

Article

Daigidan: The Great Ball of Doubt

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Abstract: In some forms of Zen Buddhism, the aspiring student is given a problem to solve, whether it be a paradoxical koan, a probing question about the self, or some personal dilemma to which there appears to be no answer. This struggle of the student towards enlightenment is described as the creation in the student of a great mass or ball of doubt, called a *daigidan*. The more and more the student struggles with this problem, the more he or she becomes frustrated, lost, blocked, enmeshed and burdened down by this growing ball of doubt. Every examination of the problem reveals new difficulties; confusion ensnarls the world; the strings and strands of doubt multiply until the point is reached where everything in the universe seems to be entangled and paralyzed—all tied up in knots. Moreover, it is said that the greater the ball of doubt grows, the greater the moment of awakening when at last it finally comes. Into our hands, in our time, has been given a Great Ball of Doubt, perhaps the greatest ball of doubt there could possibly be: the Earth. It is an immense koan, the solution for which we are now, like Zen students, intensely and personally responsible: that is, our lives and futures depend on our being able to unravel the knots of its mysterious burden. The solving of such a mystery is internal to it (unlike a problem that stands outside of us), and the realization that the planet has finite boundaries has caused an “implosion of sensibility”—a vast cultural struggle between those who have internalized this finiteness, and those who still persist in believing in an infinite planet, with infinite resources, occupied by humans with infinite desires. Instead, in order to solve this immense all-engulfing koan, we are being driven into new (and sometimes very old) forms of planetary embeddedness and immanence, and away from flights to some kind of irresponsible imaginary ranscendence.

Keywords: Buddhism; Taoism; doubt; implosion of sensibility; emergence; immanence; earth from space; ecological economics; Marshall McLuhan; problems and mysteries



Citation: Timmerman, Peter. 2022. Daigidan: The Great Ball of Doubt. *Religions* 13: 382. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13050382>

Academic Editor: Daniel M. Stuart

Received: 19 January 2022

Accepted: 6 April 2022

Published: 21 April 2022

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Arouse your entire body with its three hundred and sixty bones and joints and its eighty-four thousand pores of the skin; summon up a spirit of great doubt and concentrate on this word “Mu.”—*Mumonkan* (Mumon’s Comment on Case 1) (Sekida 1977).

1. Introduction

In some forms of Zen Buddhism, the aspiring student is given a problem to solve, whether it be a paradoxical *koan*, a probing question about the self, or some personal dilemma to which there appears to be no answer. This struggle of the student towards enlightenment is described as the creation in the student of a great mass or ball of doubt, called a *daigidan* (Shore 2016). The more and more the student struggles with this problem, the more he or she becomes frustrated, lost, blocked, enmeshed and burdened down by this growing ball of doubt. Every examination of the problem reveals new difficulties; confusion ensnarls the world; the strings and strands of doubt multiply until the point is reached where everything in the universe seems to be entangled and paralyzed—all tied up in knots (Kim 2021). Moreover, it is said that the greater the ball of doubt grows, the greater the moment of awakening when at last it finally comes.

Into our hands, in our time, has been given a Great Ball of Doubt, perhaps the greatest ball of doubt there could possibly be: the Earth. It is an immense koan, the solution for

which we are now, like Zen students, intensely and personally responsible: that is, our lives and futures depend on our being able to unravel the knots of its mysterious burden. To look at the earth from space is, as with all *koans*, to become instantly enmeshed in paradox. At the same time as we have crossed the boundaries beyond which our actions are threatening planetary effects (Rockström et al. 2009 and updates), we have also crossed over the horizon of the Earth, and are now able to gain a physical view over the entire planet. It can then indeed become an object for thought, for meditation, for gazing upon as a whole—or as the focal point for powerful dreams, grasping dreams.

We can think about how to start working on this Great Ball of Doubt, not perhaps immediately on our meditation cushion, as would be the case in an intense Zen student (not that that would not be fine)—but obliquely, through consideration of different ways of attacking it.

2. Problems and Mysteries

In the first paragraph, I used the terms ‘problem’ and ‘mysterious’ in a casual way, but a serious consideration of the differences between the two introduces us to an interlocking set of relevant concepts. A famous distinction between ‘problems’ and ‘mysteries’ was made by Gabriel Marcel, the French Catholic existentialist:

“A problem is something which I meet, which I find completely before me, but which I can therefore lay siege to and reduce. [Marcel notes that “problem” derives from the Greek “pro-blemata”, something thrown in front of you—Ed.] But a mystery is something in which I am myself involved, and it can therefore only be thought of as a sphere where the distinction between what is in me and what is before me loses its meaning and initial validity.” (Marcel 1949, p. 117; Gallagher 1962)

A sardonic version I use for the aforementioned distinction is this: suppose you are on a plane and there is a screaming child a couple of rows over. This (assuming there is no serious illness involved) involves someone’s “problem child”. However, suppose the child is your own child? Then it ceases to be a “problem”, but now raises foundational questions for oneself such as: Why did I have children? Am I a bad parent? Where did I go wrong? (etc.) Marcel often describes a mystery as a “problem that encroaches on its own data” (Marcel 1995, p. 19).

It is obvious that a Great Ball of Doubt, or koans more generally, work like this: what seems superficially a problem or a puzzle, then, as we go, ties us up in knots, saturating us, engulfing us, leaving us dangling in a net of knots like some kind of caught fish. The Zen student, meeting with the master, is soon made well aware of the uselessness of trying to solve a mystery with solutions based on the assumption that she is dealing with a mere problem.

The opposite process—trying to turn all mysteries into problems—is at the heart of much of so-called progress: both the good of the new (destroying fossilized lies) and the bad (the flattening of the world). Or (to be more supportive): progress has an agenda devoted to the task of shrinking the realm of mystery down to more appropriate dimensions. However, to be able to determine what is really a mystery, and what is only called a mystery out of ignorance or so as to control or to bamboozle people is a core task that the move into modernity took on for itself. For example, having a baby (bringing new life into the world) may ultimately be a mystery, but the arrival of anesthesia to relieve the pain focusses on a problematic—and it turns out not absolutely necessary—element of the event. Medicine is naturally at the forefront as exemplary of progress here. Still, the ultimate medical question is: Is death a mystery or a problem? The “health industry” for one is ambivalent about where it stands on the ethical implications of this question.

3. Earthshed

Returning to our earthly Great Ball of Doubt, the arrival of the image of the Earth from space at the end of the 1960s marks an earthshed moment, a moment when humanity was

(as already noted) suddenly confronted with a strange mysterious new something/object. Its disorienting strangeness was immediately recognized by astute commentators such as Hannah Arendt (1958); and widely considered to be the welcome, if unexpected, outcome of the voyages to the moon. The more we meditate on this image, the stranger it becomes. The image is the quintessence of greenness, appearing on walls and refrigerator magnets everywhere, but a brief exploration of its arrival reveals intriguing knots in our ball of doubt: (1) it was the result of the arms race—the rockets involved were essentially repurposed military stock; (2) the picture was taken with the most advanced still camera of the day, a Hasselblad; (3) to obtain this picture, the photographer had to be encased in a temporary earth environment, a spacesuit, and (4) most importantly, the photographer was carrying around not only an earth environment, but also the cultural dynamic that led him to turn around (if he turned around) to take the picture as something worth doing. So while the picture seems to speak of an earth in empty space, in fact, it was encased in an earth frame. We are both outside and inside it simultaneously.

It may also strike us in our meditation on this great ball that, as an image, it is obviously a misleading extension or a parody of a transcendent God's view of the Earth.

In the 1970s, the media theorist Marshall McLuhan argued that with the arrival of the image of the Earth from space, and the almost simultaneous growth of the "satellite surround", that there was no longer any wilderness left on Earth, or Nature (in various fora, including McLuhan 1972). More profoundly, and by making reference to the familiar image from the Psychology textbooks of the figure/ground reversal (enshrined in the duck/rabbit or the kissers/flower vase), McLuhan stated that the Earth, which had once been the ground on which the human "figured", had now itself become a figure within the ground of the human enterprise (McLuhan 1970). He noted that we are now able to hold the world in our heads and our hands. We can focus our attention on the world as a whole, and we have attained the God's eye view—what the American military now calls "The High Frontier". In the Bible, Satan took Jesus up on to the highest mountains of the earth to tempt him: the reason being that the higher up you go, the more you can survey, and the more temptation you have to see it all as graspable, manageable, and controllable.

This encirclement of the Earth, this revelation of its extraordinary living boundedness against the blackness of space, was the ironically unexpected result of the long dynamic of progress towards the infinite—a significant moment in our working towards the replacing of God with ourselves. This infinite hope underwrites the agenda of progress: freedom from constraint, freedom of movement, freedom from dependence on others and, of course as already intimated, immortality—all obvious derivations from the original model, the omnipotent, omniscient, all-seeing God as a "stalking horse" for us.

Moreover, once one draws a boundary around something, the internal parts of that thing become interconnectively sensitive. The economist Kenneth Boulding put it this way: "The most worrying thing about (today's) earth is that there seems to be no way of preventing it from becoming one world. If there is only one world, then if anything goes wrong, then everything goes wrong" (Boulding [1973] 1980). In recent history, this sensitivity began with the arrival of the nuclear age, through the prospect of the destruction within 15 min of everything we care about through the launching of intercontinental ballistic missiles triggered by conflicts far removed from our daily lives. This post-war global sensitivity was soon reinforced environmentally by the revelations of the insidious movement of distantly deposited chemicals percolating along the intricate web of global ecosystems, as most famously sketched out by Rachel Carson. And now, with each passing year, more of the elements of our global web become visible; we increasingly weave our common nervous system into the planet's interstices, with as yet unknown consequences. We are plugging in, whether we like it or not, to the ultimate ecological coherence of our bounded world. The concept of the ecological web is an echoing of the internal expression of our newfound sensitivity to our natural boundedness (see also Timmerman 2016).

4. Implosions of Sensibility

We are thus all entangled in knots of immanence; in having to solve, if there is a solving, how to live on and with the Earth. The cultural dynamic of our moment is characterizable as an “implosion of sensibility”. Similar to the mechanism and casing around an atomic bomb—a mass of fissile material timed by a series of conventional explosions to be driven inward so as to spark supercriticality—the detonations of the ecological crisis in an earthbound casing are driving us inward, towards an implosive re-valuation of our dwelling place. This is a counter-force to the conventional centrifugal dynamic of progress, those aspirations fueled by dreams, dreams that would spin us out into some vague infinite elsewhere—currently exemplified by the obsession of certain unrooted rich men, despairing of a glorious future on Earth, blasting off for Mars.

The counter-force to this fantasy is, as stated, the centripetal implosion of sensibility. It is an emergent cultural shift that unites all those efforts, spiritual, political, economic, and ecological, that are involved in support of the Earth, however local their activities may be, but all ultimately grounded by an embrace of our planet’s immense immanence, and for which there is a recognition of some kind of imperative of responsibility (Jonas 1984). There are many aspects of this shift, but at the heart of it are new (and also sometimes very old) aspirations towards ways of living and being saturated in recognition of our fundamental planetariness.

Most importantly for the topic of this paper, members of this emergent counter movement to infinitism often find themselves drawn to kinds of spirituality resonant with expressions of this immanence, rather than with past traditions of transcendence. In the West, this means confronting the legacy of monotheistic thought and practice. The Western tradition still struggles with the legacy of a widespread belief, however crude theologically, in a transcendent and external God—as already mentioned—a Creator separate from his creation, overseeing all: a God infinite, omnipotent, and unreachable. The so-called dynamic of the “death of God” over the last hundred or so years may have finished off that deity, but it nevertheless left the cultural structure intact, similar to a haunted house emptied of its resident ghost.

5. Emergent Immanence

Emergent immanence as the ground (what we could call a family resemblance) of these individuals, communities, and movements, is recognizable particularly in the transformation in our attitudes towards nature. Historically, in the West, before the rise of Romanticism at the end of the 18th century, Nature was generally thought of as dangerous, or (if considered positively at all) as a veil or “second book” of God (after the first book, the Bible). It was to be read, not for itself, but through to what was more importantly on the other side. Among the re-evaluations of Nature in the Romantic era was the flight into Nature away from the impacts of the Industrial Revolution. Nature becomes a refuge, valued for itself, and returns to being a new version of something similar to the sacred spaces of paganism (e.g., among the Greeks).

We received early intimations of this in William Blake’s famous quatrain from the “*Aurigues of Innocence*”, part of his lifelong war against the Newtonian version of infinitism:

“To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.” (Blake 2004)

Different variations of this sensibility were of course celebrated by the later Romantic poets, and by other central figures of the 19th century such as Gerard Manley Hopkins and John Ruskin, who encouraged visions of the sacred that were to be found deep in the detailed graininess of the natural world. The environmental movement, combining natural science with political commitment, is as much as anything their legacy.

A related emergent sensibility is the rediscovery of the old ways of living of peoples who necessarily lived within natural boundaries, often within hard limits not of their own choosing. Their rules of life were hammered out by necessity and respected in intimate ways. We find ourselves being drawn back, if not exactly to those previous necessities, but to the world views and practices that those necessities fostered. Peoples who lived according to the disciplines of nature once again speak to us with increasing resonance and relevance. They speak of what it means to cope and even thrive in a bounded world, a world of deep ecological embeddedness. Their hard-earned wisdoms leap over modernity and post-modernity to re-emerge as urgently relevant to our new situation. There are multiple expressions of this re-emergence, from indigenous teachings to commitments to “slow living”, to a resurrection of rituals of natural sacredness in religious traditions around the world—skills for feeling more deeply the contours of our Earthly embeddedness, and responding accordingly.

As just one of an endless supply of examples, the teachings of Australian Aborigines concerning their song cycles were recently articulated by Galarrwuy Yunupingu, in a reflection on his life as leader of the Yolngu tribe:

“Our song cycles have the greatest importance in the lives of my people. They guide and inform our lives. A song cycle tells a person’s life: it relates to the past, to the present and to the future. Yolngu balance our lives through the song cycles that are laid out on the ceremony grounds. These are the universities of our people, where we hone and perfect our knowledge. It is through the song cycles that we acknowledge our allegiance to the land, to our laws, to our life, to our ancestors and to each other. We work from the new moon to the full moon—travelling these song cycles as a guide to life and the essence of our people: keeping it all in balance so that wealth and prosperity might flow. This is the cycle of events that is in us and gives us the energy for life, the full energy that we require. Without this, we are nobody and we can achieve nothing.” (Yunupingu 2016)

Another familiar contemporary escape route from the Western tradition is, of course, through various versions of Eastern thought and practice. If we are looking for a philosophy of immanence, especially in epistemology, Chinese Taoism (and much of ancient Chinese philosophy generally) is one obvious resource. One reason is that the Chinese did not operate within a monotheistic or transcendent cosmology for unique historical reasons. Here I note the excavatory work of Roger Ames and his collaborators, including the late David L. Hall on the foundational assumptions of Chinese Confucian and Taoist thought (Ames and Rosemont 1998; Ames 2011; Ames and Hall 1995, 2001, 2003).

6. Logics and Analogics

Ames and his colleagues have sketched out what they and others have called a “correlative cosmology”, which they have compared to the cause-and-effect system and logics of the Aristotelian tradition. To collapse a substantive body of work into one brief example, “correlative cosmology” uses what William Irwin Thompson laid out many years ago in *Gaia: A Way of Knowing* (Thompson 1987). He pointed out that Aristotelian logic operated according to a pattern of —

Standard Logic:

Socrates is a man,

All men are mortal,

Therefore, Socrates is mortal.

An alternative logic—one that is particularly familiar to poets and artists in the West, and which until the arrival of Galileo and other disruptors was manifestly the cultural norm—was:

Analogic/Metaphoric logic:

Grass dies

All men die

Therefore, All men are as grass. (cf. Ecclesiastes)

Note that this is officially a logical fallacy in Aristotelian circles (affirming the consequent). However, it has, as just noted, a long if currently unrespectable history which used to be not just respectable, but was the norm—alchemy, astrology, medicine, for starters, but also serving as the basis for simile, symbol, and metaphor. It relies on resemblance, coincidental appearance, and a “feeling for the organism” to carry out its work. It is worth noting in passing, that because of the lack of a transcendent or monotheistic cosmology, ancient Chinese dealt in polarities, not opposites (see Rowley’s *Principles of Chinese Painting* (Rowley [1949] 1959 for the implications for immanent art); prioritized the flow of energy (*ch’i*) through all things, and as cited by Ames, Marcel Granet (an early Sinologist) noted:

“Instead of observing successions of phenomena, the Chinese registered alternations of aspects. If two aspects seemed to them to be connected, it was not by means of a cause-effect relationship, but rather “paired” like the obverse and reverse of something, or to use a metaphor from the Book of Changes, like echo and sound, or shadow and light.” (Granet 1934).

The question of whether this correlative method has been a block to scientific progress or a viable alternative (the classic argument over Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) is for another paper (Ames and Hall 1995; Lloyd and Sivin 2002; make acute comparisons). Be that as it may, and sidelining debates over deconstruction, an immanent epistemology—that is, one internal to itself, and not reliant on verification (or falsification) from outside the field of relevant evidence—seems to be a non-problematic tool towards handling our mysterious ball of doubt. This epistemological approach is most visible in (the West) in philosophies such as process theology, but if we are looking for relevant, immanent traditions devoted to forms of intense interdependence, and ways of learning to live intimately with the graininess of things internal to insight and practice, it is Buddhism and Taoism, particularly Taoist-flavored Zen Buddhism, that most practically fills the bill (for early hybridization, see Hollier 2008).

For instance, from the early Zhuangzi:

“People cannot see their reflections in running water, but only in still water. Only stillness can still the multitude to the point of genuine stillness. Though all life forms receive their vitality from the earth, it remains constantly replete only in the pine and the cypress both summer and winter. Although all life forms receive their vitality from Heaven, only Shun turned out aligned and balanced, which happened to have some fortuitous power to align other living beings as well. And that alone was how he aligned them all.” (Ziporyn 2020, chp. 5).

7. Solving the Great Ball of Doubt?

The essence of Buddhism in this context is as a practice dedicated to a fundamental awakening from our Great Ball of Doubt, away from the whole panoply of false problems and false solutions, to the true terrible beauty of life as it unfolds in and around us. We cannot solve our situation, tempting as it seems, with a problem mindset that sees the solutions as external to us, since the nature and future of humanity is the problem, i.e., the mystery. To engage that mystery requires a different method. In “A Still Forest Pool,” (Chah 1985) the Buddhist teacher Ajahn Chah advised, echoing Zhuangzi:

“Try to be mindful, and let things take their course.

Then your mind will become still in any surroundings, like a still forest pool.

All kinds of wonderful animals will come to drink at the pool,

and you will clearly see the nature of all things.

You will see many strange and wonderful things come and go, but you will be still.

This is the happiness of the Buddha.”

In a problem-oriented world, this seems like quietism. However, Buddhism teaches that we approach things as objects for our use, and often as part of our search for control, for some way to nail things down so they will not leave us. For Buddhists, this drive is the vain hope of finding some permanent hiding place or fixed pure detached something such as a soul or a self not subject to the endless unstoppable flow of things. Moreover, Buddhism says that there are no such hiding places or detachable somethings—that we are all in this together, vulnerable—the upshot of interdependence. Further, we can learn that the ideas of a pure, untouchable self or an immortal soul are among the most excruciatingly intimate forms of suffering disguised as solutions.

In other papers, I explore different aspects of a retooling from a Buddhist perspective to cope with the implosion of sensibility, dealing specifically with various other knots of concern—especially focusing on the future of economics (Brown and Timmerman 2015) on a finite planet, arguing for ecological economics as an alternative way. However, as I have argued here, we can identify intimations of the resurgence of an immanent sensibility in many ways. In the Western traditions, for example, we can point to the resurgence of classical Stoicism in areas such as contemporary environmentalism (for instance, in the neo-Stoic philosophy of Spinoza’s *Ethics* that underpins the Deep Ecology of Arne Naess), or in the rediscovery of “green” and meditative aspects of Christianity, or in the infusion of the very thing I am discussing, Eastern thought, percolating ever deeper into the West.

8. Language and Boundary Conditions

As a final concluding theme, I would suggest that if there is one overriding danger from the spread of uncontrolled infinitism, it might be the continuing degradation of language, language we need if we are going to cope with our situation on this Great Ball of Doubt.

In his classic work, Polanyi (1974) Michael Polanyi lays out the paradoxes of what he calls “latent or tacit knowledge”—knowledge that is required for “focal skills” (ranging from putting on our shoes to speaking English), but knowledge that is not available to us in the tight circle of our focus, simply because it is itself that which focuses the focus to its focal point(s). Ames and Hall (2001) speak similarly of “focus” and “field. As first-year philosophy students learn, we cannot step outside of seeing the world to judge whether our seeing of that world is accurate. Polanyi also refers to these forms of tacit or foundational knowledge as “implicit”, “subsidiary”, and “boundary conditions”.

The paradox or bind is that we are unable to reach these boundary conditions so as to critique them, since they are what makes critique viable in the first place—much of Kant is a response to this. Furthermore, when we do try to bring them “up into the light”, they end up withering in the process of deliberate articulation. I would argue that among these boundary conditions are the ecological conditions of our existence on the Earth, though some of these are, in fact, accessible to us. I call environmental assaults such as climate change, the hole in the ozone layer, and the extinction of species, threats to the fabric of life, to the whole ball of doubt itself. We are learning from them how little we know about our planet, which is one of the main reasons why we should be extremely careful interfering with it. Environmental destruction is the same as the vandalism of our boundary conditions.

The philosopher Wittgenstein explored a similar vein to Polanyi’s in attempting to “grasp the hand that grasps” in his last work, *On Certainty* (Wittgenstein 1972). His variation on this theme is much closer to Zen (*Opening the Hand of Thought* is a theme of a book by Uchiyama ([1953] 2004). *On Certainty* is an extended argument against the possibility of total skepticism (a philosophical worry ever since, at least, Descartes), in part because:

“The questions that we raise and our doubts depend on the fact that some propositions are exempt from doubt, are as it were hinges on which those turn. . . . That is to say, it belongs to the logic of our scientific investigations that certain things

are *indeed* not doubted. . . . If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put.” (#341–344)

This line of argument derives from Wittgenstein’s main philosophical task in his later work, namely showing that the actual logic of our use of language is embedded in what he calls “human natural history” or “forms of life”, rather than in some abstract Platonic realm. Our linguistic practices depend on basic assumptions, assumptions so basic that articulating them seems to be banal and trivially obvious, e.g., that everyone has parents, that I have two hands, that I am subject to gravity. In Wittgenstein’s exploration of the logic of scientific investigation, exemptions from doubt are themselves constitutively immanent to the process, and not truly exemptions. They belong to the constitutive or boundary conditions of human speech and practice, and among these conditions are what I call the ecological conditions that constitute us as us.

Wittgenstein links his version of these constitutive conditions to a range of subsequently useable foundational concepts and images, for which a basic ground of trust (and even prior to being able to articulate trust) is intrinsic in order to do or say anything. Interestingly enough, one of his core examples is the image of the Earth from space with which I began this paper (but his example comes from before there was a photograph!). He goes on:

“We form *the picture* of the Earth as a ball floating free in space and not altering essentially in a hundred years. I said, ‘We form the *picture*, etc.’ and this picture now helps us in the judgement of various situations.” (#146)

“The picture of the Earth as a ball is a good picture, it proves itself everywhere, it is also a simple picture—in short we work with it without doubting it. (#147) The existence of the Earth is rather part of the whole picture which is the starting point of belief for me.” (#209)

It is always by favor of Nature that one knows something (#505).

For Wittgenstein, the picture of the Earth is, as it were, an ordering device operating helpfully midway between the tacit and the explicit. For us, it is more than that, as time has moved on. We now have the image of the Earth from space with us, emergent and transformative, reconfiguring what belongs inside it, with the consequences I have been outlining in this paper.

For Wittgenstein:

When we begin to believe anything, what we believe is not a single proposition, it is a whole system of propositions (Light dawns gradually over the whole) (#141).

9. Like Dawn over the Earth

Our desire to escape the “limits” of the earth is similar to our desire to escape the limits of language. Wittgenstein argued in his later works that language is not a cage preventing us from moving past words to direct unmediated connection to the real world. (Wittgenstein 1986) Similarly, the physical and biological webs in which we are who we are, are not constraints on us but the conditions of our existence. As with the astronaut in his space suit, for the foreseeable future, we are carriers of the history of Earth in our shape, genetic makeup, and so on. No matter which Star Wars bar in whatever future fantasy world we saunter into, we will always give away the fact that we are earthlings.

Following the above, in an even grimmer way — by attempting to break out of the supposed cage of the Earth as presented to us, we threaten to lose the possibility of understanding what it means to be human, and part of the Earth, earthy. And this is happening at the precise moment when biology has brought us to the guts of the thing in the various projects real and proposed, that are seeking to redesign life. We threaten to become unmoored, “free” only to enter a barren landscape without markers or meaning, in a frictionless world where nothing grips any longer.

“We have got on to slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. Back to the rough ground!” (*Philosophical Investigations*, sec. 107).

With the erosion of a solid grounding we find it harder and harder to speak to ourselves in meaningful terms about the urgency of the dangers we face, and this feeds into our fear and anger, our feelings of helplessness and disempowerment. In a world whose boundary conditions encompass and define us, and that are now being degraded, it is vertiginous even to articulate the nature of the crises, environmental and otherwise, so deeply rooted are the delusions that continue to fuel the onrush of the infantile infinitism currently gripping the world.

10. Conclusions

So, like the Zen student burdened with the Great Ball of Doubt, when we come down to the core knot at the heart of this moment of Earth mystery, we find that it is ultimately tied to ourselves, the crisis that we are. Of this knot, the medieval mystic Thomas à Kempis wrote:

“Who has a fiercer struggle than he who strives to conquer the self? Yet, this must be our chief concern—to conquer self, and by daily growing stronger than self, to advance in holiness.”

As my final example of the emergent immanence characteristic of the implosion of sensibility, I am drawn to the last days of the Trappist monk Thomas Merton in 1968. In his *Asian Journal* before his untimely death on his journey through Southeast Asia, he spoke of this fierce struggle through the self, explicitly invoking the Great Ball of Doubt, and the great faith that sustains the struggle. Merton said:

“Faith is not the suppression of doubt. It is the overcoming of doubt, and you overcome doubt by going through it. Consequently, the monk is one who has to struggle in the depths of his being with the presence of doubt, and to go through what some religions call the Great Doubt, to break through beyond doubt into a certitude which is very, very deep because it is not his own personal certitude, it is the certitude of God, in us.” (Merton 1975)

Merton (as is well known) was drawn at the end of his life not just to similarities with Buddhist practice through his own approach to the Great Ball of Doubt (Pramuk 2018), but also to a new profundity in his relationship to Nature.

If there is anything similar to a solution to our mystery, it must ultimately be somewhere in here:

I am earth, earth
 My heart’s love
 bursts with hay and flowers
 I am a lake of blue air
 In which my own appointed place
 Field and valley stand reflected.
 (“O Sweet Irrational Worship”, Merton 2005).

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Acknowledgments: Previous versions of some of these ideas appeared in *Probe Post, Alternatives*, and the *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies* (Timmerman 2016), and formed part of an online

YouTube lecture—“Learning to Live on a Finite Planet” (Timmerman 2020). Assistance is gratefully acknowledged over the years from colleagues and staff at my home Faculty; from members of the Canadian Coalition for Religion and Ecology (Heather Eaton, James Miller and Stephen Scharper); The Zen Temple Toronto); Green Gulch Zen Centre (California); Michael Burt (Sharing the Sacred, Toronto); Hemanthi and Maxwell Ranasinghe (Sri Lanka).

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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