

# OPENING TO DARKNESS

EIGHT GATEWAYS FOR BEING  
WITH THE ABSENCE OF LIGHT  
IN UNSETTLING TIMES

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# PART 1

## BEYOND CHALLENGING: A SHORT PRELUDE

A doctor of Chinese medicine who was a famous bonesetter in China once said to me with a heavy accent, “Here, you [meaning Americans] don’t like to feel pain. You don’t like to suffer.” He said this as he wrung my neck as one would a chicken’s, snapping it back and forth in a way I had never experienced. I screamed as if he were breaking my bones.

For a month prior, I hadn’t been able to move my head to the left or right. My left arm was nearly immobile. I had just started a new job that probably should have ended the moment my body locked up. I went for acupuncture, then pain pills; used ice and hot water bottles. I went to medical doctors, and they X-rayed the area and gave me more pills and a brace to keep my head still—the kind used for whiplash. I later tried one of the best chiropractors in the city, and she gave me the number of a neurosurgeon, thinking I had a herniated disk and would need surgery. I did not seek out the surgeon and stayed in pain for weeks. Finally, a friend from my job gave me the number of her doctor, the famous bonesetter mentioned above. I called him at 10:00 pm that night. That’s how much pain I was in. To my surprise, he answered the phone. He said, “Come in. I wait for you.”

I said, “Now?”

“Yes!” he said. “You have pain, come now.”

*Wow*, I thought. *Now that’s a healer*. It didn’t matter that it was the middle of the night.

My partner at the time drove me across the Bay Bridge to San Francisco, and I met my friend from work at the healer’s office. She had

come to translate from Mandarin to English. The place was tiny, with photos on the wall of city dignitaries and other famous people who were his clients.

“Hi.” The bonesetter smiled like a boy. “I’m Dr. Fu.”

I sat down in his small room and showed him my X-ray. He threw it on the floor without looking at it. He took the brace off my neck and threw that on the floor, too, right next to the X-ray. Then he twisted me into a pretzel. I howled, yelped, screamed, and hollered. All of it. No wonder he had me come when no other patients were there. He told me to breathe, and I did my best.

Suddenly, at the peak of the pain, I felt my muscles release in my neck, shoulders, and back. It was in fact a miracle to me. I had suffered so long.

I carried my brace and X-ray out in my hands. It was as if I had never been in pain or unable to move. The night sky filled with stars made me feel like I was on another planet. I was in bliss. When I returned to work, everyone was shocked. Was it a miracle, or was it the ability to withstand a greater amount pain to be free of the pain? I would have never imagined that I needed to go deeper into the pain, deeper into the darkness of it. All I had wanted was out.

We are averse to pain and suffering and understandably so, given our American sensibility. We have access to a large market of remedies, products, spiritual paths, and, yes, gateways to the freedom from suffering. I wonder how many times we have diverted our own freedom when we have discovered there is more pain, more trouble, more darkness ahead and we keep adding on remedies. What is the mindset, along with fear and terror, that causes us to avoid our suffering rather than go deeper into seeing what is there? Yes, I should have quit that job on the spot when the pain started, even though I had been there for only a few weeks. I didn’t know at the time, but the pain that was deep inside was because I wanted something different for my life than the job I had accepted. The pain was my impatience, and it was at the same time physical pain in real time. I didn’t wait to allow that “something different” to be revealed in the darkness.

Since all paths—religious, spiritual, or without name—intersect in the place of darkness, darkness is the place where the mind is forced

to detach itself from whatever it has grabbed onto in life. And in that nothingness, in that dark place, we awaken.

What of darkness terrorizes us so that we run from it, rather than go deeper into it? How can we bear dark times, or, more explicitly, horrifying times, with the skill of an awakened one? Misery, struggle, and sorrow are not the sole intentions of this life. Yet we can respect our interrelationship with everything in the world, including the suffering in, around, and between us. Is there a way to live in unsettling times that we have forgotten?



## THE ART OF DARKNESS

**W**hile darkness and lightness have been rooted in our physical, emotional, social, and spiritual lives, it is the spiritual impact of darkness on our lives and how we suffer—with and in it—that this book addresses. How can we meet darkness as itself, alone, not as an opposition to the light we long for? What is darkness without an attention to light or our longing for light? When I ask questions like these, suddenly there are no words. Darkness without talking about light makes darkness inconceivable to many. It is much like the darkness of death. We do not know death any more than the darkness we came from. But we speak of a darkness that is not there—it doesn't really exist except in our perception. Still, there is this experience of what we call darkness that is so palpable we run from it, hide in it, and often seek ways to annihilate it. We speak of light, but we are not sure of light in the same way that we are not sure of darkness. Is the absence of light the nature of life?

Kerry James Marshall, an artist featured in the 2021 documentary *Black Art: In the Absence of Light*, is known for the black-velvety-looking skin of the people he paints in his work. He uses different pigments to create a wordless form of the absence of light. In Marshall's famous painting *A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow of His Former Self*, the charcoal-black-faced man in the painting is nearly invisible except for the white of his eyes and teeth. But the white of his eyes exists only because of the black skin. The viewer is forced to look into the white to see the black, to even see the person. Marshall depicts his reality of being seen and not seen as a dark-skinned man.

We all create an image in our minds in which we see darkness and feel it. We believe darkness exists as we imagine it. We see a dark

room, a night sky, a black sweater and imagine something in regard to darkness. At the same time, we can be unsure of darkness. How could darkness be both certain and not, seen and unseen? What is this darkness without light that affects our relationship to the earth and to each other? What is this absence of light that can cause suffering inside a myriad of life experiences? Do we see the white of the eyes and teeth without the darkness that surrounds it?

In this book, I make an effort to connect these rhetorical or abstract questions on darkness with Eight Gateways of being with darkness and ways of being with dark experiences in our lives. Our soul needs dark experiences to ascend, to evolve into a consciousness of vastness in every moment. I have gathered the teachings over the years on many paths of walking a spiritual life, and all of my spiritual transmissions are integrated here in this book. You may recognize the root of Zen Buddhism and the influence of African and Native American indigenous traditions, lucid prophetic dreaming, ceremonial drumming, and more.

## YOU ARE THE MANDALA

The mandala you're going to explore in this book was a long time coming. In a lucid dream many years ago, I was seated, with several other people, on a colorful marble floor with paintings of deities in red, blue, yellow, and green. I was unaware of the reason I had been called to the gathering. None of us present knew one another. I looked about. There were pillars but no walls nor ceiling in the room we were seated in. It was an open temple in which the sun and blue sky beamed over our heads. We waited quietly until a being came to greet us. I say "being" because, while appearing as a person, it did not feel like one. The being gave one instruction to all of us: "Create a mandala of your teachings." I sat still and did nothing throughout the dream. This was long before the creation of my oracle cards, which also came in a lucid dream; long before I was ordained as a Zen priest. I did not know how to move forward.

While being artistic, mandalas of all traditions are usually symbolic expressions of our inner worlds. It is only in writing this book, decades later, that I have finally come to the mandala of darkness that has been with me for my entire life. Unknowingly, I had been speaking of it while sharing with others the experience of navigating dark times. I had been walking it with each footstep circling the vast meadow of life.

The mandala in this book appears on the page, but it is created as you travel through the Eight Gateways. You'll find guided stillness exercises to help you experience a mandala of darkness within you. *You* will be the mandala as you walk through these gateways. Hopefully, you will access the authentic nature of darkness within you despite the distortions imposed on darkness that are learned and

experienced by everyone. Figure 1 is an outer representation of the mandala as you move through the gateways. For now, just feel what comes up when you look at it. Take some time to study it before reading the description below.



Figure 1. The mandala with the Eight Gateways

The eight dragons on the outside circle of the mandala represent the fire of darkness and protection. They also represent the Buddha's Eightfold Path for the cessation of suffering, which will be discussed later. The outlined background of the lotus flower symbolizes our lives in the midst of mud, dark periods, or unsettling times.

Also in the mandala there are depictions of dark mothers or deities within particular gateways (see table 1).

YOU ARE THE MANDALA

OUTER RING			
GATEWAY	DIRECTION	THEME	DARK MOTHER
First	East	The Nature of Darkness	Mahakali/ Daikokutennyo (Indian Hinduism/ Japanese Buddhism)
Second	South	Sensing in the Wilderness of Darkness	Mama Black Panther (Nature)
Third	West	Childhood Fear of Darkness	Mama Dantor (Haitian)
Fourth	North	Dwelling in Darkness	Mami Wata (Benin, formerly Dahomey)
INNER RING			
GATEWAY	DIRECTION	THEME	DARK MOTHER
Fifth	North	Being Messengers of Darkness	Mother Ala (Nigerian/Igbo Odinani)
Sixth	West	Darkness as Light	Papa Damballah (Haitian/West African)
Seventh	South	Understanding "Evil" and Darkness	Mama Erzulie Je Rouj (Haitian)
Eighth	East	Celebrating the Darkness of Death and Birth	Mama Brijit (Haitian)

Table 1. The outer and inner rings of dark mothers

As you read the descriptions in table 1, please keep in mind that I *divined* the directions. They are not the directions in which any particular tradition might place a deity. I use the term *dark mothers* to encompass deities, spirits, gods, goddesses, and African orishas. Know that some African religions have one deity, and that is God. Also, imagine the center circle of elements rotating in the middle, so that the elements affect all deities and at the same time.

I am deliberately *not* using the direct teachings of other traditions in which I have not been authorized. However, in the descriptions of the deities, I do borrow from others to mine the characteristics of the deities as they relate to darkness. Rarely are “darkness” and “deities” spoken in the same breath. What do they say that can help us with darkness? Know that I am completely following the voices of ancestors and there is an effort here to hold all integrity of all paths. Perhaps the ancestors are seeking to change how we practice. I am here for that effort. I already see the needed integration of the fragmented spiritual and religious paths that many of us walk. At the same time, I honor the need to transmit these paths as many have done for centuries. Please try to drop all knowing for now and return later. If you go toward teachings only to see what you already know, then you might miss what could bring new insights to you. See how confusion can lead to discovery.

In the mandala, you’ll also see the motifs of four elements in the center circle: fire (east), earth (south), wind (west), and water (north). I have situated them in the middle to illustrate their impact on all of the gateways. Again, imagine the element circle rotating in the center. Although fire appears on the eastern side of the circle, fire isn’t exclusive to the east gateway. The element of fire impacts all directions and affects all eight gateways. This is the same for all the other elements symbolized in the center.