, not denying but actively including even the most messy and difficult matters, feelings, circumstances that arise in awareness.

I want to take up this aspect of things today, following on from where we were last time, talking about deep fears and the forms they can take, including the strong escape attempts that a lot of feelings can inspire. Such feeling can be as simple and obvious as fear, but fear can also be compounded by shame, anxiety, even envy. Envy in the sense of "Why does this have to be happening to me (not that other, luckier person)!"

And deeper in from that, possibly the fear that wonders, "And why shouldn't it happen to me?"

Let's look into this matter through a case from the [Record of Dongshan](#), the 8th century Chan master from whose name and practice the Soto School of Zen derives. ('Soto' is the Japanese transliteration of the Chinese word, 'Caodong', which is in turn a condensation of two names: Caoshan and Dongshan. Meanwhile, the 'shan' part of both these names means 'mountain', as temples and their founding teachers were often named after their nearest distinctive or sacred mountains.)

Dongshan at this point was a student of the very interesting master, Yunyan, who lived not in a temple but more remotely, in a series of linked caves. Dongshan came to him saying that he still had 'some habits I have not yet eradicated'. This is a way of saying he was not quite free of the nagging and small sense of self. Still 'bound'. Yunyan tests him, asking, 'Are you joyful yet?' The character translated there as 'joyful' implies the first level of ripening of the Bodhisattva heart-mind and willingness to come forward in the service of the other... who is ultimately not other at all. So he is asking, 'Are you in the expansive, heart-opening state of ripening?'

Dongshan's response is very interesting, within our current exploring of the practice we call intimacy, in a time of so much fear, pain and anguish for the Earth, to the point where we find ourselves grieving so many startling great losses... Our time of learning to bear the unbearable, and within that to serve the Earth well. Dongshan says, 'It would be untrue to say that I am not joyful'. There's a double negative in there, he does not deny his joyfulness

but it is the joyfulness that must meet a mixed world. He goes on to make this clear in vivid language. He says, 'It is as though I have grasped a bright pearl in a pile of shit.'

A bright pearl in a pile of shit. Fortunately, Zen may be the only spiritual practice you'll ever stumble into that does not revile shit. But before we waste any deeper into that, let's consider what this bright pearl might be.

'Bright pearl' is actually a traditional and ancient way of imaging your original self-nature — blameless, radiant and complete being, reflected back to you in every detail of nature (including shit, it turns out) – an utterly joyful matter of a deeply quiet kind. Of course, my self-nature is not even mine. There is nothing that can be called 'my self-nature', even while it includes me and of course you entirely, just as we are; shit and all.

Dongshan said to Yünyen, "I have some habits that are not yet eradicated."

Yünyen said, "What have you been doing?"

Dongshan replied, "I have not concerned myself with the Four Noble Truths.'

Yünyen said, "Are you joyful yet?"

Dongshan said, "It would be untrue to say that I am not joyful. It is as though I have grasped a bright pearl in a pile of shit."

#### *The Record of Dongshan*

When Yunmen was asked, 'What is Buddha?' he replied, famously, 'Dried shit stick.' 'Dried shit stick.' Even the character generally translated as 'shit stick' is ambiguous. No one quite knows whether it was a dried stick of shit, such as you may see where dogs have been busy, or whether he was speaking about the kind of improvisational twig or stick, perhaps with a leaf wrapped around it for comfort, that was used instead of toilet paper. It doesn't matter. Plainly, shit too is utterly of the great matter.

And in the same skilful move in Yunmen's reply, any fancy notions about 'Buddha' are swept or perhaps wiped away. There is nothing separate within the great matter. What a radical and generous stand that is, and takes.

Let me offer the poem that a student of John Tarrant wrote in response to this koan. The title of the poem is, 'In Case You Think This Is Metaphor'. ....In case you are trying to sidestep dried shit stick...:

Until he had the flying dream,  
as in, being a fly,  
the monk thought the koan  
an exaggeration.  
Or simply a Master's trick.  
But traveling in the wilderness,  
using a stick to dig a hole

for the most pleasurable dump  
he'd ever taken on a stony hillside,  
he knew the Buddha  
must have had many such moments.  
And the buzzing fly—  
sensing only perfumed beauty  
in the mysterious pile  
before its burial.  
Yunmen knew, too,  
the monk realized—  
with every trip to the outhouse.  
It is the literal body of the world,  
this Buddha.

*Dane Cervine: 'Polishing the Moon Sword'*

The literal body of the world. Not a metaphor. So, when we say 'All beings, one body', or when we say 'This very body, the Buddha', be grateful once more for all that it invites us to include.

So, this 'Bright pearl in a pile of shit', what does this response open up right now in our specific context here? Can it be saying that the bright pearl, the ongoing realisation of a fundamental, shared joyfulness, depends in some way also on a pile of shit?

What is this pile of shit here? Is it something like the feeling of 'But so much is wrong!' with the sense of having to push out from our minds and hearts and bodies and beings all that is happening that cannot easily be borne? That which is unbearable. That which is inexorably and clearly happening but is also so hard to accept — including, of course, the multitude of so many utterly wrong people, the famous 'Some people!' who clearly do not understand. Is it also the anguish that comes with the sense of 'So much is wrong?' The anguish of 'Somebody should do something!' Why doesn't somebody do something? The helplessness in this – is that also part of the 'shit'?

Last time, we looked at fear and anxiety in many forms along with some of the ways that fear, anxiety, can reduce us to a place that is not helpful or useful, or accurately pointed to our own hearts in a useful way. Certainly, pulled away from any creative energy of response. It is important to say that anxiety is not a disorder in the context of what is happening and what we are aware of happening. How could anxiety be a disorder when danger is close? rather, a complete absence of anxiety might well be considered a serious disorder.

We looked last time at the way in which pain or anguish is the first responder to something that is deeply harmful, deeply out of place, deeply disordered, incoherent, not cohering, not taking a natural part in maintaining of the whole, but in fact destroying wholeness. As the first responder, anxiety is not necessarily the most coherent or clear-sighted response, but at least it is the heart jolting or being jolted in a healthy way.

You could even say it is a sign of emotional integrity to be alert in the way that anxiety starts to prompt us. So, that emotional integrity, as I'm calling it, in a sense, is a vital resource for the Earth, that crisis has the power to unearth in each of us. That wholeness of response that is not necessarily immediately available but always worth the price — of enduring whatever pain there may be in opening up towards it.

That energy of anxiety can become a kind of live ground in which we can encounter and process and live into difficult truths and the truly intuitive insight emerging out of it. It is like a bodily felt prompting towards what needs doing, and is actually to hand. But it can only emerge if we can stay with what is so difficult to be with. To become if you like equal to what is unbearable.

This is the very meaning of the honourable word, 'suffering'. Becoming able to bear with what is happening, able even to rely on it. A kind of ripening of suffering.

Jung talked about this process as living in the mandorla. The mandorla is the painful, fogged, transitional state that lies between two more clear states — one you find yourself emerging out of despite your protests, one into which you have not yet fully emerged. Some people compare it to the 'soup' stage within the chrysalis. A place of intense new becoming that is painfully not yet clear.

A place of transition that by nature is difficult, like caterpillar becoming butterfly. Hard work. A lot of messy soup involved. The mandorla is that kind of soupy state that is difficult to bear as it has no shape, no form, is blind, and dark. The willing state we call not knowing, which is an act, a practice of intimacy, both in the end, and in all the steps between. It is intimacy in the deepest sense of unqualified attention. Is that not love?. Not sticky love, or sentimental love clinging to a sense of self. It the love that can open its hands completely and let go.

Not-knowing, most intimate. Psychologists might call this mandorla state a subcognitive inhabiting of a place or state that is testing to us, at times hard to bear. And likewise, not knowing is not necessarily comfortable. It is actually holding and bearing with contending feelings, holding the opposites in one mind. Like the opposite involved in bright pearl/pile of shit. To stay with it in the state Jung called the mandorla is to explore the possibility that bright pearl and pile of shit are not two things at all, not in opposition, but resolvable into one or even less than one.

So, it's the realm where knowing in the usual sense of knowing, with strategies, plans, and bargains is in fact an avoiding, a kind of unwillingness to face all the way through the unbearable. There is a strong imaginal sort of energy in all of this too. Imagination can't take the lead in this act of unknowing, without risking bending it to our preferences and latent suppositions about what is happening. But when the way opens in the dark of unknowing, imagination holds hands with it and can be rich and valuable.

This is about allowing the images of what is happening in the world to actually come up of their own accord within your very body, not judging them and accepting them, not pushing them away. For example, global climate heating, global heating, burning, has the Buddha's ready image of the house on fire, but open further; allow the bush fires that have been raging

in Southern Queensland or Northern NSW, the Russian Taiga, Borneo, and the Amazon. If you can bear to be with the dessicating heat inside the drought, allow the burning, the burning inside gas flares with their wanton release of unconventional gasses as they like to call them. 20% of the gas wrenched from coal seam gas fracking is wasted deliberately in the process. Burnt off. This is another kind of image of the oil, gas and coal burning of the earth. And then this imaginal state is also to take in, the way a dream readily takes in, this backlash of fear in the world that we've been noticing, unavoidably noticing that is now here inside the denialism that is raging. Like the attacks on Greta Thunberg, for example, or the frightened dismissal of the eloquent passion of the school kids' strike...

So, this is about understanding how strongly or not people want to touch, let alone hold, reality, the reality of what is so plainly happening, right in our faces now, touching our bodies; and how much they need to keep it a purely optional and occasional thought. Of course, all of us know how to gaslight our own keenest realisation about a growing threat, a creeping realization about other people, about ourselves. We all know how to find an alternative fact that fits a little more attractively for ourselves. Sitting in the mandorla we sit on the point of the needle. Staying steady, coming home, on the point of the piercing fact.

All of this is allowing the untapped intelligence and generosity of not knowing to gradually release its wisdom. And that wisdom is, by nature, a healing counter to the flood of data, opinion, misinformation, or disinformation that pours all over us from the internet.

Another thing about this process of weathering the unavoidable transformation happening through not-knowing and the imaginal sensing of our own bodies, is that it is tapping into something more like interbeing, the place of overlap between all human and non-human beings. As Jung might say, we're meeting something more like the collective level of our own being. Collective, shared, interwoven.

Let me finish by recommending you listen to this week's podcast of the Radio National programme called, 'The Minefield', in which they raise the fact that Tuesday evening last week was Yom Kippur, the Jewish Festival that agrees to look into the real nature of hope and the importance of personal agency. Of responsibility for each other, Interbeing.

Yom Kippur involves you looking first of all, at 'How do I find the world around me to be?' The next step is, 'How have my actions over the last year been complicit with that?' You are required to make an honest accounting of that, and an open statement of contrition that other people can hear. And then to discover, and that might take some time, what penance might be found to meet those realisations.

Penance involves an action. It's not thinking "I am sorry, or feeling sad". There is an agency in penance. Perhaps every protest march, every attempt to rouse consciousness is in part a form of penance to the harm that we are complicit in doing and have been doing. And Yom Kippur leads you to a place where a fresh start is possible, with the question, 'How can this be brought into greater wholeness?'

One of the people on that programme spoke about the Shekinah, and the notion that at the moment of material creation the Vessel of Wisdom was shattered. You could see this Vessel of Wisdom as wholeness itself — empty of any division whatsoever, the undivided.

What an interesting proposition — that original wholeness is shattered by the emergence, proliferation, appearance, revelation of ‘the ten thousand things’, which is the old Chinese way of speaking about the infinite variety of all that is here. So, the Vessel of Wisdom, from the moment of Creation, is now in a trillion, trillion shards. You could say that every single particle of matter, each being, is a shard. Our human task is then to seek to recover the shards as an act of restoration of the Vessel. To recover the undivided.

But here is the interesting and beautifully Jewish form of wisdom at this point: the shards are mainly discovered in the most unwanted, uncomfortable, unseemly, unexpected, unlikely of places and people.

So this process is actually obliging us to go there. To the unwanted, uncomfortable, unseemly, unexpected, obnoxious places and people. To not turn away there and not retaliate with rejection there. Rejection is so easy. Extinction Rebellion, even the most creative and skilful protest, can easily devolve into adjacent forms of anger. And the powerful serve of rejection in anger curdles openheartedness.

Yom Kippur does not offer faux hope. Yom Kippur process demands the work of hope, with no early move to relieve the uncomfortable, dark dimension of the situation. It requires us to intimately meet and unflinchingly address tragic reality. It does not reach for cheap blandishment, like ‘How good is Australia!’ and does not resort to easy optimism that fails to require our agency, risk and even self-sacrifice, or to rest unequivocally on a foundation called us all.

So, our government’s pedaling of some kind of shiny, unexamined optimism while droughts and fires rage and the reef is bleaching and crumbling as the latest dire IPCC Report lands on our heads. Such easy optimism is simply bad faith — bad faith optimized for political gain.

There is also a form of faux optimism tied to an unspecified utopian techno fix that is always just over the horizon. Last year we visited our then our local member’s office to sternly demand government action on climate change. She bristled, and brushed us away angrily, saying, ‘Look, we can’t know what it will be but within ten years’ time some great invention is going to make all of this jumping up and down look just silly. We will laugh at ourselves for ever having felt concerned about the climate.’ An appalling response.

Of course that is a way of saying, ‘You do not need to do or change a thing. Just accept your docile duty to proceed on the unlivable path we are on’. And in that denial, I hear death and fear of death. I hear a frightened inability to ask what is always a good, forensic question: ‘What does this mean in terms of my death?’ To cower from our mortality is to block our own life force and deny the earth which birthed life and death.

You can see that life force trying to bubble up in Extinction Rebellion. You can see it in the joy of the school kids marches. You can see that natural joy in being here: precarious, on a precarious planet. But in so much of ‘business as usual’ you can also see a strange inability

to identify with the vivid and obvious aliveness of the world. How have people come to be able to block out that obvious aliveness of the earth?

I'll end with a beautiful little Ryokan story from [Kaz Tanahashi's translation of a lot his poetry](#). Ryokan was that unmistakably lovely, humble human being who everybody loved, back in 18th century Japan. A mendicant monk, he lived a very 'bottom out of the seat of his pants' kind of life. A mendicant life is a hard, hungry life a lot of the time, a poverty-stricken life, that he not only accepted but shared in a most generous way. For example, when he was lying down one night in his little hut, all he really had was the mat he was sleeping on, when a thief broke in to see what he could steal. Ryokan realized the thief would be going away empty handed, and so, still pretending to be fast asleep, he eased himself off his mat. Which the thief promptly took, and went away happy.

'In the middle of summer, Ryokan announced: "I will air the entire Buddhist canon in the Five Scoop Hut. Please come and see." The villagers went to the hut, but there were no books of the canon to be seen; only Ryokan, lying naked. On his drum-like belly was written the phrase "Entire canon." The villagers were dumfounded.'

There' it is — the complete aliveness of the world, in which in truth every breath is shared breath, every living body implies the entire order of life.

It is the literal body of the world, this Buddha.

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