

# WHEN THINGS DON'T FIT

(Revised 2.30.22 for UUSTJ)

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“Life is a very serious joke.” Zen Teacher

## I. Dissonance

### a. Saudade

Very often these days, I have a feeling that is most poignantly captured by the Portuguese word “saudade,” (pron. sawdawjie). Saudade refers to a feeling of loss that is combined with a sense of longing; it’s a regret at having lost something important that’s mixed in with gladness for knowing that it was important. I frequently experience this feeling when I think of the destruction of species and earth’s environment and our perilous human future.

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I think I first felt it this feeling 50 years ago (1962) after I read Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring and realized that the season of spring, which I love, would never be the same again. This summer I experienced the feeling again as I walked around my neighborhood pond and marveled at the beautiful native flowers that neighbors have planted to replace invasive species, while at the same time I know that they will not find this a suitable habitat for very long due to climate change. And probably the pond won’t be here either.

### b. Where to Focus

Sometimes I find it hard to know where to focus. I identify with E.B.White, who lamented a half century ago.

If the world were merely seductive, that would be easy. If the world were merely challenging, that would be no problem. But, I wake up each morning torn between a desire to save the world and a desire to savor the world. This makes it very hard to plan the day.” (July 11, 1969)

### c. Cognitive Dissonance.

I watch the news describing the terrible plight of refugees leaving Afghanistan which is immediately followed by equal time given to movie star’s domestic problems. It’s hard these days not to become cognitively dissonant!

#### **d. Our Precious Human Birth**

Cognitive dissonance was apparently an issue for The Buddha too! He committed himself to discovering to remain contented and happy and at the same time caringly engage in an impermanent world full of grief and sorrow.

The Hindu mythology of his time asserted that we can reborn in lower, middle or higher realms. The Buddha praised the fact that we humans are born in the middle realm. Because if we had been born in the lower realm that was inhabited by animals we would live in fear, continually trying to fight off a predator or to find prey. But it would have been no better being born in the higher realm of the gods. There we might live in blissful ignorance for eons but then this realm too would end without our finding a way to peace and we would have wasted all this time. The Buddha declared it is precious it is to be born in the human realm because we experience just the right amount of ambiguity to awaken.

## **II. Our Range of Awareness**

### **a. Foreground Focus**

We humans have an extraordinary range of awareness and this provides us the potential for awakening.. We can focus upon our immediate foreground experience or our background experience and everything in between. We can focus on what's in our foreground, for example on what we taste, what we smell, what we hear, what we feel – physical or emotional – upon what we see, and upon what we think. There may be an annoyance at a stupid commercial. We can focus on frolicking in the surf or upon resentment at needing to rake invading algae. Sometimes a a single experience can fill our entire mind as when we become “lost” in creating a work of art, or shooting for the basketball hoop.

### **c. Witness Awareness**

But our human brain is very roomy. We can also widen our awareness. Because we are “born in the middle realm”, we are born with a brain than can not only experience what is in front of us. We are born with a mind that can know that we are having this experience of what is in front of us.

And how we can know how we feel about the experience we are having, what we think about it, and how we wish to react to it. We feel about it and what we think of it. We can witness our experiencing as well as to what we are experiencing. This is called meta-awareness and it is an extraordinary capacity.

### **III. Awareness Training**

#### **a. My Early Inexperience**

Unfortunately most of us received little training in how to develop and fully utilize our versatile awareness. In elementary school I was sorely tempted to pass notes to other students or to draw pictures while my teacher was talking. She would constantly reprimand me” “Allen Wells, pay attention.” But she never told me just how to do this or advised me about how to efficiently manage my wandering thoughts and overactive mind.

I didn’t learn this capacity until I was forced to by the urgency of our times. In the 1980’s I became aware of oncoming climate change. My mind became unduly foreground focused upon the foreground loss of in nature which for me was transcendent. Desperate for a solution I experimented with many means of mind training. Finally I came upon insight meditation. I am grateful that since beginning an insight meditation practice (sometimes referred to as mindfulness meditation) some 25 years ago, my mind has grown clearer and I have become calmer and happier even in the midst of an degrading world.

#### **b. Holding Area**

There remains a corner of my mind filled with saudade and I am not sure I ever want to loose that. But, now I know that this feeling does not need to occupy the totality of my consciousness. There is more space available. We UU sing:

“There is more love somewhere.  
There is more love somewhere  
I’m gonna keep on til I find it.  
There is more love somewhere” (#95)

We can find it in the potential of our meta-awareness. In our meta-awareness we can hold an experience say of upset, fear, anxiety, and we can respond to this experience as is needed.

We can soothe it, comfort it, and nurture it and we can choose to express it. Our mind's holding area becomes the womb of our heart. From this space we can respond to our experiences with loving kindness, even as a loving parent or partner might. We can realize calm in the face of our challenges and bring love to the attacks of our enemies.

#### **IV. Practical Concerns**

##### **a. Human Conversing.**

Especially today, when partisanship strips our land of civility, we need to connect with and expand our holding place. We need to do this so what we can become able to listen to what someone else is saying when we disagree it or when it pains us, and at the same time maintain our own opinion and awareness of our emotional reaction. Thus centered, we can respond to another in a truthful but also in a kind way.

##### **b. Attending to the World/News**

We need to develop our holding space so that we can confront news of today's traumatic events with equanimity. From a calm place, then we can choose the proportion of our precious heart/mind space we wish to cede to hearing or watching this event. If we choose to focus on a tragic event, we can respond to it with increased understanding and compassion.

#### **V. Ultimate Awareness**

##### **From Astrophysics**

Of course, we are limited in our awareness. We are limited by the wave length and frequencies to which our senses are sensitive and numbers of thoughts we can entertain. Perhaps Google will develop a pair of God glasses though which I can see past our foreground experience into the complex causes and conditions operative in the universe that have caused it and avoid blaming others and myself for our mistakes.

For example I would see that 95% of the universe is space and that there's a similar proportion of space within our minds. And I could rest in this space for a while.

Perhaps I could see back in time to the Big Bang, when the universe was, according to Stephen Hawking, a super dense ball about the size of a grapefruit before its divisions. I could even look ahead a few trillion years when the stars will run out of fuel and the universe will die from entropy. With the super version of these magic glasses we might and even see myriad multiverses of which, according to some cosmologists, ours is only one. I could see the big picture

A six year old saw the ramifications taking this long view of the universe, though not with the attitude I have in mind.

Her parents were driving to their spot of summer vacation. Their kids were fighting in the back seat. The wife complained to her husband. "Why do we have such bad children? Do you think it is because we are such bad parents? He replied, "Yes, but it's not our fault, we must've had bad parents." She started to say, "But that's not their fault when their six year old interrupted, yelling from the back of the car, "It's all God's fault!."

It's not my purpose to attribute blame to the universe or to God! But, I think it may be helpful to explore the paradoxes that vex us from a larger perspective of the universe that includes all divisions and the identities that vex us close up.

## **V. The Joke Is On Us**

### **a. The meeting of Matrices**

I believe the practical joke of the universe is on us. We are both foreground and background and we don't see it.

If someone tells us about a circumstance in which two things don't mix, but in the punch line shows us how they do, we call it a joke. And we laugh.

Roger Ebert, the famous film critic, apparently did get to the punch line on the day before he died in 2013. It's reported that he smiled and passed a tenderly written note to his wife which read, "It's all a hoax." The band Clem Snide captures this moment in its song:

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 He wrote in a note  
 That he passed to his wife  
 As she felt him shedding the skin of this life.  
 It said  
 There is a vastness that can't be contained  
 or described as a thought in the flesh of our brain  
 It's everything, everywhere, future and past  
 Dissolving forever in an eternal flash....  
 It's all an elaborate hoax.  
 It's all an elaborate hoax!"

This brings to my mind a poem by Robert Frost in which he beseeches God:

"Please forgive all of the little jokes I have played on You, and  
 I will forgive You the great big one you have played on me."

### **b. Zen**

In a somewhat different tone, quite a bit more devotional, we chant in a Zen morning service:

"Form is no other than emptiness,  
 emptiness no other than form.  
 Form is exactly emptiness,  
 Emptiness is exactly form." (Heart Sutra)

### **c. A Fable: The Consciousness of God**

There is a fable that illustrates the strange unity of spaciousness and specificity that we can experience as humans. This fable comes from the Hindu tradition but is applicable to Buddhist thinking as well.

It seems an earnest devotee had just returned from a long retreat with his guru where he had become conscious of the fact that he too was of ultimate God Consciousness.

Climbing down from the guru's mountain hermitage, he then proceeded along the road leading to his native village.

But, he found his way blocked by a very large approaching elephant with the mahout frantically ringing his bell. However, the student thought. The guru is God, the mountain is God, the elephant is God, and I am God. Why should God have to get out of the way of God?

Quickly, he was thrown into the bushes by the side of the road, only narrowly escaping being stomped by the elephant. Picking himself up he rhetorically questioned a farmer who had watched the whole episode: "I am God, You are God, the elephant is God, why did this near brush with death happen?" Responded the farmer calmly, Didn't you hear the mahout frantically ringing his bell? He too is God.

#### **d. Paradox**

We live, do we not, with an amazing paradox. F. Scott Fitzgerald once wrote:

"The test of a first-rate intelligence is the ability to hold two opposing ideas in mind at the same time and still retain the ability to function."

On one hand we are quite old – about 13.8 billion years – a part of a whole universe which is beyond differentiation, good and evil, being and not being, birth and death; and that holds everything.

On the other hand we very much live in a very real world of the foreground where our every experience is worth attention, and our every moment is of worth, where we live and work, play and laugh, are birthed and die, and caring counts.

#### **Closing Words from Nisargadatta**

A Hindu teacher, Nisargadatta, put it this way:

"Love tells me I am everything.  
Wisdom tells me I am nothing.  
And between the two my life flows."