

The Joy of a Rotten Tooth

Shana Smith

As most of my longtime friends can attest, I am a Pollyanna. Don't drink, don't smoke, don't swear. (But I have been known to let out a couple of "SHIT-AKE MUSH-ROOMS!") It has never been hard to find the brighter side of things, and often annoyingly so, like when I tried to reassure my friend whose wedding got rained out that "at least the trees and flowers got nourished." In fact, when I first heard the Zen saying "Every day is a good day," it all made sense. Bad day at work? I am alive to experience it all, and help others have better days. What a miracle! The world is in peril? I am alive and well. I can help this world. What a miracle! Even when my dad died and I cried for three days without stopping, there was a simultaneous sense of wonder that I was alive to experience such grief, and how lucky I was to have known such love as to mourn his loss so viscerally. What a miracle, these experiences, this life.

Every day is a good day.

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That is, every day *was* a good day until two days ago, when my back right upper tooth started to hurt. We're not talking hurt a lot. We're not even talking hurt like hell. We're talking hurt-so-bad-why-don't-you-just-kill-me-now hurting, the kind that is so excruciating that you want to cut half your face off just to make it stop, or take massive amounts of drugs and alcohol, or both. The kind that brings forth a torrent of expletives so fierce and decidedly *un-Pollyanna* that even a sailor would cringe. The kind of pain that makes you wail, "Why meeee!?! This is too much! This is *not good in any way* and I wouldn't wish this experience on anybody!"

Just to drive the kong-an in a little deeper, this event happened on July 4, when no dentists were available. In fact, no dentist would be available until July 8. I knew I could not survive four more minutes with this pain, no less four more days.

"Every day is a good day" is a fantasy!

In desperation, I called my primary-care doctor and explained the circumstances. Somewhat reluctantly, they agreed to see me, agreed the tooth and everything around it looked very angry, confirmed I had a terrible toothache, said it wasn't infected yet, and sent me home with oxycodone and mouthwash.

The newly un-Pollyanna me popped the oxycodone like it was a baby aspirin, then went to bed.

One hour later, I was up and writhing with uncontrollable oxycodone-induced allergic itching and no pain relief. Took Ibuprofen. Took CBD oil. Wallowed in maximum misery. Cursed myself for even considering oxycodone. Cursed in general.

And then, out of the inky late night forest, an owl sounded out my window: "Who? Who? Who?" For just an instant, I forgot that every neuron in my body was firing with either intense itching or extreme pain. Just "Who?"

After that instant was over, the sensations came flooding back in. Pain. Itching. Mental torment. Waiting.

But what if I let go of the one part I *COULD* control—the mental torment? With tremendous effort, I focused on allowing the pain and itching to fire without my anguish and mental desperation adding to the mix. I was astonished to notice how hyper my mind had become in direct proportion to the physical discomforts: Oh no! Not again! Now itching too? I can't bear this! What else can I take? What else can I do? I'll do anything! Instant after instant was an exercise in releasing this barrage of thought and letting pain just exist.

It wasn't an instant relief technique. The pain was just as intense. But the quality of it, and my relationship to it, shifted almost immediately. And, to my amazement, my angry tooth had simmered to a slightly pissed-off one today, with just a few sensitive flare-ups.

From the moment that shift occurred—the shift of allowing the pain to exist exactly as it was—little tormented "me" became a much smaller voice in the background of just this, just this pain, just this owl, just this itching, just this. Just "ouch!"

And I am alive, so alive that I can feel the fiery wrath of every tiny inflamed and living nerve on this fragile, mortal, wondrous whole body, gifted for just a few precious decades. And I have a great dentist who will bring relief tomorrow. And when I meet someone else who has a toothache, or any ache, I will hug them, and do everything I can to relieve their pain. And when I think of others far away who are surely suffering, my heart melds with theirs, and I feel waves of gratitude that we can be alive together, and somehow find each other through the cosmos of compassion.

If not for this rotten tooth, my heart wouldn't have opened bigger. What a miracle!

Every day is a good day indeed. ♦

Shana Smith is a mom, musician, meditator, marine biologist, teacher and writer. She is an avid and longtime student of Zen and Buddhism, a decades-long yogini, and a much sought-after kirtaniya, or devotional chanting leader. Shana and her family live in Gainesville, Florida, where they run their meditation- and yoga-based Gainesville Retreat Center, which attracts many renowned teachers and practitioners. For more information, phone numbers and e-mail addresses, go to www.gainesvilleretreatcenter.com.