

NOTES FROM KTD MONASTERY

August - September, 2012

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ON THE ROAD AGAIN: KTD MONASTERY

August 23, 2012

As you read this, Margaret and I are (or soon will be) on the highway and heading to the mountains above Woodstock, New York for a ten-day Mahamudra meditation retreat with the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, our dharma teacher for the last thirty years. This will be our 24th yearly visit for a 10-day intensive on this same teaching. You would think I would have learned something by now!

It is an 800-mile trip that can take us something like 14 hours (or less sometimes) to drive. We used to do this in two days, but it was no fun staying in a motel. Now we drive straight through.

Once there, it is like being home. We don't know how we will ever be able to drive all the way back, but for ten days we don't care. We are there, safe with Rinpoche.

I am not sure how easy it will be for me to have Internet access, post blogs, and so, but I will try my best. After all, you folks are my other family.

KTD: KARMA TRIYANA DHARMACHAKRA MONASTERY

August 28, 2012

KTD (Karma Triyana Dharmachakra) Monastery is the main seat in North America of the Gyalwa Karmapa, the head of the Karma Kagyu Lineage, one of the four main sects of Tibetan Buddhism. The Karmapa is the oldest (and first) reincarnate lama in Tibet, now in his 17th incarnation. His well-known friend, the Dalai Lama, the head of another lineage, is in his 14th incarnation.

Here is a not-so-great photo of part of the campus at KTD Monastery in the mountains above Woodstock, New York where I am spending ten days. In the upper right you can see the golden roof (and building) of the main gompa or shrine hall. The low roof to the front and left is one side of a three-sided square rectangle that encloses the main shrine building. In the middle of the low-roofed building is a gateway into the inner courtyard. Not sure if you can make it out in this photo.

The low flat building is actually four floors or levels that go down into the earth and kind of hang on a steep hill to your left, which you can't see here because I did not bring a wide-angle lens. Of course, the parking lot is to your right, of which you can just see a few cars in the photo. It is much larger.

When I first came here in 1983, none of what you see in the photo was here, only some recently-poured walls that eventually became part of the shrine hall. This whole complex has been a labor of love and devotion on the part of Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, a small group of Tibetans, and those of us who are students of the dharma and Rinpoche. Personally, I have been on various boards, involved in fundraising, and many other activities for many years.

A fascinating book on the monastery could (and someday will be) written on KTD, how it came to exist, and the enormous effort involved in making what was the dream of the His Holiness, the 16th Gyalwa Karmapa, back in the 1970s into reality. As a student of Rinpoche for almost thirty years, Margaret and I have been involved in this project every step of the way.

Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, the abbot of KTD, has been my teacher and the glue that has held all of us here together all these years. It was devotion to his own teacher, the 16th (and now the young 17th) Karmapa, that inspired Rinpoche to see this wonderful monastery complex through to completion. KTD is like a second home to me and my fellow dharma students are some of the best friends I have in the world.

Yesterday was sunny, but punctuated with rainstorms. The teachings and practices continue. Meals are popular events and I am trying not to eat too much. So far I am doing OK in that department, but some broccoli rabe and a dish with noodles and cheese threatened my resolve. Oops, I did have seconds.

I hope all my Facebook friends are well.

FB-2012-103

DAILY SCHEDULE AT THE MONASTERY

August 24, 2012

The offices, dining hall, and all of the bedrooms for staff and visitors are located in a four-level building in the shape of a three-sided square that is kind of hung over the edge of a steep hill. I will try to get some pictures when I find time. Anyway, our bedroom is at tree level and there are trees right across from it. In those trees at this time of year (late summer) are thousands of katydids, and in the early evening and into the night they sing like crazy, calling and responding to one another. They sound like a chorus of combs screeching. If you don't like the sound, you would be in trouble, but I happen to like it. Falling to sleep to this chorus of insects is wonderful.

I should say something about our daily schedule here at Karma Triyana Dharmachakra monastery in the mountains above Woodstock, New York. Most of us are up early. You know I am. The first practice starts at 5 AM, and this is Green Tara puja, held in a special room of that name. This is a group practice, where everyone chants along together. At the same time the large shrine hall has all kinds of individual practices going on. Some folks are meditating, others doing prostrations, mantras, mandala practice, and you name it. It can be kind of noisy.

Still others practice in their rooms or sleep in, and so on. Breakfast is a 7:30 AM, followed by karma yoga. Everyone does a certain amount of voluntary work each day. My work is videoing the teachings morning and afternoon. The morning teaching starts at 10:30 AM and lasts until Noon or a little after. Then we have lunch.

After lunch, there is rest time or more karma yoga. The second teaching session begins at 3:30 PM and lasts until 5 PM. Mahakala group practice (the fierce protectors) starts at 5 PM and lasts an hour. At 6 PM there is a light dinner, and from 7:00-8:00 PM there is a group practice of the Chenresik and Amitabha sadhanas, and various other prayers.

After that most go to bed because dawn is not that many hours away. I am holding up pretty well, keeping busy and doing some astrology readings for my friends in any spare time. Today after lunch, we will celebrate my teacher Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche's 89th birthday. He has told us he does not want any presents, but rather that we contribute to a fund to plant more trees around the campus.

So, there you have a rough idea of what we are up to. Here is a little poem that came along yesterday.

PRECIOUS IS PERFECT

Perfect,
Is its own protector.
It cannot be improved.

Too fragile to touch,
It touches us,
With its fragrance.

August 25, 2012

FB-2012-104
THE FIRST DAY
August 24, 2012

A ten-day retreat like this always starts out slowly, where hours seem like days. No one is here. Then somewhere in the middle, time begins to blur, the track of time is lost, and time picks up steam. Near the end, the days seem like hours. Right now the river of time is slow. People I have not seen for a year or longer suddenly appear, first a trickle and then a flow.

Early in the day there is the feeling that something is missing. It is the fact the Khenpo Rinpoche is not yet here. You can feel it. He is driving down with some of the retreat lamas from Karmé Ling, his three-year retreat center where he lives. A few of us go outside and wait for his arrival.

The Sun is already hot and it will be in the eighties today. I sit on the stone steps in a tiny bit of shade made by a wall and wait. At first it is just me. The Catskill mountains frame the view in front of me. The monastery itself sits on a mountain high above Woodstock, NY, a town that everyone knows exists. It will be hot down there in the valley. Up here there is always a breeze.

At last Rinpoche arrives. As he gets out of the car, he greets those of us waiting. He walks with a cane now, and will be celebrating his 89th birthday in about a week. Now that he is in the monastery, I feel that part of me is now here too. The 10-day teaching can begin.

Later, there is a big lunch with many Chinese dishes, salads, and so on. Despite my effort not to, I ate too much. Meals are like islands in the stream of teaching, mediation, and what-not. I don't know why, but I always eat too much at these things.

Later in the afternoon, Margaret and I start to set up the video equipment. We will be in charge of videoing the various sessions each day. All of the various microphones must have their cords taped to the floor, and everything checked and tested. I have been doing this video work for years. As mentioned, this is the 24th year for this particular teaching, each year being a 10-day infusion of teaching and practice.

For most of those years I was also in charge of seeing that the teachings for each year were transcribed, edited, and then published. Let's see... 24 years x 10 = 240, times two teachings a day equals 480 separate teachings. The transcripts for these many years fill an entire bookshelf with some of the most precious teachings I know of.

In the evening we all assembled in the main shrine room and Rinpoche taught. Every teaching always begins with a prayer to the lineage, then the teaching, followed by another prayer that dedicates the merit of the teaching to benefit all sentient beings, with no exceptions.

I am sure that after the teachings, there was some sitting around, sharing stories, and catching up. However, I am still battling some of my physical problems, so I headed straight to bed. I wrote this little poem yesterday. Not sure how sensible it will be to those of you here, but it can't hurt.

STILL MOTION

The river hurries past,
The quiet of an eddy or a cove,
Where,
A hummingbird,
Hovers motionless,
Moving still,
Faster than the eye,
Can see.

August 24, 2012

FB-2012-105

AT THE MONASTERY

August 24, 2012

The 800-mile trip to the monastery took 12 hours flat. No real problems. We cut across through Canada from Port Huron, Michigan to Buffalo, NY and that is always a crap-shoot to see how busy customs is. Luckily we can phone ahead to find out what the wait is. Yesterday, it was something like fifty minutes or so on the bridge we usually cross, so we crossed at Fort Erie, NY where they take Nexus cards. There was also a long wait there, but the Nexus cards got us through in about 16 minutes.

The hardest part for me in this kind of trip is those first twenty miles or so, when my mind can't imagine that we could actually drive all that way, mile by mile. These kind of trips are like a dream for me, one I don't want to wake up from, less I doubt that I can ever even get there.

All was well. After about half an hour I settled into the groove of just driving, dreamed the dream, and kept in the dream the rest of the way. Margaret and I switched off. I drove a fair amount and slept in the back seat in-between. We stopped of gas and pit-stops only. We gave up eating along the way years ago. What's the point? Instead, we make sandwiches. I made a bunch of sandwiches with brown rice, tempeh, mustard, lettuce, and a slice of Swiss cheese, which turned out to be kind of rubbery.

Who cares. Any food on the road is good food to me. And the hours ticked by and pretty soon we were turning off the thruway at the Saugerties exit, and on the 11-mile ribbon of road up to Woodstock, NY, and then on up Meads Mountain Road to the monastery, Karma Triyana Dharmachakra, where we will be for the next ten days or so.

Once we were there, it was like we never left, so many years have we come here. It is kind of a hurry up and wait kind of thing. Hurry to get there and then nothing. There I am walking around the halls of the place with little to do. Few people are here yet.

Not sure, but I believe I lay down in my bed at something like 7:30 PM and did not wake up until 2 AM, and then slept some more until almost 6 AM. So, here we are, safely at the monastery and already merging with life there. More to come, as I am able.

ASTROLOGY UPDATE

August 29, 2012

No solar flares for some days, so we have a quiet Sun just now. Astrologically, the various patterns that have held our attention for some time are now starting to break up, so we should

get some relief (for those like myself, who need it) as time continues to move on. I still consider this a more-or-less fairly heavy time, where the circumstances we are wrapped in are more constrictive and confining than liberating. In other words, we are still kind of bound to the moment rather than free-floating. There is not a lot of fluidity or movement in external situations, but rather a sense of constipation and being stalled. Frustrating.

The Full Moon is coming Friday August 31st at 9:59 AM EDT, so that will be a turning point of some kind, but I suggest one that is less dramatic and freeing than usual. In other words: outwardly no immediate relief, but perhaps a shift or change in emphasis.

Inwardly, there is a little more wriggle-room. We may have some spiritual appreciation taking place, but perhaps with a more austere or serious tone than usual -- deepening. Right now these may be just ideas or concepts that occur to us, but over the next days (like around the Full Moon, and afterward), these insights will become more practical and physical – take form and shape.

For myself, I am midstream here in this 10-day dharma intensive. Nothing much to report, except my foolish tendency to find fault with the moment and wish that it would improve so that I could 'meditate' better. Of course intellectually I know that is counter-productive. I wrote this little poem to describe my situation.

PERFECT MOMENT

Whatever,
Seems wrong,
With this moment,
Is made perfect,
By accepting it,
Just as it is.

August 29, 2012

PERSONAL NOTES

August 30, 2012

What's up with me lately? For sure I am in a time of change and will try to explain it as best I can.

Way back when, my interest in Buddhism came from the "Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind to the Dharma," in particular the second thought, "Impermanence." We don't live forever.

This "turning the mind" is important, but turning the mind where? The answer of course is turning the mind away from day-to-day distractions or busyness and more toward the dharma, the things that matter in life. This happens to me from time to time.

Lately there have been some losses among my dharma friends, in particular the passing of the Very Venerable Traleg Rinpoche, something I never expected so soon. This, coupled with my own recent health problems, has kind of pushed me out of my comfort envelope into a space I don't reach often enough.

One effect of all this is a loss or weakening of attachments. I can see it in myself. Ordinarily I am pretty wrapped up in myself and I tend to forget how Buddhists view the self, as a part of us that has no permanent existence. Let me remind readers of how the Buddhists view the Self.

Some claim Buddhists don't believe in the existence of the self, but that would be a misunderstanding. Buddhists very much recognize the existence and the utility of the self, a kind of personal secretary and events coordinator for each of us. What the Buddhists do say is that our very real self has no permanent existence, but is simply a collection of attachments, things we have pulled together around us as a kind of comfort blanket. As I like to say: attachment is the glue that holds the self together.

By saying the self is impermanent, this means that the self is made up of whatever we are currently attached to, a hodge-podge of our likes and dislikes. What is important to our self image may be a new bicycle when we are a kid, a new car when we are a teenager, and our job or hobby when we are adult. You get the idea. The self is always a representative collection of our current attachments that we draw around ourselves like a security blanket, no part of which is permanent. It changes as our interests do.

Well, the point of my writing this is that when we do get a whiff of impermanence, like when a family member dies or we experience some setback, those self-attachments weaken and become less important, and with it our sense of self gets more tenuous. Great life events can even shatter our self temporarily, causing that security blanket to just go almost entirely void of meaning, leaving us momentarily selfless.

In other words we can lose touch with our own self (and other areas of our life), and they can just kind of fade into unimportance, leaving us feeling exposed, naked, or alone. This is actually a good thing. I call this my "Humpty-Dumpty" self, because once shattered, I desperately work to piece myself back together again, so that I can feel normal. I feel naked without that familiar sense of myself.

Anyway, right now my sense of self has not been shattered, but recent events have kind of weakened my attachments, so that my normal distractions are not managing to distract me as much as they usually do, and so here I am, just kind of looking around in life once again. As mentioned, this happens to me every once in a while. It is an adventure.

That self I like so much has lost some of its charm and my normal enjoyments have dried up a bit, leaving me more sober than usual, and probably not a lot of fun. All of this is gently pushing me toward change. I have lost touch with myself; it has worn out its welcome with me

somewhat.

The upshot of all this is that I now have the opportunity to kind of rearrange or reform myself, and put 'me' back together with somewhat of a new theme or look, perhaps one more in line with the reality of my situation, and the dharma. Some attachments I probably can just let go, and others perhaps replace with more appropriate ones.

Anyway I have been kind of mentally treading water lately, waiting for the other shoe to drop, and looking forward for these changes to run their course. As it so happens, it is myself that is changing, so I am not 100% sure who I used to be. Not to worry; all of this is very normal and even a little exciting. Change always enters our lives at the verge of the unknown and that, at the very least, is always refreshing.

P.S. In the last 24-hours, after a long period of quiet Sun, we are getting some C-class solar flares – inner activity.

FULL MOON and FLARES
August 31, 2012

It has been somewhat difficult for me to write lately, in part because of a busy schedule here at the monastery and also lack of access to an Internet connection or computer time. But there is more to it than that. This whole time period (the last week or so) has been kind of static for me, with not much movement on the outside, and little creativity (for me at least) on the inside. This Full Moon coming up at 9:59 AM EDT Friday morning August 31st, 2012 may help, as certain large astrological patterns are starting to break up. I am glad.

Also, after almost no solar activity (quiet Sun) for many days now, yesterday (Thursday) we finally had some actual solar flares, with one reaching into the M-class. I don't know about the rest of you, but I could feel it and needed that solar movement and inner energy to kind of get this old life moving again. Inner movement for me has been kind of stalled and slow. Part of me has been under a cloud or at least feeling cloudy.

This has been a time of growing up a bit, even at my age. I can see that many of my reactions to other people and external events serve no purpose whatsoever and are a total waste of time and energy. For example, something happens and I don't like it. It is not what I expected or hoped for, or worse, something I actually was afraid would happen, happens.

Whatever it was, it happened. It's done. Of what possible use is my getting upset or making faces over it now? I can't control either people or events, at least not to any useful extent. They happen without my guidance for the most part. My first dharma teacher, way back in the 1960s, use to say. "Given the opportunity, people will do what they want." This is so true, even if it is against their best interests.

So the "control freak" in me has just had a trip to the woodshed, something of a wakeup call,

and is (perhaps reluctantly) learning to just let go, and let things happen as they will. It is not as if I could stop them anyway.

And, as I mentioned above, instead of reacting to events with my approval or disapproval (making faces), I am better off just accepting what is, and working with the situation gently and perhaps even kindly. At least this is the theory.

Projecting my reactions on a situation only make for a bad movie, so perhaps I am enough aware of this habit on my part to be mindful when it arises and just let it go without my constant comment or bitching. I am tired of that part of me anyway.

So I am deconstructing myself just a bit, gradually detaching, and I can't say the process is a lot of fun. However, I am (perhaps) beginning to see some light at the end of the tunnel. If true, this is somewhat of a reach for me, ceasing to register my opinion or reaction to what happens, rather than just accepting and working with the situations that come up.

I am still at the stage of comparing the old way and the new way, going back and forth in my mind to see which feels best. Obviously, it makes more sense for me to stop protesting what I don't like (but cannot do anything about) and just save that energy and time. If I could make this change, I would be (by definition) a more accepting person and stop railing against the universe when I don't like an outcome. These thoughts may be too personal or opaque to make much sense. Anyone know what I am talking about?

UP AND DOWN

September 1, 2012

Winding down here and in the ninth of the ten-days. Today will be busy, with a Guru Rinpoche empowerment this evening plus all the regular activities. I have been coming to KTD Monastery since 1983, and as mentioned to this particular 10-day teaching each year since 1989. There is a funny thing that happens to me every year and I can graph it almost like a bell-curve. It has to do with mental ups and downs while I am here.

Being in Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche's presence is a definite "up." For some reason, when I am near Rinpoche I appear at my very best. Other people have told me the same thing about themselves. Perhaps everywhere Rinpoche goes, he brings out the good qualities in people and they rise to the occasion. I wish I could do that.

I certainly know that when I go back home, the ethereal feeling I have when I am with Rinpoche gradually reverts to my normal self, as my own habits and routine take hold. In other words, I come back down to being normal. I often remember what I learned while I was with Rinpoche, and vow to work to that end, but first I would have to change the way I behave a bit. And there is another aspect to being close to Rinpoche, which is why I am writing this.

At least for one day or part of day when I am at KTD with Rinpoche I really crash. I can tell when

this happens by the fact that I wish I could be home or just want to leave and go back home. I am totally down and everything around me seems no fun, etc. And this happens every year like clockwork, although I never know when it will strike. I have already gone through it this trip, so I am not going to complain to you about being homesick.

As to the why of this down experience, the only thing I can come up with is that for some reason it is important for my 'self image' to crash and burn in order to rebuild itself. I first must let go of it all and then take a new grip. Perhaps readers have some better idea of what causes this. It does happen every year. Usually it passes in a day, but a couple of years I got bummed out for a day or so. Like the phoenix, I always manage to rise from the ashes once again, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed.

In fact driving home from KTD reminds me of the Wordsworth line "Trailing clouds of glory do we come." It is no doubt I am pretty high on it all, but I usually manage to fritter that all away within a few days of returning as rock meets the bone of my daily obligations back home. And the teachings from this particular Rinpoche are so powerful.

I can read a book or a dozen books and find some of the same ideas that Rinpoche teaches, but there is something about hearing it in person that goes in one ear and does not come out the other. It strikes home.

This year's impact has to do with my own projections. Like a movie projector we paint our world as we would like to see it, with the broad strokes of our likes and dislikes. Of course I have heard this before. Self-projection is not a new idea for me. I have even written about it myself.

Yet for some reason, after Rinpoche made it clear to us, I was able to be very aware when I was doing this. I suddenly was mindful as it happened. And it is not just negative thoughts, like "This person is being a pain." or "who do they think they are," but also the positive ones, like when I see one of my favorite people show up, etc. Likes and dislikes alike are equally projected.

The upshot of all this is that an enormous amount of these filters, what we like or do not like, cloud our mind constantly like a swarm of mosquitoes. Of course these labels lay down tracks and then endlessly reinforce them in our mind stream, creating karma. Worse yet they obscure my vision for seeing anything clearly. The constant comment of my chattering preferences, opinions, and dislikes are like white noise, static that keeps me from hearing enough silence to find any peace.

Although it is going to be a tall order, I can see that I can do something about this. I can, by being more mindful in the moment, catch these labels I project as they happen, neutralize or zap them, and not add a layer of my own to what I am experiencing. It will be slow-going and hard work to rewire my tendency to project my own movie on the facts, but the rewards are also great.

Anyway, here I am in midstream, taking in what I can, practicing as I am able, and watching this great mandala complete itself, prior to heading home. Best to all of you.

THE LAST DAY

September 2, 2012

We are in the last day of the retreat intensive here at KTD Monastery near Woodstock, NY. The days have kind of blurred toward the end and now time is going very fast. Khenpo Rinpoche's teaching has touched on many topics. However, the sieve of my mind has only managed to grasp and focus on a few of them, more like maybe just one.

Of course I have read (for some fifty years now) about how our thinking labels things and this labeling amounts to a filter that separates or isolates us from direct contact with the true nature of our own mind and reality. I got that intellectually decades ago. I understand it theoretically. It makes sense.

In this year's teaching Rinpoche brought this idea home to me in a way that made me realize what I am missing and that with a little mindfulness I could perhaps begin to deconstruct this very bad habit of reacting to everything with likes and dislikes, my constant comments projected on life. If they served a purpose or accrued some benefit other than habitual entertainment, that would be one thing.

But it is clear from the teaching that not only do my personal reactions to everything get projected onto life and obscure what is there, but I am also creating a stream of mental graffiti that overwrites reality with my useless protests, remarks, likes and dislikes. Rinpoche was clear that this mindless chatter itself amounts to immense karma that not only clouds the present moment, but that itself will ripen over time to even further bad effect. In other words, I not only pay now, but I will also pay later, and with interest.

Each projection on my part etches a track in my mindstream that gets deeper every day. No, I have not killed anyone or accumulated any big karmic items, but the sheer mass of this endless registering of my likes and dislikes inscribes a karmic track of enormous consequence, one that will only grow larger over time, even after I die. As mentioned, it not only fills every open space in the present moment with the white-static noise of my projections, but it guarantees that whatever future I have will reverberate that noise as the karma I am now creating ripens and reanimates itself.

This mental filter is a self-fulfilling prophecy of negative karma that like dark-flowers blooms along my life path far into the future. As I write this, the chorus of katydids in the trees right outside my window fills the night with a cacophony of sound that can be deafening. Lucky for me I like the sound of katydids. In a similar way, the din of my own mental likes and dislikes drowns out any more subtle sounds of life that might be heard. For example, I can't hear the sound of silence of my own mind. How sad.

There is no rest without a resting place, a place to rest. My nervous projections mostly fill every available space with their noise until there are almost no gaps left. Meditation depends on gaps, the tiny spaces between the barrage of our thoughts, thoughts that seek, like foam insulation, to fill every crack in our armor until we can get no rest at all. Luckily there are some gaps, however few.

Meditation develops mindfulness that searches out these gaps and finds rest in them, allowing the mind to rest. And with practice, these gaps can be widened and we can rest even more. Turning off the constant chatter of my own projections has become a priority for me. Right now it seems like an impossible task and I am almost at a loss as to where to begin, but I at least see the problem.

In the dharma teachings they say that the light of a single match can end the darkness of endless eons. For me, mindfulness of this labeling everything is the light I needed to see the problem. And, if I can develop this mindfulness and begin to catch my mental projections and just drop them, perhaps I can gradually clear up this mental garbage I indulge in. It is suffocating in its constant presence.

Perhaps I could learn to finally see clearly what is. And I would like to hear the silence of my own mind and rest in that without the mental detritus I am projecting now. Make sense to anyone?

A STORY: THE DRAWING

September 3, 2012

On Saturday, we had a raffle and a silent auction of various dharma items that were donated to help raise money to finish some repairs on the main shrine building. Margaret and I donated a special limited print edition of a drawing of Khenpo Rinpoche that we had made as part of the fund-raising effort. This limited edition of fine-art prints was printed on special paper by an offset press. Each is signed by Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche himself. The finished piece, including a mat and frame, an acrylic sheet, plus hardware to hang it on the wall is 24x30 inches. I include a photo. Two of them were sold as part of the silent auction, one for \$1000.

There is a wonderful story behind this drawing, which I have posted here before, but I post it here again for those of you who might not have seen it.

Many years ago in the 1980s I had a dream. In that dream I presented my dharma teacher Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche a drawn image or portrait of himself. It was one of those dreams that is magical, somehow more real than waking life. For that reason I felt it was important that this dream be made real and acted out in real life. After the dream I began actively to consider how this could happen. I tried on many ideas. Although I am almost an artist, I don't have the kind of skills needed for this work.

I finally settled on a sketched portrait, but finding an artist good enough was not easy. I knew of

such an artist, one of the finest draftsman in Michigan, a man named John Felsing who was renowned for his life-like portraits of wildlife, especially birds. I contacted Felsing and asked to visit him. Then Margaret and I traveled to Lansing where he lived and sat down with him. I explained my dream and what I was hoping he might do. After some discussion, he agreed to do a drawing and I gave him a really nice photo of Khenpo Rinpoche.

Several months went by and I heard nothing. Then one day a large envelope came in the mail. It contained a first sketch of Khenpo Rinpoche. To my dismay the drawing he sent was a sketch of an elderly oriental gentleman, but not the dynamic rinpoche I knew. This would not do. I got on the phone and explained this to John Felsing and he said that he would try again. To assist him I then sent him some of Rinpoche's dharma teachings and one of his books, "Dharma Paths."

Again, several months went by and then one day another large manila envelope showed up in the mail. I hesitated to look inside; with baited breath I carefully opened the package. When I did, this time the image was actually of the Khenpo Rinpoche Margaret and I know. Apparently the books and Rinpoche's own teachings helped to communicate the idea of the man himself. The ending to this story is remarkable.

When the artist Felsing finished the final drawing he called to notify me of that. And as it happened Khenpo Rinpoche, who (of all things) was visiting our dharma center that very day, was about to do an empowerment for our local group that very evening.

Felsing did not hesitate a moment, but said he was coming to Big Rapids to see Rinpoche. He jumped into his car, drove through the oncoming night to our center and, when he arrived, formally asked Rinpoche to give him "refuge." Refuge is a short ceremony that takes place when someone discovers that they have great respect for the dharma, respect not only for the historical Buddha, but also for his teachings (the dharma), and the sangha (those monks and nuns who embody the living teaching). It is a request you make of a teacher. Felsing's request was honored and Rinpoche gave the refuge ceremony, which includes giving those who ask for it a dharma name.

Apparently during the months that John Felsing was working with Rinpoche's image and reading some of the teachings, he was moved by what he learned and had developed a true respect for the dharma. He was inspired to become more actively involved in the dharma and so asked to receive the refuge ceremony. I am struck by how a simple contact with Rinpoche, even at a distance, made a difference.

We are still at the monastery, since we don't want to drive in holiday traffic. We will leave at dawn tomorrow for home. Meanwhile, I hope you enjoyed this story.

HEADING FOR HOME

September 3, 2012

Just a note to say we leave at dawn for the 800-mile car drive home. Glad for your prayers and well-wishes. It always seems like it would be impossible to get from here to there, but somehow we seem to.

BACK HOME: NOW WHAT?

September 5, 2012

We are back home. Thank you for your best wishes on our trip. We made it in 12 hours, almost to the minute, with no major delays. And that includes driving across Canada, which means going through customs with passports or special cards, twice. That went smooth for a change.

Home is just as I left it, but I'm not. I feel I have changed and want to move things around in my office (or something) to reflect that. I just feel different. Let's see how long this feeling lasts, as day-to-day life takes its toll and I begin to slip back into my routines. I have been in this mental space before and usually any change I want to make soon gets lost in the general sieve of my life.

What did I learn at the monastery? I wrote about some of that in blogs during my stay there. Mostly it comes down to being in Rinpoche's presence and its effect, which is always powerful. Rinpoche always manages to point out to me that basically, as they say, I am busy rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. At my age, I don't have that much more life time, and here I am picking out wallpapers or something similar.

I don't want to be particularly morbid, but I certainly act like I am going to live forever, when I ought to be considering what will happen to me when I eventually do die. I am not suggesting that our inescapable "death" should take up our whole life, but as Shakespeare's Hamlet pointed out, it is what happens after death that might well interest us.

"For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause. "

Shakespeare has been said to be the greatest English writer and I have to agree, if only because what he wrote comes closest to what the Tibetan Buddhists make clear. Shakespeare's sonnets are full of dharma or something very much like it. Before I found the actual dharma, Shakespeare gave me a taste.

So right now I want to somehow modify my life to better reflect what I learned at the monastery. It is like carrying water in my hands. These resolves seldom last very long once the pre-programmed distractions of my day-to-day existence here take hold. It may just be wishful thinking on my part as I get back in line to re-board my freight train (of distractions) to oblivion,

which I apparently am quite comfortable on.

What is funny is that I resent any Old-Testament rhetoric, with its fire and brimstone whenever I encounter it. It is too much like fundamentalism for my taste, Yet it is hard to look impermanence in the eye and not blink. There is a reality waiting for me to experience beyond this particular life and the questions is: do I want to spend any time preparing for it? Or, as with the parable of the grasshopper and the ant, am I, like the grasshopper, dancing away the Indian-summer of life while Fall beckons?

I know this topic is perhaps a little heavy for some readers, and I apologize if this appears offensive or too aggressive. This is not my intention. I am just revisiting one of the "Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind to the Dharma," in this case the thought of impermanence. It was these four thoughts that (for the most part) got me interested in Buddhism to begin with.

A whiff of impermanence is the smelling salts of the dharma. A got a good shot of impermanence at the monastery. Combine that with my resent health problems and you have my attention. Now let's see what I will do with it.