

How to Welcome the End of the World

BY JOHN TARRANT | NOVEMBER 2, 2016

What is the best response to difficult and uncertain times? *Welcome*. John Tarrant, Roshi offers 10 Zen pointers on the practice of welcoming.



Photo by Chris.

*Old pirates, yes, they rob I;
Sold I to the merchant ships,
Minutes after they took I
From the bottomless pit.
—Bob Marley*

Bob Marley's version of a rough patch is that pirates snatch you from the slave pit, and then they rob you and sell you to a merchant ship. "It's always something," as Gilda Radner said when she got her cancer diagnosis.

How to meet the times we are in is a real question, and everybody feels the force of it. It is an ancient question. It comes with being human.

Here is an ancient koan suitable for our time:

A student asked, "When times of great difficulty visit us, how should we meet them?"

The teacher said, "Welcome."

In hard times, we long to touch and feel the vastness and blessing of life. *Welcome* might open some blue sky in the heart.

How do you feel about losing the Twin Towers? How do you feel about losing the library of Alexandria, or Baghdad, or Chang An, the City of Perpetual Peace invaded during the An Lu Shan rebellion when

two-thirds of the population of China died? And how do you feel about losing your parents, and about losing your dog?

In the U.S., even though our country is based on forgetting the dark karma of the old continents, and in some sense we disapprove of history as a jumble sale of old wrongs, we too are accumulating and being deepened by history. We suffer from wrongs done to our ancestors and done by our ancestors. Simultaneously, our efforts consciously and inadvertently repeat the past. So like other countries, we are going through a rough patch.

There are different kinds of hard times; sometimes we're poor and don't eat and get shot by the police. Sometimes gunmen burst into a church, or a movie theater, or a parade, and shoot us or the police. And beyond the violence coming to a city near you, the whole world is unavoidably connected to us. There's the gap between rich and poor, refugees throwing their children into boats, certainly a desperate measure, and did I mention Zika and climate change?

In difficult times, we disagree about reality. So we are drenched in false descriptions, verdicts, reasons that make no sense—we need to build a wall against Mexicans because, well, ISIS. Yes, that's what delusion is like.

If I'm outlining the obvious here, it's because I'm about to say that the inner life counts, and is the beginning of addressing our condition. The inner life is objective, and for that matter, more objective than the outer life. I say this with full awareness of all the aforementioned bad news.

So the first task of the inner life is not to amplify the delusions, not to add hatred to hatred but to head in a different direction, to be openhearted without being gullible.

The little story about welcoming the times we are in offers a path when we don't know what to do. It's not about drawing conclusions as a way to freedom. Instead, this koan is an environment. You can repeat it to yourself or just live in it and find out how you and the world change.

Our lives are full of loss, and also songs. Marley wrote the lyrics above while in pain from his cancer. Paying attention to the inner life is a practice that naturally rises to meet our actual world, the life we have now. I will die, those I love will die, bad people will get elected, diet plans will fail, I might be kidnapped or shot, strangers will certainly be kind, I will get a blessing from unexpected places, an apricot tree will be my friend.

Here's Bob Marley again:

Won't you help to sing

These songs of freedom?

Emancipate yourselves from mental slavery;

None but ourselves can free our minds.

It's worth noting that the lines about emancipation from mental slavery are quotes from Marcus Garvey, another Jamaican passionate about freedom.

What is a practice of welcoming? Here is a list of pointers:

1. Emptiness is real

All the ways *welcome* appears are manifestations of the famous Zen idea of emptiness. This means that if you look, you'll find that welcome doesn't come from somewhere. It doesn't come from good intentions or desire. It doesn't come from impressing anyone. Welcome just appears, which makes it seem like a gift or a guest. But if you look inside, you'll find it's always been there.

We are inside the mysterious light of emptiness, which can't be described but is painting the world into being. We are never apart from that light. There's a tremendous peace in feeling that. Even if we're not okay, we'll be okay. We'll know what to do.

2. The bodhisattva path

In Buddhism, the shape emptiness takes is sometimes called the bodhisattva path. This means, basically, we're in it together. We're concerned about others and, as far as we have a motive, it's to awaken alongside all beings. The effect is to make us helpful without having to feel virtuous or worthy, which are subtle ways to close things down.

We are often advised to be more armored, more paranoid, to take advantage of others. But finding openness in our own hearts—that changes most things about life. It's an exhilarating step into the unknown.

3. Empathy

Moment by moment, the imagination, dreams, and hopes of others press on us. By others I mean people, animals, and even trees and rivers. When people are suffering, we feel it. We may not know it, but we do. We may try to explain it away or even blame them, but it's just that we feel their suffering as our own.

Empathy is the most spectacular manifestation of the mysterious light in everything. The welcome practice is not to be mindful and attentive, though that could be a nice side effect.

Welcome is to see, to feel, to know the flavor of connection. To sing with others, your voice coming out of my mouth. It is the experience that we are already in love with others, and that we perceive others as ourselves. A loving quality appears by itself and is fundamental to being human.

4. Being companions to each other

Part of understanding that we are not living the wrong life is seeing that we are not living in the wrong time. Many things can't be changed; what we *can* do is accompany each other. That's the bodhisattva path again.

During the terrible ordeal of the Russian people during the twentieth century, poet Anna Akhmatova wrote of her decision to stay:

*No, not under the vault of alien skies,
And not under the shelter of alien wings—
I was with my people then,
There, where my people, unfortunately, were.*

A woman drives her SUV off the icy road, and her carefully buckled-in children drown in the river. On that day, what you can do is make sandwiches and coffee for the stricken people. It's important not to abandon those who have been hurt as somehow too damaged. Then we don't abandon ourselves either.

5. We don't need to know how it's going to come out

Not knowing is what emptiness tastes like. It's also what welcome tastes like.

We never know what will arrive next. Dreadful events can lead to wonderful events, and the other way around. It's always too early to despair. Welcome means not reaching a verdict on our lives.

It is intimate and beautiful not to know, to be vulnerable, not to be stronger than our situation. We can feel our way, we can grope along in the velvety dark, and each step will be true and ours.

6. A little note about delusion

Everyone knows how to believe something. But as soon as you believe something, you have to defend it. When I look, though, I can never completely agree even with my own views.

Beliefs depend on being unexamined. I could just put them behind a no-trespassing sign, but when I do that, I live by them without finding out what is real. The discovery of emptiness implies skepticism about the use of my own views, an inkling that they are a prison rather than a shelter.

When I was a child working with men, they would play tricks on the very young apprentices. They would send them to the store for striped paint or a yard of milk. It wasn't meant to humiliate—it was a moment of complicity in which we were comrades facing the incomprehensibility of the world. My thoughts are like that—a yard of sorrow, a few inches of indignation, and where did they come from? When I have as much as I want, I can just cut off a strip with long scissors.

7. Who am I, anyway?

The mind forms thoughts and feelings without consulting me. Old songs appear in the middle of the night, grief and memories of childhood pop up like clothing stores, but what does that have to do with me? It doesn't seem to be who I am. I do notice that welcome is destructive of my prejudices, and then a spaciousness opens. Then even sorrow has welcome inside it. I don't have to know who I am to take a step.

8. Trust and welcome

If we just hang out with welcome, the world will carry us along. Welcome is not something to deserve, and who knows who we will be when it has changed us?

Welcome might start as a practice, but it's not a gadget. It transforms and becomes something I notice about reality. Then I'm not opposed to my own life, and I'm amazed how much nicer other people have become.

9. The apocalypse also needs friends

So what's the worst case for us? Sometimes I walk outside into a sudden silence. No one is chatting anyone up on their phone, or carrying a ladder, or wondering if they look hot in their Dolce & Gabbana sandals with the little photo prints of rock stars on them, and no car stirs on its swishing tires.

The thought appears: "Oh, did something happen? Did everything happen? Did I blink and years have passed?" Then I hear a train's lonely whistle, and an owl, and an engine starts, and someone is yelling with clumsy good nature across the road. I have no idea if the world changed, but in any event it's here now. All is well.

But what if it really were the end of the world? If it really were the end of the world, I wouldn't think of it as difficult. I'd be full of wonder and possibly laughter. I'd think of it as my today. I'd think the end of the world is always happening while hummingbirds zoom past my nose and the plain brown birds scratch in the leaf litter and cars go by much faster than the posted speed limit.

"So this is what the end of the world is like," I'd think, feeling awe and probably happiness. I could stop bargaining, say, "Welcome," and listen to the vast pulse of the changes. Nothing is ever truly lost.

10. The end of the world is here

