

# BLOGS 2024 WINTER



by Michael Erlewine

**2024**

**Essays**

**WINTER**

by Michael Erlewine

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These are not all, but they are the most useful essays from 2023 sorted by the seasons.

I don't have time to 'fine edit' them and still get them out there, but these are certainly in good-enough shape to be readable.

And I don't expect many, but hopefully some folks will find these useful.

They are eclectic, yet the overriding theme is dharma and dharma practice. Those of you who reach a certain point in your own trajectory of dharma practice may find some of these useful.

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## “THE TIMES THEY ARE-A-CHANGIN’ ”

January 1, 2024

“Come gather 'round people  
Wherever you roam  
And admit that the waters  
Around you have grown

And accept it that soon  
You'll be drenched to the bone  
If your time to you is worth savin'

And you better start swimmin'  
Or you'll sink like a stone  
For the times they are a-changin'”

- Bob Dylan

These times remind me of when I had my major stroke; I could not find a thread or way back into my own history, try as I might. It took weeks to reestablish some sort of history and reconnect.

And that's the way I have felt lately, that the pathways to our own recent past, perhaps before Covid, etc. have closed and are no longer easy to find. I can't in good faith invoke that spirit or way of living that was active only a few years ago. And I have really tried. It's shallow compared to right now. We can't go back.

And so, as mentioned in my New Year post, I cannot pick up the thread to those recent times, so that I might add to that history. It's gone void and rings false. I'm not one to beat a dead horse, so after many weeks of pushing that envelope, I conclude that there is a reason for my failure to reanimate the past. It's gone.

And that's because the past has passed, thrusting us into new times, times that require a new or different response or reaction on our part. I believe that's where we find ourselves now.

It's finally gotten my attention enough that I have ceased to beat the drum to resurrect our past way of being which we have enjoyed until a few years ago when Covid arose. We have changed.

What these new times will demand of us we have yet to determine, and it's very much up to us how we take all this. I have pointed out, repeatedly, that all this aligns with the peaking of the sunspot cycle in the next year or so, now bringing more and more intense solar flares and CMEs (Coronal Mass Ejections). They are running tandem right now, this sense of loss, and struggling against this time of solar inundation is, well, hopeless.

^p

Better to work with the tide of change, whether enhanced by the solar cycle or not. To repeat myself, it is we who will decide how to take and work with these new times that are upon us. We can work with the rising tide or struggle against it.

It would seem best to use this influx of change following the old maxim "A rising tide raises all boats."



That's my choice and I am willing to shift my view to work with the tide as I see how that can be done.

I'm an astrologer, not a fortune teller. I try to understand what the changing solar and cosmic conditions mean, and how we can use them. Here that means we, each of us, are going to decide how we react or respond to these changing times. Reaction we already are doing, and that's not so good. By responding appropriately, we have an opportunity to share these times as we are able.

I'd love to hear how each of you are taking all this.

[HOUSEKEEPING: Photo by me. Today was the day I, on my hands and knees, in the attic crawlspace, made it to the way back and put in sheets of 6mm vinyl over 10-foot rafters to keep the fiberglass from hanging out and falling down. Dirty job. Had to wash all my clothes and myself as well. At least that's done. Michigan Wolverine football today at 5 PM EST. Gonna' make popcorn, sliced apple, and watch it with Margaret.]



# THE RIVER OF LETHE: FORGETFULNESS

January 2, 1924

The philosopher George Santayana, said “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.” This would make sense if we HAD experienced the past. However, in most cases folks are not doomed to repeat it because they never experienced it in the first place. An article in a book? Good luck. Today’s youth don’t read. They ‘media’ and while a picture is worth a thousand words, something is also lost without the written word.

Memory, a kind of brick wall that we can’t just get around, if we never had the experience that someone is recommending. It’s not that someone is ignoring the past if they were not there to experience it. We can’t ignore what we have never seen or experienced. Of course, they were born too late to remember what elders can.

In other words, we can’t wake up and take note of a past we never had or experienced. As elders, we are pointing to something that was available fifty or sixty years ago, and our kids are only 20 or 40 years old now. They can’t possibly know what we are talking about, except from old movies or books. And reading is not as popular these days.

It’s of no use because we are not useful if we are talking about something that happened before you were born. You don’t know what I’m talking about

because you don't know what I'm talking about. Who has time for that kind of education?

And so, our clique of readers or listeners here on Facebook is by definition a declining asset. We remember what is already fading. Or, like the old blues players used to say, "Ain't but a few of us left."

I can tell you about the old days, but I can't give you that experience or even say where you can get it. So, that's a problem we old folks have, the stories that no one remembers because they were not born yet. And so, if we are preaching to the choir, that choir grows smaller and smaller with each passing year. Our memories are evaporating. Not news.

And perhaps this effect goes both ways, meaning we are not able to experience what younger persons are now experiencing because our 'experiencer' is no longer pliable or flexible, just too old to tune into their present moment. Memory goes both ways.

And so, this perhaps is why old people like me tell stories, because that's all we have and should not be surprised if they don't get your attention. We don't share our memories with those younger than us because there is nothing to share. Younger folks were not there and don't share those memories because they don't have them. It's like building sand castles while the tide comes in. This fact limits what we can talk about, so what can we talk about?

The result is that we talk about subjects that are common to all of us, topics like life, death, and religion of one sort or another. The word 'religion' comes from

the Latin word 'religare', which means "to tie" or bind, the things that last or last longest.

These things that last come the closest to being universal because, as mentioned, they last longest. In other words, these truths are the future because they will last until then, while other things melt away and are forgotten. The things that last long will still be there in the future.

In other words, these things that 'last' are perhaps the only hedge we have against memory loss or memories that we never had because we are too young. And so eternal verities are the only coin of the realm for the aging AND the young, because we all think about these things at some level. Old people think about death and youngsters do too, at least to some degree.

For example, you younger souls may have heard the songs of Chuck Berry, one of the kings of rock n' roll; I actually met him in person at a party in 1964. There is a difference. And less and less people each year have heard Berry's song "Mabellene," and there is not much we can do about that.

"Maybellene, why can't you be true?  
Oh, Maybellene, why can't you be true?  
You done started back doin' the things you used to do."

The lyrics to the Chuck Berry song "Maybellene" won't get far in time, not that far. Who can remember them, even now? And so, what kind of ideas are more universal and common to us all?

That's where we come up with thoughts of death and taxes, something everyone will know something about, and that have the currency to be remembered by old and young.

For example, this Facebook blog by default caters to older people like myself because we want to remember or do remember and have something to remember. Younger people don't have what we do remember because they were not there and don't have those memories. A perfect non-sequitur.

What's the point if what we write is so abstract that it does not get across and make sense? I have wondered about this. For example, in dharma study:

Mahasiddhas (great dharma teachers) are not telling us something that we can remember or have ever known, but rather of something we have never experienced, never known. And so, that's similar to having no memory at all, just because we have not had it yet. And so, what's the point?

Their reason or purpose is to embed or imprint in us something that we can find within us if we will actually look, something perhaps we can get a sense of from their writing or at least a whiff. For example, by definition we have not recognized the nature of the mind, until we have.

However, at first look, these things of the dharma are very abstract, at least to us who have no experience or actual memory of them. The dharma texts say these lamas are 'pointing out' experiences and realizations that we know nothing of at this point, but that they consider to be of crucial importance.

They are sowing the seeds of our enlightenment, what can come, and not a memory we are trying to keep in mind.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



## THE TURN OF THE SCREW

January 3, 2024

Life is always upping the ante, raising the bar. I just get kind of comfortable delivering to myself my own thoughts, sensing I'm on the right course, and a bit of chaos comes along, upsets the applecart, and scrambles the parameters all over again. And after the smoke clears and the fallout falls out, I find a new set of parameters in place, and they are always more strict, yet somehow also very authentic. The turn of the screw.

I cannot disagree with the new requirements and although they are more unforgiving, at the same time, they also are more integral. And integral is an offer I can't refuse; I am always game for the authentic. What is authentic?

If I can adjust and get used to the new rules, the raising of the bar, I come out of it a better kind of me, and that's a good thing.

The cost is some kind of re-tooling on my part, being more realistic, and exploring the rules of the new 'me', so to speak.

Yet, when it all calms down and becomes normal, I find that I am good to go, better than I was, more actually there, so who can complain?

I'm going through one of those times now, in the middle of all the chaos in the world right now, the wars, the politics, the Covid, and on and on. It's disorienting by definition, of course.

This amounts to realizing the uselessness, the ineffectualness, of my current view and state of mind, and just by seeing that is enough to pop the balloon I



have been in, and shrink me down to a more efficient self-size, if you follow me.

Of course, this is a comedown from being more puffed up, a reevaluation, and requires a back-to-the-drawing-board session. The teardown is painful, yet there is nothing to regret because its been exposed by me as not authentic. And even I agree that's not good, and so, with no argument I find myself rebuilding my house of cards, once again, hopefully on a more firm foundation.

There you have it, pretty well expressed, so there should be little doubt what I am talking about here.

This is the power of a realization. Nothing more need be said. Once realized, reorganization follows automatically. No real choice because with realization WE are the realizer. It's doesn't get better or more direct than that. A realization is a direct experience. A realization is a taste of non-duality, and gives us an idea or what non-dual meditation is all about.

So, color me caught in my own vice grip. I've been served, and by me. I have no choice but to follow through. Does this happen to you?

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

# WE CAN'T UNREALIZE

January 4, 2024

Tibetans love the concept of seeing a coiled snake on the floor and realizing it is just a piece of rope. That's what realization does.

Just as we can't unsee what is seen, we can't unrealize what is realized. If you think it's hard to realize the true nature of the mind, it's impossible to un-realize what has been realized.

What I write each day is more demanding as time goes on. And by 'demanding' I don't mean it takes me more time. What I mean is that the bar continues to be raised so that I have to be increasingly more integral in what I write, as I see it, to communicate to others.

I am reminded of the widening gyre of Yeats poem "The Second Coming." I certainly am not escaping the widening of the gyre. I have to work within it. That is the nature of Samsara.

In practical terms, the whole concept of Samsara means we work against what's good for us, against our own true nature and are not even aware of it. That's what Samsara is, failing to realize the nature of the mind and how it works. In other words, we work counter to our own best interests.

Is it any wonder that from time to time we are brought down a peg or two and have to rebuild our little house of cards?

We should welcome this sobering rather than continue to ignore or work counter to the truth of our existence or lack thereof. One thing that helps is to recognize that we are not to blame for ignoring the truth of reality. It is not like we once knew and turned away. My dharma teacher made it very clear that we never knew and have never known anything but reifying and ignoring reality. We have yet to be aware, much less to realize it.

And it is not conscious ignoring on our part, but rather ignorance is our heritage. We were born into it and of it. And it is not a case of original sin as some faiths have it. We did not know and then fall away from grace. We have never known grace although it exists within us all this time. We don't realize it. That's the key issue.

And this is why the word Buddha means "aware" because the historical Buddha succeeded in becoming aware of what we are unaware of. He became aware and understood, experienced it consciously, and then 'Realized' the true nature of the mind and how it works, and that realization, like all realizations, stuck.

Realization is not something that comes and goes. Realization comes and stays. That's its nature.

In other words, 'Realization', by nature, dispels ignorance because it is nothing more than that we see our mistake, how we mistook reality to be something it is not. And in that moment of realization, as the Tibetans say, the darkness of eons of ignorance vanishes like striking a match in a dark cave.

The only thing that happens is that we can suddenly see because of the light of awareness, and the darkness just vanishes. However, realization is a one-way street. Once we realize, we cannot go back to not having realized, to not seeing. We have seen or realized and thus we have realized.

The Buddha became aware and with that stopped ignoring the true nature of the mind. And he spent the rest of his life trying to point out to the rest of us how we too can realize the true nature of the mind.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



# ENDEMIC SOLAR FLARES

January 4, 2024

The increase in solar flares over the next year, as the sunspot cycle reaches a maximum, will no doubt release a slew of new everything: inventions, start-ups, trends, and all things creative.

Which of these will survive is another story, because the onslaught of solar change drives us forward, yet the direction of this energy depends on how prepared we are to launch anything. Many will skyrocket up and fall back down to earth as non-starters.

And it's not like we are bystanders, watching all this happen. The same change that drives entrepreneurs drives us and at the same time. So, we had best watch or mind our P's and Q's. because we are not immune from having to deal with this same surge of change. Change is like cash. Spend it if you have it, but whether you end up with a sound investment is another matter.

Most of us are just blown around by the winds of change and end up disoriented or overwhelmed by it. We ride these winds at our own risk or hunker down and wait it out. Left to our own devices, this rush of sudden change will pop us right out of our normal groove and into traffic. I have studied this for years, and I still fall victim to launching off in this or that new direction thinking I'm going places, only to come crawling back sometime later, searching for my normal groove.

Today, like many days lately, there was a strong, very intense, solar flare. You can watch it through a special telescope or wrestle with it inside us as it rips through.

I have tried to be pliant, flexible, and roll with solar change as it's beamed in. However, as they say, that and a ticket will get me a ride on the bus. I am easily victimized by false starts based on the temporary rush of change that I believe I can easily use.

I can use it, but it just as easily falls away leaving me stranded in a drydock of one kind or another and wishing I had just held on tight until the flare passed rather than try to surf it.

Anyway, already today (Thursday January 4th) has already seen a M.4-Class flare that erupted at 8:55 PM EST January 3rd, last night. CME (Coronal Mass Ejection) alerts have already been issued by the space scientists.

Perhaps you don't connect what's going on with explosions on the Sun with what's happening here on Earth, yet you might find that they match up very well. The Sun has been erupting all this last year or so, and you can measure for yourself whether you feel any effects from all the turmoil in wars, politics, etc. that we are undergoing down here on Earth.

I know. Scientists have not gotten around to looking at what solar intensity does to us internally, psychologically and emotionally, but they are starting to. And we, like or not, are going through whatever we are going through, whether science alerts us to it or not.

Space scientists are monitoring and still concerned about the effects on Earth of the huge solar X-5-flare that happened on New Year Eve. Radio transmissions are being absorbed, many blacked out or attenuated. These are caused by protons that were accelerated by the New Year's Eve flare, and are hitting our planet, funneling into the poles and disrupting shortwave radio. And these can go on for days.

However, these same scientists have not managed to get around to wondering if these solar flares also affect us internally or mentally. Yet, those of us sensitive to them know they do affect us very directly. It is easy for you to monitor the current state of the Sun/Earth relationship by using the following URL.

“Solar Ham”

<https://www.solarham.net/index.htm>

“Space Weather”

<https://spaceweather.com/>

There is no use in my parroting what the above URLs tell us, so if you care about this, starting monitoring what is going on up there with what you are experiencing down here. For me, such investigation is a one-way trip. Once we become aware of the connection, we value this information.

What are the psychological, emotional, and spiritual ramifications of these current massive solar flares? Since science won't focus on them, that leaves us to work this out for ourselves. And you won't learn much

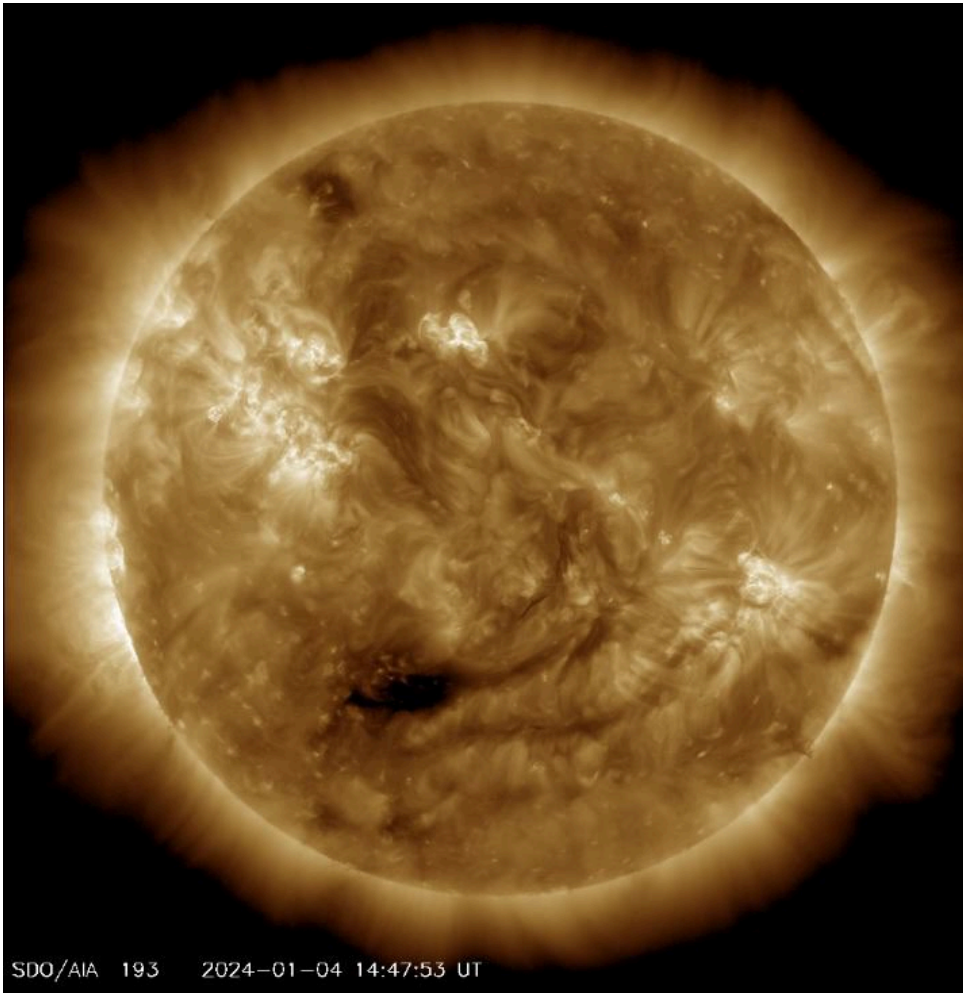


by looking outside at the photos of the solar flares. We have to look inside at what is going on right now with us.

It seems from messages from my family and folks that the current inner state for many of us is disoriented, overwhelming, and for most, depressing. Why do you think that is and could it have any relationship to these pockets and blasts of energy coming from the Sun?

We have to figure this out for ourselves by actually considering what's going on inside us right now and begin to monitor our own inner activity. I don't see a choice. The government does not seem to notice anything. Like so many things these days, it's up to us to do it ourselves.

[Current photo of the Sun.]



## THE TERRIBLE CRYSTAL

January 5, 2024

What is hard to see, IMO, and this the pith dharma texts explain to us very well, is that we have

constructed this world around us. We have not just been born into this world, but as we are born and grow, we are creating our new persona and world as we go. And so we are, by nature, complicit in who we are and where we find ourselves.

The poets have called this persona or Self that we have created the "Terrible Crystal" because by creating our persona or Self and then reifying it, we paint ourselves into a corner at the same time. The concept of a permanent 'Self' holds us back as much as it may appear to hold us together. It cannot be depended on. We each are a victim of our self to the degree we take it as permanent or as a "Soul."

And I understand that this is easy to say or write about, but VERY hard to realize that we are actually doing this. The Tibetans in my experience take a series of different approaches at this idea of construction, trying by various ways to jog us into realization.

However, apparently that is very difficult, otherwise we would all be realized by now. As my main dharma teacher explained to us, we are not enlightened. We are the stragglers, the ones who never got enlightened in all the time that there is and has been.

And we are so habituated to ignorance, to ignoring the actual nature of how the mind works, that further progress seems hopeless. There is nary a crack in Samsara's seal (and its hold on us) that we can use to deconstruct it. Samsara is a closed system, and we are at the center of it.

That we are at the center and it is all about us; that fact alone should be a clue. We are continually creating the problem faster than we are reaching any kind of escape velocity from Samsara. That's a good definition of hopeless.

Unfortunately, our habit has been to kick the can down the road, go along with the crowd, put off change until the next rebirth, and not bother to paddle back upstream and analyze our own constructions, much less solve them. This is what is called 'Samsara'. It is just 'life' to us, what we know. And if that's our habit, and we can squeak by, who is to tell us otherwise? Only ourselves. And here we sit.

Anyway, that's the situation we find ourselves in, being swept along in the river of time and not knowing how to sail or negotiate that river. This is why folks who study and practice dharma, those who have had some training, do their best to get our attention, to flag us down, so to speak, and point out alternatives to taking it on the chin as we do, passively.

To a marked degree, we have created our particular situation, our entire world, and only we can do something about it. That's why the Buddha or someone like him, cannot just touch us on the forehead and we are enlightened to all this. That's not going to happen, and there is a reason.

One of the difficult concepts to grasp, IMO, is that dharma is a do-it-yourself proposition. No one can do it (or is going to do it) for us. We have to do it by ourselves, with all the help we can get. In other words, we each must turn the wheel of the dharma on

our own. It won't turn itself and others can't do it for us.

The point of writing pieces like this is to help inform anyone interested that the dharma texts tell us that it CAN be done, exiting Samsara, and that we just actually must do it ourselves. We don't have to be swept along in time as we are now. We can learn to paddle. We can sail.

And chief among the tools to accomplish this is realizing that this world we find ourselves in is our own projection. We are not just at the mercy of the circumstances we find ourselves born into. We have ourselves created those circumstances as we go along, and can by that fact uncreate or with effort, change our situation at will. We just don't yet have the will or the awareness.

However, changing our situation requires that we drive a wedge into one of the cracks in Samsara and widen it. And to do that, we first have to find that crack. Samsara likes to appear seamless and intimidating. And since we each create our own Samsara, we have to outwit ourselves in order to be liberated.

And so, the very first thing, the first step in that process, is to be told, have it pointed out, that such cracks exist and that we are at least the co-creator of our own situation, the situation we find ourselves in the middle of.

However, we do have to find confidence in and take it on faith that this can be pointed out to us.

The seminal pith dharma teachings can do this, yet learning and practice takes courage and time on our part, and above all awareness that we need these teachings.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



## THE LITTLE DEATHS IN LIFE

January 6, 2024

Like the snake that sheds its skin or the insect larvae that molt, we do the same thing mentally and spiritually.

Whatever we are and wherever we are in our progress, we reach a point where we outgrow ourselves and have to cast off the current shell of our personality and inherit afresh a new exterior skin or View. We see things differently. We change.

I believe we vary as to how often this happens, how it comes about, and how unsettling it is for us, but the result appears to always be the same. We are, in a small way, born again or are forced to have a new take on things.

However, much like birth, this is not a painless event for us, although we may look forward to it. We literally are turned inside out, turning the aging Self-view that we have had out, and allowing a fresh approach in to take over. It just happens. So, who are we, the old or the new, or both? One can only assume that the real death, when we pass on from life, is somewhat similar.

And this new 'skin', so to speak, is at first very tender, easily impressed and far too sensitive, at least until our new shell or personality toughens and can take the wear and tear of a life being lived.

As for me, no matter how I try, I can't see these shifts or changes coming, only that I know they come. The first sign of impending change for me is when my little house-of-cards (which I call my Self) takes a hit and comes tumbling down around me. In other words, I experience a loss, not a gain. The gain takes time, and comes later.

In this process, I become disenchanted with myself, and begin to see through the veneer I have gilded myself in, and having seen this, I begin to cast it off. I'm no longer authentic in my own eyes and opinion. Yet, it seems that I feel sadness or reluctance about losing the familiar, being upset, and forced to face change head-on, the mere fact that I'm changing.

It's a little death in life that we call 'change', change that's large enough that we can't escape witnessing and being in the midst of it. As mentioned, it seems that my first reaction to the onset of this kind of change is a sense of loss, that I am losing something I know and love, that I am changing more than just a little, and into what I don't quite know. And we can't know, because that's what's changing, our 'me, myself, and I'.

Yet, having done this many times now, it seems I always come out of it better, with a fresh view, more apt and able. Nevertheless, it seems that birth of any kind, even on a small scale, is very disrupting if not downright painful.

Perhaps, it's just the fear of the unknown or the uncertainty of change itself and facing it. I believe the word 'molt' expresses it clearly. I am not totally



changed, but I do molt or cast off my previous personality to a marked degree, and reform or reassemble myself afresh. Yes, I'm still 'Michael Erlewine' alright, and yet I'm different too, at least until the difference settles down into the same, and becomes a new normal.

As for what happens to my old Self, the one that's passing away, it seems we agree to forget what we find too hard to remember. It's just easier that way.

I mention this just to see whether anyone out there also does this. I would imagine we all do, in one way or another.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



## WHAT SAMSARA IS

January 7, 2024

What's unique to me is my own experience and whatever in that experience I have managed to realize from it. I don't have to be shy or apologize for that. We each have a unique history. You do also.

Trying to fit my personal experience and dharma insights into a traditional dharma pattern or mold I find impossible. The teachings themselves say there are 84,000 dharmas. Whether that is just a high number and how the dharma scholars came up with that sum, I'm sure I don't know, yet it suggests a lot of leeway – different dharma paths for different folks.

Aside from Samsara, everything else in this universe is dharma or dharma compliant. It is just Samsara that is counter or not dharma, an opaque dam that holds back the waters of our own liberation. It keeps us from full immersion and realization.

Aside from Samsara, we can take any part of our mind and this world and it becomes another direct path to enlightenment. So, what's the holdup?

Well, of course, that would be Samsara that is holding us back, aside from ourselves. And perhaps we have to keep reminding ourselves what Samsara is. What is it?

Samsara amounts to everything that we are attached to that resists change, whatever we try to grasp or cling to because we insist that it must, should be, or is permanent, like an eternal "Soul" or a permanent Self that continues on at the next rebirth, and around which everything revolves from lifetime to lifetime. The pith dharma teachings say that such a soul just

does not exist. It is untrue. Everything changes and is impermanent, not static.

Our own clinginess and attachments are an attempt to stop the wheel of dharma, the wheel of change itself from turning as it naturally does. We insist and resist, yet we don't have that power because that entire View is a mistake.

And by that same frozen grasp or grip, that insistence, we are thereby dragged along, banging ourselves against the walls of time as we go. All we have to do is to let go, yet we can't seem to manage that. It is we who keep the show static and in stasis, and it's killing us, so to speak. Learning to let go is more than just good advice; it is imperative.

Pliancy, flexibility, suppleness are what we need, the ability to let go and allow ourselves to enter the flow of change. And to stop damming ourselves up against change. That's a bad idea and we are doing this to ourselves. Only we can stop it.

And the great dharma Mahasiddhas, who were not monks, but just lay people like ourselves, yet also astute dharma practitioners, have written volumes of suggestions, and perhaps the chief of those come from the Mahasiddha Tilopa, who ground sesame seeds during the day and ran a brothel at night, and he wrote as words of advice to us:

Don't Prolong the Past,  
Don't Invite the Future,  
Don't Alter the Present, \*  
Relax, Just as It Is.

\* Also added in some texts, two more suggestions, which are subtexts of “Don’t Alter the Present,” and they are:

Don’t Analyze or Examine.  
Don’t Intend or Control.

These six words of advice have been passed down and commented on innumerable times, and in essence they say: Relax, be fluid and bend with the wind.

As for a samsara story, I have one and will share it. Many years ago (mid-1980s), when many of the great rinpoches had fled Tibet and were temporarily homeless (they had left their ancestral monasteries), they sometimes toured our dharma centers, including our center here in Big Rapids, Michigan, the ‘Heart Center KTC (Karma Thegsum Choling).

And one of those Rinpoches was one of the four ‘Heart Sons” of the 16th Karmapa, Rangjung Rigpe Dorje came and spent a week with us at our center with his attendant.

One of the things we did was take His Eminence to a nearby pine forest, where there still were original growth trees, huge trees reaching into the sky. Their lower branches didn’t even start until about forty feet up, and the forest floor beneath was covered with moss and soft grass. We had a picnic there on the grass.

And His Eminence remarked that "Someone could become enlightened here" and later said “This is very nice Samsara.” Of course, sometimes Samsara is

nice. As we left the pine forest and were driving back on back roads, a miniature almost-tornado came up. It was pouring rain and the windshield wipers could barely keep up, with dust-devil whirling winds pushing the car around in the road.

Margaret was in the front seat with me, and His Eminence and his attendant were in the back. My knuckles were white from trying to control the wheel and we were struggling against the storm. I happened to look back at the lamas, and they were sound asleep, completely out and relaxed.

That was a lesson right there.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



## POINTING OUT WHAT CANNOT BE POINTED OUT

January 8, 2024

This is going to be one of those mind-twisters, for which I apologize. I don't know a clearer way to say this.

A perennial problem in dharma instruction is trying to put into words that which cannot be put into words, yet over the centuries endless reams of words have been expended trying to do this. It's not like the great dharma teachers don't know better than to attempt to describe what cannot be described, but rather they hope something rubs off on the reader, some inkling.

If these words (or actions, signs, and signals, etc.) are shared by a Mahasiddha or great dharma teacher to a student, they are often called the "Pointing Out Instructions", pointing out the actual nature of the mind. This is hard for students to grasp.

For example, in Mahamudra meditation, when we are not just learning and practicing it, but are actually doing Mahamudra, and this is a form of non-meditation. We don't do anything other than just rest.

What this means, is that when we are doing Mahamudra properly, "We" are not actually doing anything but resting in nature of the mind and then perhaps reflecting on that or reflecting that experience. Here I'm talking mostly about the combination of the Insight Meditation itself and then 'reflecting' on that insight.

And by 'reflecting', this means we are aware that we are (or just have been) aware (through the insight), yet that awareness itself is not an awareness of any 'thing' or object. Mahamudra is non-dual. It has no object and no subject seeing an object. Resting in Mahamudra is, as mentioned, non-dual, meaning we are fully immersed for however long we can sustain it, most often momentarily, followed perhaps by some awareness or reflection that we have been immersed.



And while the duration of actual resting, immersed in the true nature of the mind, can be short, it can be done successively, repeatedly, as often as we like, with each momentary immersion followed by the reflection (duality) of the immersion, whatever that may be. And this string of immersion/reflection can be strung together in a seamless chain of light -- insight and reflection.

And after the insight, we may have a reflection not of any 'thing', since in Mahamudra there is no object or subject, however, in the world we live in (Samsara), we very much have both subject and object and in reflection some light from Insight Meditation may be reflective.

My point is that alternating between immersion (non-duality) and duality (subject and object) in rapid succession does not in itself create an object. The clarity and lucidity that is intrinsic to full immersion in Insight Meditation, can be pointed at (like a flashlight) at whatever thought or activity we are actively involved in and it's like the immersion with that thought or idea in mind sheds light on the thought upon withdrawal from immersion. Insight Meditation is like a flashlight that illuminates whatever it is directed at, although itself it has no object. Like a lamp.

In dharma training, duality (subject and object) is called Relative and non-duality (full immersion) is called Absolute. And there are caveats.

The main caveat here is that our idea of resting in the nature of the mind has to start somewhere, and by that, I mean using our normal idea of resting, as in

'give it a rest' is where we have to begin as that is all we know.

And we can do that by stopping what we are doing and just resting in that moment as best we can. Relax. This can be awkward at first, yet in time, if we do this as often as we can think to do it, over time we can actually rest and stop just trying or making an effort to rest.

Obviously, trying to rest and actually resting are two different things. And there is one step more I have to share, and it is more complicated than just resting, and this cannot be put into words except very poorly. It can't be said, not because it is secret, but because it is ineffable, beyond description or words. The closest analogy I have found is presented in this short video on polymers, which I find illuminating, very much worth seeing.

“Stretching Polymers”

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z5RR\\_mVJf3s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z5RR_mVJf3s)

In this video, I found it helpful to view what is called “Necking,” when a polyethylene polymer plastic is stretched. See the above demonstration. When a polymer plastic is stretched, the polymer chains in the original plastic are not aligned, but when carefully stretched the polymers align and create a plastic that is very much stronger than it was, and also crystal clear. This is the principle that makes Kevlar armor so strong.

The above is just an analogy, yet one I find instructive if we consider the kind of resting required for Insight

Meditation. It is not just that resting is clarifying, but rather that the particular 'clarity' achieved is an order of magnitude more clear and lucid than we have ever known. Insight Meditation is stark or vividly clear AND it occurs without any sense of duality (subject and object).

This event in dharma terms is called "Recognition," and it refers to our recognizing the true or actual nature of the mind for the first time. I can't tell you when this will happen or exactly what causes this or how, but this in dharma training is invoked by the 'Pointing-Out Instructions', where the result (what is pointed out) is a non-dual (no subject and object), a fully immersive insight or experience.

That recognition experience, so to speak, is actually a form of mini realization. An insight in Insight Meditation is a vivid and non-dual experience that is realized. We are aware, but not aware of any 'thing'; just vividly aware.

And the point in explaining this is that this experience of vivid 'insight', is like a spiritual flashlight that can be pointed in any direction we wish, and the insight itself is not a thing, but rather Insight Meditation is something like a light or torch, that when directed at an object, can't help but illuminate or light up any subject or 'thing'.

That's about as clear as I can make something that cannot be described in words. Insight Meditation shines the light of truth wherever it is invoked. Or it is like a star in the sky of the mind, that lights up anything in its vicinity.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



## HOW TO REMOVE BAD KARMA

January 9, 2024

A question that comes up in many of the pith teachings is how do we remove the 'bad' karma we have accrued not only in this lifetime, but throughout the many rebirths we apparently have had.

The answer to that question would take a library of traditional dharma texts to answer, if we had time to even read it all. And of course, many who study this are concerned about what they can do to erase and remove all the karma that has been accumulated.

However, when I first looked into this, I was not prepared for the key or most useful way to remove our accumulated karma. It took me by surprise, but after I took it in and thought about it, this is obviously the true solution.

And that advice is to stop accumulating karma which will take a toll on us. Don't create bad karma in the first place. Just don't continue to rack up the kind of actions and intent that leads to karma. Of course, I never thought of that. Duh. Yet, it's the obvious correct answer.

OK, good. How do we go about doing that, not committing actions that get recorded in dharma's little-black book of the karma we are liable for, which is kept in the Alayavignana, popularly called the 'Storehouse Consciousness', which is a crucial part of Samsara.

One thing each of us can do to lessen Samsara's hold on us is to stop reifying everything, stop exaggerating, gilding the lily, so to speak. Probably more than trying to erase the past ('Out damned spot') in order to lessen our karmic load, we could, in addition, stop accumulating still more karma. That's an easy solution in theory, just not so simple to actually carry out.

The dharma texts say it is very, very difficult to remove karma, once recorded and accrued. It is much easier NOT to record it in the first place.

What makes us feel secure or real? A lot of that is our many attachments, each of which binds us further into Samsara. The same goes for generally grabbing onto everything as ours or whatever is important for our Self-identification.

It's like we are hanging on to Samsara for dear life, constantly reifying our identity, upping the ante on our attachments, and identifying, identifying, identifying with ourselves, our Self, as more important than what we actually are, and that Self which we had created and constructed by amassing attachments to form it. A bad habit.

The consistency of our Self is maintained by all the things we paste or post on to it. Our Self is like a great magnet for all our attachments, likes and dislikes, growing and seeming ever more and more real to us, although we have passed reality long ago and by now are deep into pure reification, gilding the lily, as they say. We make our Self more real than reality will support. That weighs us down and amounts to Samsara personified.

The dharma texts continually state that we have no Self in the sense of an eternal Soul or an entity unaffected by impermanence and change, yet that does not deter us from magnetizing what Self we have in an attempt to ignore reality and pile on, shore up, and decorate our "me, myself, and I."

And the pith dharma texts don't kid around as to our eternality, our continual reification and attempt to personally persist in time. beyond the corners of this life. There is nothing permanent other than change itself. Everything changes and no matter how much we gather to make our identity as real as we imagine it to be, nevertheless we (our Self) are just an empty hologram that will shape-shift and change right out of permanent existence. So, what's the good news?

There is no promise of good news, yet my opinion as to what is encouraging is the fact that here we are right now. We are alive and present. How did that happen?

Sure, we rally around the flagpole of our personality, trying to keep it up to snuff, while the wear and tear of time tears it apart, because our personality is a losing game. According to the pith dharma texts, our personality or Self ends, as our body does, at death. What moves on?

Apparently, we have never (not ever) had a permanent existence or eternal soul, and yet, here we are existing, just not permanently. We have never been an entity that is independent of time.

Apparently, disparate karma, as recorded in the Storehouse Consciousness, proceeds forward after our death, and is then cherry-picked as relevant to create a fresh persona (Self), yet that rebirth personal is not the coherent Self or persona of this, the previous life.



## A SHIFT OF VIEW

January 10, 1924

OK, OK. Yes, this is winter. It started snowing a little while ago and will probably keep snowing for who knows how long. It's beautiful, of course. And cold.

I don't know whether it is just the winter doldrums, trapped inside like I am, that are getting to me or a



certain change of heart and view that's come over me of late. Either way, I'm embedded in a shuffling and shifting of priorities that is pointing inward.

And it is not something I can surf or just ride out, but more like an inner shifting or pivot, a reorientation. I'm changing. I'd like to talk about it here, but just how to do that I'm not sure. I will use photography as an example, since that is something, I know well and also what I consider visual dharma, 'Liberation Through Seeing.'

In photography, lighting is very important, especially to the camera, because proper lighting makes it much easier for the camera and lens to take a photo without artifacts or approximations, especially if, like I do, we stack photos.

It's no different from using our eyes to look at a scene that is not properly lit. We can't see clearly or clearly enough. Come up with some good lighting and the scene is much easier to see and resolve. With photography this is even more important.

As a nature photographer since 1956, I was used to only using natural light, even in the studio, having two large south-facing windows and a skylight directly overhead. I fell into the assumption that artificial, or studio light was not 'organic' enough for me and I avoided it. I almost never used it.

Apparently, this assumption was just prejudice on my part, and I became aware of this when I happened to use a couple of studio lights set to daylight Kelvin. I live in northern Michigan and in winter it not only gets very cold, but we also get gray days all the time,

sometimes for what seems like weeks at a time. Hard for me to photograph with no direct sunlight.

And so, when I didn't have enough natural light and it was gray and overcast, I turned on some LED lights set to 5600K (daylight) and finished a shoot. To my surprise, when I looked at the results, I could not tell the difference between outdoor light coming in the windows and the studio lights.

And then it dawned on me that light was light and Kelvin was Kelvin. All this time I was excluding daylight studio lights from giving any kind of assistance, because it was not 'organic' enough for me. Big mistake, meaning I was just plain wrong.

There was no difference that I could see between the two types of light, natural daylight and studio LED daylight. And a corollary I also became aware of is that due to this prejudice, for many decades I never tried lighting my photography subjects other than with one light, outside daylight, either going outside or using daylight coming in a window.

And because of this, I didn't have what are called hair lights, rim lights, fill lights, or anything other than one light source, usually called a key light. I did everything with a key light.

Anyway, of late, I've begun relaxing my light prejudice and, so to speak, letting the light in where it is most helpful. Of course, I knew by name all the different lighting techniques, and even had the equipment, only I never really used them. Now I'm exploring and using them. Oh My.

It's like a whole other world, the other half of photography is lighting, suddenly available to me. That's the analogy using photography.

However, this is also happening in other areas, yet those are more difficult to put into words, and I'm still figuring it all out. My take on dharma is also shifting and that's a little terrifying for me because I don't know dharma as well as I know nature and photography.

To hazard some words, I will say this:

The dharma path I have travelled for many decades of course leads to this present moment. And as I take more and more of everything that occurs (and is present) to the path, the path becomes increasingly inclusive, ever widening until it is more like a plain than a path. The path is now everywhere and so it does not seem to lead anywhere else than here. And I'm here.

That should say something.

[Photos by me. Nikon Z7 II, Nikkor Z 105 MC Lens. Lights.]



## POINTING OUT POINTING-OUT

January 11, 2024

With an interest in dharma, what are we going for? Like the historical Buddha and many great dharma practitioners that followed, we are going for enlightenment, yet there are several distinct steps along the way.

The first big hurdle or 'Ring Pass Not', a barrier we must work through, is called in the Karma Kagyu tradition "Recognition," meaning recognizing the actual or true nature of the mind. In Rinzai Zen Buddhism, this is called "Kensho."

It's somewhat of a big deal, and not something we can buy, be grandfathered into, or work around. We either have Recognition or we do not, and if we do not, then we have no idea where the door or opening to it is located. We can't fake 'Recognition', only fool ourselves.

In other words, it's not a place we can get to without having actually gotten there, pretend as we may. And so, there is a huge pool of dharma practitioners who have reached the point where they are ready to recognize the actual nature of the mind yet have not. I can tell you something about that state is like because I have been there, swimming in that pool.

I will share one story about receiving the pointing-out instructions a number of times and NOT getting it, my being unable to recognize the true nature of the mind. Without going into needless detail, I received the pointing-out instructions from very authentic dharma teachers a number of times, but perhaps because I was not properly prepared failed to recognize the

nature of the mind, try as I might. And I will narrate this particular very embarrassing pointing-out story.

In the 1980s, I received a personal message at our dharma center that one of the Heart Sons of the Karmapa (I will not say which one for privacy) that I should come to see him right away. He was visiting here in Michigan at the time.

Just to be clear, there are four Heart Sons, and these are the four tulkus that are in charge of transferring many teachings into a new Karmapa when he is found. Next to the Karmapa himself, these are traditionally the highest rinpoches in the lineage.

Of course, I jumped in the car and drove to the town where His Eminence was staying and told the center I was here. Well, soon I was ushered into a private interview and the door was closed. There I was alone with His Eminence.

His Eminence had me sit in a chair and pulled another chair right up in front of me and began giving me the pointing-out instructions as to the actual nature of the mind. Wow!

This involved speaking to me, very close and in my face, and doing various things with his hands around my head, and I had no idea as to what his gestures were all about. I just did my best to receive the pointing out.

This went on for some time, until His Eminence finally gave up. I was not able to recognize the nature of my mind and finally had to get up, head hanging down, and make my way out of the room. Needless to say, I

was disappointed and embarrassed to fail at this. And I drove back home with perhaps close, but no recognition.

I am just letting you folks know that 'Recognition' of the mind's nature, at least for me, was not just a walk in the park. Yet, I had no choice but to keep trying. And some years later, I received the pointing-out instructions again from my main dharma teacher, Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche and from his instructions, something sparked and I understood something about what was required and set about working on that for several years and it did lead to Recognition.

I am very grateful to Ven. Khenpo Rinpoche who by pointing out to me the nature of the mind became my Tsawi Lama. The particular dharma teacher who finally succeeds in pointing out the nature of the mind to a student is said to be his or her Tsawi Lama, their Root Lama.

It took me many years to prepare myself enough that I actually was able to receive the pointing-out instructions. If we are on this path, we don't give up. We keep on keeping on.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



## SHOCK AND CHÖGYAM TRUNGPA RINPOCHE

January 12, 2024

Here is part of a teaching by the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche where he talks about his serious automobile accident, what he went through in recovery, and how it changed his life. I will post some excerpts here. I found it very revealing and with some similarities to my own major stroke account.



Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche:

“The interesting message to me personally from Jamgön Kongtrül was a sense of maturity and a sense of growth: you have to take care of yourself and everything is left up to you personally -- one has to develop one's own dignity, one's own sanity and one's own resourcefulness I think my journey up to here became one big journey of that nature.

“I was driving a little car, which was recently purchased at the time, a sudden blackout overwhelmed me, and I ran into a joke shop. I broke in the door of the joke shop, which is a shop that sells tricks.

“Having been unconscious for several hours, I woke up in a hospital bed. A fluorescent light above me was my first experience. Subconsciously, I had heard sirens and people talking about: “Is he alive or is he dead.”

“And that was a very interesting, extraordinarily powerful message to me personally. It was a question of there still having been a faint hesitation whether I should work on myself or simply to take refuge in my reputation, in my robes, in my monastic vow alone.

“Relying on my credentials -- that's what it boiled down to.

“This was an expression of a certain fear in me, myself personally: suppose I give up my paraphernalia, so to speak, my outfit -- I'm going to be a fish out of water.

“There was still some doubt as to whether the transplanted sanity from my guru was going to work or not. In other words, I still wasn't convinced, still not committed to the teaching properly. And obviously, the only help for this that existed was this sudden message, this shock, this accident.

"If you're not going to behave as you should, like the good boys and good girls of the lineage, then this is the message--and make the best of it: WHOMP!

“And it took some time to recover from that message obviously Having realized this message, the instant reaction was: unclothe yourself, be naked.

“A certain time after my accident, my marriage to Diana took place. This was a very important part of my life, extraordinarily important . It was a further commitment to my life, to trusting basic sanity, working with the world, and further unclothing myself not particularly looking for an ideal wife and home and washing machine and TV set and motor car, which is going to provide you with hospitality and comfort. It was an act in the unclothing process.

“You go out, you go and open to the greatest extent you can in your life, in terms of being naked, reducing yourself to a fetus, completely opening. Doing that creates and created a tremendous uproar obviously. Because people love for that naked person to be clothed, masked, encased in a suit of armor.

“For the first time in my life I experienced that sense of nakedness extraordinarily powerfully. I was not only stripped of my monk's robes and my celibacy, but also

stripped of my skin and my flesh. You become a walking skeleton. You are still alive and your heart has not been stripped away and your brain hasn't been stripped away. But apart from that, everything has been stripped away. Which is a fantastic experience.

“Not only are you stripped of your own culture but you are stripped within the alien culture, full of pollution, motor cars, airplanes, jets hovering above your head-- and people gossiping about you, murmuring. It was an extraordinary stripping process.

“The basic question is after that if there's any sanity left in you. Does your sanity remain or was it nested in your clothes? Was it in your skin or your flesh, or was it in your heart and brain, in your bones properly and completely.

‘That's the test of whether you've been completely indoctrinated (in the positive sense) and completely blessed, so to speak, in the basic core of your marrow and in your heart thoroughly and completely.

“If so, then the messages become extraordinarily stronger and stronger, constantly. Then your bone begins to create flesh, which begins to grow out and develop; and your flesh creates skin, and your skin begins to create clothes. And you begin to develop a new human being. The basic point is: how much can you give in. And having given in, how much can you grow out. . . “

End of quote.

Trungpa Rinpoche's words speak for themselves, but they underline my own teacher's continued emphasis to be aware of any shock, any sudden surprise, in terms of a loss of Self and possibly recognizing the true nature of our own mind.

We may or may not be a Buddhist practitioner, but in the lives of any of us there can be shocks outbreaking that may break us down, temporarily shattering the cohesion and stability of what we call the Self, yet at the same time opening new doors of awareness.

In my case, I have never sought out shocks or events of that import, but nevertheless at least several have occurred to me in my life anyway. And each of these three shock events shattered my self-security and the glaring gaps or vacancies left by each of these shocks brought profound clarity of a dharmic nature to me in response.

When the Self is eclipsed by reality, even temporarily, the response is like that of sunlight on soil. The seeds of dharma sprout and grow, at least this has been true in my experience. I am somewhat ashamed to say that without the prodding of fate (and destiny) by way of adversity, aside from meeting Margaret (and the kid's births), no other of my experiences has been as fruitful for me dharmic-ally as big upsets. LOL.

And while, I never sought for or welcomed any of these sudden onslaughts to my Self, after I got over whining and being disappointed at my fate and difficult karma...after the smoke cleared, so to speak, my internal dharmic growth blossomed like a flower. That I can't deny.

I can see the same pivotal nature of these type of shocks in Trungpa Rinpoche's above account.

[Photo of Chögyam Rinpoche used with permission.]



# DREAMING THE DHARMA

January 13, 2024

Some folks have asked me to share how I got interested in the dharma. Here, in brief, is an early history, up until I met my Root Guru, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche. After that, an account would be a lot more technical, with all the different practices involved. This early time was more about intent and imagination.

I became interested in the Dharma around 1959, when I became fascinated with Zen Buddhism. My friends and I would stay up late at night and talk about Zen, Ingmar Bergman films, and perhaps peyote . We had our hot plate to make hot water, terrible instant coffee, powdered creamer, and lots of cigarettes to keep us awake.

At that time, it had not occurred to me to personally practice dharma. I just wanted to read about great Zen monks, haiku, and look at shoji screens, bamboo mats, and teak furniture. Of course, the raked-sand Zen gardens were fascinating, and I watched about every film and short by director Akira Kurosawa and owned most of them. I loved the idea of the 'Ronins', yet I did not yet even have a guru.

All that late-night talk gradually shifted into an interest in sitting zazen. I sat all day sesshin with Zen teachers like Roshi Philip Kapleau of the Rochester Zen Center, had my back hit with the kyosaku (wooden stick), and whatever else I could invoke. Yet

still this was not a regular daily practice. That took a while. I was like a Zen dharma voyeur, a dabbler.

Somewhere along in there I segued from Zen into Tibetan Buddhism and studied the Tibetan Book of the Dead, volumes by Walter Evan-Wentz, and stories by Anagarika Govinda. Back then, in the late 1950s and early 1960s, there were few books on Tibetan Buddhism and no Tibetan lamas in Ann Arbor that I knew of.

Along with talking about dharma, my friends and I also spent entire nights listening to jazz like John Coltrane's "My Favorite Things" in 1961. Or driving into Detroit late nights and seeing jazz greats like Cannonball Adderley at clubs like the "Minor Key." There was so much happening.

In the late 1950s in Ann Arbor, Michigan, there was no music in the local bars until after November 9, 1960. That was when liquor by the glass laws were repealed, and there was money to hire live music. Until then, jazz in Ann Arbor was held in apartments and homes, mostly up on around the U-M campus. I know because I hung out there, just a high school kid, barely tolerated at these all-night adult gatherings.

We kids ended up off to the side, being inconspicuous, sitting on the floor, with our backs against the wall, listening to jazz players like Bob James, Ron Brooks, "Turk" Pozar, and Bob Detwiler play. Small groups formed and improvised far into the night. Pot was smoked and wine drunk, but not by us, the few high school kids who managed to sneak in. Desperate to be a part of all this, we kids used to snort the ashes left from joints in the ashtrays. That

was some harsh stuff. LOL. But the Ann Arbor music scene back then is another whole story. Some other time.

In the early 1970s, I was stunned by the cover art of books by Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, and equally by his writings, especially his book "Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism." My eyes are very sensitive to what is visual, part of my interest in 'Liberation Through Seeing'.

And that came to a head early in 1974 when the Tibetan lama Chögyam Trungpa in person came and gave a talk in Ann Arbor, Michigan, where I lived. I was so enthused by his forthcoming visit that I ended up being his chauffer for the weekend and designing the poster for his talk that I silk-screened myself helped to put-up all-around town.

Meeting Chögyam Trungpa, face to face, and eyeball to eyeball, and hanging out with him was life changing. After that weekend with Trungpa I came away a dharma practitioner.

For one, Trungpa Rinpoche took me into a room, sat me down, and taught me Shamata (Tranquility Meditation) for an hour or so, just the two of us. Believe it or not, until Trungpa, I had never thought of myself as a practitioner. I was mostly a dharma talker. Trungpa made it clear that the dharma was something to actively do, not just talk about. What a great introduction to sitting meditation.

I am very devoted to Trungpa Rinpoche, yet I did not follow him or join his group, and for two main reasons. His American followers all had to wear suits and ties



and they drank alcohol like there was no tomorrow. I had been a performing musician, and by that time had my fill of alcohol, and you pretty much had to die to see me in a suit.

Like so many things in my life. I got a wonderful sense of Trungpa Rinpoche and that was enough to inspire me, those few days. I took him to heart. That was sufficient.

And so, in brief, that is roughly how I got interested in the Dharma and the story of my path up to the mid-1970s. It was some time after this that I met my Root Guru, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche and became a fully committed dharma practitioner. And that's when my dharma practice began in earnest, which is very much more detailed, but if folks are interested, I could tell that story at some point.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



# THE LAMA OF APPEARANCES

January 14, 2024

Mother Nature lays it all right out for us, the good, the bad, and the scary. In other words, as to dharma, we can read it in the sacred scriptures (Lama of the Scriptures), hear it taught by word of mouth (Lama of the Lineage), naturally intuit it (Lama of the Dharmadhatu), or learn it from Mother Nature directly, which in dharma terms is officially called the “Lama of Appearances.”

In my case, due to how I was brought up, far out in the country, with no neighbors or kids to play with other than my brothers, I fell into learning the dharma from Mother Nature, not that I knew the word dharma or had heard of Buddhism. I learned from “The Lama of Appearances.”

And carefully schooled I was, self-schooled, yes, driven by my own interest in and fascinated by the natural world around me. There was really not much of a choice. Nor was there a better teacher than nature, at least at the time.

However, learning directly from Mother Nature kind of ruined school for me, being taught by anyone other than the natural world. I knew, early on, what learning was about for me, and primary education at school was no match compared to the natural history all around me where I lived.

Being forced, however kindly, to learn in school did not measure up to learning at the rate of my own natural interest. And so, I had no real choice. If what I learned in school did not compete for my interest in nature, and it did not, there you have it, a problem.

Nature does not mince words, and concepts like 'impermanence' are never candy-coated, but straight out obvious to me as a child from my constant observation of the natural world. I was brought up on natural law, so society's law lacked the crystal-clear insight of nature. I already knew better, even as a young boy, and without realizing I was offended by the clumsy efforts to educate me otherwise.

It was the inspirational factor that was missing. Let me explain this by using photography as an example.

The poet Gerard Manley Hopkins came up with a concept that struck me as true. He even made up his own word to describe it. He called it "inscape."

Inscape was to Hopkins an insight or path into the eternal or beautiful, literally the way in, a sign, and signal of the beautiful and true. I will try to explain.

I look forward to my trips out into the fields and woods. They offer me a chance to get my head together, to relax from the day-to-day grind of running a business (now retired) and generally a way to relax a bit.

This is not to say that just going outside and walking in nature means that I am instantly relaxed. That usually takes time. It is the same with taking nature photos.

In the first ten minutes of a morning photo walk I often don't see all that much to photograph. This too takes time, time for me to slow down, open up, and 'see', to let the natural beauty all around me in.

It could be that I was still filled with all the workaday-world thoughts, the things I have to do, problems, and what-have-you. It takes time for my mind to relax and let go of its constant chatter.

This endless worry and thinking affect my photography. And here is where the word 'inscape' comes in.

As I get out there and wander through the fields or wherever, I gradually start to slow down and relax. I begin to see things that are beautiful, scenes that I might actually want to photograph.

Slowly my view of the natural world around me starts to open up again and I begin to view things differently. I begin to 'see'. It takes time and usually does not happen all at once.

This little pattern of leaves over here or the way the light comes through the forest canopy, grabs me just a little bit, tweaks me, and the chatter of my mind begins to slow and then goes into pause.

As I continue to walk along, some little thing or scene appears beautiful to me; I am touched by it, however lightly at first. I gradually get distracted from my daily distractions and begin to center. That's when the inner me wakes up.

These little moments are ‘inscapes’, ways out of my mundane world of distractions and into the beauty of nature or, more accurately, back into the natural state of my own mind or being.

As I take my time, I am able to see the beauty in things once again, and what I am seeing suddenly seems worth photographing. Like most of us, I photograph what catches my interest, what I find beautiful or worthy in the world around me.

These inscapes are signals that catch my attention, and they flag me down on my busy way forward to nowhere-in-particular. These moments and signs are how I stop going nowhere, and manage to almost miraculously arrive somewhere once again, perhaps only at my own peace of mind.

This is one of the functions of the beautiful and true, to catch us in the turmoil of life, flag us down, and induce us to pull over and take a moment of rest. Time out.

These moments of inscape are different on different days, and different for different people. They represent the clues or signs that catch our attention and show us the way into the beauty of the natural world, actually into the beauty of our own mind. Some inside light turns on.

Another way of saying this might be: what is beauty actually?

What happens when we see something beautiful? Beauty is not simply somewhere out there in nature waiting to be found, but always here within us, locked

within us, we who are seeing this nature, we who can now see the beautiful. Like the old saying, “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. “True.

Beauty breaks down the rush of the everyday world and opens our heart a wee bit, making us vulnerable again, open to experience and input. Through natural beauty we go inside and experience the inner beauty of things, which is none other than our own inner beauty.

That is what beauty and truth is for, to be touched on, seen, so that we find once again the beauty within our own hearts that we may have lost through the distractions of our daily life. We look outside in nature to see in here, to see into our own heart once again. And we can be sensitive to beauty in our photography.

I would hate to tell you how many photographs I have of this or that butterfly or critter that are perfectly good photographs, but are empty of magic or meaning. They are well lit, well composed, and have everything that makes a good photograph except the ‘magic’ that keys or excites me.

Instead, they are ‘pictures’ of a butterfly, but they have not captured any essence of anything. They might as well be in a field guide – snapshots in time with no meaning and for no one.

The reason for this, so I tell myself, is because they just happened to be there, photographic opportunities. I saw them and I took a photograph, but at the time they did not instill or strike any particular beauty in me.

This, to me, is what I call “gotcha” photography, taking a photo because I can, not because I saw beauty in it or was moved to do so. There was no inscape moment, no moment of vision – snapshots only.

I find that it is really worth paying attention to what strikes me as beautiful or meaningful and photograph that, rather than just photographing the Grand Canyon because it is there, or I am there.

A lasting photograph, in my opinion, requires more of me than that, by definition. It has to mean something to me and, for that to happen, I need to actually be moved or inspired. Photographs that have special meaning for me usually have some form of inscape into a special moment that inspires me to capture the scene in a photo. I see beauty in those moments.

We can wander for miles looking for something to photograph, chasing down this or that butterfly or animal... searching. Or we can slow down and let nature herself show us the signs, her mudras, the inscapes through which we can relax and begin to ‘see’ naturally and photographically once again.

We can listen to our own intuition. This process of inscape, of insight into the sublime in nature (the sublime within ourselves) I find to be the key to good photography and to creating photographs that are real keepers, at least in my mind. If we don’t touch our own inner self in our work, we touch no one at all, but



when we are touched by a moment, I find that others also feel this. Touch one, touch all.

[Photo by of a Night-Blooming Cereus by me.]



## LIBERATION THROUGH INSIGHT

January 15, 2024

Perhaps a better title would be “Deconstructing Samsara.” My ante in to have continuous insight Meditation is that I use it each day (for hours) in many

things I do, like writing this blog. The words that I write are pinged off the immersion available in Insight Meditation, flavored by it, so to speak. If I can explain it well enough, this should be interesting.

My experience of Insight Meditation, although mostly in brief moments, is one of great clarity, and reflection on that clarity when I come out of that moment's immersion does its best to shape or embed my words with meaning from the traces of insight available to me upon reflection, on coming out of nondual immersion.

There is no describing non-dual experience. However, there are traces, what the Tibetans call perfume or 'smells'. Something rubs off and is available to us upon dualistic reflection after complete immersion in Insight Meditation.

The value of Insight Meditation, as part of Mahamudra, is its ability to lessen, solve, and remove the hard duality of Samsara, through insight realization, one instant at a time. They add up!

And the key is that while for most of us Insight Meditation is very brief, these moments of insight can be strung together like beads on a string or mala, one after another, until it is a stream. It is very much like digital sampling on a CD or DVD. The sampling is often enough so that to us it appears seamless. The same with Insight Meditation.

It's why I write about this so often. Insight Meditation gradually and consistently deconstructs Samsara. It is liberation through insight, through 'Seeing'. And we can do it. How incredible is that?

To learn this takes some real effort, at least it did for me in the beginning, but it's not like working in the coal mines, more like sampling from the mind of light. It's a privilege not a drudgery. I can do it all day, now that I have done my best to squeeze the effort out of it that it took to learn it. In large, it's not taxing, yet I do find myself doing stints of it and taking breaks, which suggest I am not all the way there yet. Close. However, I do that with most anything, do some, rest some, do some, etc. It's like breathing.

Insight Meditation is a main link to what might be called my 'dharma practice,' yet the path of dharma for me has widened so much that by now it resembles a level plain or a high plateau rather than a narrow path. There is nowhere to go other than right here. And that's where we are. Insight Meditation, moment by moment, eats away at the heart of Samsara, gradually loosening and deconstructing it.

That's why it is so important to learn.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



## RECOGNITION OF THE MIND'S NATURE

January 16, 2023

[I first learned to recognize the actual nature of the mind and how it works through close-up photography, creating photos like these , and not by sitting on my meditation cushion. Liberation by 'Seeing'.]

We are a victim of what we know, and this is true about anything, any study or topic. I know what I know, yet I don't know all of it about anything. There are a few things I know quite well, enough that I could teach them. These would be astrology, photography, music, rock n' roll concert posters, archiving popular culture, and probably nature study. I could also teach a course in being an entrepreneur, yet I doubt many could do the homework for that.

I also know something about dharma and have studied it for many decades, yet I don't consider myself a teacher of dharma. I like to share dharma with others. And I know a few parts of dharma training quite well, but I am a sharer of dharma, not a teacher. I can be a dharma friend.

In other words, I don't have a PHD in dharma because I only know my own path, the thread that has led to me as I am now. And I'm not interested in knowing everything about dharma just for the sake of knowing it. Rather, as mentioned, I just want to take the next step in the path of dharma that works for me.

So, with dharma, I can't say to readers, do what I do, because that makes no sense. What I know is just too personal and unique to me. The best I can say is that we each should do something to get to know the actual nature of our own mind. Become familiar with your mind.

Of course, with dharma practice we can talk about what are called the 'Common Preliminaries' and even the 'Extraordinary Preliminaries', what is called 'The Ngondro', and Lojong, because they are dualities and can be talked about. And we can talk (but it would

make little sense) about the various deity practices that come after the above, which practices are very detailed. Yet, information on what I mentioned above is readily available in book, video, and in-person format.

What's not available and what I do talk about is the pivot from the dual or relative forms of dharma training mentioned above to the non-dual dharma practices like Mahamudra and Dzogchen.

That remains a mystery to many because all (or any) of the nondual dharma practices can't be put into words. These topics result in an abrupt halt and are a ring-pass-not. I write about them, yet I know how difficult that is (from my own experience) to make sense of.

The non-dual dharma practices are not something we know or have ever known. We have no idea what the non-dual experiences, much less their realization, are like.

And my writing about the nondual dharma practices also is, for me, a way of clarifying all this for myself. There is nothing more subtle or difficult to negotiate that I know of. Also, I know of nothing more important to communicate than how to make the transition between dual and non-dual dharma, particularly because it can't be done with words.

Yet, many of us continue to use words (or try to) to get as close to understanding as possible. I'm using them here right now. And why I don't stop doing this is the belief that at the very least, some bit of insight might rub off.

And there is a long history of dharma teachers (and sharers) throwing everything including the kitchen sink at this problem. Zen Buddhism has a long tradition of jolting, shocking, upsetting, and doing whatever to a student necessary, trying to jog or jolt them out of their dualistic rut and into non-dualism, which once achieved is irreversible.

Realization is realization. It has the word “real” in it and that for a reason. When we ‘realize’, there is no going back to unrealizing. For example, when we realize how to turn on a light switch and get light, that is not something we forget next time. We realize it once and for all.

Yet, there is a vast difference between realizing how to turn on a light compared to realizing the true nature of the mind, yet the principle is the same. Realization.

And so, when someone realizes the nature of the mind and how it works, this makes a profound difference in our lives, and, as mentioned, once realized, there is no un-realization.

It’s exactly like the light switch and turning it on. Once you realize how to do this, you can turn on the lights!

It’s the same with realizing how the mind works. We suddenly become familiar with the nature of the mind, meaning we can work it. Like realizing how to drive a car, we can drive it.

We have never known how to ‘drive’ the mind, how to use and work it. Suddenly we can. It’s no longer a

mystery. After that, there is nothing standing in our way toward enlightenment other than our own effort.

[Photo by me.]





# INSIGHT MEDITATION: A STORY

January 17, 2024

One might ask what proof I have to show how important learning Insight Meditation can be for a practitioner. As I have repeated here endlessly, Insight Meditation is one of the non-dual dharma practices, non-dual meaning it cannot be described or expressed in words. This is traditional.

That makes it very difficult to communicate because it can't be communicated in language. It is ineffable. However, over the centuries countless folks have done their best to put Insight Meditation in words. So, what can I say?

Also attempting to express this in words, I can say this to describe the non-dual experience, my original recognition of the actual nature of the mind. I will do the best I can, yet if you consider what I am saying, you may get at least some idea of how stunning Insight Meditation is once we learn to invoke it. It's not just another dharma practice. It is a key transitional practice.

I will put aside the very special circumstances as to how this 'Recognition' that led to Insight Meditation came about for me, yet these conditions were considerable, should be discussed, and have to be noted for clarity and understanding as to how this is possible. I will say a few words.

This dharma event came during one of the most difficult times I have ever gone through, when I was at

my lowest ebb. I had just lost my job and suddenly had no way to support my family. I was crushed and my Self was shattered. However, apparently, it took this kind of sobering event to pull me down from my high horse and sober me, so to speak, enough to allow this breakthrough to happen.

I was so popped out of my normal groove that I did not even do my daily on the cushion dharma practice, something I had down ritually for decades. I was just too upset and all I wanted to do was get out of the house and wander in nature. This went on for many days.

Anyway, this dharma opening happened to me at dawn years ago in the late spring, when I was out in nature with my camera and lenses photographing plants and small critters. I was crawling around in the wet morning grass just as the sun came up during the time when the morning light for photography is very good. I was trying to forget all the hard knocks I was going through and I just didn't care about much of anything.

At the time, I was looking through the camera lens at whatever I was looking at, usually plants, flowers, bugs, and the like. And I had to have patience because Michigan is mostly flat and susceptible to wind, so often one has to wait for the wind to die down to take a photograph.

There I was peering through the lens, waiting for the wind to die down, and concentrating my focus on the subject, when for no apparent reason I was no longer just looking at the plant or subject. Instead, I slipped into seeing the 'Seeing' itself, seeing the whole thing

as in the line “The dewdrop slipped into the shining sea.”

Suddenly, I was a subject no longer, and what I was looking at was no longer an object (but still visible, of course), and like waves subside into water, I was fully immersed in the moment, lock, stock and barrel, yet crystal clear and devoid of thoughts .

And this was not a momentary passing insight or moment, but once invoked that day, it stayed as long as I concentrated -- the clarity, lucidity, and stillness.

And the impression stayed in my mind even later that day when I went back home and no longer was out in nature. At home my mind was just normal again, yet the impression of the Insight Meditation was something I could not forget or put out of my mind. It was by then an imprint like LSD leaves an imprint.

In fact, from that day forward, whenever I went out and photographed as I described, I could enter that same non-dual state if I followed my little photographic ritual. However, as mentioned, when I returned home, I could not invoke that same state. My mind was just normal. Needless to say, that summer and fall I spent a huge amount of time out in nature photographing.

And now comes what I consider as, at least to myself, some reason or proof of the importance of this event, which I hope you can appreciate.

For the next six months, from late spring of that year until the winter frosts drove me inside, I was out every morning when it did not rain, watching the sun come

up, crawling around in the grass in the fog and morning dew, looking through my camera lens and invoking the same vivid non-dual experience. It was like a portal had been opened, yet only when I was photographing as I have described.

And I'm talking here of every day. Before that, I can't remember when was the last time I watched the sun come up? It was years before, yet now I would not miss a day in order to have this vivid insight experience until physically it was too cold for the camera and myself to be outside, in late November. In other words, this went on for some six months straight.

That, to me, says something and it should be enough of a sign or flag to get your attention as to the import and imprint of this experience, at least for me. And why am I explaining this?

And that is because this experience was so life-changing for me that I can't help but do my best to explain what I can about how and when it happened, in case it could be useful for others to discover something similar themselves.

How strange it was to suddenly discover or open that portal into the non-dual world after a lifetime of a dualistic view. And it only existed when I was out in nature doing close-up photography, which is why, with all that daily photographing, my skill in photography improved a lot.

Yet, as mentioned, when I returned home each day, I could not invoke Insight Meditation around the house or anywhere else. It was like the rabbit hole in "Alice

in Wonderland.” I had to go out there in nature and look through that hole each day so that I could re-experience that state, again and again. It’s not like it happened and then just went away. It was an open port into another world, but I had to go outside to peer through it.

The Insight Meditation was always there if I went through the ritual of photography as described. Yet, as mentioned, my life had changed because of it, and dramatically. And, as winter came on, I was forced indoors, and my camera did not like the extreme cold. So, what happened then?

What happened is that I built a little studio in a small room in the upstairs where we live. And in that room, I did my utmost to create conditions similar to photographing outdoors, but in a studio with plants, cut flowers, and things like that, anything that was alive and green.

And, with some work, I was able to reestablish my experience of Insight Meditation right in the studio. I was so grateful.

And so, I nursed my photography experience in the studio until spring rolled around. And then I was back outside again, as early as sometime in February, doing photography and experiencing Insight Meditation. And life continued on into that spring and summer as it had the year before. However, by then there were, as they say, two trains running.

One was the Insight Meditation and photography, and the other was trying very concentratedly to see if I could move the Insight from photography into some

other part of my life, like for instance writing. If I could expand Insight Meditation to include writing, it would greatly improve my life.

Yet, as detailed, my window into Insight Meditation was like a portal or a rift in the cosmos that I could peer through provided I went through a strict procedure, that of photography, as I have described.

And I tried to make that shift beyond photography to happen. I willed it to happen, again and again, yet that went nowhere. Try as I might, over and over, day after day, to make that happen, I could not. I could not even lift even one finger by will. Obviously, I was doing something wrong, but I had no idea what that was. This went on all winter and into the spring. I was exhausted from the effort to make something more happen, yet nothing budged.

However, I did not give up. It took me over a year before something moved inside me, and even then only a tiny amount. And that was only a beginning, a first sign that there was hope. And then, inch by inch, or micrometer by micrometer, that inner portal began to open wider and include more with Insight Meditation than just photography.

And I would have quit long ago had not the Insight Meditation been so crucially important to me. And to make a long story short, inch by inch, I enlarged the portal, that hole in Samsara, to include the act of writing. And today, that portal includes writing 100% as well as photography. And I have not asked for anything more, yet I feel that expansion and extension continue, and inclusion is ever more inclusive.

And, as mentioned, this was not a matter of will. Instead, it was a matter of letting go, relaxing, and allowing this to happen naturally. And later, having discussed all this with my dharma teacher of 36 years, his last words to me before he passed on (96 years old) was to keep extending and expanding my recognition as to the mind's nature.

[Photo by me.]



## TALKING ABOUT DHARMA

January 19, 2024

It's hard not to refer to my own experience in talking about dharma because that's all I have. How's that for a Catch-22?

How to do that without seemingly gilding the lily, reifying our own experience and thus appearing too self-oriented. Not sure how society wants us to handle this. It is not socially acceptable to refer to ourselves too much, not to mention be labeled selfish.

Historically, this seems especially true of any reference to dharma and it's results. We are not supposed to have any experience much less claim realization. I have spent decades watching how the Tibetan masters handle this, which is always professing that they have no realization whatsoever, and at best they say they are just repeating or parroting what they have read or been taught.

I get that, some kind of humility, but it is so transparent as to be embarrassing. Of course, they have some realization or knowledge, otherwise they would not be rinpoches or high teachers. This must be some form of cultural etiquette.

And it's worse for those of us just learning dharma, when all we have, if we are honest, is our own experience for sure and what little realization we have accumulated, with no one else to speak for us or about us. And, as mentioned, it's ridiculous to parrot the masters and feign humility.



At this point, we don't have enough realization to even be humble and are trying to figure out what actually we do have. I have stumbled across this endlessly over the many decades I have been practicing dharma.

This is particularly true in that non-man's-land from when we begin doing deity practices and eventually segue into the non-dual practices like Mahamudra and Dzogchen. No one talks about it.

Not only are the non-dual practices ineffable, meaning they cannot be expressed in language, yet folks either can't or won't try to talk about them, even though over the centuries there are libraries of written teachings that do.

Yet, people like me are expected to make sense of all this, each on our own. Yes, I understand that we each have to turn the wheel of the dharma on our own. However, I see nowhere where it says we have to do it alone. There is no reason why while practicing individually, on our own, collectively we should not discuss and try to bring clarity to the process of practicing dharma.

Dharma may be self-secret, but there is nothing secretive about the non-dual dharma practices other than the inherent difficulty of accomplishing them. IMO, we need to be able to talk about all this.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



## SUNSPOTS TURN EARTHWARD

January 19, 2023

The sun has been very quiet for about a week now, but some large sunspots on the far side of the sun will be turning in Earth's direction soon, and some of them are very active scientists tell us.

The sun rotates once in 27 days.

We have had solar flares with us as part of our Earth-life equation literally forever. It's not that flares are new or anything like that. We not only live with them, but also live off or from them. Sunlight is essential for life here on Earth. Additionally, solar flare energy surges, allow us to draw inspiration and creativity from large solar influx. Solar flares are the main arbiter of large-scale change for those of us here on Earth.

As a group, society is not aware of solar flares and the flares insistent influence on us other than outwardly as scientists study, physically. Yet in time, I believe understanding of solar flare influence on our emotional and psychological well-being will emerge for what it is, that flares from the Sun force change upon us and it's up to us whether we are able to use that change productively or just ride out the increased change as best we can, hanging on to our hats.

The huge disparity between normal sunlight and the packets of energy that Earth has to digest in times of solar flares and the resulting CMEs (Corona Mass Ejection) is something that space scientists are studying in terms of their outer effect on radio signals and power grids, but they have yet to seriously look into and answer the question as to what this intense solar emission does to us mentally and psychologically.

To say there is no effect, IMO, is ridiculous. How many more years are we going to wait for someone to look into this? Some of us are already doing this.

Solar energy packets affecting us psychologically and even spiritually and are just another one of those things that science will ignore until it is unavoidable, at which time suddenly space scientists will reverse their opinion and declare solar flare emission an important, even key, factor in human creativity and change.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



# “SUCK ANY SENSE FROM THAT WHO CAN”

January 20, 2024

The above title is from a line by the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, making sense from words. Squeezing some life or sense out of language. We are so bound to conceptualization, that it too often does not lead to actual experience.

Without experience it seems that we cannot realize anything. It has to make sense, or it is literally nonsense. And the senses traditionally in dharma terms are six: sight, hearing, smell, touch, taste, and mind itself.

However, for experience to make sense we have to break the habit of only conceptualizing and without that conceptualization leading to actual physical experience. All the senses point or lead to experience, which experience then can be realized. As mentioned, the six senses are: sight, hearing, smell, touch, taste, and mind itself.

Oddly or interestingly enough, the ‘Sixth Sense’ is also called ‘ESP’ or extrasensory perception, referring not to the five common senses, but rather to what can be sensed with the mind.

At the same time, while we are familiar with using the five common senses, most of us don’t claim to sense life with the mind. In fact, it’s almost an oxymoron,

sensing with the mind. And yet we do it all the time as best we can, even if we may not realize it. We intuit.

The 'Sixth Sense' commonly suggests a more mystical ability, while simple intuition is associated with the subconscious and immediate or direct insight.

Yet, IMO, each of us intuits like mad, constantly, and as best we can, feeling for the future, sensing and precipitating experience with all our senses, and then squeezing out some meaning.

We can ask ourselves which of the six senses can be used by us to create or further spiritual experience. I find it is worth considering carefully.

Of course, to some limited degree, we intuit with all the senses, yet they all don't often lead beyond the senses to extrasensory or spiritual experience. We wish.

As for me, it seems that I have activated the sense of sight as an on-ramp to spiritual experience. And of course, as a dharma practitioner for many decades, I have done the same with exploring or 'sensing' with the mind itself. I have been trained.

In my case, visual art, such as photos like the one posted here, which I took today, can serve as inscapes, a way into the beautiful, a lift upward. Of course, we each have our own sense of beauty, so you will of course find photos that work for you. I just share here one that I react to.

And through years of patient (or not so patient) dharma practice, with the help of Tibetan rinpoches, I

have slowly learned to turn my gaze inward, sense with the mind, and generate experience that can then be realized. The 'realization' is the hard part.

The realization as to the nature of the mind, becoming familiar with the mind's nature, is what dharma is all about.

[Photo by me taken today.]





## THE ROOT OF THE ROOT

January 20, 2024

When I peel back the layers of what probably is the dharma onion in my life, I already understand that there is nothing at the center. That's traditional dharma.

Yet, as far as I know, what is the deepest layer or imprint I have found so far and where did it come from?

That's my question and I'm parsing that word, the Quest-I-On.

I believe that the deeper I go, using depth or 'suchness' as the measuring stick, all of my attachments get closer to being the same and funnel together. In other words, they are not very different from one another.

It's like spinning the wheel of life and arriving at what I am most stuck on, the heart of my heart, so to speak.

And this is beyond my family of kids and grandkids, and also my parental family of four brothers, and so on. And beyond those, are all my life's loves and interests of which the Dharma is what I would have put money on as the heart of my heart for many years. I have been concentrating on dharma for decades.

However, when the time came for dharma to speak to me directly, I was surprised to find that dharma spoke to me not from the meditation cushion I have sat on for all these decades, but rather from Mother Nature herself. Nature spoke for dharma.

When, during a time of extreme duress, I reached out not to that mediation cushion, but leapfrogged the cushion and found myself back with the early imprints of nature itself.

That was how I was raised and who or what raised me, Mother Nature.

Of course, my parents and family cared for me and brought me up. No question. Yet, as to who or what raised me internally, when push came to shove, and it did, I found myself trusting Mother Nature as my guide and teacher. This started when I was young, about six years old.

There is no doubt that Mother Nature and Dharma are to the greatest degree identical, two buttons on the same shirt. I know that. Yet, at the same time, of those two, Mother Nature came first and it is that which I am most familiar with and trust. There is no question.

And when it came time to introduce me to the actual or true nature of the mind, that task fell to Mother Nature as to where I wound up when 'Recognition' arose.

The birth canal, so to speak, was through Mother Nature, and her portal Insight Meditation arose and was invoked.

Of course, they are essentially one and the same, the dharma and Mother Nature. It's just that my deepest and earliest imprints were made many decades

before I ever heard the name Buddha or could understand what the term dharma meant.

For example, recently I watched a long series of episodes of a 'Reality TV' show. And while that was very interesting to me psychologically, what I found myself watching most, what was I was most enthusiastic about and brightened my day, were all the short video moments of various insects, lizards, snakes, and animals spliced into the narrative.

And every time any greenery was present, or a swamp or pond, all I could think about was how I would like to be there rooting around in the grass or shrubbery, seeing what life lived there.

I have always been impressed and fascinated by lush vegetation, jungles, swamps, and the like, because of the profusion of life in those places.

Anyway, that's the tell of the tale for me, familiarity with nature and the natural environment.

My history as a child was just too rich with exposure to nature, all of which left an indelible imprint on me at an early age and that imprint continued so until my late teens. Like a play on the old saying. "You can take the boy out of nature, yet you cannot take the nature out of the boy."

My many decades of dharma training have preoccupied me all this time, yet when life's 'push come to shove' events brought me to my knees, so to speak, it was Mother Nature where I woke up in when I gathered my wits and pulled myself back together again. That was a surprise.

As mentioned, dharma and nature are essentially one and the same, just different labels. Yet Mother Nature predated my introduction to the dharma by some long time and is where I feel naturally at home. I realize that.

And perhaps most importantly of all, it was Mother Nature that taught me how life actually is and that is very different from civil or society's laws. Nature's laws are how I was trained and what I judge life by. And my practice of Dharma has kind of been a finishing school for me.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



## MIXING: STIRRED BUT NOT SHAKEN

January 22, 2024

My photography has come a long way from when I was doing nature photography at the level of field guides. I started with close-up photography in 1956, using a Kodak Retina 2a, a light meter, some close-up lenses, and a tripod loaned to me by my father.

And then, over the years, I got more and more detail oriented until I mastered a photo technique called 'focus stacking', where a single photo could be made up of 100 or more single photographs until everything (at least all that you wanted) was in focus. I have taken close to 1,000,000 photos over the years, many of them being the stacks or layers of photos I mentioned.

However, in recent years I have begun to mix in a single photograph, areas of precise focus, while leaving the rest of the photo in a profusion of out-of-focus colors, sometimes called 'Bokeh' in photography or 'Bouquet'.

It's my way of seeing or reminding myself that our world of vision is something like a sea of light in which float various rafts of focus or consciousness. Or it is like drawings that great draftsmen have made, pencil drawings that are unfinished or like M.C. Esher's pencil sketch named "Drawing Hands."

I like precise detail in recursion, focus floating in a sea of bokeh, more or less like the photo included here that I took today.

I like the feeling that we are knee-deep in creating our own world, quite busy detailing chaos or creating detail in chaos.

Or is it that many of my stacked photos have points of focus everywhere, so there is no one point of focus as traditional photos have, no single point drawing your mind consciously or unconsciously to itself, a point of view. In a stacked photo, everything can be in focus

and the eye is free to look wherever we wish because there is not one point of focus.

Of course, I moved through that phase a while ago, and today I like, as mentioned, islands of focus that are awash or floating in a sea of sameness.

I am saying something by this, at least to myself.

In my photography, I don't want to just spell it all out and call that a day. I want to suggest or peek at detail that itself is like a salt crystal forming within a jar of brine.

In other words, the detail or point of focus is not where we start or what gets pointed out to us, but rather it is the last to form and the first to dissolve, that is: if there is a point at all.

There is no point to life. No beginning and no place to end up or be. There is no permanent or existential being, again, no point at all. Dharma is a process of diss-a-point-ment.

The best I could say is that the process itself IS the point of it all, and that the way we travel is where we are traveling to. Or, if you have to have a point, then there is no real point to a process other than itself – the process.

And everywhere we look, recursion rears its head.

This darkish poem I wrote back in my youth, as a child of the 1960s:

“Look at yourself, first yet first,



No better, and yet not worse.

Now get yourself together in a bunch,

And call what carriage as you may your hearse.”

I like walking along the rim or edge of sense, not losing touch, but also staying aware. And by ‘touch’ I mean immersion, and full immersion at that, and staying aware as well, at the same time or in aseamless succession.

Do I believe my photos express something? Yes, I do, yet it may not be something you enjoy like I enjoy. I like the tightrope between being and non-being, which is called ‘becoming’, the borderline where sense and nonsense touch each other and then let go. And the reason I like that is, as best as I determine, is that’s the way it is.

I like the sampling, the immersion and then letting go, absorption and reflecting, like a heart beating or the breath breathing.

[Photo taken today as an example of what I am explaining here.]



AUTHENTIC EXPERIENCE

January 25, 2024

I grew up in the 1950s and beyond, back when a college degree was what separated the classes in our society and in high school as well. It was all about college prep and the divided classes that resulted, those who were preparing for college and the rest of us who were not.

I quite naturally bucked that, never finished high school, never got a diploma, and even though I was accepted (without a diploma) into the University of Michigan, I chose to drop out of college after only three weeks because of boredom, which choice only further separated me from my peers. I was young with a thirst for life experience, not more education. I certainly took “The Road Less Travelled By.”

Instead, I chose to follow what then was called ‘The Beat Generation’ and Beatniks, which introduced me (oddly enough) to an even more elite view, that of the Liberal Arts, and at a notch higher than we would find in a college Liberal Arts degree. The Beats were deeply immersed in poetry, literature, jazz, and the Fine Arts, along with spirituality well beyond what college seemed to offer.

To me the Beat Movement was what ‘elite’ meant; they were, IMO, the true elite, The Jack Kerouacs, Allen Ginsbergs, and a vast array of European (and some American) poets, writers, and philosophers. In 1960, I hitchhiked to the West Coast and California, where I lived on the beach in Santa Monica’s “Venice West,” right on the beach in an abandoned walk in freezer in an art gallery called “The Gas House.”

And although the Beat lifestyle, at least for me, got funkier, the purity of the intellect found there only became more even conceptual and well, finally, pure intellectuality. "The Beat Movement" was more an idea than it was satisfying.

I knew and sensed something was wrong, but I did not know just what it was. It took an introduction to Zen Buddhism and eventually to 'The Dharma' to tell me different and even that took a long time for me to get the point, that there was no point, no fixed state of mind, or place to arrive at other than the way we travelled. And I wrote this little poem back then.

"Look at yourself, first yet first,

No better and yet not worse.

Now get yourself together in a bunch,

And call what carriage as you may, your hearse."

And the slowly dawning realization was that it was not higher or more refined intellectual clarity that I required, but rather just the reverse, that all that intellectual conceptuality had to be immersed (dunked) in authentic experience and fully, if I wanted to gain any realization as to what this life is actually about.

The book and concept of Jack Kerouac's "On the Road" in 1957 and "The Dharma Bums" in 1958 were for me symbolic of what I was missing in my life, authentic experience. I wanted th more than anything.

For a kid, a young man coming of age in the social environment of the post-war 1950s, how does one get oriented? Everything I knew, the kind of experience I came up into was mostly some kind of uniform conceptuality with, crew cuts, conformity, strict gender roles, “Modern,” suburban, and of course movies, television, and the middle class.

And in the midst of all that conformity, that uniformity, a great storm was already forming, which is kind of summed up in the tune by Muddy Waters called:

“The Blues Had a Baby and They Named It Rock n’ Roll.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZveMYqEqJyI>

And nothing could stop that music tidal wave. Kids like me, somehow sensing the blandness of the times, just naturally found us going against it. You have a positive pole and that is attracted by a negative pole. My generation, riding the leading edge of the “Baby Boomers,” found us in opposition to the sterility of the 1950s. It was like magnets. And I am getting to the point of this article.

For me, all this turned on the fact that conceptuality can only be refined so far and then it self-deconstructs. In the 1950s we were living the life of a highly refined and sterile conceptuality, in which the meaning of life could NOT be found by still further refinement, but just the opposite; any meaning came from plunging into authentic life experience. And only that could scratch my inner itch.

It was all about abandoning the elite conceptuality of those times and immersing ourselves in what makes sense, and not just an artsy-fartsy idea of sense.

The glory of the 'conceptual' was not what it used to be in the America of the 1950s. The liberal intellectual college elite was not only dying; it was mostly already dead.

And the reason is that the whole country, including the liberal intellectual college-educated elite, was realizing the shortcoming of their state. Intellectual isolation is, to put it simply, self-limiting, a form of punishment, and just no fun. There is no 'meaning' there.

As a country, and perhaps as a world, since then we have moved the focus of our identification from the intellectual stratosphere downward toward common sense. We were taking the plunge yet we don't know how to dive deep.

And that is what dharma was then and is now, plunging into direct experience and full immersion, putting out the flame of the pure intellect in authentic experience and, eventually, realizing that. It's all about realization, yet there has to be actual and authentic experience for there to be something to be realized. That's the rub.

One problem with the 1950s, and even the Beat Movement, the 1960s Alternative Culture, and certainly the 1970s Spiritual Movement was (and is) the lack of grounding in common sense, simple experience, in order for there to be what the dharma calls the "Realization" of that experience.

We have to live from the gut, the 'Hara'.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



## REVERSING THE WHEEL OF EXISTENCE

January 26, 2024

For me, most of the European philosophy that I studied back in the 1960s leads to or points to the end of itself. It is unapologetically too intellectual, all conception and no experience, much less any realization.

Of course, and in fact, everything intellectual is just that, intellection. What a fistful of Catch-22 that is!

And in the case of intellection, it's a web that we do not weave, there being no suchness or viscosity to conceptuality. Instead, there are just concepts that are nothing more than pointers beyond to experience itself.

And all these language-induced pointers, all this conceptuality, says or points to one simple meaning: "Go LIVE!" Actual life experience is the answer to intellection.

And of course, I read all the philosophical words, always searching for meaning, hoping to feel and taste whatever has substance, what is substantial. What is that urge?

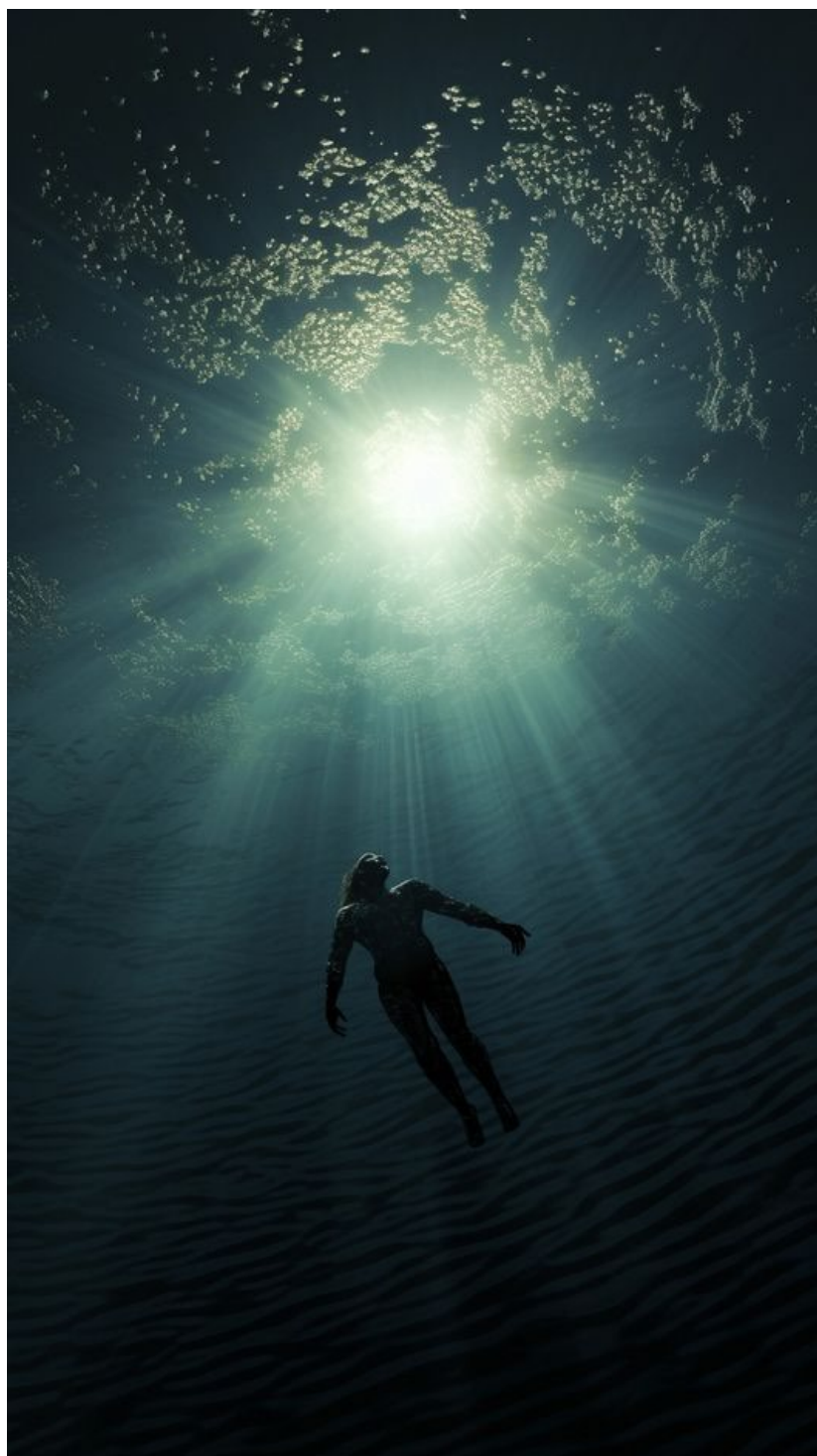
Language, like an onion, layer within layer within layer, all resolve to a center which is nothing at all, empty of substance. In other words, there is no point to it at all and thus no point to be attached to if we will just let go.

Our being is becoming; it has never yet 'been'. And that is what has to be understood, experienced, and finally realized.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]







## LET'S NOT MAKE A DEAL

January 26, 2023

I doubt that we can make a deal with life, much less with other people or loved ones, one that is not subject to change, and that's because change (as they say) is the only constant. Contracts and 'deals' are the province of lawyers, which most of us are not.

Such 'deals' are only invoked when there is no inherent trust between those involved. I suggest that we work on the trust part of the equation and not depend on deals made or understandings agreed upon. Why? Because I find that because of the nature of change, we cannot but alter and change with time, and we all do.

Instead, to my understanding, the place to emphasize is trust, trust in ourselves and trust in others, especially those we know and work with in life.

"The Art of the Deal" is a book by Donald Trump, which should tell us something right there. Again, we are not lawyers, and there is seemingly no end to legal contracts, if you have ever had a prickly one. And even if refined, such 'deals' are essentially just threats to make us behave in a certain way.

This also holds true for friendships and especially for marriages, IMO. Work toward mutual trust rather than good deals or agreed upon arrangements. I know that

marriage is said to be a contract, yet I question that. If we are responsible for one another, we most of all have to find trust. No amount of agreements or 'deals' will ever work as well.

If you have a problem with me, tell me. I don't suggest a lot of discussion, because discussion too easily falls into 'He said, she said' or 'let's make a deal' and understanding can typically spiral down into argument and mistrust. Just tell your partner what the problem is and trust that they will respond accordingly. Don't argue it, is my suggestion.

And give them time to consider and respond. Build trust for mutual security and not agreements or deals. Above all, learn to trust one another.

I don't find too much discussion helpful. Most discussion end up as arguments and often they spiral down into dealmaking or worse. Deals are for lawyers.

Say your piece and allow your partner to think about it and give them a chance to rectify it or do the right thing. Same goes for your view of their response. Give it time and consideration.

In the end, we are responsible for the welfare of others, especially our loved ones, and naturally want to do the right thing, and the same for them to us.

This is why it is so important to have a basis of mutual trust and NOT try to make a deal or agreement that is subject to change. True responsibility does not lend itself to deal making.

Both men and woman are victims of deal-making, and women in particular have historically been subject to this. IMO, nothing good comes from lawyering human relationships. Mutual trust is the key.

This is just my opinion, yet I have studied this in my own way, as well as prayed and sought spiritual insight. And one thing I have learned is that in general, women in this country (and the world) have had a tough and unfair go of it. Many have had to do what they can to survive, having to go along and make do with situations no one would ever have chosen. We can do something about this.

It's up to those of us who understand this historical situation to protect and care for those (women and men) who need our care, as well as for all other human and sentient beings.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



## PRAYER

January 28, 2024

What on Earth is 'prayer'?

It certainly is not what I was raised in catechism class when I was a kid to consider prayer, which is praying to or at something or someone, basically a dualistic prayer, which IMO hangs up before anything can be answered.

Praying to something like God or some spirit as an object seems somehow divisive, more a form of separation than of inner union.

As far as I can tell, for me, prayer is what in non-dual, non-meditations like Mahamudra and Dzogchen, we call Insight Meditation, an intent with no limits.

Prayer, as I know it, certainly is, IMO (and in experience) nondual, meaning full and complete immersion, an intent resulting in no subject and no object.

It's more like bringing something or someone to mind, like whatever is holy, and with that in mind then just resting in full immersion, a shot of light in the dark.

IMO, prayer is not a guided meditation, because nothing is guiding us or is an object, but more like 'pointed' meditation, not meditation on an object or subject, but rather bringing Rinpoche or spirit to mind (pointing), and then resting in some kind of immersive intention, resulting in resting in the nature of the mind without support of any kind.

Obviously, I don't know how to express it, but somehow prayer is internalizing an intention by full immersion and resting in that inwardness and immersion.

The result is nothing external and nothing at all, for that matter. It's a pure intent made, yet not distinguishable.

A pure intent that does not touch the walls of time and thus is free from friction and goes on forever.

I know it's mundane, but the song by 'The Platters', "My Prayer" always comes to mind. This tune itself is a prayer, IMO.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DE0UMnrQBDO>

If you can and will, please tell me about what is prayer for you? I'm sure I just have one view of it.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



MUCH ADO ABOUT LESS



January 29, 2024

Gray day. Nothing is happening other than more solar flare effects hitting Earth. As for me, no inspiration at the level of writing. Working on photography.

One thing that strikes me is our increasing attachment to samples, as in sampling audio (CDs), sampling video (DVDs), sampling light (LED), and a multitude of video formats.

Sampling simply tells us that we can throw away a lot of the audio and throw away a lot of the video and still just hear and see just fine.

And LEDs show that we can throw away a lot of light and see a continuous light stream when in reality there is only flickering.

And what is interesting is that in meditation they are telling us the same thing, that sampling the nature of the mind can also result in what appears to us like a continuous stream of consciousness, which in reality, is a form of sampling, immersion and reflection, immersion and reflection, and so on.

What then is a hologram? Or is our world of sampling just enough for coherence, for us to continue to cohere.

Cybernetics is concerned with how any large-scale system, like the solar system, galactic system, or even our own bodily system communicates with itself enough to maintain coherence, to hang together.

[Photo by me.]



DISTRACTION

January 30, 2024

“Distraction” from what? That would be a distraction from allowing ourselves to rest in the true nature of the mind, which we may not have ever done.

If we are attached to something, and by ‘attached’ I don’t mean just fixated on something we want or like, but also attached by our interests, whatever we are busy with. Our interests, even if productive, are forms of attachment.

And my point is that attachment or ‘focused interest’ confines our scope, narrows it. If we can relax and not have a limited focus, a more natural intuition can arise.

I noticed this a number of times. For example, when I am on a project, fixated on doing something, whatever it is, my intuition just dries up and goes away. However, when I snap out of the fixation and it subsides, all my ‘feely’ intuitions start to pop up again.

That tells me something.

For one, we are our own prison wardens, and our constant busyness and fixations narrow our scope so that we can no longer sense or feel the more intuitive parts of ourselves. I have experimented with this and its true.

The moment my fixation ‘pops’ like a balloon and goes away, I start to feel intuitively again. In other words, if I am fixated on some interest or other, I get tunnel vision and can see little else but that, which is a pretty good definition of Samsara, IMO.

And when that fixation is resolved or runs out of steam, then that distraction evaporates, and I am once more open to just feeling normal again. And it is then that new ideas to think or write about begin to bubble up into my consciousness.

I just share this for those interested, to see if you have something similar going on.

The message for me is that, as mentioned, I am my own worst enemy, and my tireless effort to fixate on this or that closes me off from what I really seek, which is to naturally be intuitive and live life.

It also reaffirms my dedication to dharma because it reinforces the idea that moving away from the purely conceptual and into the more immersive non-dual states of non-mediation is the key to liberation from Samsara and all of the above.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me of some sea anemones, with their feelers relaxed and open.] When they are threatened they pull in all those tentacles and wait it out.]



## THE LINEAR TUBE OF TIME

January 31 2024

I try to pry my fingers off any stick-to attachments, yet this is inefficient and would take forever.

It's fair to say that ANY dualistic endeavor, any situation with a subject and object, accumulates karma faster than we can remove it. That boat will sink faster than we can bail it out.

And so, this makes Samsara, in all its facets, a losing situation, a downhill slide toward the oblivion of increasing karma.

And this is why the great Mahasiddhas have repeatedly pointed out to us that anything short of Insight Meditation (Vipassana) is hopeless and that the best way to remove our accumulating karma is not to accrue it in the first place.

This obvious fact is a precious suggestion for us. Work on not accumulating karma in the first place. Work on the one who is busy accumulating karma (which would be ourselves), instead of trying to remove the karma that we have already accumulated. Karma, once accumulated, is very, very hard to remove without it first ripening.

Cut the root, not the branches.

In summary, dualistic situations like we find with words and language are inherently flawed and can't be entertained without accumulating karma. Even if it is a slow leak, we are still accumulating karma.

This is why there is such an emphasis on the non-dual dharma practices like Mahamudra and Dzogchen, of which Insight Meditation is an integral part.

With Insight Meditation, which is non-dual, we are totally immersed, with no subject and no object, thus nothing 'sticky' for karma to cling to.

In fact, as mentioned, this is the preferred (and only) method to remove karma, both as a preventative and a remedial measure. What this means is that through Insight Meditation, we avoid adding new karma and at the same time begin to deconstruct existing Samsara (the karma maker) one moment at a time.

We transmigrate by transforming Samsara into Nirvana, a bit at a time, turning Samsara inside-out like a glove.

What's difficult or problematical is that Insight Meditation is not just something we can do without training. It is not linear as in simply the next step in a line of steps, although it is what has to come next of after dualistic dharma practices. That's what is meant here by non-linear.

Rather, Insight Meditation is a step beyond or outside the box, beyond a linear approach into, as mentioned, non-linear space, something few of us know anything about – non-duality.

We are not 'witnessing' in non-dual meditations because there is no subject or witness and simultaneously nothing to witness. That's why it is pointed out that non-dual meditation is also called non-linear and also non-meditation.

It is the full immersion of non-dual 'meditation', our being without a subject and an object, that avoids or cuts out the attachment or stickiness, the clinging,

that accumulates karma. There is no one that clings and nothing to cling to.

And yet we are not used to letting go and being fully immersed, which is, of course, non-dual; we are used to the dualism of language and Samsara, which is 'sticky'. We cannot just let go and fully immerse ourselves at will without training. At least that's the way it has been with me.

And so, IMO, the first step is being aware of the problem, that it exists, and that we cannot just immerse ourselves in clarity without thought and thinking. Non-dual immersion is not natural to us, and apparently has to be first pointed out and then taught.

That's how I learned it, by having it pointed out to me by an authentic dharma master.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me. The tube of time and being careful not to touch the walls and create attachment-friction and thus karma.]





## THE POOL OF THE NON-DUAL

February 1, 2024

Attachment means friction between reality and Samsara's misapprehensions and the friction of that duality is the sign of karma accumulation. Samsara is that accumulation.

And so, we try to slide or travel down the tube of time without touching any of the walls, so to speak, without creating the friction of attachments. Of course, unless we are a Zen sensei or dharma master, we leave a trail of sparks (karma) banging against our attachments which make up the walls of time.

It is the nature of Samsara that we create more karma each day than we resolve or remove. We just pay karma forward. Clinging to attachments, reifying, and layering up reality, what is called “gilding the lily,” results in a massive accumulation of karma that is blinding. Historically, we are used to accumulating karma as we go along. The dharma texts we have never (not ever) been without it.

Lessening or removing that karma is difficult to almost impossible, despite all of the duality dharma practices to efface it. Inevitably karma will ripen in time and express itself. A careful reading of the dharma literature will support this. However, the non-dual dharma practices can deconstruct Samsara.

Aside from not creating karma in the first place, once we have mastered the dharma preliminaries (Common and Extraordinary Preliminaries, Lojong, and the like), the key to removing or breaking down karma is training in the non-dual, non-linear dharma teachings like Mahamudra and Dzogchen, fueled internally by Insight Meditation working with Tranquility Meditation. Even conceptually, the non-dual forms of meditation, which are non-meditation are impossible to put into words or understand without actual experience with them. We have never known that.

As mentioned, while working with the dual forms of dharma training, the Common Preliminaries, Lojong, the Extraordinary Preliminaries, and the Special Preliminaries, which we can accomplish on our own, with a group, and with a variety of teachings and teachers, eventually we have to master the non-dual meditation practices which are said to be ‘non meditation.’”

However, the transition to the ‘non-dual’ forms of dharma training, such as Mahamudra and Dzogchen, is a different story. We cannot do it by ourselves or even in a group. It depends on having an authentic teacher with whom we can work and who is willing to work with us on a one-to-one basis.

In fact, there is a large pool of practitioners who have gone as far as they can with the duality dharma practices mentioned above.

I am reminded of the way migrating salmon school in deep pools while going far upstream. I have seen them. In a similar way, this large pool of practitioners wait for an introduction to the nature of the mind and perhaps are unable to locate and mix their minds with an authentic teacher who can guide them to deconstruct duality enough to immerse themselves in the actual nature of the mind. Becoming familiar with the nature of our own mind is what advanced dharma teachings are all about.

And this next step cannot be grandfathered to us, bought, or found on our own, because there is a singular requirement. Nor is there a work around,

bypass, or backdoor way into the nondual dharma practices.

And it is here that many diligent dharma practitioners sit and wait, like the salmon in a pool, for the missing ingredient, an authentic master and guide who can introduce them to the nature of the mind so that they can become familiar with it enough to work it themselves.

It is like learning how to drive a car. Usually someone who can drive a car instructs us how to do that. It is the same with being introduced to the actual nature of the mind. We have to be instructed, the technical word is “introduced” and that means finding a teacher willing to work with us, from whom we can naturally learn, and this is often not an easy task.

Of course, we actually have to want this enough to make an effort to find a dharma teacher for this particular introduction to the mind’s nature.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



## GAP IN PRACTICE

February 2, 2024

As mentioned yesterday, the only visible or ‘glaring’ gap in dharma practice comes as we complete what are called the preliminary (dual) dharma practices and ready ourselves to be introduced to non-dual dharma practices like Mahamudra and Dzogchen.

This gap faces all dharma practitioners and can take a little to a very long time to negotiate because by ourselves, on our own, we cannot just tackle it. The

introduction to the actual nature of the mind requires that we have an authentic teacher to work with. That stymies a lot of folks, either out of shyness, or lack of understanding what is required here.

And, as mentioned, we can't just do this step on our own. And this is a huge difference, IMO, because up to that point our progress with dharma practice is pretty much up to us, how much we work with it. In fact, dharma is very much a do-it-yourself project, with this huge exception.

For this transition, we require help in the form of instruction, what is technically called the 'pointing-out instructions' as to the true or actual nature of the mind before we can proceed. And after that, once again we are on our own and progress is up to us.

And not only is our progress with the recognition as to the actual nature of the mind in the hands of our guru, an authentic master, we are also facing an introduction to the non-dual practices and as it is written, they are ineffable, beyond words and language.

So, it's not like we know what we are getting into. We don't know what is ineffable and it can't be known or studied without being first introduced to the non-dual dharma practices. We can't do it without help at this point.

And solving that equation can take time and a different kind of effort on our part than we are used to. And the fallout of this situation is what I liken to a pool of practitioners suspended in time until they first get that instruction (pointing-out instructions) and second

that instruction takes hold, and they attain the recognition of the mind's nature. Those are two different stages.

I know that in my own case, I received the pointing-out instructions a number of times and failed to recognize the mind's nature. It's not like we can fake it and declare we have recognized the mind's nature. We either have or have not had that recognition, because it's not an understanding or even an experience. It is a recognition and the realization of the experience of ordinary mind, when we have become familiar with the nature of the mind and can work it.

Yet once had, recognition is undeniably obvious. A door opens that we did not know where it was, a portal or rabbit hole, and down it we go. And, by definition, it is like nothing we have ever experienced before in our life. It is magical or miraculous.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me. In this image, the stone monolith is Samsara, and the sea is non-dual non-meditation. Samsara is like a crystal of karma floating in that sea. ]



## SOME HOUSEKEEPING

February 2, 2024

The solar flares seem to be down to a gentle roar, none too large of late. The snow is melting, at least for now. They say February may be mild.



It was 38-degrees Fahrenheit outside and sunny today. As mentioned, the snow is trying to melt, and we took a walk in the fields and woods where they are cutting a new roadbed that will become a nature trail to walk on this summer.

There was still snow on the ground, but it was patchy. And the road where the bulldozers cut through the forest was muddy and strewn with logs and branches. It was covered with deer tracks in the mud, so someone was already using it. The trail was a mile or more long, but we slogged it.

It was my first time out this New Year for such a hike and my lower back took a beating, but I am going have to strengthen what in our family we call our “zoo legs,” which was a term we used for taking the kids to the zoo, which means a lot of walking. Your legs have to hold up.

As for me, I am considering taking another whack at all the stuff I have around here, sorting through it, and giving it away or throwing it out.

It's not easy getting rid of stuff you have that could prove useful if you need it, so you don't just have to go out and buy it again. I literally have tons of it. It might be useful.

I probably should give it away or sell it and then if I need it again, I will just have to buy it all over again.

I don't like having all this stuff everywhere on a need-to-use basis. It's depressing and like a dark shadow hanging over me.

What do you folks do about all the stuff you have that you are attached to and store, but should pare down?

I could use some pointers, please.

[Photo I took today of a Chinese cloisonne vase. It is a couple feet tall without the straw.]



# “KENSHO” IN ZEN, “RECOGNITION” IN TIBETAN DHARMA

Februar 3, 2024

I thought it might be helpful to point out some of the similarities between what is called "Recognition" as to the true nature of the mind in Karma Kagyu Tibetan Buddhism and what in Rinzai Zen Buddhism is called "Kensho."

The term "kensho" is often translated as "seeing one's nature" or "awakening," and it represents a profound insight into the nature of existence.

Both "Kensho" in Rinzai Zen Buddhism and the "Recognition of the mind's nature" in Karma Kagyu Tibetan Buddhism refer to profound experiences of insight and realization on the path to enlightenment. Since I am not skilled in Rinzai Zen, I have asked ChatGPT to help me a little bit with this article, so I don't write things that are not helpful.

While there are differences in the terminology and specific methods used in these traditions, there are also some similarities in the underlying principles:

## DIRECT EXPERIENCE

Both Kensho and the Kagyu Recognition of the mind's nature emphasize a direct and non-conceptual experience of ultimate reality or the true nature of the mind. These experiences are not based on intellectual understanding alone but involve a direct, experiential realization. It's all about familiarity with our own mind.

## TRANSCENDENCE OF DUALISTIC THINKING

In both traditions, the practitioner aims to transcend dualistic thinking and sees through the illusions of separateness. The experiences are often described as a direct encounter with the fundamental nature of existence beyond ordinary distinctions.

## PROFOUND SHIFT IN PERSPECTIVE

Achieving Kensho or the Recognition of the mind's nature is considered a transformative event that brings about a profound shift in the practitioner's perspective. This shift can lead to a greater sense of freedom, clarity, and understanding.

## INTEGRATION IN DAILY LIFE

After the initial realization, practitioners in both traditions continue their spiritual practice to integrate the insights gained into their daily lives. The goal is not just a one-time experience but an ongoing transformation that permeates all aspects of existence. In the Kagyu tradition, it is a process of extension and expansion of our recognition.

## NON-CONCEPTUAL AWARENESS

Both Kensho and the Recognition of the mind's nature involve a form of awareness that goes beyond ordinary conceptual thinking. The experiences are often described as direct, unmediated encounters with reality that bypass the limitations of conceptual understanding.

It's essential to acknowledge that while there are similarities, each tradition has its unique teachings, methods, and cultural contexts. The language used to describe these experiences may vary, but the underlying goal of realizing the true nature of reality is a common thread in many Buddhist traditions.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



## LIBERATION THROUGH “SEEING”

February 6, 2024

I am still in ‘Camera Land’, spending most of the day posting lenses for sale from my collection to Ebay. Little else is getting done.

While sorry to see many of the lenses go, all in all I am glad to stop collecting lens and just keep the ones I actually use most.

I’m dividing and conquering by having an alternative to my large Nikon system, which will still be right here. And the Hasselblad X2D has no video, which is fine. I have it in other cameras.

As most of you who read this blog know by now, I am forward looking and generally positive. This camera upgrade completes a very long time of wishing to get into medium-format territory, and also looking for an appropriate portal. Medium format cameras were always too expensive for me and for various reasons not yet quite where I wanted them to be. Somehow it did not seem quite ready for what I needed.

The Hasselblad X2d 100mpx camera is just about perfect, IMO. It has a 1 TB internal SSD, which has a lot of memory, and also a slot for a CFexpress card.

In addition, it has 5-Axis 7-stop in-body stabilization and 16-bit color depth as well as Hasselblad’s famous Natural Color Solution, which is just to my taste.



I can't afford all the lenses I need, but I will at least have a good solid macro lens. That's the outer element. There is also an inner train running.

I am getting flashes of insight, remembering that after many decades of dharma practice, when it came time for me to actually become familiar with my own mind a bit, it did not occur while sitting on my meditation cushion as I always had imagined it. And it did not come while saying mantras, prayers, or any kind of dharma practice.

Instead it quite came naturally while crawling around in the wet grass at the break of dawn, watching the sun come up with a camera and peering through an incredible lens at small critters in their tiny worlds.

That's where and when it happened.

And so, in my declining years I look forward to exploring this world around me with lenses and a camera capable of responding to the insight that Mother Nature brought to me as a young boy, and that same insight was verified in me after many years of dharma practice while out there crawling around in nature. That's a message.

Perhaps what I cannot say in words, I can say in images.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



## 900 HUNDRED MILES FROM MY HOME

February 7, 2024

“I’m walking down this track,  
I got tears in my eyes,  
Trying to read a letter from my girl.  
If this train runs me right,  
I’ll be home tomorrow night,  
I’m nine hundred miles from my home.”

I'm walking the rim of time these days, half in and half out. Not wise to stay here all the time. Too out-of-the-body for health. Time blows us out anyway, so hang tight is my advice.

And the large solar flares are back again. Apparently, one called a 'Full Halo" flare event occurred on the opposite side of the sun. It's called a full halo because the explosion is so strong that its halo embraces the entire sun.

This far-side event is a very large explosion, one we have not seen so far in this cycle to my knowledge. I have not been writing about it because I have been so busy.

I am doing my best to surf the wave of solar flares this round as so much is happening in my life. I might as well. As mentioned in recent blogs, my life is changing in some significant ways.

Sure, I will blog on here, yet I have a vision of doing more with photography, thus liberation through sight and seeing. As mentioned, it was through just that, visual experience with photography, that I first gathered something about the nature of the mind and how I might become familiar with it and put it to use.

Heaven knows I have worn out the welcome of my words, done the best I can, and of course not been able to express what is most important to me. I give words a workout; that's for sure.

And so, I am very busy rearranging my tiny photo studio, sorting through piles of photo stuff, and setting the scene for the arrival of a new (used) camera.

And with some outside warmth this February, Margaret and I have been walking and starting to get the kinks out of what winter does to a body in this climate.

Every winter I struggle to wake up from the physical impairment of being in the house for six months or so. Each year it is more difficult, yet I will do it.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



## THE WIDENING GYRE

February 9, 2023

The solar flares continue to ramp up. There was almost an X-Class flare only a few hours ago. Energy packets from the sun will be heading our way, each more than we can digest in the moment, so we can either hide out and lie down or try to surf the change. I

am trying to surf the change this time, and trying to use this powerful energy.

I got my second shingles vaccination today, which always brings some fever. I have a low fever and am working through that.

However, I am falling behind with the blog writing. Very busy and not much to say. My dharma blogs get few comments and without those comments I have communicated about everything I know, over and over again. Personally, my dharma activity over the last years has migrated off the cushion and into everything I do all day.

I feel that's the way it is supposed to be. It's all dharma all the time, IMO. If any dharma questions come up on this blog, I will try to answer them, if I can. And I will write more dharma-related blogs as I am moved to do that.

As a musician and student of music I well know that music is enlightening, at least for me. As a photographer, I also well know that images are worth 1,000 words. Our six senses are our means for enlightenment, IMO.

I hope to pursue photography fueled by a new camera, the Hasselblad X2D 100mpx, which is on its way to me as I write this.

As mentioned, the six senses are also a means for our liberation, if we realize this. Personally, I depend on hearing, seeing, and insight, which are three of the six: ears, eyes, nose, touch, taste, and mind.

We are in a widening gyre.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



## THE MINIMILIST IN ME

February 11, 2023

It's ironic that I love minimalism, but have surrounded myself with very busy and endless detail work,

documenting millions of music performances, films, rock concert posters, and many other huge collections. My CD collection is now at Michigan State University and numbers (I am told) 800,000 CDs. I no longer have access to it.

All this time I have been on a long journey into the future. I started with photography back in 1956, armed with a Kodak Retina 2A, a light meter, 3 close-up lenses, and a tripod. I'm always looking for the 'beautiful' in nature and life.

Many years ago, I got into focus-stacking images. This was before it became accepted, much less popular. The various photo forums I was on, generally, made fun of me. Somehow focus-stack was considered 'cheating' back then. I soldiered on.

When I was able to post on focus-stacking without negative remarks, I concentrated on perfecting my focus-stacking technique, in particular the retouching aspect of it. It just takes time. I have done more than a million photos for focus stacks.

Then I wished Nikon would implement pixel-shift and envied those cameras that did that. I bought three early Sony cameras and didn't like any of them. Today's Sony mirrorless seem very much better. I have always loved their video cameras.

I can see by using the Nikon Z8 (which just added pixel-shift) that a simple pixel-shift of even four images is a great improvement over a single shot. In my dream-world, what I need is an in-camera resolution of four pixel-shift images and the ability to



do that and then focus-stack each layer simultaneously. That would be the best.

However, we don't have that, so I am swimming upstream and into Hasselblad's 100mpx sensor and the ability to stack those images.

The Hasselblad X2D has a built-in focus-stacking feature for up to 1000 images at a time, so I am trying that. Of course, this huge sensor size means it gets slower and slower in processing, but it still gets the job done. And of course, photography (for me) burns money like nothing else I know. It's endless.

And so, I intend to escape some of the 35mm camera woes and see if I can't make progress with the Hasselblad X2D Medium Format camera. I will continue with my Nikon cameras, D850, Z7II, and Z8 work.

Actually, there are two trains running, the first I just described. The other is that it's just time for me to relax and have more fun with photography instead of being driven by the impossible.

I am hoping the X2d will provide that. I don't mind it's minimalism because I am a minimalist by nature, in love with the Zen view of simplicity, and Scandinavian minimalism is right up my alley.

I don't even have a single photo on the wall other than one baby picture.

[Part of our living room, a bit minimalistic is it not? I built that table. ]



## THE OX HERDING IMAGES

February 12, 2024

Of course, I saw the ox-herding images early on, probably in the late 1950s. What to think of them? I could think them through and only come up with a conceptual understanding following the classic Zen quote:

“In the beginning, mountains are mountains and rivers are rivers; later on, mountains are not mountains and rivers are not rivers; and still later, mountains are mountains and rivers are rivers”

The Zen master Dōgen is quoted:

““Before one studies Zen, mountains are mountains and waters are waters; after a first glimpse into the truth of Zen, mountains are no longer mountains and waters are no longer waters; after enlightenment, mountains are once again mountains and waters once again waters.”

In the beginning we are encapsulated in Samsara. In the middle we rise above this at least in the mind of conceptual understanding and envision the emptiness, and at last we are able to do both, live in the real world of appearances and at the same time realize that the appearances around us are the emptiness arising. We realize that we have been doing this from the beginning.



Searching for the Ox



Finding the Footprints



Seeing the Ox



Catching the Ox



Taming the Ox



Riding Home on the Ox



The Ox Forgotten, the Self Remains



Forget Both Self and Ox



Return to the Origin, Back to the Source



Entering the Marketplace with Extended Hands

## “AS IT IS”

February 14, 2024

The great Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche, who recently passed away, was a wonderful teacher. I have had many teachings from Thrangu Rinpoche, received him at our center, been to Thrangu Monastery in Tibet, and received all of the 3-year retreat empowerments from him.

Here are some inspirational excerpts from Rinpoche's vast collection of teachings:

“One of the slogans in Lojong (Mind Training) is ‘Rest Within the All-Basis, the essential nature.’

There are two aspects to the All-Basis (Skt. *alaya*, Tib. *kunshi*): the consciousness aspect called the all-basis consciousness (Tib. *kunzhi namshe*) and the wisdom aspect called the all-basis wisdom (Tib. *kunzhi yeshe*). What is the difference between these two aspects?

Even though the wisdom quality of this eighth consciousness is ongoing and unimpeded, we may not yet be aware of the empty nature of phenomena. Not realizing this is called the consciousness aspect of the all-basis.

This ignorance forms the foundation for the other seven consciousnesses. However, with meditative training, we can see that even though there is no entity there (i.e., when we look for this consciousness, we do not find anything), present at the same time is

this wakefulness, the wisdom aspect of the eighth consciousness.

So, our task as a practitioner is not only to rest in the nature of the all-basis but to also be aware of its nature.”

END QUOTE

And IMO, the above advice is pretty much a recipe for all advanced dharma practice. Resting, resting, resting is what we have to do. And ‘resting’ does not mean some dharma-ized kind of rest, but just rest as we know it when we take a load off and just give it a rest.

Perhaps where we rest is key. In this case, we rest not watching a football game or a movie, although we could do that if we can. Here rest means letting go and resting in the nature of our ordinary mind, something we all need to become more familiar with.

I found it very difficult to just rest in this manner. As mentioned, for me the most difficult concept to get through my head was that rest is rest. We must rest.

And to rest, we have to let go of just endeavoring ahead into the future. Instead, we must let go and relax, as the great Mahasiddha Tilopa so succinctly said: “Rest, As It Is.

Whatever and however it is for us, we must rest there, in that.

And not rest with a thumb on the scale of the future, where we are going and how we plan to get there.

We must even abandon all hope and expectation. The Mahasiddha Tilopa so concisely said to us everything we must consider:

Don't Prolong the Past.

Don't Invite the Future.

Don't Alter the Present.

    Don't Analyze or Examine.

    Don't Intend or Control.

Just Relax, As It Is.

[Photograph by me.]



## BOBBING ON THE SURFACE

February 15, 2023

Not much different here. I'm still working like crazy learning a new camera system and all that it involves. This is on top of learning studio lighting and I'm now looking at strobes. Trying to pace myself yet given to

fits and starts trying to make sense out of question after question. It's hard to let off and find normality again. No time for that just now. And the resounding solar flares both fuel and obscure the issues.

Meanwhile, the sun is moving north, and the light is returning. Grateful for that.

As mentioned, I am getting more and more familiar with the new Hasselblad X2D medium format camera with its 100mpx sensor, that large a sensor a first for me.

It's clear that this camera can do what I'm used to shooting, yet it beckons beyond that and calls out for portraiture and photographing most anything at all. I like what it does and how it moves me out and beyond my usual photography into photographing people and things.

Here is just a casual photo of the entryway into our kitchen, when posted to our family group brought four requests from all four of our kids asking for a large copy because it reminds them of home. I sent them each a huge image 11,656 x 8742 image by DropBox which they can have printed if they wish. I include it here. This Hasselblad X2D camera seems to call for documenting life in all its forms.

I don't seem to have a choice in this and happily go along.

[Photo by me.]





## RECURSION IS IMMERSION

February 18, 2023

How deep is deep? I wrote this poem years ago.

TIME OUT

“What if at every out,  
I set an “in.”

I said:  
What if at each out,  
I set on in.

And in on in on in on in ...  
And if on in,

I'm lost within?

Time is sure to see me out.”

That's about how I feel these days, not lost within,  
because, as mentioned, I know that time will see me  
out no matter how far in I venture. There is no in or  
out.

I am, however, cut loose from my touchstone, having  
shoved off from the secure banks out into the stream  
of time.

I have not forgotten and am not unaware of this  
moment, not a kite without a tail.  
The mundane is not mundane, but as sacred as  
anything else. That's what immersion is all about,  
letting go of attachment, and being unattached. The  
training wheels come off the bike.

Who knows whom or where?  
Recursion is Immersion.

Immersion is Recursion.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



## WHO YOU ARE

February 19, 2024

“If who you are is who you will be,

And who you will be, will be who you were,  
Then:  
“Who you are is not who you were or who you will be.  
“So, who are you?

The above is a poem written long ago.

As for today, more of the same. Winter is hanging on, having perhaps a last blow, and perhaps it is going to wind up early this year, soon, I hope.

As for me, same thing, different day. I continue on with photography, although I have kind of segued into cleaning out the whole studio and its large walk-in closet. Didn't plan on that yet I knew it was coming. And it's here.

I dug out my label maker which tells me something. A lot of stuff is going on the Ebay auction block. That much I can see.

As to how it feels getting back to working on 'stuff' and not writing so much, well, it's different.

The guide rails that writing provides me each day don't exactly extend beyond their scope. “Hey, I'm over here Michael...” crosses my mind.

Guide rails and muscle memory are so much a part of keeping me in my groove that stepping outside of that can't but trigger new experience. And it's not schizophrenia.

The old Lojong dharma saying of “Take it to the path” takes on new meaning. Yet, how do we take getting

off-path to the path? It's a bit like an out-of-the-body experience. I'm right here and I'm not.

Who is it that's cleaning this closet?

More and more, I'm naked of the 'clothes' that identify me as me. Is that, OK? Who is the ventriloquist and who is the dummy?

And it's not a migration, transformation, or a case of the emperor's new clothes, but rather one where the emperor vanishes and becomes invisible. He does not want to wear those clothes anymore.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



## “IT’S ALL GOOD!”

February 20, 2023

The insight here is that the mundane and ordinary are also sacred and that nothing is that different, and positing difference itself is a miss-take. The Zen Buddhists point this out. Or, as we say, “It’s all good.”

As for me, I keep ending up with the inside turning itself inside-out, and it is said that such inversion nurtures the soil of life. Either way, I keep finding myself leveling off on a vast level plain where everything is equal. Everything ends up here. It's all one.

And where is here? Here is where we are.

“Don't differentiate” is the theme. Don't bother with that. Walk it back without effort if you can or just let it lapse on its own. Get beyond the great divide of duality and dividing. It's what all dharma practice points to.

There is no difference out there worth remembering. Take everything to the path, good and bad.

And it's not about loving the mundane or common for its own sake. That would be just another mistake. It's about not taking notes, not keeping track. Voyeurism. Don't be the great divider. Let that go. Give up on that because it's just another bad habit.

In other words, we have to bend it the other way for it to come out straight. As the Bible says, “Straight is the gate and narrow the way.” And deification is still deification.

The end of the special is the common, the ordinary. It's all special or it's all common. Today the uncommon is also quite common, perhaps all too common.

There is no difference, no place to go, no way to get there, and no one is going.

To recap, what do we do when we are no longer special? Are we free to go (and where), when we have picked the special out of us?

For that matter, what's special got to do with it? It's not a badge of honor, but just something else to do something about.

What's special about commonness? Specialness is not common, which is why it is special. When special becomes common, everything and everyone is special, and commonness itself also becomes special. We fear immersion.

That's the state of the world today, everything and everyone is special, leaving no room for what we have in common, our commonness. As mentioned, commonness becomes special, looked up to, and to be longed for.

Asleep, awake, by night or day, specialness has become common and commonness special. That's how turned around we are. The thirst for special has become common, and commonness very special. To be unadorned, not pointed out, is a freedom now quite rare.

Everything is flipped on its head. Go figure!

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]





## A DIFFERENT DRUMMER

February 25, 2024

Someone said to me in the middle of the night “You are staying up late,” and my response was not that I was staying up late, but rather that I was getting up early, because this is when I get up each morning, work for some hours and get some additional sleep. Before the Industrial revolution, people used to sleep as I do, in two parts, at least in Europe. So, in the wee hours I am up and working.

Here is a photo I just took since I got up. This is using the Hasselblad X2d camera.

I am or have been primarily a wordsmith of some sort, and this goes way back. Yet, photography goes back at least to 1956, which is when I first began to create with a camera, both technically and artistically.

And it was through photography that I had a very major dharma insight and not through my writing. There is that to consider.

I find that there are two trains running here. Anyway, although I love nature and nature photography, much like photos you might see in a nature field guide, there is that second train that is also running and that train knows no bounds, meaning it is not bound to appearances the same way a naturalist's photography is bound to a field guide.

Call it the "Zen" of photography or my spiritual drift, whatever floats your boat. My photographic 'reach' appears to go beyond the acknowledgement of just physical reality.

And by that, I mean that, photographically speaking, the inspiration of color and composition dance to a different master than my day-to-day reality, although the two are very much related.

For me, the beauty of nature is related to the nature of the mind itself, perhaps beyond just the nature of outward appearances, or better put, getting at the actual nature of the mind itself with its ingrained conceptual duality, but also freedom from that, immersion in non-duality and into joining or becoming one with this reality.

The quote by Sir Edwin Arnold from his translation of the Bhagavad Gita “The dewdrop slips into the shining sea” is what I am pointing at with words here. Yet, how can we say the same thing with images, and images indeed may be worth 1000 words, as the old saying goes.

I don't find myself caring whether all this makes common sense or much sense at all. Yet, I don't consider it so vague as to be nonsense, either.

Pointing beyond words with images is what I am doing or attempting to do. Whether that makes sense to anyone other than me I am not so worried about. I believe in the old saying “Touch One, Touch All,” meaning that if I please or satisfy myself with a photo, there are others who may also resonate at that frequency with me. I can't worry about all that much.

I am not worried about others appreciation for my work the photography for that matter. I passed that road mark years ago. We each march to our own inner drummer, IMO, with apologies not needed to anyone else. That's my view.

[Photo by me.]



## MORE WITH LESS

February 26, 2024

I never expected that I would ever get camera lenses that are sharp enough for my work, yet I have. It's not

that I am no longer interested in the sharpness issue, but rather that other issues rear their heads and are also worthy of consideration.

Like what are my photographs for and for whom? Of course, they are mostly for me because even my family doesn't want to see more than a handful at a time, and I have thousands and thousands.

At what point do considerations of composition and beauty compete with sharpness? Or is sharpness the most important part of my photography? And is pushing the limits of equipment more interesting to me than photos as something to look at by themselves? And is gear more interesting to me than what it produces? I have always assumed that gear was valuable for what it can produce rather than as a thing in itself, yet is it?

I'm asking these questions of myself thanks to the addition of a hundred-megapixel camera I acquired, the Hasselblad X2D. How has this camera rocked my photography boat? And it has.

Believe it or not, it actually took me a few days to figure out what to do with the X2D. I only know what I know, so of course I tried out all my little tricks, but with this larger sensor. Interesting, but not all that convincing.

It takes time for the sun to come up, and it has taken me time to move beyond what I know into a new realm or dimension with this camera. And there is one, a new dimension.

As a focus-stacker, of course I wanted to check that out, and the X2D has a built-in focus-stacking feature as well as something similar for exposure bracketing. I have not tried the exposure bracketing.

As for focus stacking, large stacks on the X2D don't seem as easy to handle as on the Z Nikon cameras, and I don't mean sheer size. Short stacks, of just a few layers, which I usually cherry-pick what I want in focus, work just fine.

Although the laws of diffraction know no difference from camera to camera, nevertheless, it seems to me that this 100-megapixel camera allows me to use smaller f/stops without it looking so obviously bad or washed out.

In fact, I am finding that I enjoy taking a single-shot photos with the X2D and pushing the f/stop to f/11 or even higher without regretting it. It is obviously not a sports camera and has no video at all, which is fine by me. It does have face recognition, but is not the camera for wilderness, the tracking of animals, etc. Landscape, yes.

The X2D is a camera to slow down with, create your composition, check the lightning, and so on. Then take the photo.

It's not the only camera I need, at least I don't think so for now. It is a special camera for people, places, and close-up work. I find I like taking photos of anything, any old thing, with this camera.

The X2D is a minimalist camera, both in terms of its appearance and also its menu and controls. It has but

a few buttons. A lot of things are missing, just not there, like a thumb joystick. There is none.

And so, I have a lot to learn, and I am learning a lot.

[Not a photo, but a Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



## WHAT A DIFFERENTIAL MAKES

February 28, 2023

Where is the differential, the difference that differentiates? What if I can't feel any difference? Or a more crude way of saying this is "Nothing makes any difference anymore."

Can we be aware of no difference? What if there is no difference for us to sense or feel? What then?

And this is not just some abstract construct to understand. Real immersion is real immersion, hook, line, and sinker, as my dad used to say. We are 'all in' and we are not even "We" anymore.

If we live on the edge and by the edge, if we can no longer find the edge, we have lost our ability to know by that.

For me, it's getting more difficult and easier at the same time. How do we explain that?

It's getting more important (and thus difficult) to not touch the walls of time and create friction that slows me down, which friction is the cause of Samsara at least in this analogy.

As to 'easier'. If I don't create karmic friction, my life gets easier. There are two reasons. Going deeper into the difficulty may be helpful.

I realize that reification, exaggeration, puffing things up (which most of us do) is what creates Samsara, and it's me doing it. And it's not as simple as just not referencing the Self and if we do reference the Self, creating yet another layer of patina to obscure inner clarity.



It's more about not leaving the body and indulging in out-of-the-body experiences, dualistic conceptualization not grounded in common sense experience. I need to get down to Earth and stay there.

Promising myself "Pie in the Sky when I Die" and other forms of hope for the future also are just obscuring habits that lead to nowhere.

The same goes for preoccupation with the past, what is over and done with, also just another obscuration to dwell in.

Yet, the main issue that is to me a red flag I mentioned above, my getting on a roll that, while not exactly a rant, amounts to the same thing.

I am reminded of the admonition of C.L. Ingalls:

"If wisdom's ways you wisely speak,  
Five things observe with care:  
"To whom you speak, of whom you speak, and how,  
when, and where."

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



## COMING EVENTS CAST THEIR SHADOW

March 1, 2024

The Signs of Change: I'm not going to address here coming events for the world. Instead, I want to outline some coming events and change I sense in my own world. I know it is change that is coming because its

partly here. It all starts with how feel and the changes I am going through, IMO.

And not all changes are of the slam, bam kind that are all too easy for us to be aware of. There are subtle signs of big change that it pays to be sensitive too. I am going through one of those right now, but I have yet to grasp it consciously.

I can feel change coming. It's happening now, at least personally, yet only barely. It kind of comes in edgewise, slicing up what I remember, but not yet present enough to reveal itself so that I can recognize it right off and get a handle on it. Too soon for that.

This kind of subtle change always comes with a dawning sense of clarity, a kind of clean feeling like I am finally getting down to the nitty-gritty and am about to give up pretense of one kind or another.

Yet, as mentioned, while I sense something changing, it is barely there, more of a whiff or almost a premonition rather than my being able to grasp it whole. What are the signs?

One sign is that I'm tired or wearing out what drives me on or forward in life. It's very subtle, almost a sense of ennui, but not so romantic as that. A tiredness.

It's like the sand is running out of the hourglass of satisfaction of my being happy with how it is with me. Something is about to change for me, and this is just the tip of the top of the iceberg of change. It's like the old Dylan line: "Something is happening here, but you

don't know what it is, do you Mr. Jones? Only, I'm Mr. Jones.

I don't know and I can't yet say what it is, only that I sense a change in the air, and I know this because I am being distracted from being satisfied with the way things are going just now. What was satisfying no longer is, but yet this is very faint or subtle. It's like I catch whiffs or glances of the coming change, but only out of the corner of my eye, so to speak.

I know that I will be the last to know, because it is 'Me, Myself, and I' that is changing and not something or someone out there. It's hard to see yourself changing when that's what is changing. Yet, here it is, in the offing, just beyond the pale, and still out of sight.

Anyway, hard to put into words, but the idea here is that this 'somewhat dissatisfaction' gradually, but eventually, turns into the recognition of change and a renewal, with the satisfaction that whatever change is happening is for the best and is satisfying. Again, what are the signs?

The upset of not knowing what is happening to me levels out and gradually is replaced with by an interest in the changes taking place. A new version of me is emerging, one more integral, down-to-earth, and in a word "worthy." What's not to like with that?

Well, I have not reached that point in this current sense of change I am now experiencing. I'm only at the point where I realize that I am changing and trust that the change is going to be for the better after all. The first sign of relief.

I can't yet put my finger on just how I'm changing, yet of course would like to. All kinds of fears are starting to be dispelled or evaporate. Fears like I'm changing for the worse, that I am losing the thread of dharma that I cling to, and on and on.

Yet, this thread of dharma that I cling to, the clinging itself has to go, sooner or later. As odd as it sounds, we can't be attached even to the good or sacred things. Attachment is attachment, no matter what we are attached to, the good, the bad, or the ugly, so to speak.

The training wheels have to come off the bike, the scaffolding to build a house taken down, etc. if actual freedom is to arise.

We must be free of our attachment to dharma and all its trappings if freedom is to be. Like a garage sale, "Everything has to go," all of it.

Anyway, that's the kind of change I feel happening just now. Losing my guardrail, even my attachment to the good, in this case the dharma that I have clung to for many decades, while so helpful all this time, has to dry up and also blow away.

The good, for goodness sake alone, or as my first dharma teacher used to say to me, again and again:

"My God is no beggar. He does not need me to make the ends meet. The ends already meet!"

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



## INNITIATION INTO LIFE

March 3, 2024

Although I have had many ups and downs in my life I have been very fortunate in the area of having perfect life teachers and guides. The universe has always provided me with key people who have appeared in my life, connected with me, and transmitted information essential to my future. Most of my Facebook friends know I have worked with Tibetan teachers for the past 50 years or so but I had other teachers before that.

I'd like to share with you something about the most incredible teacher from my early years and that is Andrew Gunn McIver, a man who literally changed my life.

And, as I am getting older by the day, I must warn you that in what I write here I am not going to sanitize or tone-down my accounts of what happened back then. Why should I? I am putting it out there so that some of you might know that these kinds of experiences still exist in the world and not just in movie plots and novels.

And after I introduce you to Andrew I will attempt to communicate some of the esoteric teachings and initiations he shared with me those many years ago. This may not be of interest to everyone, so note that please.

One morning sometime in 1967 (or perhaps earlier) I met what appeared to be an old man on "The Diagonal" of the University of Michigan campus. He looked a lot like the writer Bernard Shaw. This meeting was to change my life forever.

In fact, here is a poetic (and perhaps exaggerated) account of that meeting that I wrote as a journal entry long ago and which, while certainly over the top, will give you at least a flavor of what that first meeting was like. You were warned of this above so please don't complain now.

"It was somehow ordained that they should meet. It was permitted.

Preparation for this kind of meeting began far in advance. Perhaps they put on their first disguises hundreds of miles and maybe hundreds of years apart -- lifetimes ago. Even the heavy layers of flesh were hardly adequate as they reached each other in that first moment. All others even near wore protective glasses and thick shielding. The light which was all around was white hot, and it's very heat had hidden them.

"The old man's eyes (like crystalline stalks) burned, staring straight inside himself. Then both their eyes, intensive, meeting no resistance, shot out, one into the other. The old man let his secret start between them and he was understood -- known.

The impulse from within each shot out into the other. Eyes eyed other's eyeing. Their words resounded in that great silence and then wore off, consonants crackling, and their voices sputtered out in the silence. Silently speaking, this conversation stuttered on endlessly like static in a radio. There was no reason. Sight itself was seen seeing.

"And their eyes soon lost the heavy shine of flesh and, flat out they were seen seeing, eyes straight-out



that sought support inside, and inside, settled, seeing light itself shining out. When their sight struck, they stuck, united in two, tying inside into itself. They were one and moved together parallel. In unison, they shared this dance and saw 'that' seeing. In unison they sought to set inside each eye, sharp strength. They were the inside insight itself. Mind moved.

"They were of one mind and matter. What matter what remained. And they showed their soul's insight that shot forth and froze forever, now already fully formed. Their eyes, once set singing inside, just shot out. And then the eye, once set singing, slowly settled and shared insight."

As fantastic as that account may appear, it 'was' like that. And after that, for almost two years we worked together. The old man walking with the young man walking. Andrew would talk; I would listen.

Andrew Gunn McIver was born in Glasgow, Scotland in 1887. He served in the first world war where he had the job of recording the dead. Later he emigrated to Canada where he worked as a lumberjack even though he was only a little more than five feet tall. As a young man he was burly, strong, and had red hair, fair skin.

And he also worked for many years as a travelling initiator for a Rosicrucian order. Later in his life he ended up in Ann Arbor, Michigan where he spent the final years of his life working as a custodian... "cleaning up after others," as he put it. During those later years Andrew McIver became an important fixture on the U. of M. campus where he met and probably befriended hundreds of students like me.

At the age of 66, a time when most are retired, he was caught in a boiler explosion at the University and was almost killed. He spent six weeks in the hospital covered with burns and had to start life all over when he was released. His hospital stay had used up all his savings and at the age where most people are no longer working he had to start over from scratch.

As mentioned, he was a custodian at the University of Michigan until his retirement. His last years were spent living in a single room on a very modest amount of money. His passion was the mind itself and all the world religions, particularly Buddhism.

Andrew was in his eighties when I first met him there on campus in Ann Arbor. A red-head in his youth, Andrew's now-white hair contrasted with his fair skin, which had a reddish hue.

With his long white beard, as mentioned, he looked for all the world like Bernard Shaw. Andrew's fierce eyes were intense and yet very vulnerable at the same time. He had no fear of any kind and would just address people straight out.

"It's not 'Touch me if you dare!', but 'Touch me if you ARE!,'" Andrew would declare. To meet his gaze was to know what compassionate wrath is, fierce but open and kind at the same time, removing what had to be removed, supporting what needed supporting. There was no B.S. with Andrew McIver. Your whole being rose to the occasion the moment your eyes met his.

In my experience Andrew was the only person I had ever met up to that time who did not have some form

of shadow or dark side. The effect of contact with Andrew was always positive. He consumed darkness and had a kind of love affair with the Sun.

As a redhead, his fair skin should not have been exposed to the Sun more than necessary. Yet Andrew above all loved the Sun and would stand in it for hours on end until his pale skin would just peel away exposing red patches.

“Imagine yourself standing at the center of the Sun,” he would growl at me, “That’s hot stuff!” He felt he had been consumed personally in the very heat and cauldron of the life process, and that what remained had been purified. This seemed true.

“You have to choose,” he would say, “between being a diamond or a pearl. A diamond is the result of a very long time and immense pressures while a pearl is created to protect the organism from irritating matter. Which one will it be?” Andrew was, without a doubt, the diamond and he shone forth with an intense light.

Many days I would look for Andrew around campus and often find him sitting on one of the wide cement benches along “The Diag” up near State Street, usually in the full sun. I would spend whole days with him listening to the various aphorisms and lessons he would speak to me of.

Although normally talkative (can’t you tell from my writing?) I seldom spoke when I was with Andrew, almost never. I just could not find anything important enough to say to interrupt whatever he might be saying. And I absorbed the information Andrew

offered with a great thirst. Communication of this kind was what I had longed and prayed for my whole life. This was the real deal.

Andrew would say that he was tuning me like an instrument and that one day, years from then, I would respond to the information he was placing in my consciousness. He told me that straight out.

And the things he said were absolutely true and often, after 10 or 12 hours of intense listening, I would be so exhausted as I stumbled home that I felt I would have to be sick and throw up. It was like chemical radiation, the information he shared was so strong.

Andrew spent a great deal of time in the libraries of Ann Arbor, particularly in the public library at the corner of 5th and Williams where he read intently on mostly Eastern religious topics. He would write out short quotes from various books on tiny 3x5 slips of paper. At his death I found thousands of these slips, each with writing on both sides.

The sad thing to me was that the reason Andrew wrote down the quote was often more profound than the famous quote itself. I only wished he had written out his ideas in his own words. His juxtaposing of the quotes was more brilliant than the original quotes. Think about that!

Andrew not only would repeat certain themes or sayings, he would ask me to memorize and recite them. And he did this in front of others, often at Circle Books, the local metaphysical bookstore where I worked.

There, around a low circular oak table, Andrew would ask me to remember and recite particular aphorisms in front of a group of other people gathered there. I was often embarrassed because my memory (on the spot) was not always that sharp, but it was a sign that Andrew took some stock in what he was drilling into me.

Andrew had been for many years a traveling initiator for a Rosicrucian order. He was familiar with almost all branches of metaphysical and occult wisdom. His reading was vast. He was very familiar and had worked with the Max Heindel school of Rosicrucianism and knew the book “Cosmo Conception” inside and out. He was familiar with astrology, numerology, occult science, and about every kind of metaphysical study. He was perhaps most interested in Buddhism of all forms, in particular, Zen. Also Sufi wisdom.

During my years with Andrew McIver, he initiated me into a lineage of esoteric knowledge some of which I will attempt to share with readers here if I can find the words.

As mentioned above, Andrew would tell that me that he was reading this deep esoteric knowledge (like you would write out a script) deep within and into my mind and consciousness. He literally would say that he was tuning me like one would tune an instrument and that many years from that time I would remember, and this knowledge would come alive in me and live on.

That my friends was a powerful experience!

And to give you just one example, as I related earlier, he would repeatedly say to me . “Michael, imagine yourself standing at the center of the Sun,” he would then growl at me, “That’s hot stuff!”

And years later when I become well-known as an astrologer it was heliocentric astrology (sun-centered) that I became an expert in. Literally, I imagined myself standing at the center of the Sun. That is how it works. That is what initiation and lineage can be like.

And the proof of the pudding (to me anyway) was when I traveled with my family in 1997 to Tibet to meet His Holiness the Karmapa high in the high Himalayas (something like 15,000 feet). In that remote place the Karmapa (who did not speak English) through a translator, gave me a name. “ You are Tenzin Nyima,” he said. This translates as “holder of the Sun” or “Keeper of the Sun.”

Before I try to express his teachings in words I should tell you a little more about him. When I knew him, Andrew spent much of his day working with language, with words. Palindromes were a favorite, words or phrases that read the same forward as backward, like the famous one about Napoleon, “Able was I ere I saw Elba.”

More often he would take a word and create a list of all the other words that could be derived from it much like the popular game today called “Boggle.” And most often he would take the English language and spell words out on the spot to me, like the word ‘initiate’ -- “In-It-I-Ate.”

Andrew would declare that this helped to give insight into the inner meaning of the word. This was his gospel or as he would say it "Go Spell." From his point of view the words themselves were signs that described their own nature. Their secret was in plain sight.

He would also do any and all kind of word games, where letters were rearranged. Not crossword puzzles mind you, but other sorts of word gymnastics. He had very little money and true to his Scottish heritage was somewhat frugal on top of that.

He lived until the very last months of his life in a tiny room at a boarding house. The few belongings in his almost empty room were always neatly placed.

He loved to read newspapers and, in particular, the fresh news of the day, but with a special twist. It seemed that whatever happened on a national or international level would also happen to Andrew in his life at the personal level.

For example, when race riots broke out in Detroit, that same day Black youths broke into Andrew's tiny room and destroyed something. Andrew was totally aware of this and felt it represented a level of consciousness he had earned by burning off various obscurations.

Just like we astrologers say that the cosmic dance up in the heavens is acted out down here on earth at the same time, so what happened in the news on earth seemed to happen to Andrew McIver personally and daily.

It was the imperfections, Andrew would say, that kept him still around on this earth and he would show his slightly-bent little finger on one hand that had been injured years earlier.

This imperfection, he would say, helped to keep him from passing on. I never knew if he was just kidding or using this example to instruct me in one of life's secrets. I was always the rapt student.

And Andrew was an expert on just about every business establishment in the campus vicinity. He made a point of visiting them all and would not stand for bad service or the deterioration of service. He was always vocal about this sort of thing, would make his observations known to management, and if unanswered, he would avoid the place completely. I would not like to own one of those businesses that Andrew shunned. They are all gone today.

There is no question that Andrew McIver was a protector being, perhaps what the Tibetan Buddhists call a 'dharma protector'. He was fierce, although his indignation at those who harmed others never burned anyone. He was living fire that did not burn.

The correct term for what Andrew often exhibited would be righteous wrath, wrath at all and everything that obstructed and obscured the pure flowing of the life force.

Perhaps you can imagine encountering a five-foot figure in his eighties on the campus of the University of Michigan and casting this old man a condescending kindly glance, only to be suddenly



eye-to-eye with the most vital force in the universe.  
Unforgettable!

And I will mention this just once: Andrew was ‘with’ us but not one of us, in that his personality had no shadow – cast no shadow. He was so perfectly clear that his presence was like a window in this dream we all have called life, a window through which I could at times gaze. He was only there to help. Aside from that he was not there at all.

Andrew had a notable chance-meeting of the governor of the state of Michigan, who greeted Andrew as if he was one more doddering senior citizen in a group of elders. “And how are you,” Governor Romney said in his obsequious politic voice. Andrew responded, “It’s not ‘How are You?’ but ‘Who are you?’ that matters,” he replied, to the governor’s complete confusion.

And Andrew was very careful with what he ate. Over his long life he had tried eating almost everything and learned what each thing did to his system. He could tell you exactly what certain foods would do to his body, producing a boil here, a rash there. For example, this particular brand of tomato soup would cause a rash here on this part of his right ankle, and so on. He ate very simply and would cook food for me once in a while. Andrew taught me how to boil coffee by dropping the grounds into boiling water, turning off the heat at once, and covering the pan. We would often drink coffee together.

And he had real powers. I could recall many times when I approached Andrew at a time when I was in a foul mood. Andrew could sense this at once and

would always tell some story that led to an emphatic action of some kind on his part.

He would be talking along, getting more and more crisp about some point when, taking the newspaper that he usually carried, he would bring it down sharply in his hand or on the edge of a table or something. Whack!

In that instant, at the precise point where the sharp sound occurred, my headache or bad mood would just vanish. It was gone.

Andrew did this all the time, like swatting a fly. Andrew McIver must of had many students and I know that many people benefited from his presence. I only knew a few of his other students personally. As time went on Andrew and I became almost inseparable.

On Andrew's death on March 9th, 1969, I was the one who worked with the police, contacted his sister in Scotland (his only remaining kin) and saw to his burial.

Andrew was buried in the Forest Hills cemetery near the corner of Observatory Street and Geddes Road in Ann Arbor, up near the students dorms on the hill. I saw to this and designed a tall granite stone with the symbol of the Sun on it, a circle with a dot in the center. I enclose it here. He would have liked that.

If you want to visit his grave, it can be found just inside the fence near the sidewalk along Geddes Road, about 3 blocks from the cemetery entrance and

to the South. I often visit there when I am in Ann Arbor.

Well, I have told you something about Andrew McIver, but for me the most important point was that in Andrew I had found an individual and a person who had no shadow, no personality flaw of any kind that I with my outsized critical eye could discover.

Andrew McIver was absolutely transparent and empty as far as obscurations were concerned. He had none that I could see and I had looked you can be sure. And yet his mind was as vivid and lucid as a cloudless sky. As mentioned, you could see right through him into yourself. And through Andrew I could finally see into the future of... myself, i.e. that I had a future.

It was clear when I met Andrew McIver that this man cared more for me than I knew how to care for myself. I sensed this and trust and confidence arose in me (for the first time in my adult experience) for another 'person'.

Through Andrew I could see clearly and I was able to open my heart to him with no reservations. And with that gesture, all of my fear of other people vanished and I ceased to be hung up on other people's personal faults.

This is not to say that I stopped recognizing flaws in those around me but rather that I was no longer afraid that others could infect me, that I would end up like them if I listened to them.

Andrew McIver was like a pole star in the general direction of my life. Because he was authentic,

genuine, I was able to trust my own judgment because I had with me now the experience of the real deal, a fully realized being who, once known, left no doubt in me about who was a poser and who was not in those around me.

Once I encountered someone like Andrew, I could never again get caught up with those who just pretend to know. I now know the difference and knowing that I could have compassion for those who just pretended as opposed to fearing them, debating them, or thinking they were contagious. It made all of the difference.

I promised to share with you at least a taste of Andrew McIver's teachings. As I get right down to doing this it is clear to me that these teachings are not only very useful and profound but also very, very difficult to realize experientially. There is a long journey between grasping these concepts vaguely with your mental understanding to realizing that they are actually true, much less living that reality consciously.

This is what is called esoteric or occult (hidden) doctrine and this kind of learning has usually been passed down from mouth to ear, not because it is secret or forbidden but rather because it is self-secret, hidden from ourselves by our own ignorance, which means society chooses to ignore the obvious, And these kind of teachings are hidden in the obvious, in plain sight, the one place we would never think to look.

Andrew McIver was very much about what are called climactic life events, pivotal points of change on which

our life turns, times where there is a definite before, during, and after. These kind of events are often called rites of passage or life passages, gates we each pass through whether we are aware of it or not.

Andrew called these passages 'initiations' and he would often say: "We are all initiates, but it is a question of to what degree." Andrew's view was that each of us goes through and experiences all of life's passages or initiations fully but often with little or no awareness of what is happening to us and thus no memory of the event. It was never consciously recorded.

This is perhaps why he was so fascinated by Buddhism because as we know the word "Buddha" simply means awareness. Gaining awareness of what we are going through in our life was very important to Andrew.

Recognizing these great life events or rites of passage are important, but even more important is celebrating them. So many of these deeper life initiations are never spoken of in public, much less actually acknowledged and celebrated. It would seem that in these current times each of us celebrates our own most intimate self secretly, privately, or perhaps with almost no celebration at all. This indeed is sad and unnecessary, but true.

Andrew was very aware of astrology and in particular the motion of the great timekeeper, Saturn. The planet Saturn completes its first circle or return to its original birth place in the zodiac around thirty years of age. According to Andrew, one of the key or main life passages (climactic events) is that first Saturn return.

You know the old phrase “Never trust anyone over thirty.” Well, there is a reason for that. The area of time in our late twenties and early thirties marks a great life initiation, a great passing or passage. Andrew used to say that 33 was the year that Christ died, and he would also say that 33 is when ice melts. And there is the 33rd degree of freemasonry, and so on. In life the 33rd degree or year marks a pivotal change for every person although most of us have only a dim awareness of it.

And although we all experience our Saturn return (this rite of passage), not that many of us do it consciously and with full awareness. Instead, we tend to sleepwalk through these life changes and miss or ignore these important inner passages or events. Andrew McIver was very much into helping people (especially young people) go through these rites of passage consciously and with full awareness before they were thirty rather than sometime later on.

“Awareness is everything” was his view, so you can see it was quite natural for me to eventually wander into Buddhism which is all about being more aware. Andrew wanted those people under thirty years of age to go through the great Saturn initiation with their eyes open and not ignorant (ignoring) and asleep in their bodies at that crucial time. His philosophy was very much one of “go and meet your maker consciously” rather than be dragged into awareness reluctantly.

Waking up was what Andrew McIver was all about. And there is much more and it gets deeper.

I will present two esoteric truths for you to consider, and I warn you that they are not easy to grasp and may even appear as pure nonsense, so don't jump to conclusions.

Relax and just let these concepts roll over you and do their work for a bit. Thinking won't help you now. These concepts work internally on their own. Here we will just attempt to point them out. You will either get a glimpse of them or you won't.

The first esoteric concept is that all of the hoo-haw about being "born again" is nothing other than becoming aware of this great rite of passage that takes place around the thirtieth year. Although Christians have claimed it for their own, there is nothing particularly Christian about being born again. We all are born again by virtue of living beyond the age of thirty but not all of us are equally aware of it. When we do become aware of this, that is what is called being 'born again'. Again, awareness of these events is always the key, not whether you experience the event. We all experience this passage, but we don't all remember it.

And while it is perhaps best to have this awareness of being born again 'while' you are going through the rite of passage at around thirty years of age (because it is an event that happens to each of us), we can become aware of it at any time after that. In other words, we can also realize that we have become born again anytime later on in our life.

However, it can only happen once, this awareness, this being "born again," and not over and over. That is what defines a 'realization,' the fact that once you

have experienced it you never forget it. It is not something that waxes and wanes, that comes and goes, but is instantly a permanent part of us, a realization. And now for the really esoteric part, the hard part to grasp.

In the esoteric sense the 'death' we all wonder about, perhaps fear, but have no choice but to look forward to, does not come at the live-long end of life like we imagine or have been told.

On the contrary, the important death comes right smack in the middle of life, around that first Saturn return. In other words, death happens in the midst of life, at the Prime of Life, and after 'that' death are only the 'after-death' experiences, what the Christians call the resurrection. We 'are' literally born again, each of us right in this life.

In other words, we die and are born again right in the middle of life and not at the very end as we imagine. There are different kinds of death.

By the time we reach the old-age end of life we are about dead, physically, but the death that counts and that everyone fears happens right during life itself. In fact, the prime of life (like the top of the bell curve) is simultaneously the exact point of a psyche or spiritual death (and rebirth) for each of us.

I know this may be hard to understand for some of you who are reading this, so I can appreciate that you may want to just ignore all of this and move on. But there may be a very few of you who can grasp this very esoteric or occult (hidden) concept and make it



real for yourselves: realize it consciously. And I will try to explain this in more detail, but know this:

Andrew McIver was very much into initiating anyone (those who could grasp it) into these concepts and helping to prepare us to experience this great rite of passage consciously and not have to piece it together later in life a bit at a time or not at all.

Some of you have commented or messaged me that these concepts are hard to understand. Well, yes they are. Don't feel like the Lone Ranger. It took me years to understand these concepts and that is pretty much par for the course, so relax and let it permeate and percolate.

Keep in mind that the statute of limitations never runs out on this realization because it is not about 'time'. By definition, it is outside or beyond time as you and I know that term. That is the whole idea of Saturn we are discussing here.

Remember that in astrology Saturn 'IS' time itself, all the time in the world, all the time you and I will ever know. And once Saturn completes its first full cycle (which is around thirty years of age – (29.4 years) it starts to repeat itself and to go over the same zodiac degrees for a second time. This repetition is key.

That is when we start to wake up, because during that first round of Saturn we are all caught up in the clutch of time and unable to release ourselves. Our body is busy growing itself. When Saturn gets repetitive, starts to go over the same material again at thirty years, it is like a Déjà vu experience for us.

Somewhere inside we dimly know that we have done this before, been here before. Time's (Saturn's) grip on us starts to fail and we quite naturally begin to wake up and (as the Christians like to say) are born again. This 'born-again' experience can be sudden and all at once like a lightning strike or it can be gradual and slow like the Sun coming up. It takes all kinds and this experience varies just as we all vary from one another.

Since we live in a materialistic time and in a materialistic society we have been trained or indoctrinated to focus only on the material body and its eventual death. That's materialism, plain and simple. But there is another more-important death or change that happens to us and that death happens right at the prime of life, right when the physical body stops growing and is complete. And that change is (we could say) the "death" of death, which is why it is a rebirth or a being born again.

It is unfortunate that the concept of being born again has been bogarted by the Christians. It is not their fault that they were smart enough to catch on to this, but their enthusiasm can be off-putting to the rest of us to the point of driving us away from our own experience of this climatic event, an experience we each need to complete ourselves.

Here is more about the way Andrew presented this concept to me:

He spoke of this 'being born again' epiphany as like a space capsule, one that each of us builds during the years that our body is growing and forming, those years when we are less than thirty years old. He

spoke of this time as if during these early years we are on Earth or within the body. And it is at that time that we make changes, choices, and otherwise modify our own personal vehicle, our particular space capsule.

However, he taught, at around thirty years of age that space capsule we have formed through our youth (the body) is launched into space and then time (as we know it) just stops. Think about that for a moment because that is the end of time or the “end time.”

Time no longer has dominion ‘over’ us and ceases to fascinate or transfix us. You could also say that Saturn (Satan as the Christians say) loses his grip, and we pull free of that force, the force of time. Then, as Saturn starts to go around in its orbit for the second time, degree by degree, we are launched, ready or not, beyond time and out in space.

Because modern society has lost the awareness of deep inner changes (rites of passage) like these, there is no discussion and little awareness of this natural life initiation. We each are left to figure it out for ourselves privately, to celebrate alone as best we can what would better be celebrated outwardly with our family and friends. But as it is, we each get short services and silence from those around us. We enter that silence.

This great inner change (the loosening of the material death-grip on us) releases us from the body and we float free like an astronaut on a tether in space. In the occult tradition this is called “entering the Silence” and it can be a somewhat frightening experience when time stops.

This of course is just an analogy, but it is an apt one. Andrew McIver made it very clear to me that once our vehicle is launched beyond time (around thirty years of age) it cannot be altered physically. Whatever we have achieved, however we have formed it, all of that remains just as we left it.

In other words, we leave the body at that time just as it is, finished, half-finished, or unfinished. We just up and move on, which is the awakening experience I am trying to describe here. I am not going to call it “born again” any longer because that phrase carries too much baggage.

We wake up or become aware which (as I keep saying) is what Buddhism is all about: awareness. Nothing more.

Andrew spoke of three orbital periods of Saturn, three cycles of thirty years each: the cycle ending at around thirty years, one ending at sixty years, and a final one at ninety years. And he said this:

We spend the first thirty-year cycle building our vehicle (growing our body), the second thirty-year cycle repairing the damage we make launching our vehicle (getting out of the body), and the third thirty-year cycle (if we live so long) actually becoming a conscious part of the creative force itself. That last cycle is incredible, so think about what that might mean.

A traditional analogy is that of flower. First there is the bud (first cycle), and then the opening of the flower (second cycle), and finally, beyond blooming, the total

relaxing of the flower (third cycle). I may do another blog or two, but for those of you with an interest in this I have a free e-book that I wrote years ago called:

“Astrology of the Heart: Astro-Shamanism”

It is all about this concept and you can download it here:

<http://astrologysoftware.com/books/index.asp?orig>

This awakening experience can happen around the age of thirty or ANY time later, whenever we start to realize that we have already left (or are leaving) the body.

This wraps up the blog on my life teacher Andrew McIver. Of course, words cannot express my debt to Andrew or my deep-felt love and appreciation for the man. He caught me in the throes of struggling with my own personality, successfully tamed me, and then proceeded to instruct and initiate me into my own mysteries. It changed my life.

Looking back from now it seems that Andrew was some kind of emanation that appeared to me. I have no idea how I merited it, and it came at the end (and caused the end) of years of my struggling to not-take anything from anyone. Remember, I never graduated from high school because I literally could not be taught.

Part of that problem was because if my would-be teachers had personal faults, I refused to learn from them. I used their failings as an excuse to ignore what else they had to say and would take nothing from them because I did not want to end up being like

them. I did not want the bathwater that perhaps came with the baby. This was a mistake (miss-take) on my part.

Lucky for me Andrew helped to correct that mistake. He was so perfect in every way that I had no complaint and just had to listen. He had my undivided attention. This is what I mean by “he tamed me.” With Andrew I had run out of excuses, run out of time.

Even today there is a quality about Andrew McIver in my mind that was more like a dream than real. A better way to say this is that the dream was real. He was more than I ever dreamed it could be. And through Andrew I got over my resistance to other people and (as I mentioned before) their personalities and in two ways.

The first way is that by meeting someone who I felt confidence in and that I could totally trust, my inside world or psyche was projected outside myself into (and through) Andrew and that opened a window on reality that gradually widened. In other words, my outside and inside began to mix and merge and this was key.

Like a drop of water in a still pond sends ever-widening concentric circles that are more and more inclusive, so did my pent-up inner psyche go out into and through Andrew, gradually mix with that threatening outside world, and both myself and the world become more balanced or equalized.

And second, having known Andrew, having known authentic wisdom, I never took another wooden nickel from those who had no authentic experience and

literally did not know what they were talking about, those who had perhaps abstract knowledge but no experience and no realization.

For me this was a big thing. Before Andrew I could not tell who was authentic and who was faking it. I had no reference point or experience to go on.

Although I did not know this at the time, it was a sign of strength that I was able to manifest a real-life teacher in my outer world, that it was even permitted to happen. These things don't just automatically 'happen'. You have to want them, ask for them, and pray for them. You have to REALLY want and need this. Andrew was that bridge to the outside world that I needed and that I had been waiting for all my life up until then.

I will close by sharing with you what I now see is an important truth. Although I needed a pristine and perfect example in the outside world to have confidence and to forge a wormhole into a new dimension, this was a misunderstanding on my part. Of course, I found that example in Andrew McIver, but since then I have learned:

It does not matter what the personality of your teacher is like. Of course, it has to be within the limits of your tolerance for differences, within your idea of what is accepted behavior. But that aside, what is important (and the only thing that is really important) is that the life-teacher is capable of pointing out to you the way into yourself. That alone is initiation.

There is no teacher of any kind, nor has there ever been or ever will be, that can do it for us. The whole

point is that we have to do it ourselves, to actually have the experience and to learn to “know.” All written words, all spoken (and even all silent gestures) are only signposts, pointers to having the real life experience for ourselves. All are signs that point to our jumping into the pool of life and experiencing it for ourselves. It is the only way to know.

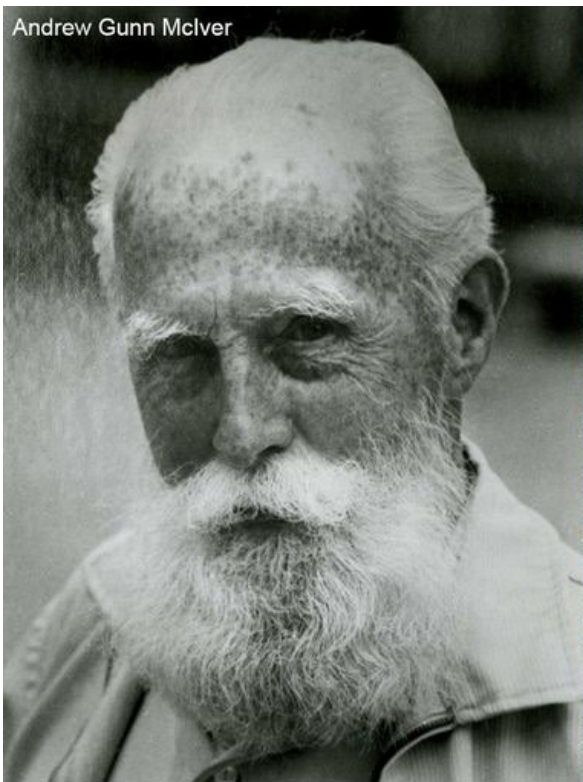
A teacher is someone who can point out to you how to realize yourself. That is their entire job. Period. They don't have to be your friend. They don't have to look or act perfect. Their personality is their business, not yours.

The only question to answer is: CAN they (are they able) to point out to you a method for you to know yourself and for you to know the true nature of your own mind. In other words: when they present it, do you get it? As I understand it, that's all that is required.

Andrew McIver was very much in the “now” and would say to me more than any other saying: “Michael, this is it!”

[Here is a photo of Andrew Gunn McIver and his tombstone.]





Andrew Gunn McIver



## THE TIMES THEY ARE A-CHANGIN'

March 4, 2024

Don't take this too literally, but the bonfire of our mind is consuming both facts and imaginations in a conflagration. The past is but a memory in decline. There is no refuge there.

I am reminded of the poet William Blake's "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell" and the line "After dinner

I asked Isaiah to favor the world with his lost works; he said none of equal value was lost. “

And the future is not yet graspable, not in our hands. There is no refuge there and it is foolish if we believe there is, which leaves this present moment. Here we always are.

I have always been fascinated by the idea of ‘truth’ and the fact that the truth in us lasts, and I delight in saying that “Truth is the Future.”

And I say that because it is only the quintessential truth that will last until then, until the future. The truth will still be there then. The rest will fall by the wayside and be lost in the conflagration that was mentioned above. We are by definition stuck between a rock and a hard place to grasp.

And of course, there is always the kaleidoscope of the ever-changing planetary patterns in the heavens above, especially true with our own solar system and these heliocentric patterns there that the planets are bound to.

These changing planetary patterns bring one geometric whole-chart pattern into focus and then dissolves it again. And we are living that. And with these changing patterns, my mind comes into focus and then fades with the degradation of the pattern, like a twinkling star.

I seem to know when to go take a look at the current whole-chart astronomical patterns only to often find it is the same general pattern as the pattern at my birth. Somehow, I’m aware that my natal pattern is

happening. And when it is, I'm in focus once again for a time and then it's gone. I can offer a funny story.

Back in the early 1970s when I was discovering and documenting all this whole-chart planetary patterns (I called them Star\*Types to myself), I was calculating an looking at these Star\*Type patterns in various groups of people, my family, my friends, musicians, etc.

Well, one day I had the idea that I should do the Star\*Types of all those people I did not get along with, in particular my 'enemies'. Why not, and so I did that.

When I got them all calculated, what I found is that almost all of them had Star\*Type patterns just like mine. What a shock! Apparently, I didn't like people like me, too much competition. In a nutshell, I didn't like myself in all of its many forms.

I learned a major lesson right there and began working on liking or at least tolerated myself and myself in other people. If you would like to do that yourself, here are two free books that can help.

“StarTypes: Life Path Partners”

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/StarTypes.pdf>

“Dharma Chart / Karma Chart: Astrological Empowerment in the 21st Century”

<http://spiritgrooves.net/.../Dharma%20Karma-2003%20rev...>

And here is another anecdote: I can't say if this only happens to me or that it happens to everyone. I do know that the current whole-chart pattern in the sky is not there just for me, but for everyone. And as it changes, forming and separating, life changes with it. These changes mean something, certainly they are not nothing. They are right there and happening.

I don't know whether to laugh or cry. I am fine, even with everything around me in this world in what appears to be chaos. And the chaos is deepening, not lightening. That turning political and war-driven gyre draws us deeper within and is not spewing us out, at least not yet.

And with it, as mentioned, the political spiral surrounding us also deepens. We are falling into it, not coming out of it. Beyond the obvious outer chaos, there each of us sits, doing the best we can to be stable in the whirlwind of changes engulfing us.

I should sleep, yet I cannot. I mean well toward each of us and even collectively. We have no choice but to ride this one out, to see these changes through to their destination, whatever that will be.

When it is done, this chaotic time, no matter the outcome, there we will be, maintaining our own inner compass, even if the compass of the world and these times is convulsing. Our inner gyroscope will still be silently spinning and stable as best we can manage it.

We are personally not these outer changes, unless we are, yet we are in these changes, embedded in these changing times.

[StarType whole-chart patterns for men and women, created by me.]





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 actual life. After the dream and its imprint in my mind, I began actively to consider how this could happen. I tried on many ideas.

I finally settled on a sketched portrait, but finding an artist good enough for the job was not easy. I only knew of a single such 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 have a number of his watercolors.

I contacted Felsing and asked to visit him. Then Margaret and I traveled the two hours 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 carefully 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, a book I also worked on called "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; and then with bated breath I carefully opened the package. When I did, this time the image was actually of the Khenpo Rinpoche Margaret and I know and love.

Apparently the books and Rinpoche's own teachings helped to communicate the idea of the man himself. I let Felsing know that he could now do the finished drawing. And the ending to this story is remarkable.

When the artist Felsing finished the final drawing, he personally called me on the phone 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 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, he formally asked Rinpoche to give him "refuge."

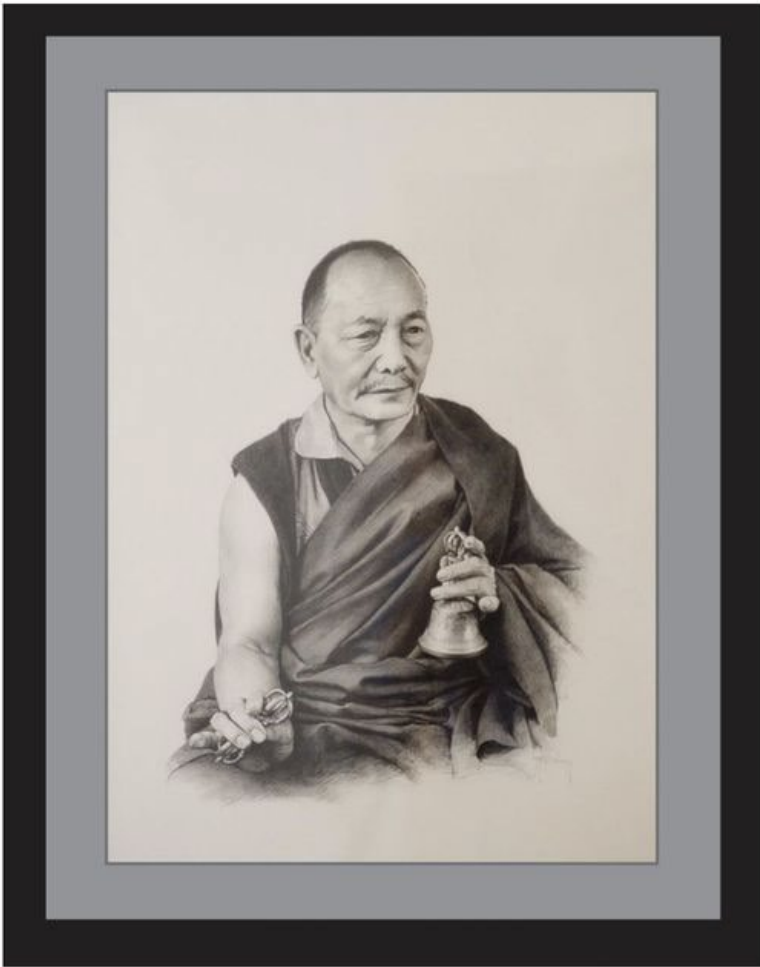
Refuge is a short ceremony that takes place when someone discovers that they have great respect for the dharma, respect not only for the historical Buddha, but also for his teachings (the dharma), and the sangha (those monks and nuns who embody the living teaching). It is a request you make of a teacher.

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 such a difference.

[Here is the drawing that the artist John Felsing made of Khenpo Rinpoche]



WE DREAM A BRIDGE TO HOLD  
BACK WHAT WE HAVE

March 6, 2024

In photography, “Light” is light, yet it can be shaped. Shaping light is an art. It’s the same with the light of our mind. It too can be shaped. This too is an art.

Flat light, light with no dimensions to it can be shaped until it pops out and becomes three-dimensional. It’s what is called suchness. Expanding our collapsed view of the world until it takes on shape, as mentioned, is an art gained with practice. However, it still is a construct.

Where do we go when we take shelter in sleep? Not very far is my view. There is no refuge anywhere, IMO. It’s a flat world we live in, a world just short of shape.

Light and shadow. Light and shadow create the illusion we call life. And creating that third dimension, like an expanding paper accordion is the darling that we wish and try for.

Yet, our preoccupation with suchness, on having substance and being ‘real’ is the hallmark of how great is our illusion. All that to eclipse the realization that we are not really permanently here and have never been. Our being is still becoming, never arrived.

The ennui we struggle to muzzle and deny is the slipstream of something that does not even exist, that has never existed. How tired we are of it all, yet we are unable to face the fact of this emptiness we sense inside, how empty it is.

Reving up our internal gyroscope just to hear that roar of emptiness is no solution. Instead, we have to accept, accept, accept things as they are.

We dream a bridge to hold back what we have from vanishing, vanishing away. We are unable to let it go, to just let it go on. As if we could stop it anyway.

The ultimate futility of effort. Go with the flow.

The Dewdrop Slips into the Shining Sea.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



# SPACE WITHOUT DISTANCE; TIME WITHOUT END

March 7, 2024

Out on the vast plain of ordinary consciousness, where everything is the same and equal, there is no direction to go because we are already there, meaning here and now. There is no place to be other than here that I know of. And we are always right there.

Learning to live without a differential, without any way of measuring difference, I have written of this before. Nothing has changed, meaning nothing has not changed from being nothing.

Of course, the sands of time keep running through my fingers. And here I am, still walking out to the edge of nowhere to look at nothing. It's still there.

Always habitually looking for difference, some way to measure time and space, I come up empty. Emptiness is everywhere the same. I have to stop looking.

There is nothing to find and nowhere to go because, as mentioned, I am already there by virtue of being right here. There is no more or any other "more."

"Enough or too much" as the poet William Blake put it.

'Too much 'is anything more than enough and enough itself fills me to overflowing. It's all I can feel or

measure. Overflow is just that, more than enough. Beyond that we don't know and can't see a difference. This is no more difference.

As Mentioned, I'm not going anywhere because I'm already there. And that's a puzzler. I've come to a standstill if only because I am here now.

I've arrived at the here and now, yet the here and now is not a place to go to because, as mentioned, we are already there, but rather an endless process that frustrates any desire we have by absorbing it, bringing it back to rest, to zero. Who would have guessed that?

And it's not a place to be because there 'IS' no place to be, nothing permanent, no end because there was no beginning, never a starting point. We have yet to begin, so we can't end up. That's the confusion.

Because this is beginningless, it is endless. It just IS, without beginning or end!

How did we get here? We got here by the exhaustion of direction in any direction. We are at a standstill, again meaning a process, not a static place.

We just are and it just is, both nothing and nowhere.

Space without distance. Time without being or end.

Where do we go from here? Nowhere. And this is because we are already there. And what is there to do? Nothing.

Rest As It Is.

Just STOP.

Let go of everything we are attached to.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



## UNDERSTANDING, EXPERIENCE, AND REALIZATION

March 11, 2024

The Venerable Thrangu Rinpoche has this to say about the process that leads to 'Realization':

"There are three ways that we can know something. We can have understanding, experience, or realization.

"Understanding" is when you think about something through inference. Your mind is directed outward and you think, "Oh, it is probably like that." Is that understanding good?

"Of course it is, but it does not have the power to help us develop the ultimate qualities that we really need, so it is not enough.

"You might also know something through hearsay or stories. You might have heard someone say this is how it is: "They say that all appearances are mind."

"You might think some great lama or great scholar said so. But that is not what we need, for that is also merely understanding.

Of course, learning things through reading and listening to teachers is good, but it can't really produce realization. We need to experience and realize the nature of the mind for ourselves.

"Experience comes when we are meditating and we think to ourselves. "This is what the mind is like!" However, at first it is not stable. Eventually meditate on it and cultivate that experience; eventually it will become stable, which is what we call realization."



I find the above very helpful.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



## THE HISTORY OF EFFORT

March 12, 2024

“Those were the days my friend, I thought they would never end.” For me, it’s more like “Those ARE the days” and these have been difficult days, with one

hard-edged issue after another arising. Plus, there was an M7.4 solar flare on Sunday.

I brought my indoor-vegetable-growing attempt to a halt and harvested my small crop of collard greens, three very large 12-inch flower pots of them. We cooked the greens up and ate them, but they cooked down to almost nothing. So much for growing vegetables inside in winter. Nice try.

I'm about to plant some turnips and collards outside in the six raised beds I am preparing. We will see how that goes.

As for the "Me, Myself, and I" quotient, I feel like I have been buffeted by a hurricane, kicked around by events until I can't see straight. I managed to keep my sense of humor, although as to what's funny I couldn't tell you. The operative word is "Choiceless."

Could it be the exact conjunction of Mars, Venus, and Pluto at zero degrees of Aquarius heliocentrically, coinciding with Jupiter Conjunct Uranus, all making a Grand Trine Kite with Neptune Opposition Earth – seven planets in that Kite.

My internal gyroscope has done pretty well, when I stop to think about it and these events have not managed to throw me off course but it has been like riding a bucking bronco. I roll with the punches if I can.

I will spare you the ugly details, but they are there. One nice thing, my daughter Anne came to visit and stayed the weekend. That was good. Also, Margaret and I walked the woods trails along Mitchell Creek

and sat down on the bank and watched the water flow by. There is that.

As mentioned, internally I would say I am doing well considering the series of events I have been marched through. If I can't get done what I hoped to have done, at least I have surfed the events that overcame me pretty well.

I have been working outside when it is warm enough and finally gave up on pumping up a bad tire on one of our garden carts and took it apart and replaced the inner tube. Remind me to get "no flat" tires on garden carts in the future, and no more inner tubes for me. They can't survive the winter outside.

As for "spiritual," whatever we could agree that is, I am doing OK. My mind is clear and my focus is stable.

One can't look for ripples on a still pond.

I am washing the history of dharma effort from my mind, day by day and bit by bit. Everything has to go and with effort there is nothing worth remembering.

What is left? Nothing and that's a good thing.



## RAISED BEDS AND HÜGELKULTUR

March 14, 2024

I'm up early and out in the yard where I am finishing four raised garden beds, trying to fight the coming rain later tonight around 2 AM. That was yesterday It's Midnight here now on Thursday.. We had to work hard as far as preparing our raised beds.

Here are a few shots of our side yard taken early this morning as to what we finished setting up yesterday, which was to ready four raised beds, including two new ones I built this spring, for implementation using

“Hügelkultur,” which is a method of layering wood, sticks, twigs, greens, compost, and soil to establish a longer lasting mixture to raise plants in. It lasts about five years.

I built eight raised beds, four of them new or newly erected this year, most of them about six feet long by 35-41 inches wide. And I coated them with a mixture of food-grade beeswax and mineral oil which I painted on to protect the wood. I did this a couple days ago.

Hügelkultur is kind of the precedent (Middle Ages) to planting on a straw bale topped with soil which is popular now. And once the wood of the beds was coated, we managed to dig out and embed and level four raised beds and place a lot of old firewood as the base layer for the Hügel method. I will explain.

Our next step is to go out in the woods and find logs, sticks, twigs, leaves, etc. and layer up the beds getting ready to plant seeds soon.

We started at our local cemetery and got lucky right off. The cemetery crew was cleaning up after winter and had stacks of logs, sticks, and twigs all ready for us, which they were only too happy to have us cart away. We did just that.

We had a large camouflage tarp laid out in the back of my SUV and we loaded it up with all manner of wood. After getting back home I got out our chain saw and cut up the long logs, some five inches thick, and did the same for large sticks.

Then I added all this to the bottom layer of fireplace logs we had around here, placing them in the bottom

of the raised beds, below the ground a few inches. And on the large logs next came thick sticks and on top of that thinner sticks and twigs. And the next addition was mulched dry leaves.

And to do that I had to really get soaked with sweat. I got out our lawnmower, attached a bag to the back of it, and set about mulching a lot of leaves.

First, I had to rake them into piles and then run the lawnmower back and forth over the leaf piles, mulching them into a removable cloth bag. I had to wrestle the lawnmower each step of the way, raising it and placing it on the pile of leaves again and again. Very tiring.

I then removed the filled leaf bags, which were heavy from the dampness of many of the leaves and haul it over to the four new raised beds and fill in the beds with a layer of mulched leaves.

This took a while and plenty of filled bags, until I was pretty much exhausted from the effort. I have photos of these steps so that you can better see what we are doing.

And all of this was trying to beat the rainstorm coming early this Thursday morning, around 2 AM, which would soak the leaves so you could not really mulch them. This had to happen right now or we would wait days for them to dry out. Got it done and Margaret was right in there with me, raking up some of the leaves.

The raised beds are now ready to put some cut grass on top of the leaves in a day or so, and then add

organic compost (no poop in it) and a rich soil mix as soon as we get it delivered, some 50 cubic feet of it. And then we will be ready to plant.

We are doing this for the beauty of raising some vegetables, in this case cherry tomatoes, Kentucky Wonder beans, turnip greens and small turnips, collards, and some Zucchini summer squash. Perhaps some other vegetables as well, like cucumbers, herbs, squash, and what not.

On other raised beds elsewhere that we already have finished, we will have peas and we will see what else. Also, we will have flowers. I have six large pots, each about 13-inches across for Dalias, Hibiscus, and the like.

[Photos by me.]

And that's about the size of it. Busy days.











## THE KARMA OF EFFORT

March 15, 2024

There is some karma to effort and often a lot.

I am reminded of Shakespeares Sonnet 129 and the line:

“The Expense of spirit in a waste of shame is lust in action,” although I would modify it to read “The

expense of spirit in a waste of shame is 'effort' in action."

And this is just to say that with any endeavor, we leave behind us a trail of effort expended, effort perhaps we needed to get anywhere at all, yet effort nonetheless and it leaves traces and scars.

There are no doubt more natural ways to accomplish the same goal and forcing ourselves is not one of them.

I'm talking about learning dharma here, yet the same principle is true for any other kind of endeavor, anytime we find ourselves making an effort beyond what feels easy and natural. We do it all the time, especially in daily repetitive tasks that we don't feel like doing. Undue effort is one of the major causes of the deadening effect of karma.

What's the problem with a little effort, with pushing ourselves beyond what we naturally want to do? Well, the obvious is that we are doing something more than we feel like, and by that we accumulate the scars or karma that result from this.

And yes, it varies from a little trace to a lot, actual scars that accumulate that at some point have to be removed in one way or another.

Again, here I am concerned with the results of effort learning dharma, about the last place we might want to accumulate karma and it is detrimental to the dharma itself.

Dharma wants to be purified and anything that is attached to it will be removed. Here what will be removed are the scars or remains of undue effort that we make trying to learn the dharma.

One dharma practitioner responded to this by saying something like, “Oh well, we will just use the Vajrasattva mantra (a cleansing practice) to clear away whatever remains as karma and that will take care of it.”

My response to that comment is that this is just wishful thinking and that karma, once accrued, is not easily remedied or removed and IMO they have another thought coming.

And of course, the classic comment on this in the scriptures is that the best way to remove karma is not to accrue it in the first place. Yet, with undue effort, ineffectual effort, this is hard to avoid.

Rather than go on describing the problem, let's just jump to the question of what we do if we have generated karma through our efforts that has to be removed. And again, I am talking here about dharma effort.

When we have persevered in our dharma training and finally been introduced to what is called Insight Meditation (Vipassana), it is at that point we begin to realize how much baggage we are dragging along with us because of the karma from effort we have made that was not natural but forced.

Indeed, it is an obvious stain to any insight or realization that has dawned for us and just as

obvious, it has to be removed because now we can see it. And this can be a painful discovery, IMO and experience.

As mentioned earlier, there is not much we can do with karma that we already have on the book, so to speak, yet the purification of that karma is not an option, but rather a necessary step in our path. How to do this?

And the first step in this process is to not add any more karma to the pile by not making any further undue effort. Instead, we must just relax our efforts, smooth them out, and naturally rest in the nature of the mind. Stop struggling.

As for the old karma we have already accrued from years and decades of over-effort? That will have to just fade away as best it can. No amount of scrubbing will erase it, and that kind of scrubbing will likely just add to the problem.

If anything helps, it is that at last we are aware of the situation, what we did, and that this accrued karma is ours to remedy, but remedy without effort.

The effort to relax is something like an oxymoron, yet that is the condition we face. Relaxing in the present moment so that no further over-effort occurs is the first step. And this will typically take a long time for us to relax enough.

If we are aware of the results of our undue effort, then we are no longer adding further karma to that already accumulated and this is a big deal and a true accomplishment.

It takes a lot of exercise in our dharma practice, removing the kinks as we can, and becoming more fluid and natural. And this may require we remove the wheat from the chaff, so to speak, of our dharma practice, replacing meaningless effort with actual living dharma. This is key: don't keep mindlessly practicing.

I'm hoping you get the idea here without further description. If we get the true insight that comes with Insight Meditation, than we can finally see the forest and the trees.

In other words, we can see what to remove and what to allow to remain in our practice, and the idea here is to rejuvenate our practice so that it no longer is just a practice that we do but actual meditation, now that we can see and feel what that is.

The value of Insight Meditation and the insight as to what that is reveals to us exactly as to what was organic and real about our dharma practice and what was feigned and a meaningless effort to practice. The artificial dharma practice has no meaning and needs to be removed, meaning: don't do that anymore.

And the very good news is that with Insight Meditation at last we can see what actual meditation is and just do that, letting go any attachment we have to the effortful dharma practice we have dragged along in our wake all these years.

I hope that this is useful to those who can see what I am pointing at.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



## A PIECE OF THE ROCK N' ROLL

March 19, 2024

Right in the middle of life things happen that require us to change our focus and deal with them as we can. This recently happened to me.

I had a whole bunch of posters (25 pounds) leftover from my decades of collecting them, plus I still have a



few of my own silkscreened posters from my old band the 'Prime Movers Blues Band', when Iggy Pop was our drummer.

I had arranged to give them to a collector all in a bunch and he would pay me for the lot and do what he wants with them. That deal fell through and suddenly all the posters came back in a large FedEx package weighing 27 pounds, which means I have to deal with them one by one myself. Quite the job, when you thought they were history. Back again.

It takes up a lot of time that I don't have for one thing. Anyway, here they are and I'm dealing with them. Many of these posters are special in that they were signed by the artists when they visited me. I can't keep them all, and I have to photograph each and every one, etc. and etc.

So, this morning I got up early built a largish vacuum table and braced, squared it off, and placed it on a ten-foot table we have. I include a photo.

That vacuum table is connected to a large vacuum so that posters can be placed on the vacuum table and the suction will hold them flat so I can photograph them. I'm doing that today, poster by poster.

Next, I have to process the photos, measure the originals, and describe each one so that I can post them to Ebay for sale. I'm working on that.

However, I thought I would post a few here in case any of you like the bands and want a poster for that group before I launch them on Ebay. Many are signed

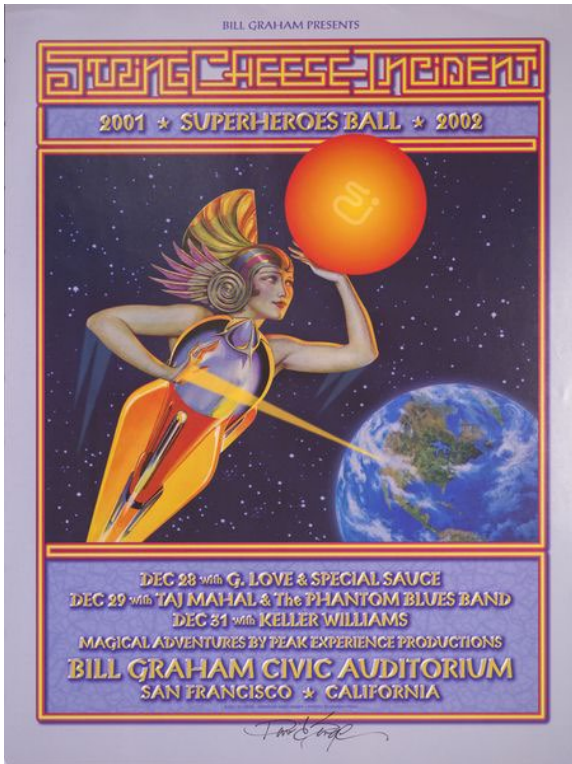
and numbered which makes them more valuable. Some are rare.

If you find something you just have to have, I will charge the going rate for the poster, and also include a shipping fee of \$22 to send them by USPS Priority Mail. The shipping fee pays for a hard cardboard tube with caps, which costs me about \$3.84 apiece and rest is what the USPS charges to get the poster to you in about three days.

So, if any of you see a poster you like, you can order it by number and name and I will send it to you. You can send me a check for the poster and shipping (include a clear address or use Paypal to Michael@Erlewine.net. Be sure to describe what you are ordering. I will get it out to you pronto.

I have only a few of my original posters for the “Prime Movers Blues Band” and they are very rare. I will part with a few.

Anyway, there you have it, what I have been doing of late. These are just a few posters. I have many more to process over the next few days.



## BETWIXT AND BETWEEN

March 24, 2024

From [SapceWeather.com](https://www.sapceweather.com):

“SEVERE GEOMAGNETIC STORM--THE STRONGEST IN YEARS: As predicted, a CME struck Earth's magnetic field on March 24th (1437 UT). The impact opened a crack in our planet's magnetosphere and sparked a severe G4-class geomagnetic storm--the strongest geomagnetic storm since Sept. 2017.”

The two ends meet because they form a circle or cycle.

So, it's not like the flat-earth view that we go one way until we drop off. Instead, we go one way until we find ourselves coming back the other way, again: a circle or cycle.

This is all relatively obvious until we find ourselves running out of attachments, at which point we are STRUCK by the same in everything, sacred and profane. There's no difference.

And that's when we start to realize we are suspended in space and time without a beginning or end. We are just there, which is always right in the here and now.

Getting along without our attachments is like the emperor's new clothes. We are naked and vulnerable, just out there standing in the spotlight of time.

Once realized, there is no going back on realizations. They are permanent because they are eternal and true.

Detachment is humbling, to be sure. I'm reminded of one of my favorite Freddie King songs, "I'm Tore Down," which go like this:

"Well, I'm tore down,  
I'm almost level with the ground.

Well, I'm tore down,  
I'm almost level with the ground.

Well, I feel like this  
When my baby can't be found.”

Listen:

Freddie King: “I’m Tore Down.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YB52eLfirFA>

And the ‘baby’ can’t be found.

Mind our own gyroscope.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



## THE TERRIBLE CRYSTAL

March 26, 2024

We have learned to use what we call our 'mind' and it can think up all kinds of ideas and ways to do things. As mentioned, we call it 'our' mind, but it is just the mind itself that we have learned to use, our limited experience with it.

And aside from the mind being handy, we don't know the mind all that well, which is exactly what meditation is about, becoming more familiar with the nature of our mind as something other than a one-trick pony, a thinking device.

In fact, it's just the other way around. The mind is not the thinking end of things; 'WE' are the thinking end of the mind, being what we so conveniently call our Self. The "Self" itself is little more than a frayed bundle of attachments, none of which are properly grounded in reality.

In fact, this is just what learning to meditate teaches us, that what we call "We" is the exception rather than the rule. In other words, we are the odd-man out (or woman), the nether end of the mind itself.

This is true, such that an eventual realization does give us pause to reflect rather than just blindly march on toward oblivion. Such a fragile thing life is, "Much Ado About Nothing" as Shakespeare put it.

And so, in the meantime, we cluster or gather around what we might call the campfire of the Self, when in

reality it is like this rather dark poem I wrote years ago  
about our Self or personality.

Sorry about the darkness, but welcome to the  
realization.

## PHOENIX

Personality,  
Bright beauty of the night,  
That terrible crystal,  
Burning in the darkness,  
At the very edge of time.

Watching,  
In rapt fascination,  
Fires,  
Impossible to ignore,  
Forever frozen,  
On the face of age.

It is a dark light,  
Indeed,  
Funeral pyres,  
Signifying nothing,  
But impermanence.

This is a fire,  
That does not warm.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



## CHASING THE WILD TCHOUPITOULAS

March 27, 2024

Getting at the roots only goes so far, yet it is farther than a White boy in 1950 knew. And oddly enough for many of us back then, IMO this 'farther' was not found in White music but rather in Black music, at least for me.

I hate to embrace a cliché and say that the fate and history of Black Americans are the source of the life vitamins that I (and perhaps many) need, but they were. These great blues musicians were the fathers and mothers of my soul and I sought them out to absorb what I did not know but could only wonder.



I had started out in the folk revival of the late 1950s and early Sixties, hitchhiking and traveling with people like Bob Dylan and we were all doing our best to revive White folk music, with perhaps a sprinkle of country-blues from Black artists.

And to my shock, there came a time when I discovered that Black music needed no revival because it was alive, well, and playing on the other side of town behind a racial curtain. That for me was an earth-shaking discovery, a life changer. What I thought was in the past lived.

As it turned out, it was me who needed the revival and not the Black blues musicians and their music that I subsequently witnessed on trips to Chicago's South and West Side in the mid-1960s.

And for me this all came to a head at the first Ann Arbor Blues Festival in Ann Arbor, Michigan in the late summer of 1969. I was not only present at that festival, my brother Dan and I (plus all five brothers and father) ended up being responsible for food and drink for all the performers at the festival.

We actually operated out of dad's station wagon backstage at the three-day festival (August 1-3). And in the process, I morphed from being a player and student of blues music into an interviewer and documenter of Black blues and jazz and eventually this expanded to include all recorded music when I founded the All-Music Guide ([AllMusic.com](http://AllMusic.com)). However, let me back up a bit.

That first Ann Arbor Blues Festival in 1969 changed my life. I was 29 at the time and that event became

one of the most important in my life, a pivoting point, where I turned from whatever I was doing at the time, more toward what I became and still am today, an archivist of popular culture. As they say, “Who Woulda’ Think it?” Not me.

If there is one of those times where we feel like we are living in our own dream, that first Ann Arbor Blues Festival was that. Imagine.

Suddenly, in one place, were almost all of the heroes of my life at least for the recent years, the great blues players, assembled in one place, with all their sidemen and some with their entire family.

Not only was the general public (read: mostly White people) introduced all at once to most of the great living black blues players, but equally (and perhaps more important), those scores of blues players, their sidemen, and families were assembled together in what turned out to be a kind of celebration among themselves.

So, as the public was overcome by this profound blues music perhaps for the first time, with that many blues players present, there’s was somewhat of a celebration and reunion going on with the blues players themselves.

It was epic and cosmic, IMO. And there I was, not one of the university-folks who planned the festival, but an on-the-ground guy who knew some of the players and ended up in charge of artist “hospitality,” which means providing all these players and their families with food and drink, and “drink” was all about alcohol in those

days. My family and I were very popular serving these folks.

I was there with my brother Dan, who was equally interested in all this, and also our other three brothers, Steven, Phillip, and Tom, plus our father. We served the booze out of my dad's station wagon and my dad spent most of the time hanging out and drinking with folks like Roosevelt Sykes, Big Mama Thornton, and some of the other blues greats.

As for my relations with my dad, I seldom had connected all that much with him about whatever I loved, but we connected that weekend through introducing him to all these players. It was, so to speak, a bit of the divine, a taste of heaven on Earth as far as I was concerned.

There is so much I could tell you and probably should, especially to those few of you who are transported by the music and life wisdom of these great black blues players. What I can do here is show you some of the photos that came out of that event, many by the great photographer Stanley Livingston. Stanley Livingston and I published an award-winning book on all this some years later.

And hidden within that event, like a seed, was my future as an archivist of popular culture. I never saw it coming, but I was always into organizing and documenting what I most loved, and I loved the blues and those players!

After that first Ann Arbor Blues Festival in 1969, came the second blues festival in 1970, which was more of the wonderful same. And then, after the University

stopped sponsoring the festival, there was a year of no festival, (1971) and then the festival was reinstated by music promotor Peter Andrews (who brought a lot of music to Ann Arbor) and poet and blues-expert John Sinclair, with the “Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festivals,” which were held in 1972, 1973, and an unsuccessful festival held in Canada in 1974.

Andrews and Sinclair expanded the venue to not only include blues, but also jazz and Rhythm & Blues, with performers like Ray Charles and Miles Davis.

Years later the Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz festivals resumed and I was on the festival board for some of those years.

I was also on-site for the first two of those blues and jazz festivals, again handling hospitality and doing even more interviews, this time with audio and video. I eventually became the official historian for the Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festival.

Well, the long and the short of it is that from those seminal blues festivals, both the Ann Arbor Blues Festivals and the Ann Arbor Blues & Jazz Festivals that followed, I became aware of how precious and fragile that time was. And I came out of those festivals with an intense desire to protect and preserve America’s musical heritage.

This manifested some years later with my founding the All-Music Guide ([allmusic.com](http://allmusic.com)), which today is the largest collection of music data on the planet, millions of pieces of information all organized. Of course, I did this assisted by an incredible team, that eventually

numbered (before I sold it) 150 full-time staff, and over 500-700 freelance writers, all working together.

And later, with my company, AMG, we founded the All-Movie Guide ([allmovie.com](http://allmovie.com)), which is one of the two largest film databases, and the All-Game Guide, which game-guide was eventually abandoned after I sold and left the company.

I also founded the first major Concert Music Poster site called, "Classic Posters ([ClassicPosters.com](http://ClassicPosters.com)), which is still going today, and other collections, etc. I went on to interview scores of rock poster artists, some rock players, and so forth.

I have been busy these last years divesting all of these archives so they are not swept into memory anytime soon. These include:

My Rock Concert Poster data has been donated to: University of Michigan's Bentley Historical Library

The Haight Street Art Center (non-profit) in San Francisco

My collection of music CDs is now at the Michigan State University, some 800,000 CDs.

My collection of astrological books, magazines, and so forth are now part of the permanent collection of the University of Illinois, one of the largest ever assembled.

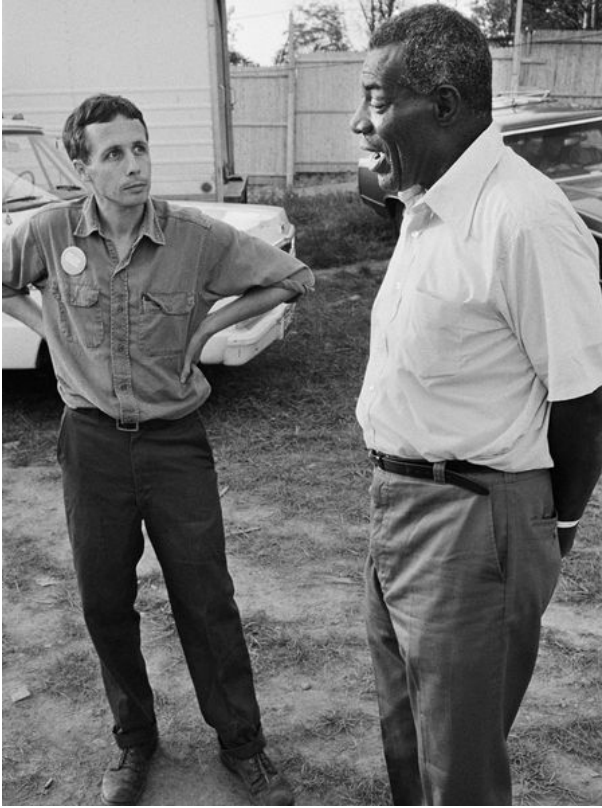
A large collection of Tibetan Buddhist teachings, thousands of tapes, are at the KTD Monastery in upstate New York.

Plus, a collection of some 500 pen & ink line drawings by Bhutanese artist Sange Wangchuk are now a permanent part of the Ruben Museum of Oriental Art in NYC.

And there you have it, a quick overview of the first Ann Arbor Blues Festival in 1969.



Michael Erlewine and Muddy Waters



Michael Erlewine and Howlin' Wolf

## “ALL HAT AND NO CATTLE”

March 29, 2024

Not really a thought, but bliss and lack of distraction is the pointer rather than thinking. Feeling. We have to experience, feel life.

We feel our way along.

"What goes up must come down,' meaning that experiencing rather than 'thinking' is the point here. Don't get stuck up in the clouds.

All of us tend to 'think' before we feel when it is probably better to feel and experience, and then see what thoughts arise. Like the old blues song lyric:

"Take your fingers off it. Don't you dare touch it because you know it don't belong to you."

Or as the dharma masters put it: "Don't alter the present moment."

Unfortunately, I often can hear in other's voices that they are tripping the conceptual ceiling and that what they say is not grounded in actual experience, much less realization. They are just reading from their understanding like we would read a book. In short, they don't yet know what they are talking about.

It's not often helpful to point this out to a conceptualizer, unless you can help precipitate the experience that goes with their understanding. It's hard to talk someone down from their ivory tower, when they don't realize that this is all thought and no experience.

I wonder if whole civilizations have died out through lack of actual experience, preferring to live in the mind rather than in the world of experience. Living from the top down rather than from the bottom up is difficult to impossible. We need our roots.



It reminds me of the old saying about city cowboys, that they are “all hat and no cattle.”

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



## IT'S NOW OR NEVER

March 31, 2024

The well of the present moment is always right here and now, no matter what excursions we make, whether we dwell on the past or imagine the future.

The present does not and cannot go anywhere else but here.

Of course, we each have our reasons for reflecting on what has passed on or anticipating the future results of time. However, we should keep in mind that time out or away from the present is just that, not being in or focusing on the here and the now.

It's not a question of blame, that we should or shouldn't be distracted. Rather, it is simple mathematics as to time spent focused on the present moment. If we are absent, we are not there.

Focused attention, which is what meditation is all about, as each of us soon find out, is not so easy to do. We are all over the place from moment to moment. And it is not the case that this being focused is something we can force ourselves to do out of sheer will, at least for more than a short time.

We are soon exhausted trying that. The only antidote or approach I am aware to remedy this is allowing the mind to rest, just as it is, without our help or our doing anything at all.

I have to repeatedly remind myself that nothing I can do, outside of just letting go and resting will get me anywhere at all and that the main goal of what we call 'meditation' is simply greater familiarity with the nature of our own mind or 'the' mind that we all have access to.

This was always pointed out to me by my meditation teacher for 36 years, the idea that he was introducing me to the nature of the mind, yet it was up to me to

become familiar with it and to extend and expand on the familiarity. I must become familiar by becoming familiar, by familiarizing myself with the mind's nature. No one can do that for us.

We can dance around that as long as we want, yet sooner or later we get on with the process of familiarization with our own mind, which as mentioned is called 'meditation.'

Flexibility and familiarity with our own mind only make sense and without it we are, well obviously, unfamiliar and inflexible. The mind is very much like a muscle rather than just a 'thinking' device.

And this familiarity is the process of coming to terms and realizing we are not the boss of our own mind anymore that we are of another person's mind. The mind is the mind, and our only option is to become more familiar with it, so we can work with it harmoniously and get in synch.

It is a bonus that if we can become flexible with our own mind, we can extend that flexibility to all other minds as well. We each have our own take or purchase on our own mind; that's personal to us.

However, everyone else has their own grasp on the mind and it is the same mind that we each are becoming familiar with, although we each have our individual or personal take on it.

[Photo by me.]



