

Dharma Blogs

2018 Fall



by Michael Erlewine

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2018 FALL

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INTRODUCTION

This is not intended to be a finely produced book, but rather a readable document for those who are interested in my particular take on dharma training and a few other topics. These blogs were from the Fall of 2018 posted on Facebook and Google+.

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HALLUCINGENS AND DHARMA

October 1, 2018

Why and how was LSD different from other drugs back in the 1960s? This is such a touchy subject because the idea of taking drugs is not recommended and I don't recommend it. That being said, it DID happen way back then, as I know well. So, what in my opinion was so good about the LSD experience? And, of course, I can only speak for myself and here goes:

Back in the late 1950s and early 1960s (and of course later still) there were various drugs and their experiences going around. I won't even bother to mention that alcohol, caffeine, and nicotine are drugs and are addictive, but they are. Let's just look at some of the eventually outlawed drugs back then.

Without spending a lot of time of them, they included Bensedrine, Dexedrine, Methadrine, Marijuana, Hashish, Codeine, Opium, Heroin and others. I never tried heroin or any hard drugs. In a separate category, IMO, were the various hallucinogens such as Peyote (Mescaline), Psilocybin (magic mushrooms), Morning Glory Seeds, and others. But the most notable hallucinogen seems to be D-lysergic acid diethylamide (LSD), commonly referred to as "acid."

Here I will look at LSD, although I chewed Peyote buds as early as high school (in the late 1950s) and watched tigers dance on the wall of my basement room and I ate Morning Glory seeds (and threw up) many times. What is dharmic about these hallucinogens? The answer is simple.

Just as the tabloids warned us about LSD when it first appeared as a popular drug, "acid" (as we called it) IS capable of altering our mind permanently, as in

forever. And it did! Only, back then (in my circles) the word “mind” essentially meant to us the “brain.” And so, we erroneously assumed that LSD could physically alter the brain and permanently damage it. Perhaps LSD can affect us to some small degree physically, and it is capable of permanently altering the mind, but here (IMO) the mind refers to our view -- how we see things.

In my case, taking Sandoz LSD (which I did on May 5, 1964 in Berkeley, CA) did not affect me physically (as far as I know), but it did change my mind and how I saw the world permanently. It changed me forever and that (thank goodness) was a good thing.

In a nutshell, through LSD I became aware for the first time that what I saw out there in the world and reacted to was very much (VERY MUCH) my own projection. “Who woulda’ thunk it?” I saw that in a real way I was creating the very world I lived in, the same world I had always thought was independent of me. Through acid I became aware of this and “awareness” is the essence of dharma. See the connection?

From that late-night trip forward, I was never the same. My mind was altered because acid set off a chain of reactions and realizations that continue until today and are responsible for my interest in dharma and all of the blogs I write here. LSD caused a crack in the egg of my dualism and allowed me to see beyond the claustrophobia of relative-truth, if at first only dimly. It took me years to have enough mental room to maneuver beyond my habitual dualistic thinking. And, as you might expect, ultimately, the dharma was the most efficient tool to accomplish this. It still is.

I was so amazed by what I saw on LSD that I spent years trying to find sources that verified what I had

experienced in the two acid trips that amounted to anything. Of course, having been raised Catholic I went to the Jesuits who, in Catholicism, are said to know “everything.” They had not a clue and basically crossed their fingers at me as if I was now somehow the devil’s handiwork. I searched and searched, but did not find. However, when I discovered the Tibetan teachers, particularly Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, he never blinked. He knew precisely where I was at and what I was so excited about with the mind. And the rest is (my) history.

The Tibetan lamas know the mind like nobody else I have ever met. They say that when Chögyam Trungpa once took acid to see what the big deal was all about, his comment afterward was “Nothing happened!” LOL. For him, I’m sure it didn’t. He was already realized!

THE REST OF THE MIND

October 2, 2018

The dharma is all about awareness. That's what the word Buddha means: aware, awakened, enlightened. What are we aware of?

Ultimately, we are aware of awareness itself and we learn to rest in that and that alone, because that alone is nondual. Yet, most of us are not initially aware of awareness, but rather of something (anything) other than awareness, like an object. We all are familiar with the dualism of subject and object. How do we get from there (subject and object) to awareness of awareness itself?

It's not really that difficult to be aware that we are aware; just look at the awareness that is reading these words. That's the awareness we are talking about here, but how do we get at it? "Resting in awareness" (without distraction) itself for more than perhaps a glimpse is more difficult. This is something that dharma practitioners practice and train for – resting in the awareness alone (all-one). I wrote this fun poem years ago:

THE REST OF THE MIND

You cannot rest the mind,
But you can let the mind rest.
Just let go,
And don't mind the rest.

We might ask: why would we want to give up monitoring what we see, as in self-consciousness and duality, and lose ourselves in non-dualism? Who will be looking out for us, if we are not? Are we not somehow vulnerable? What's the problem with

relative (dualistic) thought and life? We are totally used to it.

Well, the answer to that is that non-dual thought does not mean we are not aware. In fact, non-duality (awareness of awareness) is pure awareness and that includes the awareness of everything at once, and not just fixating on any one part of it (subject and object). We are one with what is, one with the flow, so to speak.

It is duality that is “stuck,” so to speak, with this or that particular object – fixated and not free. Perhaps that explains why I am, in photography, interested in focus-stacking, which can remove the single plane and point of focus and (because everything in the image is more in focus) allow the mind the freedom to explore the entire photo-image at will. In that way, focus-stacking is liberating. It allows us to look around rather than be compelled (draw the eye) to focus on one point.

In a similar way, non-dual awareness does away with our fixation on objects and frees us to appreciate “what is” entirely without having to constantly objectify by fixating and getting stuck on this or that part of the whole. So, to repeat myself: non-dual awareness is not sacrificing anything other than the limitations of dualism’s fixations. In non-duality, we are free to flow rather than get stuck and attached by our own fixations, if what I am writing here makes sense to you.

And so, it does make sense that we would be interested in dharma practices that help relieve us from the obligation to always divide everything into subject and object, so that I am the subject and you are the object (or vice-versa). In other words, “WE” can be altogether one, instead.

To me, it's as simple as recognizing the ongoing process of life rather than having a scrapbook of snapshots, full-motion video instead of still-camera shots – something like that.

I am curious what others think of this approach?

BEING IS BECOMING

October 3, 2018

Every once in a while I get antsy and don't want to follow or play by the rules. I just call a time-out and head at right-angles to whatever I am engaged in, like this little poem I wrote one day.

TRUE WORDS

I find that it is only,
At the very edge of sense,
Where words break down,
That they release,
Their essence,
And that's the truth.

Well, the teachings on emptiness make it clear that being is not permanent or eternal, not static or unchanging, but rather completely impermanent. In fact, it is said that the only thing that is unchanging is change itself and even that changes. LOL.

Well, that will never get us anywhere, will it?

In other words, in the Buddhist cosmology, being has never materialized, has never arrived at the state of actual being. We sometimes see references and statements to the effect that "Being is becoming," which I find comical at best or just confusing because what exactly is being becoming if it can never become actual being?

So, humorously (and comforting humor at that), I sometimes like to think of "Being is becoming," using the somewhat archaic meaning of being that we find in statements like "Isn't that a becoming dress that she is wearing?" I like that meaning of "becoming" quite a lot because to me it means something like

“that sense of not-being being is nice” or, as I mentioned, comforting.

We know that being is never going to become permanent, because it already would have done so by now, but it has never made it. Perhaps that is why we reify everything so endlessly, trying to make it real. And this is why I so love the tune recorded by Les McCann “Compared to What?” and the chorus in that song that goes “Trying to make it real, compared to what” because there is nothing that exists to compare our non-existing being to, because there is not even any being to begin with; whether that not-being is “becoming” or not perhaps is up to us. LOL.

THE DHARMA OF LOCATION

October 4, 2018

“Can you locate where the mind is?
If not,
Can you find where the mind isn’t? “

I’m sure that I must appear to readers like a stuck record when it comes to talking about how important it is in dharma practice for each of us to prepare for and achieve for ourselves the “Recognition” as to the true nature of the mind. In the Zen Buddhist practices, this is called “Kensho.”

I have blogged here about this topic for years and I probably will keep on doing so from time to time. I can’t help but be inspired by this theme because I am starkly aware how incredibly important it is for each of us. When I just let my mind rest and allow my intuition to speak to me directly, the need for “Recognition” for all beings is what surfaces again and again. It just comes up and speaks to me. And I listen.

The above little poem I wrote (more like a fun haiku) is reminiscent of some of the pointing-out instructions that I have received over the years from my teacher that precede recognition of the mind’s true nature. That’s where the idea is not to understand WHAT the words say (their meaning), but rather that these words are a command to DO what the words say.

In this case, that would be to actually stop short-circuiting the process of searching the mind (looking in our own mind) by conceptualizing or “thinking” (only understanding the words) and instead start getting off our mental duffs and thoroughly performing the actual search to see for ourselves where the mind is or isn’t. We have to look for ourselves! For me, this seemingly

semantic difference make all the difference in the world. Please take that instruction in.

“Recognition” of the mind’s true nature marks the end of the rule of thought in our lives, just as it marks the implosion of dualistic thinking and the advent of non-dual insight. All of the many dharma practices, appropriately called “The Preliminaries,” are universally relative-practices in that they are dualistic. Through recognizing the actual nature of the mind, we transition from these relative practices to the realization or non-dual practices. Recognition as to the nature of the mind is a profound change (the first for a practitioner) that can’t be walked back. It is a one-way street and is permanent. At the appropriate moment and with the guidance of an authentic teacher, it just happens. It’s the “Aha!” that all the dharma teachings point to.

And it’s difficult to avoid not road-mapping dharma practices into those that precede Recognition and those that follow realizing that event. And which of the preliminary practices work best for us can be very individual – in fact, personal. It is said there are 84,000 dharmas, so we do have some choice. LOL.

In the world (and abundance) of dharma practices, at least in the tradition and lineage (Karma Kagyu) I am in, it is helpful, even mandatory, that we have an authentic guide. And by an “authentic guide” we mean someone (a lama, guru, or teacher) who has themselves realized Recognition and who thus knows both the process and the intended result.

It is encouraging to know that after Recognition of the true nature of the mind, we no longer need the guidance of our authentic teacher, at least not to the same degree. Their essential task is done when we have grasped the nature of the mind. We are on our

own. And this is so because Recognition is not just another spiritual experience we have that comes and goes, but rather a realization that empowers us in a variety of ways that are worth noting.

Perhaps most important to understand is that recognition is a “realization” and not just a spiritual experience that we have one day, but can only remember a week later. Because it is a realization, it is non-dual rather than dualistic, and opens the door to the realization practices like Insight Meditation and Mahamudra Meditation.

Recognition of the true nature of the mind is just that, recognizing how the mind works and MOST important “realizing” that we, just as we now are, can work it. “Recognition” is a unique realization for each of us, one never before had.

And “Recognition” is a profound confirmation, a certainty as to where we are in our practice and simultaneously a change from relative (sounds-like) Bodhicitta to what is termed Absolute Bodhicitta. Bodhicitta is an awakened heart when it comes to other sentient beings.

In a very real way, Recognition resolves any doubt we may have had about our own practice and certifies to us (beyond a shadow of a doubt) that we are free to enter the path leading to our own enlightenment and this for the first time. It is our entry into the non-dual practices.

By finally resolving our own doubts and obscurations as to the nature of the mind, we are free to realize the suffering and confusion that others, all sentient beings, have and the net effect of that realization is the birth in us of, as mentioned, Absolute Bodhicitta, which means a profound (previously just emulated)

sense of compassion for others, for all sentient beings.

And it is this real compassion and the insatiable drive that it engenders that is the fuel that will keep us on the path to our own enlightenment provided that realization is carefully extended and expanded.

As many of you know, I could go on all night about this topic. Instead, for now I will end with this little poem.

RESTING

Sitting quietly,
Properly,
With tongue to teeth,
My body invites,
The mind.
To be,
At ease.

TALES OF RECOGNITION

October 6, 2018

[Notes: Stayed up late. Margaret, I, and 4-years old granddaughter Iris drove into Grand Rapids last night for a double-header, a music set by Iris's mom May, followed by a set by our good friend Luke-Winslow King. Both sets were great and we drove back home (some fifty miles) in the rain. Still didn't manage to sleep in; I wake up like an alarm clock. LOL. Iris wants pancakes for breakfast!]

I am struck by how different the accounts of individuals who have had the realization called "Recognition" are and can be. This is certainly true in Rinzai Zen Buddhism and the stories about "Kensho," the equivalent of the Tibetan "Recognition." They are innumerable. One author on "Recognition" says that with the realization of emptiness, the fixation on Ego is dissolved. While I agree with that, I am not so concerned or interested with always using "Ego" as the fiducial-reference, as my understanding is not so much about ego or Self, although I can appreciate that reference and understand where it is coming from. And that's my point: there are many ways to look at such a realization as Recognition and the stories that go along with it too.

Needless to say, I am sure there are (and will be) other ways to phrase all this. My own view is that the realization of Recognition itself is so confirming, so definitive, that we no longer have any (or as much) worry about ourselves (and The Self) than we did. The Self is now realized as the sideshow it has always been. But, more important it's just not as important as it used to be – not a big deal.

IMO, recognition of the mind's nature simply eclipses the Self in terms of our priorities and perhaps that is saying the same thing. Crudely put, perhaps with Recognition, at least to our own mind, we feel that we are "saved," so to speak. At long last, we have graduated and taken over our own practice in a very real sense. We now know what has to be done with our own practice and that we (just as we are) can do it. We never had that before; there is no longer any doubt. Imagine that!

As mentioned, with Recognition, we can for the first time see just what we have to do with our practice. Whether we actually do it remains up to us, but that event is news and we are no longer obscured by doubt. That dualistic veil has lifted. And with that freeing up of our own needs to be secure, what remains in the vacuum left behind are the needs of others and this by default. This point is key.

We suddenly are free to assist others because (when the smoke clears a bit from our own obscurations) we finally can more clearly see other sentient beings and their needs, those who are still obviously suffering, while for us a great load (and cloud) has been lifted. It is obvious. This perhaps is why one of the major pieces of dharma advice is that we realize ourselves first and THEN try to help others do the same.

With some realization ourselves, we have space and time to sense other people's obscurations and they now totally attract our attention; since much of our own obscurations have subsided, we can see now through and beyond them), which is not to say we don't have a lot of work to do. We do, but there is now a confidence that we can and will do what has to be done.

In the meantime, we find ourselves embracing whatever and whoever still has the obscurations we have just been relieved from. And of course, we “get it” and know exactly where others are at (because we have been there only too long ourselves) and compassion for their state naturally springs to mind and no longer has to be ginned up. We find ourselves totally in response -- responding. That is news.

And so, the result of the freedom that Recognition of the nature of the mind brings is this ability to respond to others, what is called “responsibility.” And we now have that ability naturally and spontaneously. Our natural and heartfelt response to all sentient beings is compassion and no longer relative compassion at that, but natural non-dual compassion. IMO, this is Bodhicitta and its pure urge and drive are the hallmarks of the entire Bodhisattva path. There is nothing more important to do.

INTUITION OR DOUBT

October 7, 2018

This is just a bit of a ramble, so bear with me. The above title for me is a toughie. Am I intuiting or is this just doubt creeping in once again? Tilopa's classic words of advice include "Don't invite the future," which clearly says to let well-enough (or whatever) alone. Let's not prime the pump by anticipating the present. Wait for it. Allow it to "present" itself in its own time.

That's what I tell myself and it is all good advice, IMO, but too often I think I have a hunch as to what is coming next and I know I'm not one prone to be psychic, just wrong a lot. LOL.

And for someone who is naturally impatient and hates to wait around, I wait around a lot. I am always early to anything I do by appointment (never late) and so there I wait. Over these many years, I have done it so much that I have managed to almost like waiting. It is almost an art, IMO. It seems I am always waiting.

And I will barely mention waiting on other people; It amazes me how slow they are. Or, am I just speedy? It's the later and I can't seem to help it. What am I in a hurry for? Where am I going? I'm just future oriented and can't get there fast enough.

As mentioned, this extends to people as well. I'm one of those folks who almost always answer my email, and right away. And the problem is that I expect others to do the same. Well, perhaps not when it comes to the endless requests for money from strangers on Facebook who say "Hi!" and end up asking for support of one kind or another. I let them pass.

If you don't show up or don't answer my email or phone call, I still (even at my advanced age, LOL) tend to doubt and to imagine that I have said or done something that has offended you. That's the doubt I was talking about earlier. It creeps in and catches me unaware, without my knowing it. I have trouble just leaving things be, waiting for the future to unfold itself. I tend to jump the gun, so to speak, and too often I let my imagination run wild. Well, anyway, it runs wild.

And so, patience (and learning it) has been mandatory on my menu. I have learned most about patience, as mentioned, by waiting, but also by doing the various very tedious camera work I do. And this is not to mention the ultra-tedious things I have done all my life as a vocation, like documenting all recorded music, film, rock concert posters, astrological books, and on and on. And that stuff is slower than molasses, yet, it did not slow me down enough. Even now, I still need more patience and it has been a lifetime already.

So, if I stop to think about it, my whole life has been a process of waiting to live, of slowing down enough in time to have any kind of life at all. And I have been busy. Allowing life to just happen has been (and still is) a problem for me; I have had to work at it. It is not a surprise that one of my favorite poems is "Waiting" by John Borroughs:

WAITING

Serene, I fold my hands and wait,
Nor care for wind, nor tide, nor sea;
I rave no more 'gainst time or fate,
For lo! my own shall come to me.

I stay my haste, I make delays,
For what avails this eager pace?

I stand amid the eternal ways,
And what is mine shall know my face.

Asleep, awake, by night or day,
The friends I seek are seeking me;
No wind can drive my bark astray,
Nor change the tide of destiny.

What matter if I stand alone?
I wait with joy the coming years;
My heart shall reap where it hath sown,
And garner up its fruit of tears.

The waters know their own and draw
The brook that springs in yonder height;
So flows the good with equal law
Unto the soul of pure delight.

The stars come nightly to the sky;
The tidal wave unto the sea;
Nor time, nor space, nor deep, nor high,
Can keep my own away from me.

DHARMA: GETTING PERSONAL

October 7, 2018

I keep writing about how personal the dharma must get for each of us before we can recognize the true nature of the mind and the reason for that is because I keep being brought face-to-face with this fact myself. It seems that realization has to come from inside us. Duh.

Every time I try to extrapolate, to look outside myself for the dharma, like in teachings, books, and people, I'm brought back to and end up turning inward to accessing and depending on my own experience. In other words, it's still me translating all of this to myself. LOL.

And the reason is rather simple. Our five senses and the measuring of experience that we each accumulate through simply living is all that any of us have to monitor or register the various experiences in life, whatever they are. We don't get a new set of senses given to us through dharma practice, but we can refine the ones that we have had since birth. For me, this point is crucial to understand, but it seems too often to go in one ear and out the other of many folks.

In general, we are always (and endlessly) looking outward beyond ourselves for something new to acquire, even if it is just a new way to grasp the dharma. It's a habit. What needs to be understood is that's not how it works. We don't get a new set of anything but, through dharma practice, we always end up learning to more properly use the senses and skills we were born with and the experience we have already gained up to this moment in order to realize

something that is already within us. Do you see my point?

In other words, we don't get a new set of clothes, so to speak, something we don't already have. Nothing changes but our view. Instead, we have to use what we now have, have always had, (and are familiar with) to make sense of the dharma we are taught or exposed to. "WE" translate the dharma that we study and are taught into something we can understand in our own speak. We are the translator and bring the dharma home to ourselves and filter it through our own experience and senses. There is no choice. In that way, the dharma is always personal and through our translation results in any greater awareness. And awareness is what the dharma is all about.

This has been brought home to me over and over again, that the dharma I encounter in books or teachings is usually more formal than I am, even stiff or too scholarly at times for me in many cases. And, ultimately the way I end up understanding it is more colloquial, less formal, and ALWAYS as filtered through my own intelligence and experience. That's all I have, my own filter! I always have had to make the dharma my own in order to fully understand it or at least that's what I in fact do. In this, we all share.

And what that means is that the truth of dharma has to knock ME out, grab ME by the short hairs, and make sense to ME personally, by using my personal sense of words, experience, and understanding. And this is why we have to stop fixating on a Self and (without removing the Self) we learn to see beyond it.

It is this point that it seems is so hard to communicate. We can't hold the dharma at arm's length and fully assimilate it from other folk's words; at least I can't. It has to be brought home to me in my

gut, using my own words, understanding, feelings, and conceptual ability. I have to actually grasp it.

Dharma, when translated and filtered through our own experience is what dharma is all about to us. It's what gets through and makes sense. For me, anything else is school-book learning and little more than a pointing "at" rather than an incorporation-of.

In fact, I find that I have to encourage myself to be more brave and confident enough to dare to make dharma my own, no matter how clumsy or inexperienced I am, and to actually just go ahead and use it. I believe that we can't afford to be "too polite" and assume that dharma should be kept at some respectful distance, like putting it on a high shelf in a museum or shrine when, only by fully incorporating it in our own body language and life, does it work. That's my point.

DHARMA: NO PLACE TO GO

October 8, 2018

The deeper I get into dharma practice, the more I realize that, as my first dharma teacher used to say, “This is it!” And by that he meant, as the title of this blog points out, that there is no other place to go. And this goes for Nirvana, enlightenment, and all the Buddha realms of bliss like Sukhavati. Our wish to go, get to, and be elsewhere is like trying to climb out of the middle of a very deep lake. It’s impossible.

This is what the pith dharma-texts mean when they say to imagine or view the world as a magical illusion. The dharma texts may speak (and we think) of this suggestion as out there in our future, something we have yet to do, but in fact it is our sole present situation – already here and we are living in that now. We just don’t realize it. We are not aware, which is the whole point of the dharma -- awareness.

To put this in another way: every “out” or “other” that we set for ourselves, “anything but here,” is just wishful thinking. There may be other worlds, but not for us, at least not right now. This is it!

The pith dharma texts clearly state that this world of suffering (what the Buddhist call Samsara) is connate with enlightenment (what the Buddhists call Nirvana). They are not different places, but rather different views of the same place. By stating that Samsara and Nirvana are “connate,” which the Buddhists emphatically do, means that these are simply two sides of the same coin, with the accent here on the word “same.” Samsara and Nirvana are one and only one (and the same) place, just with a different view from the other side of the coin. Again: this is it!

In other words, Nirvana or enlightenment is not a place or location that we reach other than in the right here and now; they are just a different view (or way of viewing) of this same place and time. If we read the more advanced (pithy) texts carefully, that is what we find clearly spelled out for us. There is no mistaking it. Yet, how do we manage to ignore this?

And now, back to what I'm pointing out here. Every "out" that we imagine, every bridge we dream, is just our way of ignorance, our way of ignoring the reality before us in the here and the now. These may be fancy words, but the reality of what they point to is ultimately very sobering and, if taken to heart, liberating. We stop projecting into the future, trying to keep from facing reality, and let the future just play out in the present. The present is our future -- always.

Everything we tag as the future keeps us from the present and we hope and dream (so it would seem) constantly – tag, tag, tag. We are looking for relief, but in all the wrong places. We are putting off the present in favor of the future and that is a major obscuration and impediment as far as I can see. Constantly anticipating the future holds us back from the present.

We have to stop writing letters to ourselves that we alone have to answer for. They keep us so busy that we have no time to live in the present. Thoughts of the future smother the present with their RSVPs.

And so, for me, simply changing places and locations has ceased to satisfy. As the old saying goes "wherever I go, there I am." Why bother? Or, as another saying goes "We can take the boy out of the country, but we can't take the country out of the boy" - - same sentiment.

My way of saying this to myself is that if you could get me to the Grand Canyon, I would like looking at it, but the process of getting there and back is not worth it. To me, travel, like the French word “Travail” is just plain work. I am OK with the right here and the now. I find this “here” remarkable enough because I’m present and aware. What more do we want?

The itch to alter the present is one of the REALLY GREAT words of advice that the Mahasiddha Tilopa left us. He said “Don’t alter the present.” Perhaps Ram Das would phrase it as “Be Here Now,” but I would not make it an imperative, but just say “This is it!”

In truth, I am tired and worn out from rescheduling my enlightenment. LOL. I just want to get on with it and the “here and now” is just fine with me as a good place to start. I don’t need to scout other locations or even set the stage differently than as it presently is. I am good to go right now.

Another way to put this is that I am tired of entertainment, of being entertained, and even entertaining others. It’s just a huge distraction and a waste of time having to be entertained all the time or entertaining. Let boredom ring if it wants. Even boredom is not THAT boring. I have learned this through great practice. LOL.

“See the world. See the world.” I have seen it enough and it is lovely and all, but I don’t feel like going out of my way to see it. That just seems redundant, another kind of oxymoron. “Start where you are” is exciting enough for me. I’m sorry if I’m being a poor sport or spoiling the conventional party. I’m no longer a party goer. And that’s just a fact of life for me. I don’t lack for interest just where I am at most of the time.

And I am not tired of living, but I want to give it all a rest, this restless need or urge to entertain myself. I'm entertained enough by just everyday life. Is that so bad? I don't think so. Endless distractions don't do it for me anymore, at least not much.

So, what am I good for when it comes to socializing? Not too much. I like questions more than answers. The way most people tell it, IMO, asks a lot. I hear how they are claiming it is, but mostly I hear a question crying out somewhere in there and they are not asking for answers. LOL.

I do like dialogue, to talk with people one-to-one or perhaps in a small group. I would guess I am most interested in being of help sharing basic dharma with others. If I can be of use sharing the dharma, I am happy. That and my family are about it. Oh yes, some photography too. I like that. It's my form of poetry.

DHARMA WISDOM: WHAT IS THAT?

October 10, 2018

The wisdom of Dharma is said to be sacred, but just what is it? Buddhism is famous for its lists and sheer number of written texts. In fact, scholars claim that the written texts (and so on) in Buddhism are an order of magnitude (10x) greater in number than any other religion. That's a lot of reading! I always jokingly say it's all the caffeine in the tea that the Tibetans drink! Yet, nowhere that I know does Buddhism have an equivalent to the Christian Bible or even a "Ten Commandments."

In Tibetan Buddhism, the so-called Tibetan Canon consists of almost 100 volumes of the sutras alone as said by the historical Buddha (the Kangjur) and the commentaries on those sutras number some 224 volumes (the Tanjur). So, we can't carry that many books around, much less have time to read them. And most have never been translated into English anyway. As for memorizing them, well, not really.

I find it helpful to keep in mind what the dharma is all about, which is basic awareness. The word Buddha is the past participle of the word "bodhati" (awake) and means to be aware and so on, but awareness of what? What is it that we are aware of?

For one, we are most aware "OF" awareness itself, which many of us don't spend much time doing. And awareness reflecting on itself is like a hall of mirrors, an endless series of reflections that short-circuit the conceptual process and leave us alone and resting in the awareness itself. As to the wisdom of the dharma, we should ask ourselves what we consider wisdom to be. Wisdom for what? That might help.

Of course, we all need more wisdom, whatever that is, but since the dharma is all about becoming aware, any wisdom has to be the wisdom of awareness, just as the historical Buddha's teachings are all about how to become aware. Of course, I'm for that! And how does all this wisdom relate to what is called "Recognition," becoming aware (realizing) the true nature of our own mind? After all, "Recognition" is what all of the preliminary dharma practices are about preparing us for and point to.

And what is the wisdom of recognition all about? The wisdom that comes from Recognition is the wisdom of knowing how to better use what we already have on hand to accomplish dharma rather than being gifted with some new secret set of rules that will suddenly make us "wise." Said another way, through Recognition we become certain that we are good-to-go just as we now are, imperfect, warts and all. Think about that for a second. At that points, we can use what we now have on hand to progress, where previously we may have thought we have to first perfect ourselves before we get to anything as wise as "wisdom."

Yes, depending on the thickness of our obscurations, we do have to thin them out through the various purification practices. However, it's like "season to taste" rather than remove them all. We just have to be able to see through or beyond our obscurations enough to see the road, the path our particular dharma will take. We don't need 20/20 vision starting out. Even purification has to be abandoned for realization to occur.

In other words, with Recognition is lost this idea that we have to first perfect ourselves and then we can be wise. That idea of perfect-perfection is misguided,

IMO. We just have to be able to grasp the steering wheel of our dharma vehicle and drive on the road. Some of us see more clearly, drive better, and so forth, than others, but if we can see to drive well enough to get on down the road, that is good enough for starters. We refine as we go.

In other words, with Recognition we come alive in action. It's a realization on our part as how to use what we already have, our particular talents, such as they naturally are. And, as we realize this, we just start driving the car, so to speak. We will get to be a more perfect driver by driving, not by just further studying more books. In fact, by driving, we will understand what's in the books, what the authors are writing about. Recognition is like passing our driving test and getting our license; from then on the driving is up to us. We are good to go.

It sounds good, does it not? However, doing it, recognizing the nature of the mind and how it works is unfortunately not a slam-dunk kind of thing. Most of us know that because we have tried and missed the point of the pointing-out instructions. I did this a number of times myself and came up with nothing – like water running through my fingers. LOL. Of course, it was embarrassing too for my dear old self. [to be continued.]

DHARMA: SEARCH UNTIL EXHAUSTION

October 11, 2018

Looking for the backdoor to the unique dharma event called “Recognition” (discovering the true nature of the mind) or hoping to be grandfathered-in is an exercise in futility. There is only one access to Recognition and many great teachings have spelled this out in triplicate. If we don’t follow the pointers (and correctly at that), nothing will be pointed out to us. This I know from experience. LOL.

I literally spent YEARS not quite following the pointing-out instructions correctly and they didn’t work for me at all. My mind remained quite ordinary. You can’t short-cut or think your way through the pointing-out instructions. They may sound like they are purely conceptual, but they are not. In fact, they require that we abandon conceptual thinking in favor of actually searching the mind for ourselves... on foot, so to speak. And that means going into our own mind and searching to find this or find that (or the lack thereof) until we exhaust every possibility. An exhaustive search is what has to happen.

For example, if we are asked to find where the mind is located, we can’t just conceptualize and think, “Of course, the mind has no location,” and let it go at that. That is just the exact wrong way to go about it and I did it for years. Little Mr. Smarty-pants was not about to get down on his hands-and-knees (so to speak) and crawl around searching in the mind for something that does not exist. I just knew it did not exist from the get-go, so I told myself that I will wait this one out, thank you very much. That was my attitude.

Well, that attitude and a ticket will get you a ride on the bus, so nothing happened, although I had the pointing-out instructions given to me a number of times... and by great masters. And the result was “nada.” When the music stopped, I had no chair to sit on, I had lots of great spiritual experiences that came and went, but no Recognition. LOL.

And so, after many years of coming up empty, I had to rethink my strategy. I must be doing something wrong, thought I. And sure enough, I was. As explained above, I was short-circuiting the search process by thinking, drawing conclusions conceptually instead of actually looking at and searching in my mind physically, so to speak. You might want to read that last sentence again because it is the point of this blog.

I “thought,” instead of actually looking at my mind (whatever that might involve), I conceptually drew an immediate conclusion to the search by thinking I had the answer. I was even embarrassed that other people did not immediately see that the mind has no location, for example. My search was done in a millisecond, which amounted to no search at all.

Or, Rinpoche would ask us to find out if the mind is the color “red.” Of course, the mind has no color, red or otherwise. I thought this in an instant and let it go at that. Period, end of story. I waited for the other students to find the same conclusion. However, and a big “however it is,” I neglected to grasp that Rinpoche was not asking me to draw a conclusion conceptually by thinking, as I did, “Of course the mind is not the color red. How silly!” thought I.

Instead, Rinpoche was asking us to search the mind thoroughly, day and night, and determine if the mind was the color red and then report back to him. I was

done in an instant and had 24 hours, 59 minutes, and 59 seconds to do whatever I wanted, which I did.

It was only years later that it occurred to me that I had missed the boat by jumping the gun and conceptualizing the search as I did. When Rinpoche said to examine the mind to see if it is the color red, he meant for me to go and look -- search the mind. We have to physically go and search, search, search the mind to the fullest extent of our ability until we have exhausted all possibilities that the mind is the color red, for example – until exhaustion! He was not asking me to just sit there and think conceptually that the mind is not the color red. Got it?

That was my mistake and I'm not sure you will grasp what I am saying here; I am sharing with you something of importance. The mind is a lot like a muscle. It has to be physically used. In this case, it has to be searched by going into it and searching it for ourselves. We have to actually look for ourselves. Armchair searching, by thinking and conceptualizing, will not get the job done. There is no shortcut I have ever heard of that works.

I have made this point as clear as I can.

AUTUMNAL

October 12, 2018

Fall is here and as the old song says: “The falling leaves drift by the window, the autumn leaves of red and gold.” The house plants are in and the garden no longer needs watering since it has been raining for days. What flowers remain have finished up. Today’s photo shows a few of the last Dahlias that I rescued from the cold.

The heartbreak for me each year (so-to-speak) are the huge V-shaped flocks of Canada geese flying overhead as they head south. I can hear them honking long before they appear in the sky above me. For me, the sound and the sight of these birds high up there in the cold air is always so haunting.

Meanwhile, down here life marches on as it likes to do this time of year, one day following another as the Sun moves southward toward the Winter Solstice. This is when I wish I lived in warmer climes, but the warmth is all I would gain. My family, kids, grandkids, friends, their pets, etc. would still be up here and I would be down there in Florida or somewhere-I-don’t-know wondering what to do with myself and why I am there. LOL. It happens every year.

And so I turn inward, or rather more inward, since I am quite inward-oriented as it is. Walking outside each day gets colder. Today’s high is 44 degrees Fahrenheit and there is wind on top of that. The body reacts to weather change (I can feel it) and most of all what foods we eat move from Yin to Yang and oatmeal, root veggies, barley, tempeh, and anything “heavier” comes back into play.

It has not frosted yet and there is as yet no ice to slip on, but that won't be too long in coming; the first frost is scheduled to come tonight and the ice in a month or more. Each year we swear we will drive south for a spell, but we never manage it. It's almost a running joke.

And so, don't register this as a complaint, but rather as notes from the autumn starting to filter through. We are getting the message. It's hard to come inside and harder yet for me to close the windows so the soft summer breeze no longer reaches me.

FROM A DREAM

October 13, 2018

“I have gone to paint the sunrise in the sky,
To feel the cool of night warm into day.
The flowers from the ground call up to me,
This self I think I am is hard to see.

A little poem I wrote in the midst of it all. It's hard to remember that Earth is hurtling through space around the Sun at 67,000 miles per hour. Our solar system (with Earth in it) moves through space at 515,000 miles per hour. And our galaxy, the Milky Way, is moving us through space at 1.3 million miles per hour. So, we are not exactly standing still. And yet, here we are, still standing. It's all relative. LOL.

And that's just our physical motion. Mentally, it's much more precarious. I find that it's best not to doubt or try to figure things out when we are walking a tightrope. That's not a time to think.

We each have our high-wire act, suspended in time and space, infinitely near and yet still so far from enlightenment. There is a certain point we reach where doubt just makes no sense. Doubt becomes an obscuration all by itself. If we are more than halfway started or are already committed to the dharma, there is really no point in turning back or even considering such a move. Where would we go? So, keep moving and, by the way, don't look down. LOL.

WISDOM ENERGY

October 14, 2018

Oh, that I was perfect; what a day that would be, especially for my family! However, I'm not perfect, try as I might. Nestled among my good traits are all kinds of funky. I don't like it either. And I'm sure that I'm not the only one like this.

Behind the curtain of the personal self is, more often than not, a Wizard-of-Oz in each of us, someone doing the best they can back-in-there to pull the strings. It would be so much the better if we could accept everyone just as they are and support them to being better, to improving. However, at least in my life, that's an uphill climb and the concept of "unconditional love" and support is a rare bird, if it still exists at all. It might be extinct.

Yes, I know that Jesus, Buddha, and other saints are said to love sentient beings unconditionally, but what about right now? We don't even love ourselves unconditionally, although I do try. LOL. Where am I going with all of this? I'm already there; I've said it.

The only question I have is how much better could we be if we were loved unconditionally? As mentioned, we don't even love ourselves that much. Is imperfect the same as being dualistic? Do we have to embrace the whole enchilada? Fine; just how would we go about doing that? Would we be loved unconditionally if we loved unconditionally? So many questions...

If I read the teachings right, it takes realizing emptiness to invoke and embrace unconditional love. As I understand it, in Vajrayana Buddhism the ultimate source of dharma-wisdom is the Dakini, the

female embodiment of wisdom (and its energy), often translated as Sky-goer or Space-dancer. Perhaps a better term might be Emptiness-goer or Emptiness-embrace, the movement of energy held in the infinite ever-expanding embrace of space. That alone is freeing. Embracing emptiness (and its nature) is ever the mother and ultimate source of compassion. Of course, feminine energy appears in both woman and men; however, traditionally Wisdom is feminine, just as Skillful-Means is masculine.

A little poem I wrote on the Wisdom-Dakini:

DAKINI

Unconditional love,
Has no conditions.
It accepts,
The exceptions.

Total receptivity,
Takes you in,
Until you know,
Nothing.

Emptiness,
Contains everything,
And that includes,
Nothing.

DHARMA: TWO GREAT OPPORTUNITIES

October 15, 2018

[This is a bit of a long one. Sorry.]

I am still learning and expanding the basic Vajrayana realization practices and I don't know what else these practices will demand as time goes on. In other words, I don't need more advanced practices; I need to continue to advance in the practices that I already have. I am also a householder and not a lama. However, each of us knows what we know, yet at this point most of us don't know enough that we can write out our own sadhanas. At least I can't. LOL.

However, more and more of the time I do tweak the traditional English in the various prayers and support texts I use so that I can better understand what is being said based on my own experience and realization. I know, that may look like a slippery slope, but if we are into the realization practices like the special form of Vipassana that is part of Mahamudra, there is no reason I can see not to put whatever we realize in practice into words that actually mean something to us. I work at this all the time, word by word. And for me, this has been important.

Yet, beyond that I'm not sure how to approach this topic. However, one sign I did receive was a spontaneous intuition that writing our own support texts is something that we can do. We all can. And I tend not to ignore what comes to mind intuitively – from inside. What I am talking about here are daily aspirations (before practice) and dedications (after practice). We all do these or would benefit from them.

If you are happy with the aspirations, prayers, and the texts you now use, fine. As for me, just reciting words

I am not totally comfortable with is not the best approach in the long run. I have benefited from modifying my support texts (at least the English) so that I better understand the words I am saying. If I don't understand the texts I use enough to modify them, then I just leave them as they are. And I am talking here about moving a few words around here and there to better grasp them, not about rewriting them.

There must be (and are) many practices that I could do, but for whatever reason none that I have found are as absorbing as Mahamudra and the Mahamudra form of Insight Meditation. This seems to be my lifelong practice. I will hopefully work on it for the rest of my life.

The precious directness that the form of Insight Meditation taught in Mahamudra brings is for me the very lifeblood of dharma instruction, the continuity of an ever-present awareness that is uninterrupted, contiguous, and beyond doubt of any kind. Like when an infant first finds its mother's nipple and latches on, the dharma protection of Insight Meditation, IMO, is a safe haven for practitioners in this samsaric world.

This is particularly true when it comes to aspirations and dedications, which I am writing about here. In fact, I believe these are the two great opportunities that any practitioner (beginners too) can always benefit from. We start our dharma practice each day with aspirations and close it each evening with dedication of merit. I can't say the same for other texts (i.e. that I should modify them and don't), but at least I am free to write out my own aspirations of intent and dedications of merit. I believe anyone can do this and will only benefit from it. Example of aspirations that I might offer are:

“May all beings have unwavering insight into the true nature of the mind such that the essential meaning of the dharma (and its instructions) is realized and flows uninterrupted into and through our consciousness.”

“May all beings find protection from the defects of samsara in the shelter and uninterrupted awareness of Insight Meditation that is part of Mahamudra practice.”

“May all beings be wrapped in the brilliance and blessings of Mahamudra Meditation, a practice in which we can each find a safe haven until we reach full enlightenment.”

Anyway, you get the idea. Here I am using words that I might use and feel that each of us should use words that connect with us. As they say, “Use your own words.” And it’s the same with the dedication of merit. We dedicate any merit (accrued from our personal practice, but also any merit accrued by others in the past, present, and future, to all the buddhas and bodhisattvas that they may bring all beings to full enlightenment.

Aspirations (before practice) and dedications (at the close of each practice) are not just “add on” prayers to whatever else we do, but rather essential parts of any dharma practice. The Tibetan teachings clearly say that unless the merit of any practice we do is dedicated (not just to ourselves, but to all sentient beings), it is liable to be lost like sand running through an hourglass. However, if our dedication includes all sentient beings, then it is locked forever like (pardon me) money in a spiritual bank. It accumulates interest. Sorry for the mundane reference, but it fits. I can tell a little personal story.

One year, Rinpoche gave the pointing-out instructions as to the nature of the mind during one of the 30 years of ten-day intensive Mahamudra teachings I have been to. I can't say that I saw the true nature of the mind that year, but something inside me clicked into place from what I did experience. For one, I finally grasped the importance of aspirations and dedication of merit at (for me) a deeper level. When I got home from the teaching and found myself back in my daily routine of making a living, I changed a few things. And while this may seem a little extreme (Rinpoche laughed when I told him about this, he said it was just fine to do this somewhat elaborate practice. And here it is:

For something like three years after that intensive, while I worked as a computer programmer each day, sitting there at my desk lost in computer code (or whatever), each time I was interrupted, I dedicated the merit and renewed my aspirations. By that I mean that each time the phone rang, one of my kids came into my office (I work at home), a car honked outside, my dog barked, or whatever interrupted me, I stopped what I was doing (after all, I was already stopped by the interruption) and I took the time to dedicate whatever teeny-tiny modicum of merit I had accumulated up to that point (through what I had been doing until I was interrupted) to all the Buddhas and the Bodhisattvas with the wish that they use it to benefit all sentient beings. After that, I said an aspiration (renewed my intent) that whatever I was about to continue doing be meritorious for all beings. And with that I went back to work. I did this all day.

I could be (and often was) interrupted one minute later or whatever, at which time I did the whole thing all over again. I did this throughout my day (and life),

so that it happened many, many times whenever I worked or concentrated on something. As mentioned, I did this (more or less) for some three years or so. I am sure it may sound ridiculous and time consuming, which it was, but it always took place at a point of interruption, when I had already been interrupted, so it was kind of a natural articulation point. And it very much helped.

I tell this here because what we think is enough may not always be enough. As the poet William Blake said "Enough or too much." My point is that sometimes it takes too much to be enough. If I have learned anything about dharma, it is that realization (at least for me) demands going beyond any sort of casual practice. I'm sure that I am a hard nut to crack, but in my case, just doing "enough" has never been enough. For me it's like imagining that going to church for an hour on Sunday will get me to heaven. Or, playing the guitar for an hour once a week will make me a good guitarist. Not likely. I am a hard case. In other words, I have to go beyond the known for anything to be known -- that idea.

DHARMA WORMHOLES

October 16, 2018

Something that I harp on here in these blogs is the need, at least on my part, to get serious. I really do believe that most of us walk around as if we are going to live forever; we don't think we have to prepare for our eventual death whatsoever. Out of sight, out of mind. Yet, when I read the many dharma texts and teachings I have been exposed to, they don't say that. In fact, it's just the opposite. The texts say to get ready for death and be sure to secure a future human rebirth. Who am I to believe?

Well, you can bet that my money is on the dharma texts and not the grasshoppers who don't realize that every summer has an end. Sensing the eventual end, our personal impermanence, is not something we have to get all funeral-parlor about; however, it has to be noticed and responded to, IMO. But how?

I understand the old Schlitz beer commercial and their slogan "You only go around once in life, so you've got to grab for all the gusto you can!" It reminds me of the old "party till you puke" days of my generation, but for many of us, that got old pretty fast or at least it got old.

The dharma texts don't say not to enjoy life, but rather to enjoy "lives" (to have the right ones) among the rebirths that are coming. Yet, just how do we do that? Well, the most obvious thing I pull from the dharma teachings is that it very much helps to have what they call another "precious human birth" after we leave this one, so that we have the opportunity be born in a body that can make use of the dharma and learn. Being a housefly should give us pause. In other

words, we might want to hedge our bets against having a lower rebirth, such as an animal or a bug. And it is a sobering thought when we discover that the dharma teachings state that every sentient being, even a bug or a dog, has the same Buddha Nature as we have, limited only by the physical limitations as to the KIND OF BODY we are born into. My wish is that anyone who reads the previous sentence understands it in some detail. To me, the import is earth-shaking.

So, the Schlitz beer commercial that suggests we just go around once or to just let the cosmos sort it all out may be a little premature or just ill considered. We might rather be at least a little more deliberate about our future rebirths. It may not look cool to plan, but it might be wise on our part. And just how do we do that?

Well, the long and the short of it perhaps is as simple as to live a dharmic life, one with an eye to our future rebirths as well as to our present situation. If you were born with crystal clarity in this life, then god bless you. Mighty few of us are. Most of us have a foggy windshield, one that has to be cleaned so that we can make out the road ahead of us. To do that takes some kind of purification practices. From a dharmic point of view, purification simply means getting our mind right-enough to be able to see clearly enough to take any meaningful direction at all.

And, as mentioned, the idea here is to (at the very least) secure another human rebirth, which the texts say is the best vehicle in which to learn dharma; and so, which then is the best way to become aware of the nature of our mind and benefit both ourselves and others?

We have no trouble imagining that we went through the process of this birth to be here now (because we did and here we are!), but is it so hard to believe that we could do that all over again through our next rebirth? IMO, there is a major disconnect to thinking that “we only go around once.” That birth canal is the wormhole to our next rebirth. This should be clear to us by the simple process of what is called “dead reckoning,” which is defined as:

“The process of calculating one’s current position by using a previously determined position, or fix, and advancing that position based upon known or estimated speeds over elapsed time and course.”
LOL.

Those of us who are short-sighted might well consider taking a longer view of life than just one time around and you’re done. Mind the gap.

DHARMA: THE METHOD IN THIS MADNESS

October 17, 2018

One of the reasons I wandered away from Christianity (and my Catholic upbringing) was a lack of any real method. I actually like the mystery and mysticism in the Catholic Church. However, there was the pie-in-the-sky intoning and that did not sit right with me. Then there was the mind-numbing dogmatism. Of course, I can't forget the cruelty of the nuns in Catholic school that I attended, yet ultimately the swing-vote was the lack of any practical method that caused me to turn away. It was this lack of practicality or usefulness. I am not one to take things on faith. I want to see them at work and be right in the thick of it.

Yes, there was the power of prayer, but aside from mentioning that power, no one ever explained to me how to actually pray. It was kind of assumed that we all somehow naturally know how to do that. I must have been absent from school the day that they explained that part. LOL.

On the other hand, with dharma, it is all about method -- how to do things that bring about change in our awareness. For me the practicableness of the dharma was like fresh water in a sea of salt. Here was the differential itself in concise form, something that I could understand and then actually use – the ultimate do-it-yourself kit. Having been raised in my early years out in the country (until 6th grade) with no neighbors and only my younger brothers, I was already an island unto myself, busy learning the laws of nature and not of civility. Later I came to understand that, at least for me, the laws of Mother

Nature and the dharma were practically the same thing.

Yes, in dharma there is theory, things to conceptually understand, yet by nature I was never good at abstraction. For instance, I had to take Algebra-One three times before they finally just gave me a “D” and pushed me through, but I got all “A’s” in geometry. I am visual by design. I can have real trouble understanding something as simple as a switch, like on and off, black and white – that kind of thing. I have to be sure if the switch is off and not on.

When I got old enough (in late high school) to understand that Buddhism (at least dharma) is not really a religion, but rather a methodology, I was good-to-go. Methods were things that I could grasp and immediately put to use. This I understood. With dharma, there was no pie-in-the-sky (or very little). The dharma is, IMO, the ultimate Swiss-Army-Knife. It is a universal differential. And so, what’s not to like?

The beauty of the dharma is that we are not asked to accept anything on faith. In fact, it’s just the opposite. We are encouraged to test and try out the dharma for ourselves. I have found that the dharma is not true because the Buddhists say so; they say so because the dharma is the truth. There is a difference. The dharma just works.

Telling you about the dharma is not my attempt to “sell soap,” so to speak, but rather to make you aware of this unique method to become more aware. And anyone can do it because there is no hierarchy as to having Buddha Nature. Every sentient being has it intrinsically by birth. It’s not like an SAT score, a test some folks excel at, while other’s do not. The dharma is democratic. Any of us can fully realize ourselves,

because we each can realize the nature of the mind for ourselves. It's the same nature for everyone.

A "Rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief / doctor, lawyer, indian chief," are lyrics from a song by Bruce Springsteen. The dharma has no favorites. If we realize the true nature of the mind, that's it. There is no better or worse. Realization is realization. It is the great equalizer. It's the tribe with no leader or, rather, the tribe with only leaders. The dharma is impartial, democratic, and egalitarian to the nth degree. It plays no favorites.

We can share the dharma between one another with impunity. The dharma is so precious that no value can be put upon it. It is not a "thing," but rather a method - a way or path. The ultimate language, the dharma is a series of pointers and not anything in itself. It's a verb and not a noun.

DHARMA: THE UNBORN

October 18, 2018

The word “unborn” is frequently used in Tibetan Buddhism. For example, it is often stated that the mind and its thoughts have no origin; they are “unborn.” This does not mean that the mind is somehow waiting to be born, but hasn’t yet. That’s not it. Neither does it mean that the mind and thoughts are not currently present, because of course: here they are. What it does mean is that there is no cause, place, or time the mind originated or was born, meaning that the mind and its thoughts are just (and have always been) right here with us, naturally present. It has no beginning and no end.

Like waves on water, thoughts arise and appear in our mind and they also dissolve and vanish back into the mind. There is no place that the mind itself came from and no place where thoughts go to when they vanish other than back into the mind. In other words, there is no exit door in the back of the mind; thoughts have no place where they go other than right here. Thoughts are just completely contained to and within the mind. As mentioned, thoughts are an integral part of the mind in motion, like waves are to water.

Waves that arise from still water are just the same water in motion. There is no difference between waves and calm water other than their appearance. In the same way, thoughts are just the mind in motion. If we look directly at a thought rather than follow its contents (what it means), we will see that the nature of that thought and the nature of the mind itself are identical – water to water, mind to mind.

I can't help but notice that in the various Mahamudra texts, there is sometimes a reference to a siddha or great master as unborn, like the famous "Unborn Shang" (founder of the Tsalpa Lineage) or some other rinpoche or master. This is never explained that I have seen, but I imagine that if they refer to an individual as the "unborn," this means their mind is one with the unborn nature of the mind itself.

And, although we humans are born (and reborn) in this samsaric world, in some greater sense we too must be "unborn." The dharma cosmos has no beginning and no end. In other words, we too are unborn but have not yet realized that state, which is perhaps what the concept of emptiness is trying to convey to us.

REST HOME

October 19, 2018

“My thoughts,
Like birds aboard a ship,
I let go free,
As they fly away from me.

“No need to follow on,
And here’s the perfect test:
There is no place to go,
All thoughts come back to rest.”

I have been around the dharma for many decades, since the late 1950s. I have watched dharma practitioners (myself especially) struggle with a lot of things, but the two that stand out IMO are: struggling with our thoughts and with ourselves (as in The Self). For sure, these are paper tigers, but nevertheless there they are and we struggle.

Of course, the Self is our favorite scapegoat; we can always blame things on being selfish (as if that were an excuse). LOL. And, IMO, Westerners are so confused when it comes to their selves. On the one hand we are told to “be ourselves” and on the other “don’t be selfish.” Which is it or both? We really need to sort that one out, which is why I finally gave up on western psychology and found Buddhist psychology so much more advanced as in “useful” – actually practical! The Asians are much less preoccupied with the Self in my experience. I don’t want to run a rant here about the Self or even offer a detailed explanation, but I should to say a few words.

What we call the Self is an integral part of our makeup. If we could stamp it out as some suggest, we would just have to re-invent it to get anything done

in life. The Self is not only our personal secretary, but our own homemade dummy, something we ourselves have created that is encrusted with our particular likes and dislikes – the sum total of our attachments. And we are the ventriloquist, but many folks have it just backward. They are too busy taking orders from their selves, which they originally created in their own image and endowed with all their attachments. In other words, the dummy is “talking” the ventriloquist. LOL. Now, that has to be funny. Either that or sad.

As for “thoughts,” the situation is a little more serious. For most, thoughts are just another case of tilting-at-windmills. We struggle with them so; either that or we ride our train of thoughts, every last one, mindlessly into oblivion. The Tibetans say that thoughts are to the mind our natural environment, what waves are to water and the ocean (both are water). The act of trying to suppress or get rid of thoughts only proves this to us. They don’t go away, but only grow stronger if opposed. They can’t be removed because they are as natural as rain.

Letting thoughts “just be” is the kind thing to do, at least for ourselves. Thoughts are harmless unless we fixate on them to the point of attachment. In the realization practices, we learn to look directly at the nature of each thought that arises rather than the content they carry (what they are about).

Of course, we could fill books on either of these topics. I don’t want to do that. As for me, I turned my Self out to pasture years ago and treat it as I would an old cow; give it some hay, some sunshine, and don’t feed it too much, but just enough. The Self is harmless that way, at worst perhaps a little embarrassing.

As for thoughts, they are more useful and can't just be dismissed or put out to pasture. Unlike our Self, which is a composite, thoughts are native to the mind, as natural as the mind itself – the mind in motion. For many of the more advanced dharma practices, thoughts are indispensable, especially when we come to the realization practices where they are one means to look directly at the nature of the mind. It is through directly looking at the nature of thoughts that we can discover the waves-and-water analogy. As mentioned, thoughts are to the mind as waves are to water – nothing more than just the mind itself in motion. It's much easier to learn to live in harmony with thoughts on the sea of the mind than any futile attempts trying to deny or subdue them.

SAMSARA REDUX

October 20, 2018

For years in the back of my mind I worried that this world, this place we call Samsara, with all of its suffering and also beauty might be lost to me should I become enlightened. Aside from the parts of life that are no fun, there is a lot to like as well. And I like it. Anyway, I didn't need to worry. LOL. I was struck by what my favorite poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, wrote in his classic poem "The Leaden and the Golden Echo." I will quote from the first part, about Samsara:

THE LEADEN ECHO

"How to keep—is there ány any, is there none such,
nowhere known some, bow or brooch or braid or
brace, láce, latch or catch or key to keep

Back beauty, keep it, beauty, beauty, beauty, from
vanishing away?

Ó is there no frowning of these wrinkles, rankèd
wrinkles deep,

Dówn? no waving off of these most mournful
messengers, still messengers, sad and stealing
messengers of grey?

No there's none, there's none, O no there's none,
Nor can you long be, what you now are, called fair,
Do what you may do, what, do what you may,
And wisdom is early to despair:

Be beginning; since, no, nothing can be done
To keep at bay

Age and age's evils, hoar hair,

Ruck and wrinkle, drooping, dying, death's worst,
winding sheets, tombs and worms and tumbling to
decay;

So be beginning, be beginning to despair.

O there's none; no no no there's none:

Be beginning to despair, to despair,

Despair, despair, despair, despair."

Well, those lines, when I first read them, were enough to catch a young man's eye back then. Unfortunately, and I am sorry to say that the second part "The Golden Echo," although also well-written is not as convincing. But that first part, oh yes, familiar enough. But I digress.

My point is that as much as I yearned to be enlightened as Buddha was, there was a part of me that dragged my heels to think that might mean giving all that up that I found is so wondrous in the life I knew here in Samsara, despite its shortcomings. Of course, in "The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind toward the Dharma," it was that fourth thought, the one about the defects of Samsara, that I also was stuck on. The other three all made perfect sense. Anyway, what is this Nirvana? I had no idea.

Of course, years later, when I gradually understood that the Samsara I was suffering in and the Nirvana I aspired to are themselves, connate, two sides of the same coin. The upshot of that concept is that it's not like when we get enlightened, we exit this world and escape to another more enlightened realm or world. There is no chalet hideaway.

What the teachings say is that there is no other world that this (at least for us now) and that enlightenment is a transformation of our view of THIS world, not

some other place to go or get to. In other words, there was no danger of my losing the misty morning walks and everything I loved about this world.

Enlightenment or even realization as to the nature of the mind is a change of view of this selfsame world I both loved and feared. What changes is OUR attitude, how we see this world of Samsara. This was a shock to realize, but also in some way kind of a relief. I would not have to give up the beauty of this world, but on the other hand only I could change my view of this world by actually changing it bit by bit. There was no button to press to reach Nirvana.

Of course, this was quite childish on my part or perhaps child-like. Not only would I not lose anything I loved about this samsaric world in enlightenment, but I couldn't escape samsara even if I wanted to. That was a total switch compared to what I had been thinking. And with that realization came home the idea that the transformation before me was not some physical alchemy like I had imagined, like escape to Nirvana, but rather a change of mind and attitude. That realization was sobering because it would be me that had to change my mind as to how I viewed all of this. No one else could do it for me. Once again, there is no free lunch. The lamas and teachings could but point the way; I had to walk the path on my own if I wanted to. And my degree of "want" went up and down like the tides.

Heaven knows, I had tried to find my way out of this suffering world, first in mysticism, with wise elders, then philosophy, and of course endless reading and studying. I had made the rounds of esoteric teachers and self-proclaimed gurus, but nothing stuck. When push came to shove, no one could help me. The awful truth was that, no matter which way I turned,

ultimately I would have to help myself. And I had no idea how to do that of even if I could.

Fortunately (and fortuitously) I met the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa in early 1974 when I served as chauffer during his first trip to Ann Arbor. Here was someone that as far as I could tell was totally present, looking me right in the eye, and talking directly to me, someone with blow-torch clarity, real wisdom, a master of idiomatic English. He tamed me by his very presence. A critic by trade, Trungpa was perhaps the first person in the world I had ever met about whom I had no criticism. He was good to go just as he was. To take a line from the movie “Jerry Maguire,” Trungpa had me at “Hello.”

Since I have met the Dalai Lama personally, the 16th Karmapa, the 17th Karmapa, all of the four heart sons of the Karmapa, and on and on, how was meeting Trungpa Rinpoche different from those other great beings?

And my answer is that, aside from the fact that Trungpa also was a great being (IMO a siddha), talking with him was like talking to myself. From the moment we met, he was instantly totally familiar with me, like a brother or close friend would be. There was no formality or intervening persona between us. His every word and action was like an instruction or a demonstration as to how to be. That is the difference. He was like a living dream.

Of course, like a dream was the fact that no sooner had I brought Trungpa Rinpoche back from the airport to the professor’s house where a small group was waiting to meet him and stood back along the wall to be out of the way. I was just the chauffer and did not know whether I should leave at that point.

They wanted to take Rinpoche on a tour of the University of Michigan campus and prepared to do that. At that point Trungpa Rinpoche said he was tired and needed a nap and that they should go ahead without him. I waited to the side as everyone filed out and as I moved to leave, Trungpa said “Michael, you stay.” When the rest were gone, Trungpa took me into a small office and sat me down in a chair and taught me to meditate.

Trungpa never even said what he was doing; he just began to instruct me in his form of Tranquility Meditation (Shamata). I must have spent an hour or more with Rinpoche. It was pure magic as he had me breathe in and out. And I was very nervous. He was particularly concerned about my “out-breath,” breathing out. I was not letting the breath go all the way out as he wanted to see. Of course I tried to exhale. And he finally said to me “Let it go all the way out and don’t worry. It will come back.” And when he said those words, somewhere deep inside I let go and all my lifelong fear of death and dying just came up in my mind and evaporated. I let it go out. And I have never been as afraid of death since. That’s the kind of effect that Chögyam Trungpa had on me. From that day onward, I had direction.

DHARMA: TAKING POSSESSION

October 21, 2018

For me, the dharma is much like the North Star, what we call the Pole Star. It serves to guide me in the proper direction every time. And, even though I may not always grasp it fully, I can sense the truth of dharma intuitively. Yet, making dharma our own can be a different story. Like a time-release capsule, it often takes time to assimilate the dharma. At least it does for me. I keep going back for more, each time a little deeper.

And it is not just “depth” and deeper that we should consider. More important than depth is orientation, by which I mean reorientation. That’s really what takes place through dharma practice. What I mean by depth actually is a change in attitude or approach on our part – and a change of heart.

IMO, the dharma is not designed to be just conceptual and kept at arm’s length, but rather the dharma is a vehicle that we each have to take over, inhabit or possess, and drive. It’s all hands-on. For me, the dharma is the ultimate Swiss-Army Knife, a method that itself is THE one indispensable tool.

Aerodynamically, the dharma is perfectly designed to take the winds of change that life brings. It has no perceivable slipstream, IMO, but is just the pure differential itself – the nitty-gritty.

That being said, if we can’t quite grasp the dharma intuitively, it’s because we currently lack the awareness needed to do so. That’s why there are so many purification dharma practices, to help us thin out our obscurations so that we can have greater awareness and better see the nature of our own mind

and how it works. Ultimately, realization on our part of the true nature of the mind is what makes a difference. It's called "Recognition."

In brief, we have to take possession of our own life vehicle and situation enough to drive it. It reminds me of those robot-transformers that kids like, where a human gets inside and manipulates a much larger transformer. We have to take over our own life and karma in order to direct it. The dharma is not for wallflowers, but requires full immersion on our part – all hands-on. We have to be all-in.

In other words, we have to transform ourselves and by that I mean transform the way we see things – our view. But that last sentence makes it sound like "We" do something conceptually, when the reality is that realizing dharma is a total transformation that includes in the process the transformation of the idea of transformation itself. We don't have that correct either, which is the problem in a nutshell. Actual transformation is all-inclusive and without actual realization we can't grasp what that means.

A small shift in our inner attitude, a change of heart on our part, can transform everything as to how we see this world. Just as we don't get out of this world alive, so to speak, in realization it is "WE" who are transformed to the exclusion of whatever and whoever we thought we were before transformation. We change. Everything goes and is given up and abandoned in the process. That is what is meant by "all-inclusive." And that includes the "I" in us.

DHARMA: THE PRESENT IS A GROOVE

October 22, 2018

[I'm a little out of my body these days, so these are the kind of thoughts that can result. Not for everyone.]

We all know that time is a relative truth and the slipstream of time is filled with memories, but only brief ones. Extended time spent in the past or the future requires either deliberation or escapism on our part. Like adjusting the flame on a gas stove so that it burns cleanly (blue flame) is like adjusting our attention to the present moment, as in: being always of it. Both the past and the future can encroach on the present if we allow or pursue it. This happens all the time.

In other words, we can't just "be present" by force of our will as dictated with a self-imposed imperative such as "Be here now!" However, we can learn to allow the mind to rest so that it just naturally reveals the present. This may take some training on our part, yet even that training cannot be one that forcibly tries to block-out the past or the future. Instead, we become aware of the present by carefully finding and gently falling into the natural groove of the present that exists rather than attempting to BE present. This is a case of where all trial is error! We have to stop trying to rest.

If we can allow ourselves to rest naturally, meaning that we don't somehow mess with the moment, our attention will naturally bob to the surface and just be present. In other words, we allow the moment to keep us present rather than make efforts on our own trying to be present. That's the idea. Nice work if you can get it and it is possible with practice and training.

However, being in the present moment is not like threading a needle by purposeful intent. As mentioned, it cannot be arrived at through effort. The present moment is the only pure oxygen vent there is. And, like smelling salts, breathing it wakes us up smartly. If we prefer instead to slumber-on (as is our habit), apparently no one will stop us. That to me is a scary thought. Only the accumulation of our incessant karma may jar us awake from time to time so that we pause in our sleep to look around. And, usually we just go back to sleep. It's our convenient delinquency. Staying awake would require waking up, which is why the Dharma exists: to be aware.

This reminds me of those sci-fi movies where the passengers on a space voyage are cryogenically asleep in pods until a time when they can awake. With our own awakening, I guess its "no wine before its time," but we CAN train to wake up. When I was young and in my twenties I wrote a poem about what in the esoteric literature is called "The Monad." This poem is reminiscent of what I am referring to here. It is a bit of a tongue-twister, what I used to term to myself a "mantra poem," meaning that if you say it out loud clearly, it will (or can) recreate the vision of the original experience and initiate you. It includes some unusual uses of words, which you will have to just let work on you, like the connotation of the word "last" as something shoemakers use. It goes like this.

EVERLASTING LIFE

What will in words not wake
Clear sleeps,
And clear, sleeps on.

What wakes stands watch to see that sleep as sound.
What wakes will serve to set asleep,
Inset a sleep with standing words,

That wake,
If ever, last.
And on that last,
In overlay,
Our life.

Yes,
To lay at the last a life that ever lives,
To ever last that "last" of life,
And in ever "lasting" life,
Everlasting,
We have a life that lives at last.

TOLERATING TEDIUM

October 23, 2018

I have to write about tedium because that's what I face a lot. And I don't mean just another boring day, but something really tedious. And I can match "tedious" with almost anyone in the world because most people avoid it. I don't choose it because it's tedious, but rather because it's a no-man's land that I would like to see cultivated. It is virgin territory, so to speak. Perhaps I just like to be alone. LOL.

We all know what taking a day at a time means. Here, I am talking about increments, taking one step farther at a time in whatever I'm doing. I don't bother depressing myself with the size of the task (don't think about it); instead, for me it is one foot in front of another and ever forward that I keep at. I have done this for decades through sharing information about the music and movies we love with all people. It's what keeps me going. And this is not directly dharma, either, but reflects on happiness.

Today, right now, I am looking at digitally developing the result of many, many hundreds of thousands of nature photos that I have taken over the years. From all those photos, and many of them are each part of a short series, I have reduced the lot of them to what I call the "keepers," a mere 40,000 of so. And I mean to work through (and digitally develop) them one at a time to arrive at what we could call the tip-of-the-top of all these photos. And finally, I hope to make these photos available to everyone, either free or for a small charge if need be. I can afford to work for free, but displaying them all on the Internet costs money, so

we shall see. However, I would like to share them with anyone interested.

And I am no stranger to tedium either. My bona fides are somewhat well known for all to see. So that you can know what I mean about tedium, I will name a few of my projects here just to make my point.

Technically, I am what I call an archivist of popular culture. I have spent my life preserving some of the culture we all enjoy, such as popular music, film, rock concert posters, astrology, and the list goes on. And for dessert, I do some photography, which I am looking at here. My Facebook friends know some small number of my photos. Other previous projects of mine have been:

I singlehandedly (and later with many people helping) created what has become the largest database of music on the planet. When I sold this company there were 150 full-time staff and over 500 free-lance writers. The All-Music Guide (allmusic.com) is the largest collection of albums, artists, biographies, discographies, covers, tracks, and details about recorded music from 10" records onward in the world. You have to understand that I did this from the same tiny office I am sitting here in now.

I did it because I felt the music that we all love and grew up with was precious to us and should be available to all and preserved in some way. So, I just began entering all the music I could get my hands on and called it the "All-Music Guide." Famous music critics in New York, the Heartland, and the West Coast all laughed at me, saying things like "Some guy in a tiny town in the Midwest says he is going to review and document all recorded music." But we did just that and it is still available today at AllMusic.com.

Then we did the same with movies and film, creating one of the two largest movie databases in the world, with all cast and characters listed, the All-Movie Guide (allmovie.com). I did it with video games, but after I sold the company they did not keep up with it.

And after I sold AMG (the All Media Guides), I went on (this time with almost no help) to document all of the important rock concert-posters, complete with measurements and details. I photographed myself some 33,000 rock concert posters, and so on.

I also collected and documented what I believe is the largest collection of books and periodicals on astrology ever assembled. It is now a part of the permanent collection of the University of Illinois Library System, along with all my letters and papers, etc. It took a full-sized moving van to transport the collection and a UPS-sized truck just for my papers and correspondence.

I cannot convey in words what a wasteland of tedium documenting and recording all that data was. It taught me incredible concentration and preciseness.

What I am perhaps most proud of is that I have been a good steward of all that I have collected, working really hard to donate and place each collection in the hands of an institution that will keep and preserve it for future generations. These music and film databases are available to the public. My rock concert-poster data has been placed in the Bentley Historical Library of the University of Michigan, and at the non-profit Haight Street Art Center in San Francisco. Some of my poster data is also available at ClassicPosters.com.

I also assembled a large collection of audio dharma teachings by my dharma teacher and many others. It

filled a room and existed as a backup to the originals held at in our monastery in upstate New York. That collection has now been returned and was used to replace tapes that somehow were lost or misplaced from the originals. All have now been digitized. And so on and etc.

Which brings me back to my current task of developing some 40,000 photo images. Not sure (I never am) that I will complete it, but I have entered the stream and am working on this photo project. In all of these projects, what keeps me moving is the wish to make available to everyone these precious parts of our cultural heritage. In the case of my nature photos, it is just to share these visual experiences.

I also, as you know, am very interested and dedicated to sharing the dharma with anyone interested and work each day to that end. And since I have been unusually quiet about dharma in this blog, I will end what has to be a funny dharma story.

After I was personally taught Tranquility Meditation (Shamata) by no less than the great Chögyam Trungpa, I set about learning to do sitting meditation. I am embarrassed to say that I worked on sitting meditation for some 32 years straight. And here is the embarrassing part. No matter how hard I tried, I never managed to properly meditate in all that time. Who else do you know that took that long to learn something supposedly that basic?

Well, the long and the short of this story is that all those years (decades!) I was trying to follow the instructions I was given on how to do Tranquility Meditation and never mastered it. It involved a lot of concentration.

Then, one year, I had a bit of a breakthrough, during which (among other things) I realized that all those years that I was trying to learn to concentrate on Tranquility Meditation, I was trying to salt the salt, so to speak. Because of my dedication to all of the ultra-tedious projects mentioned above, I already was totally able to concentrate and had been able for all that time. I didn't need to learn to concentrate and so all my "trying" was just futile. I was trying to do by rote what I already could do quite naturally. And we don't learn to concentrate just to concentrate as an end result, but as a base from which to master Insight Meditation (Vipassana) as taught in Mahamudra Meditation practice.

Once I realized that I already knew concentration from all of my tedium, there was no problem. In fact, it was not until I discovered Insight Meditation enough to use it most of the time did I then realize that I could (and always could) do Tranquility Meditation. I could concentrate in my sleep, so to speak. Anyway, that has to be funny or sad, so to me it's funny.

DHARMA: REST IN PEACE

October 24, 2018

Frost has come a few times by now. Today I dug up my dahlias, carefully shook off the little tuberous roots, and brought them inside to store until spring, at which time they will go back in the ground. It is supposed to be relatively warm out, so now is the time to do it. That's part of my outer day.

Inwardly, of course, my mind moves on. I'm not myopic, but I tend not to look too far into the future or think much about the past, but prefer to keep my mind in the present on whatever I am doing. As they say, there is no time like the present, no time like now. To me, there is never any time in the present moment. Time is relative, a relative truth. The present is not.

I tend to use the present moment like I would a window, to see through into nothing so much as anything, but rather as a means to look into the very nature of the mind itself. This is a well-known approach to working with thoughts that is part of the special form of Insight Meditation as found in Mahamudra practice. At a certain point in dharma practice, thoughts are the main event for us much of the time and each thought offers an occasion for us to look directly at the thought; not at the content of the thought (what it is all about as we usually do), but rather looking to see the actual nature of the thought itself.

We all know that habitually we use thoughts as vehicles for their content -- what they mean. And we are used to looking at the content of thoughts and perhaps even following them as they morph into what we call a train of thoughts. However, in this special

form of Insight Meditation, we pay no attention to the content of thoughts, no matter what it is. Instead, we look at the actual vehicle of the thought itself, that which holds the content we are so used to looking at.

When we look directly at a thought rather than its content, the thought immediately dissolves and vanishes. Poof! In that vacuum of what was just a thought is a perfect place to just rest our awareness. In other words, we look through or past the content of a thought at what is a thought and find nothing there. And the thought vanishes. When we do this and find nothing at all (the thought just vanishes), there remains spaciousness where it was. We take advantage of that spatial moment which has opened up and rest our awareness on top of the spaciousness. It's a little like the old phrase "rest in peace." LOL.

And since thoughts (so the teachings say) are to the mind as waves are to water, when we look at the nature of a thought (and it vanishes), we are also seeing (or are left with) what remains, the natural nature of the mind itself in which we can rest our awareness. This technique is part of Insight Meditation training and IMO is a good place hang out. As the Beatles lyric goes "I'm looking through you and you're nowhere."

Since thoughts tend to be many, there are many opportunities to look at thought's nature and thus rest in the space in the mind that remains when thoughts evaporate. Instead of thoughts being like mosquitoes, they become like food for our mind training. This is a very powerful technique indeed and is a great practice for resting in the nature of the ordinary mind. This kind of practice usually precedes more fully grasping Vipassana (Insight Meditation).

DHARMA: HOW COME INSECURITY?

October 25, 2018

There are more questions here than answers, so take note. This whole idea of reification is puzzling to me, trying to make something more real than it naturally is. What's wrong with what "Is" just as it is? Where did we come up with the idea that we are lacking and that there is something more real (or should be) than what obviously is? If we should treat this world of samsara, as they say, like a magical dream (and if it has always been that way), why are we not content with things as they are, including this natural sense of emptiness and impermanency? How and when did we start feeling we need something more?

Is salt not salty enough? Is the sky not blue enough? Are we not real enough as we are? If we sense that we are somehow not "real" enough, where did this idea of wanting to be more real than we are come from? That's my question (or one of them), that we seem to want more than we have or are. How and when did that notion arise? Where did it come from?

If everyone is busy reifying themselves right and left, priming the pump so to speak, is this because of our sensing the emptiness that the dharma points out as our natural state? And if "emptiness" is the way things already are and have always been, why does it make us feel uncomfortable? If we have never had anything more permanent to compare to this impermanence that we can feel, where is the relative truth? Where is the duality in that?

My first dharma teacher used to say to me. "Michael, my god is no beggar. He does not need me to make the ends meet. They already meet!" That's my point

here. Why do we have to or want to pimp reality? Why is not life already enough just as it is? Who told us it is not enough? How can we imagine that which we don't know (and have never known) to the point of wanting to be something more than we already naturally are and have always been? How can we compare ourselves to something greater than what we are if we have never experienced it, if it does not exist?

I don't know the answer to these questions, but I do have them. There seems to be a disconnect in there somewhere. How can we miss something that we have never known to exist? Why do we pile on the reification as we do?

In other words, how can we be insecure without ever first having been secure? Explain it to me please.

DHARMA: SEEK TO NOT FIND

October 26, 2018

With advanced practices like Mahamudra Meditation, it is typically suggested that we conduct many short practices instead of attempting to prolong a session just to prolong it. Once Rinpoche said that a session might be as long as it takes to pick up a teacup and take a sip. That's short.

We are talking here of resting our awareness in awareness itself, some kind of recursion that, like a hall of mirrors, finds us letting go or giving up all effort – short-circuiting the dualistic process. All of the advanced “realization” practices are effortless and this by definition. We are all in, which means we tuck in our shirt too. Or, as the mystic philosopher Gurdjieff once wrote, be sure to include the postage. The idea here is one of non-duality, with no monitoring or self-consciousness. Even the Beatles chimed in with “No one will be watching us, why don't we do it in the road?”

That's the task at hand and we may have to learn how to do it without effort. Are we too old to learn these most important things? I don't think so. However, after all the talk, we have to actually do something about our situation. Reading another book is not going to help at this point. We have done that already, probably ad nauseam.

Can we figure all of this out by ourselves? I doubt it and all the pith teachings I have received say it can't be done, so IMO that counts for something. Of course, we can daydream on about what we are going to do, but that will just get us to where we are now. And we are already there.

Beyond purifying ourselves, cleaning up our act, which has to be done, what is there? To a great degree, what remains is to actually start looking at and into our own mind instead of just thinking about it so much. And what is the first step we can take?

Well, that can vary, but one thing is for sure. It will involve actually looking into and at our own mind. For example, look at who is reading this blog. Don't "think," well that is me reading this. Instead, actually look into your mind to see if you can find who is reading this. Where is he or she? Where is the "reader" or the awareness that is reading this blog located. Is that reader, that awareness, in your brain or your head or your heart? Where? Look!

If you find out where that awareness resides, please tell me because I (and all previous Buddhas and Bodhisattvas) have never been able to do so. However, my point is that they all have actually looked to see and searched to find. And so have I. It does not matter WHAT we find (which will be nothing) that is important as it is that we have looked. It is the actual looking and searching that we have never done until now.

Looking, searching to find, is like exercising a muscle we have never used until now. Instead, we have just thought this or that and jumped to this or that conclusion. Instead of jumping to conclusions by thinking, we need to physically (and with some effort) look to see for ourselves what is in the mind or where the mind is located, etc. Exercise the mind!

We use the mind every day to do this or that task out in the world. What we have not done is use the mind to directly look at itself. The mind remains, for most of us, unsearched and untouched, something that has

never even been massaged or used, much less known.

I don't know how to say it any simpler than this.

“WHEN THE STUDENT IS READY...”

October 27, 2018

Something to keep in mind is that the “nature of the mind” (and what dharma points at) predates even the historical Buddha. It is the natural state of things. The historical Buddha pointed this out to us and it became what is called the Dharma, but it was there to be pointed out forever before that. In fact, it was just below the surface and might have been sensed or almost grasped by any number of great teachers of the historical past, but perhaps not realized clearly enough so that it could be pointed out to others along with a method to achieve it. Who can say?

Just because something can be finally named or pointed out does not mean that it was not always there before, full and present. For that matter, the true nature of the mind is not hidden from us or if it is hidden, it is hidden in plain sight for all to see. Unfortunately, whether we can see it or not is up to each one of us. This sorry fact is why so many dharma practices are about removing obscurations and purifying ourselves enough to the point where we can become aware and realize this obvious nature of our own mind. That’s the whole point of dharma. It is too close to us to notice.

My guess is that there are many more teachers capable of pointing out to us the nature of the mind so that we can recognize it than there are students ready to have this nature pointed out to them. It always comes down to the student’s readiness. So, once again, it is up to us to make the necessary preparations for realization. And if we have no clue where or how to begin, we have all of the teachings

and methods that the Buddha left for us and (many authentic teachers) who are more than capable to help us do this.

Just as we might shower and put on some fresh clothes before we go to a job interview, those of us who are looking for an authentic teacher might as well prime the pump a bit by working through some of the many dharma practices that can purify our obscurations. We can spruce up, get our act together, and perhaps even make ourselves more visible to those authentic teachers out there who are also looking for qualified students just as we are looking for them. We can further qualify ourselves and go to meet our future teacher through some preparation.

Some of us may have the karma to have an authentic teacher find us in this world. The rest of us, and I believe that we are the great majority, have to get out there and find our teacher, preparing ourselves by removing our obscurations, one by one. I just want to emphasize that, at least in the beginning, we may have to really work at our practice. However, our progress can't be measured by sheer effort alone, but rather by learning to practice properly. To fly a kite, it has to be constructed just right. That's the idea.

DHARMA: POLISHING THE LENS

October 27, 2018

Dharma practice is not something we do and are done with. There is no such thing as already been there, done that. That's not the point of dharma practice. True dharma practice leads to doing dharma (living dharmically) all day long. Everything is brought to the path, 24x7. There are many dharma practices and techniques, but just doing them by rote to get through them will not be of much help. Its like trying to find the right key technique to open the door to realization. Just any old key won't work. For example, what is the appropriate gesture or mudra for invoking the lineage, all those enlightened masters who are still present somewhere in the mind?

The result of invoking or supplicating these masters, again and again and again, depends not only on our endurance, but primarily on our intent. We have to feel out what actually works; otherwise it just won't work.

It's frustrating that, as the old saying goes, "We are too soon old and too late wise." By the time we figure something out, we usually no longer need it. That seems to be the way it is. What we could use is some help figuring things out when we have yet no experience or realization, which IMO is exactly what the dharma in the hands of these great masters is all about. They are trying to help us get the point. Heaven knows, we need it.

Just how good are we at following instructions? More important perhaps is: do we understand that dharma instructions (techniques) are just the residue of the actual experience or realization of masters, a map of

the route and not the experience itself. A practice technique is intended to get us down the road toward realization, somewhere in the general ballpark. This worries me a lot because I know from my own experience that being in the ballpark can still be worlds away from the realization. That's what the legendary "pointing-out instructions" are all out, pointing out the nature of the mind to us so that we get it.

Unfortunately, this is a two way street. It is not enough to have the nature of the mind pointed out to us. I have had that done several times. We have to be prepared and in the right frame of mind to receive it. Getting into the right orientation or attitude is not a trivial task. It is really, really difficult, IMO. We all know the traditional image of the wise man pointing out the moon in the sky with his finger, and the student focusing on the finger and not seeing the moon. The dharma instructions are the finger and the realization is the moon in this analogy. Look to where the instructions are pointing and don't get lost in the instructions. Practice is the means, not the result.

In other words, don't take the instructions as anything more than a gesture, the reference or pointer that they are and not anything in themselves. They point, yet they point toward (in the case of realization or recognition of the true nature of the mind) at something that is ineffable, something beyond description and beyond pointing-out. It's impossible, yet it happens. There is a threshold here. Making the connection between the finger and the moon, the pointing and the recognition of what is being pointed out, is the crux of the matter.

It helps me to remember that in Rinzai Zen Buddhism, the equivalent of "Recognition" is called Kensho),

where the system of koans are their pointing-out instructions. And that koan-system is very elaborate and takes (usually) a very long time to work through to successful recognition as to the nature of the mind. It is the same with the pointing-out instructions in Vajrayana Buddhism. It is all about careful preparation.

And so, these very elaborate pointing-out instructions may not be rocket science, but they must be at least as difficult. Walking that last mile to “Recognition” or the last microsecond is where the mastery of an authentic teacher is important. But the real test, of course, turns on whether the student is ready and that is a much more difficult problem -- getting ready. LOL.

As I understand it, getting ready is mostly a question of purification, like polishing a lens. We have to work off the rough corners and polish until we can see through that lens to the actual nature of the mind.

INFINITY IN THE TEDIOUS

October 29, 2018

I am still lost in some 40,000 selected photos out of several hundred thousand images. It is a bit overwhelming and each photo has to be digitally developed or tweaked. I have to do them one by one and try not to be overcome by the sheer number of images waiting to be worked on. It is a challenge, like walking on a tightrope. Don't look down. LOL.

There is no successful way of automating or speeding the process up. It would be easy to just say forget-about-it and do something else, but who will do it if I don't. Like: no one will. My whole life is something like this or frequently has been.

As this is what I'm currently doing most of the time these days, I guess I need to tell someone about it and you readers are chosen. LOL. And this is not a complaint, but more like me coming up for air. I look around and then dive back in. There is a crazy edge to this and I know it. Yet, there you have it.

Here is one of the images I am working on, which might help in understanding why I do this. I can't resist bringing these images into the world and sharing them. This is not a flower or nature photo, but rather the face of a full-figure statue of the great Mahasiddha Tilopa which sits on the small shrine in my office where I do my daily practice. I don't like the word "worship" much, but I do supplicate the great Tilopa for his blessing, however that might be possible. Tilopa's lineage is the one I practice in and belong to. It is one of a number of Mahamudra lineages and just happens to be the one I first identified with and still do.

To keep up this pace, I have to focus on each image, find its beauty and digitally bring the image to maximum fineness. Then I save it and move on to the next image. If I look around or get involved in determining where in the stack it is, that is a recipe for trouble. It is easy to get stripped of your energy if you start doing that kind of thinking. I try to just work on the current image carefully, save it, and pick up on the next one.

It is very similar to living life in the present, one moment at a time, and not spending time prolonging the past or inviting the future. The present is both a narrow window in time and yet of infinite scope. Working with 40,000 images has some similarities; stay in the moment!

Doing this kind of work DOES keep me out of trouble.

CONTENT, NOT “CONTENT”

October 30, 2018

[This is a little tongue-in-cheek and humorous because I need to let off a little steam.]

I have been over my head in content and technical issues for some 46 years. It never stops. Time may be unstoppable, but technology is even more fiendish, IMO. So, let me cry on your shoulder for a bit here, if you will.

Before there were computers or even calculators, there was pencil, paper, and log tables, at least for a budding astrologer back in the early 1970s. It's hard to believe, but small 4-function calculators only appeared on the public market around 1972. I was on it like white on rice, as they say. I soon did away with the log tables and had designed (and shared with my fellow astrologers) a quick way to calculate an astrological natal chart using a 4-function calculator. That was the raindrop before the storm.

It was only a few years later that I had one of the first home computers, the Commodore PET 2001 (and also the Apple II, and the TRS-80), with a whole 8K of RAM on which I wrote an entire planetary program (sun, moon, and all the planets) with good accuracy (less than two minutes of arc or better), including several coordinate systems. Everything computer-wise back then was bleeding edge. There were no disk drives, hard disks, but only tape cassettes which had to be recorded-on, rewound, and then verified by playing them again. It was painful, but also a beautiful opening. Life is something like that.

There were no printers, so I had to convert a 65-pound used teletype machine and make it a printer.

Then, to seal the deal, I had to write my own word-processing code to justify type and things like that. It was horrible in its own way, but to me I was like a pig in mud through it all. I could go on and on through the entire history of home computing, from back when I knew about as much as anyone else to the current day, when no one knows but a very small part of it, if that.

Me, I have given up keeping up with technology, or tried to anyway. Still the thickets of technology beckon me. Even though I do my best to avoid them, I still end up right in the middle of the briar patch all over again, which brings me to today.

Of course, I'm in the middle of this massive photo sorting and Photoshop crevasse wondering how I got here. And in the middle of all this, my antiquated email application reached a point of no return. It is no longer supported by Microsoft or anyone else and has several files of personal data about 14 GB in size. So, yesterday it just pooped out. Calls for help essentially told me, as I mentioned, that my software was no longer supported.

Fair enough. I get it. This has been coming on for years and I have put off doing anything about it, like getting new software, especially since the software I use has gone from a one-time purchase to being a utility like gas and electric. You subscribe to it now... forever. I hate that!

And I am just getting to the worst, the most despised (by me) part of it all and that is the ENDLESS hours I have to spend on the phone trying to get support for software that should be self-supporting by now. The wrong passwords, the outdated passwords, the right passwords that still don't work, and now something new: if you fail a few times entering the right

password, they start making you wait 5 minutes, and that becomes 5 hours if you fail again. There is nothing you can do but wait. Who are they trying to punish?

Or, I get on the phone for support and find myself in the Philippines talking with someone who knows little to no English and even less about the problems. Yes, I am venting a bit here because I just got off the phone after hours of this kind of treatment.

And then there is the new photo site I am building, which has its own hassles. No, I don't have to write the back-end code. Thank god! However, I do have to almost create my own manual as I go, trying to figure all this out.

This sort of thing has been my life. I had email in 1979. I was fielding massive databases on the Internet before the World-Wide Web even existed. Most of you probably haven't even heard of the WWW. Back then, what we had were Gopher Sites, whose name says it all. I built 110 separate forums (fora) for Microsoft, had giant music and film databases on CompuServe and on and on.

I have worked under contract with almost any large company you could name. Amazon flew out to my home twice trying to hire me to do music for them, but I was already spoken for, unfortunately. Netflix became what they are today by using our data for the first number of years and so forth and etc.

So, as usual I am not complaining as much as I am exclaiming! And I'm taking a break from the hectic to write this. However, it's waiting for me to calm down so I can do it again. LOL. I have to go back into it and sort it out. And I will.

What am I after this time? Well, ostensibly to create a permanent home for a bunch of my photographs because folks asked me to. But really, some part of me must like the anguish of technology. I wouldn't vote for it, but here I am again right smack dab in the middle of creating something very tedious that hopefully will appear lovely. LOL.

THE LACK OF ECHOS

November 1, 2018

In my experience, anticipating and projecting the future is like flying a kite with a metal key on it. You never know if lightning will strike. In a very real sense, everything we do is a trial balloon sent up against eternity, but we don't always get feedback. Not only that, but some spaces are just too vast and empty for echoes. Nothing comes back. This whole idea of returns (or even responses) is problematical. We all know the old refrain "I can't get a witness." At times, the lack of response to our existence is deafening. Here we are; will someone please find us is how many folks feel. We all want to be at the head of the line but if we do manage to get there, we have no one to follow. LOL.

I spent my early life desperately trying to fit in. I am reminded of the story someone told us of a line of cats parading near sundown across the lawn, walking nose to tail, one after the other. And, at the very end was one skunk following along and trying to fit in. I felt that I could never quite fit in. Now, as an elder I can't worry about it. Things I used to be self-conscious about I now feature. That's the easiest way to handle it. It's not a liability; it's a feature. It has to be funny.

Something that fascinates me is how our persona, our personality, is built and gradually accumulates. In particular, some choices we made years ago (when they were unpopular) gradually become popular. And when a lot of these kinds of choices or life decisions ripen together and arise, it's like when a group of random fish suddenly school and all point in the same direction. An authentic personality, warts and all, is

hard to argue with because it is hewn from rock-hard decisions made, one by one, along the way. We can't imitate what is authentic without that being obvious to everyone. And our life choices determine how authentic we are for a given era.

If our accumulated persona sparkles a bit now, it was never intentional or even envisioned as each choice was made on the path that we call our life. Some of the more edgy choices in my wake (and Margaret's as well) include home birth, home schooling, no-babysitters, organic food, whole-grains, no meat, caffeine, alcohol, nicotine, drugs, and so on. I am a child of the 1960s, but because I was a little older than the average hippy, it is more like I helped to father-in the Sixties. My generation (only a couple of years older) taught the hippies about literature, the arts, and everything bohemian. We had been schooled trying to be Beatniks when it was already fading.

My point here is that our decisions each day define us as time passes. There are results to our actions and choices. For me, the single most important decision of them all was made more by my inner nature than consciously. And that was to insist that whatever I did to make a living was something I passionately cared about, rather than something I was told to do, or had to do and accept. I refused to go along just to get along. This made life more difficult in my case, but somehow I would not have had it any other way.

And because of this, perhaps the hardest decision I made was to not finish high school or go to college, even after I was accepted at the University of Michigan as a freshman without a high school diploma. I went to college for three weeks until I saw that (for me) it was just the same old programmed

thing. Instead, I just always wanted more time to inspect my own mind and psychology. For years what I did for a job was to clean bathrooms at a building containing a number of businesses. If I worked hard, I could finish that work each day in half an hour and have 23-1/2 hours to do exactly what I wanted, which I did. You know I loved that. Still do.

Above all, I was and am basically a phenomenologist, someone who prefers to study what is going on in their own mind and world, from the inside out, so to speak. If this meant that I was not as social as I might have been and sometimes felt isolated, so be it. Although there were moments of loneliness, all in all I found finding my own way more refreshing than lonely. I prefer the clarity and insight of my own mind. I'm just saying: we are determined by the choices we make.

THE EYES HAVE IT

November 3, 2018

[I am very busy with photography these days, so I will share with you just a little of what I share with professional and skilled amateur photographers on photo forums.]

I get philosophical about photography and taking photos. It is deeply wedded to my meditation practices and has very much become a practice in itself. Quite a bit of the photography I do involves what is called “Focus stacking,” which consists of taking many layers of a flower or a subject, each with a sharp focus at a slightly different distance and combing them into a single image. The result is an image that appears to have more depth of field (everything is in focus) than traditional photography.

Focus stacking is often said to appear to give us more depth-of-field (DOF), which can be true if we always move from front to back of the image when we are stacking. That’s something beginners latch on to. However, it is so much more than just putting everything more in focus.

By stacking focus, we can also have areas of the image in sharp focus, even if they are in the front, back, or middle of the image. And what I find most useful is that by stacking focus I can use very fast lenses (well-corrected) that are also sharp wide open to paint blocks or whole areas of an image in focus.

In general and traditionally, fast-focus lenses are used when we want a razor-thin depth of field with one slice in sharp focus and the rest in bokeh of one sort or another. However, by using fast, well-corrected, and sharp lenses we can (as mentioned) paint focus

where we want and leave the rest to go to bokeh, which fast lenses are famous for.

By breaking away (taking a break) from the traditional one-point/one-plane of focus, the eye of the beholder is not automatically prompted or drawn to a pinpoint or plane in the image. Instead, the eye is free to roam around and assume whatever view pleases. It is kind of a new experience!

This is what I find so liberating about stacking focus, the freedom of the eye to direct itself. It is also, IMO, why stacked images have been said to be a little psychedelic. We are used to having our eye being led by the focus plane and its points in the image and not used to having our eyes point things out for themselves. It can be an adventure.

And there are lots of ways to stack. There are long 25-30 and very long (160) and “scientific” (hundreds) of layers, but there are also what I call short stacks. A short stack might be from 3 to 7 or so layers and photos are not taken in serial sequence from front to back. Instead, you can just make a stack out of points of interest. For example, you have a subject with five flowers. You might take a shot of each flower focusing at the very center of each and stack those. You end up with a photo with five very sharp flowers and the rest just blends in. It is very easy to do.

Or, you might take a shot of the whole scene with the lens wide open and get a field of bokeh. Then take a few shots of individual flowers at an aperture with more depth of field and stack the bunch. This type of collage-stack may require more retouching to bring the different layers together.

Stacking, like DVDs and CDS, is a digital sampling technique, where by definition some data is lost while

the data you want to keep is highlighted. There are many methods, but each has a specific result. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder. For example, I don't like most HDR photos, but I do like a well punctuated stack.

So, if we think of focus stacking as just having everything in focus, I (jokingly say) "Why not just take a picture." I look at stacking more as if each photo is an impression of what I see or the world as I would like to see it (or sometimes do). Ming Thein is my favorite photographer, but my work is nothing like his (not that I could do what he does!). I kind of paint with light and like images where parts of the image are stacked and in sharp focus or micro-contrast, while other parts are bokeh or extreme dreamy bokeh. Examples of what I like can be found here that speak louder than words.

<https://MichaelErlewine.smugmug.com>

At one time or another I have bought all the major software that stacks focus and tried the free-ware too. For my purposes, Zerene Stacker is my software of choice. It offers two major approaches to stacking, that if combined can produce images that I like. They are called PMax and DMap. Briefly, DMap protects color and PMax protects detail. I always use Dmap first because to me "Color is King," and then I fill-in by retouching with PMax. I find the retouching features of Zerene Stacker to be more profoundly useful than other brands, IMO.

Retouching is an art as I see it. So, I don't avoid retouching, but work to become skilled in it. I also have tried focus-rail auto-stacking, but don't use it often, not to mention every of kind of focus rail. A lot depends on how you stack. The very best way to stack images for modern stacking software to handle

(and avoid artifacts) is on the view camera by moving the rear standard. The second best method is by turning a helicoid on the lens or a lens barrel, and the worst (relatively speaking) way is to use a focus rail. I pay attention to that.

I also experiment constantly. In fact, I consider all my photography as experiments, rather than finished pieces. I have shot many hundreds of thousands of images and have yet to print out a single one. And never have I put a printed image on the walls of my home. To me, photography is not a vocation, but a passion. Although I am getting decent results these days, the process of photography has always been more important to me than the results. Perfecting the process perfects the results, IMO. In other words, the place we are going is how we travel. That idea.

RECYCLING: GETTING UNASPHIXIATED

November 4, 2018

Not talking here about separating the trash, but recycling, as in getting in sync with the life cycles that be. This is especially hard for me. Traditionally, I never looked forward to family vacations, not because I did not want to be with my family (I worked at home so I was there all the time), but because I could not let go of whatever I was currently working on. I find it difficult to relax or, putting it another way: I relax by working, which must be some kind of oxymoron.

That being said, trying to relax or hovering on the verge of relaxing is not relaxing. Sometimes we just need to fully relax in order to reset our internal focus-counter. I know I need this, but for me this is easier said than done. I would rather skip the relaxing and get on with the focused stuff. However, that is not how life seems to work, at least in my case.

Just like the breath heaves in and out and the heart beats, we open and close, open and close. That's what cycles and spirals are all about. Even my Mahamudra meditation teacher says many short sessions are the best way to learn. After all, everything cycles. We expand and contract, expand and contract. However, if we only contract and never expand, we short-circuit our practice and perhaps our life. LOL.

It is true that even with the lineage prayer in my practice, it says that "Unwavering attention is the body of meditation," but they don't mean we stop breathing or stop expanding and contracting, but rather that we rest in unwavering attention and awareness of the

process, right in the midst of the endless expansion and contraction. Again: it's like breathing or the heart beating. That cyclic life process goes on and our awareness embraces it all; it's not that we force ourselves to be aware at the expense of (and by ignoring) the process of rhythmic cycles.

Another way to say this is that if we get excited and focused on something, it can be hard to let go, come down, and recycle. "Recycling" here means getting back in synch with the rhythms and cycles of life, like: breathing. Put another way, holding our breath is not the best way of breathing. We have to go with the flow. It's not a real option. LOL.

Whenever I get into something that fascinates me, I tend to do it full bore. It can be hard for me to let go of it long enough to take a breath, so to speak. This has been happening with all the concentrated work I have done these last couple of weeks on photo images. Anyway, right now I need to just let go and relax. I'm making an effort to do so, but it's like those stick-tights that I pick up walking through fields at the end of summer. They tend to cling to you and I get attached to what I'm doing. I need to let go and allow myself to feel the cycles again, the pulse of life.

So, I'm making an effort, which itself is counterproductive to relaxing. I watched the Michigan/Penn State football game this afternoon. I ate a bunch of dumb food. I spent an hour at the new Jo-Ann fabric store that just opened in our little town. I like textiles, fabrics, etc., but I am very picky. And so on. Can't you see that I'm trying to let go. LOL.

When I get too excited with some project, I start to drop out of life's cycles and begin to ignore the rhythms going on around and inside me. It's not healthy. It reminds me of in the dharma, when I have

a powerful spiritual experience, I try to hang on to it. Spiritually, I hold my breath. And that is like the new born baby that won't breathe. The doctor has to whack it on the butt to get the breathing started. That's the way I feel lately, just out-of-sorts, holding on to my breath. Getting too attached to what we are doing is a form of asphyxiation, IMO. If I don't do something life will have to whack me. LOL.

Anyway, I'm doing my best to stop and take a rest, to let go a bit, and start breathing again.

DHARMA CONVERGENCE

November 5, 2018

My memory or retention does not seem to be getting stronger. What is getting stronger is my ability to deduce accurate insight in the moment. This is a little scary, perhaps. It's like I am giving up the effort to remember, "trying" to remember what floats through my mind, in favor of being able to realize more in real-time, right on the spot. I should paraphrase this and make it clear through another pass at rephrasing this concept.

I often have insights when I am falling asleep or doing something other than writing. I don't want to jump up, run to the computer, and write these down, although perhaps I should. I remember them at the time (on the spot) and kind of notate them momentarily for later comment. However, when later comes, like the next morning or whenever, I don't remember them or just remember them "generally," as "in the ballpark." It's not as bad as trying to remember a dream and coming up empty, but it has similarities.

That being said, what IS improving is my ability to have proper insights, if not at will (instantaneously), then soon after. Another way to say this might be that I can often do this kind of insight meditation on just about any topic, whatever is required. So, what IS lost is effort, the effort to keep all things in mind. A visual analogy might be that instead of trying to see, it is easier not to try but just to look and see, if that makes sense. There seems to be a convergence taking place, a move away from relative thinking to insight, rather than thinking at all. Then again, perhaps I am just getting old. LOL.

I am reminded of this poem I wrote 51 years ago:

“Bobbing at the surface to bloom,
Opening now,
Letting go,
Letting it go,
Letting it go on,
Allowing it to go on.

As if I could stop it anyway.

The morning's brightness,
Lights the day,
And when that day is gone,
The quietness of evening,
Here approaching,
Settles to sleep,
This restless world.

Hard can I hear,
The frantic rush,
As I turn away from the edge,
Out into floating rest am I.

It is not my conscious direction doing this,
But as a head down-turned all life,
Now turns up a blossom to the night.
The night of time urges me open,
At last a flower,
Too,
Open to life.

Already the dawn.

Still,
Around me,
Urging caution,
A retinue of persons set my spirit,
Like a jewel is set,
In time.

But where before my worry,
Now my rest.

The tide rolls on beyond me.
Ever changing,
It rocks me now asleep.

And in my sleep,
Awake am I,
So clear a bell is ringing.

The smart of persons lash and crack,
To drive me at time's edge.
My personal ties are slipped,
As floating out,
I'm gently tugged.

Too long have fought,
To force my thought,
And not,
At ease,
Arising,
Like some cloud,
To pass.

ANONYMOUS AWARENESS

November 6, 2018

We each have awareness naturally. It's what's enabling you to read this page. No, it's not about the content of this page, your reading this, or even you at all. Not only is not everything about us (me, myself, and I), but nothing about awareness itself is about us personally. Awareness is like the vast sky and our problems and concerns are just clouds in that sky, clouds that form and then melt away, only to form again. The teachings say that awareness is continuous, contiguous between rebirths and just plain always there. They also say that awareness is pristine, clear, luminous and untouched no matter what we do or have done.

We can be suffering or happy, but when we become aware that we are happy or unhappy, it is awareness that is aware of the happiness or unhappiness. However, naked awareness itself is neither happy or unhappy. And we are free to look at our own awareness anytime we want to, like right now. Take a look.

If we do, what is remarkable is that the awareness within us that is aware of everything around us is not stained, no matter what we go through. It is a constant awareness that is as pure as the driven snow, as they say. That fact is really amazing and available for us to verify 24x7, like right now. We are so used to having this awareness as our flashlight to light up everything we see and go through that we take it for granted. We use it but don't really know it ourselves because we have never looked. Perhaps it

is like the sun in the sky, too bright to look directly at, and so we don't. I don't find that true.

And it is interesting to me that this natural awareness is not personal. The sky is vast; our awareness is vast, unlimited. I can find no trace of me in it any more than I can see traces that birds make in the sky they fly across. Are we inside looking out or outside looking in? Or, more to the point: is there any trace of me anywhere in the mind other than in mere appearances? Is this life all a magic lantern show or hologram that even my graspingness can only come up empty?

Does all of this only seem real until I reach for it? Is "grasping" just the fact that we can't grasp anything real that's permanent? Is our need for attachment and reification just the fact that everything must be let go, that there is only process and never states? Nothing is permanent, meaning only an emptiness of permanent being is the case.

In other words, attachment can never work in the long run, but must be let go. It is just grasping at straws. Obviously, it's about letting go. The following excerpt from the poem I posted yesterday says it more clearly.

"Bobbing at the surface to bloom,
Opening now,
Letting go,
Letting it go,
Letting it go on,
Allowing it to go on."

"As if I could stop it anyway."

EVERYTHING MUST GO

November 7, 2018

I know we tend to become attached to the things that we fixate on and get stuck there. Is this because of the fact that sooner or later each of us has to let everything go, like when we die? Are we trying to grasp and hang on to things because we can't permanently keep anything? Or, because everything is empty of any permanence, are our fixations and graspingness all about trying to fill a bottomless cup? Is this form of suffering what drives reification, life's intangibility, and thus our attempt to make everything more real than they in fact are? These are some of the questions that I have.

There is no argument that probably sooner than later we will be moved to let everything go. At my age, I know that for me it will be sooner. This happens at death for sure, but my understanding of the teachings tells me that the karmic traces and habits that caused me to fixate in the first place are NOT left behind when we die. No sir. Yes, everything personal (and my so-called Self) is abandoned at death, but not what caused me to be attached to myself in the first place. The teachings say that those unfortunate habits and desires are ever so carefully preserved in the Alayavijnana (Storehouse Consciousness), that slow moving barge of karma that accompanies us from rebirth to rebirth. And karma is the Scrooge of all Scrooges, never spilling even a single drop of what we owe through our own uncertain actions, a record of exactly what it will take to atone for them and get our mind right. As Shakespeare put it:

“Aye, there's the rub,
For in that sleep of death, what dreams may come,
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause.”

I don't know about dreams, but all of the great enlightened dharma masters have said, each in their own way, their words of caution about how we accumulate our karmic tab and the reckoning that will eventuate. I hear that. We may come rushing into the cow pasture, but we each end up tiptoeing out.

So, that is my reason for looking into ways to rectify whatever karma is outstanding sooner (while I still have the means and a body) rather than later when I won't be able to. I call this “going to meet my maker,” which is preferable to the grim reaper hunting me down or the dharmic equivalent. LOL.

And what is it I am abandoning? That would be my fixations and undue attachments. I have to remind myself that I don't have to abandon any of the joys of life or wear a hair shirt, but only to let go of my fixations (having to have them) on whatever I am fixated on. It's a discipline worth having, IMO. And it should be done early (before death) and not later.

It's kind of a dumb analogy, but one that keeps coming to mind over and over again. Fixation is like a vertical steel pole and moving up and down it is a large metal circular washer that if perfectly at right angles to the pole moves easily up and down the pole. However, if it is angled or oblique to the vertical pole that washer sticks and stops. That is how (or one way) that I view fixation and attachment. We have to keep the washer (our fixations) leveled out (zero tolerance) to avoid attachment. We can enjoy, but not fixate and thus fall into reification.

And of course, no matter how attached we are (hanging on by tooth and nail), come death, we are going to let every last thing we are attached to go. However, the one thing we do not let go is our habit of attachment, our graspingness, which moves on to our next rebirth and reattaches itself all over again. It's a real bad habit.

So, the moral of the story is that it is not WHAT we are attached to that makes a difference, but rather our habit of reifying and attaching ourselves to what we like and reverse-attaching ourselves from what we don't like and want to stay away from.

If we want to take steps to level this playing field and begin to remove our habit of grasping, the best dharma practice I have found to do this is Reactivity Tong-Len, reaction toning. I have written about this for those interested. Some articles can be found here:

<http://michaelerlewine.com/viewforum.php...>

DHARMA: BESIDE THE POINT

November 8, 2018

Some days it is too cold or wet to go walk what I call “The Four Elements,” meaning four hills in our local cemetery, almost a two-mile trek. What that means is that I must move indoors and work-out on the elliptical machine at our dharma center. It’s not my favorite choice, but better than nothing when the snow and ice make walking in the cemetery not possible (which will come soon enough). So I have the elliptical machine rigged up to be not too boring.

I have in front of the elliptical, on a small bookcase, an older laptop that is hooked by Wi-Fi to the Internet and YouTube. And on YouTube I have been playing various videos. I used to watch a lot of Anthony Bourdain, but after his suicide I kind of stopped watching much of him. I could always feel that part of Bourdain, but I’m sorry that he took that way out. Who can explain it.

So, lately I have been watching various dharma talks, some of which go on for an hour or more, not to mention often they are part of a whole series of them. I have not learned too much from these, at least not what I hoped to learn.

One thing I did note is that there seems to be some confusion as to just what Insight Meditation (Vipassana), actually is, even when the person speaking about it is not too far from my own tradition. That worries me a bit, so I want to be clear about Vipassana, if only for my own sake.

There really are two parts to Insight Meditation, at least the kind of Insight Meditation that belongs (along with Tranquility Meditation or Shamata) to

Mahamudra Meditation. It is pretty simple; there is the learning to do Insight Meditation and then there is doing Insight Meditation. The two should not be confused. And these two, in our tradition, are connected by the event called “Recognition” by the student of the true nature of the mind.

I should add that while there is only one root dharma, there are many approaches to Buddhism, and thus many kinds of dharma practice called “Vipassana.” It is easy to confuse one method with another, especially if they are very different but have the same name, “Vipassana,” which they can have. The particular form of Insight Meditation used in Mahamudra Training, as I understand it, is very different from any other Vipassana method I have heard of.

For one, before we can correctly do the Mahamudra form of Insight Meditation, we have to have Recognition, which involves recognizing the true nature of the mind. So, what we have in this form of Insight Meditation is first a period of training the mind, preparing the student to recognize the actual nature of the mind. This precedes actually doing Insight Meditation. And this is done through what are called the pointing-out instructions by an authentic teacher.

As mentioned, the pointing-out instructions (the process of pointing out the nature of the mind) is preliminary to recognizing that nature. Once this nature has been pointed out so that the student recognizes the true nature of the mind (and the teacher acknowledges this), only then does Insight Meditation begin. Anything before that is just that practice, practicing and training for “Recognition.” And this practice is the gateway to the actual Insight Meditation.

I find dharma students confuse this training period with actually doing Insight Meditation (Vipassana). They think they are doing Insight Meditation when they are only practicing to learn Insight Meditation. In other words, they are just undertaking the training in order to do Vipassana. There is a world of difference. IMO, this is all the difference in the world.

And so, while this may seem a small point (or being picky), to me it is not. I feel, for clarity's sake, these distinctions are crucial, otherwise students can be confused. I run into a lot of students who tell me they are doing Vipassana Meditation, when they have not yet done any, but may talk themselves into thinking they have. More often, they are learning ABOUT Vipassana, practicing FOR Insight Meditation, but not yet doing Vipassana meditation. I hope this is clear. Don't confuse practicing meditation with actually meditating.

And before I get a deluge of comments: Here, I am ONLY talking about the special form of Insight Meditation that is part of Mahamudra Meditation as used in the Karma Kagyu (and related) lineages. I know there are dozens of other types of Vipassana out there, which are probably perfectly excellent for their own purpose. However, if you are learning the special form of Vipassana taught in Mahamudra training, then what I explained above is true, at least as far as I know.

So, be clear as to whether you are practicing Insight Meditation (practicing to learn it) or actually doing Insight Meditation, which comes after you have achieved Recognition of the nature of the mind. If you are still "practicing" and imagine you already are doing Insight Meditation, you can be misguided and misdirected.

If in doubt, ask an authentic teacher. If you have no teacher, then you will need to find one before you can recognize the nature of the mind. When it comes to Insight Meditation, armchair dharma is (at best) preparatory and tangential, by definition always beside the point, which is hands-on, actual, and non-dual meditation.

DHARMA: SPIRITUAL ALCHEMY

November 8, 2018

Like those rockets that drop their booster stages and go farther, it's time for me to pull the plug on what holds me back. And I've pulled some plugs myself lately, suddenly deciding to sell off some things that are precious to me because I realize I never use them anymore. They may be precious, but for what? In particular, I am letting go of a group of very rare and precious rock concert-posters that I have been holding on to for decades. I don't put them on the wall and seldom look at them in the flat-file drawer they are stored in.

And the other collection being jettisoned is a set of very rare and special jazz recordings, in fact a total of 52 box sets that I have also been hanging on to. These amount to over 70 lbs. of recordings, some 238 CDs and 27 LPs, all rare recordings printed as box sets in very limited editions, with special liner notes and all that. And they are not inexpensive, totaling out at over \$10K. These are box sets from Mosaic Records, to me the preeminent jazz label.

And so, one of the unexpected results of my sudden willingness to part with these two collections that previously have been so much a part of who I am is that freeing up my attachment to these things, even if they are not as important as they once were to me, is somehow liberating. And the fact is that almost all that was left after so many years was my attachment to these things. LOL. It's not that I no longer love them; I just don't need them. Someone else can enjoy them. Just for fun, I put them up on Ebay for \$11,000 for the lot. It would take a nut like me to want them, but they

are in pristine condition and, as limited editions, many are now rare.

The net effect of letting these things go is like a weight has been lifted or an obscuring block removed and everything flows easier. It's not that anything happened other than my making a decision to be practical. Somehow, my overall resistance or life tension (at least for the moment) is less; there is less to nothing to resist. Everything is more fluid. It's like I'm swimming in air rather than water.

What all this brought home to me is that it seems that so much depends on us. Our own progress waits on us and no one else. Of course, now it is obvious. Duh. When we decide to pull the plug on something (like getting rid of these things), the plug gets pulled. Everything is like this. In other words, it is up to us to progress, when we feel like it. It reminds me of when I work out on our elliptical machine. I have it on intensity level 4, but if I suddenly switch it back to level one, there is no resistance and it feels like I am awash, floating on air, at least for the moment.

And so, although I like to think of myself as spiritual, dharmic (and all of that), dharma effectively is just a series of instructions, a method or practical path to realize (or spiritualize) what is most mundane. Everything becomes sacred.

I am reminded of those ice storms that steal in overnight and you wake up with everything coated with ice or heavy snows. The world is a magical palace. Like the proverbial Philosopher's Stone, the dharma is pure alchemy, transforming the mundane into what it has always been, sacred.

FINDING THE HEART OF ASTROLOGY

November 9, 2018

How did I go from being an astrologer with a worldwide reputation to being a dharma practitioner? It's not that they are mutually exclusive, yet I get asked that a lot and the answer is not so obvious to many. Not only that, but not everyone liked it when I found myself transforming from being primarily an astrologer into also a dharma student. How odd, because to me the dharma is the heart of astrology.

From the beginning, as an astrologer, I studied the personality or what we call the Self (my self and chart in particular), which of course is abandoned at death. The Self amounts to the accumulated history of our attachments, our likes and dislikes, and those attachments basically are the glue that holds the Self together. So, in a very real sense, concentrating on our Self has to be an exercise in futility. It is doomed from the outset. LOL.

What's beneath the Self? Back then, to me, thanks to my Catholic upbringing, that would be "The Soul." In other words, behind the mask of the personal (self) of each of us is our soul. That is what I thought and felt back then.

Through long study, I realized that traditional astrology (and its natal chart) was basically a map of our personality or self and the circumstances into which we are born. Yet, it was what was behind the Self that interested me. And, as mentioned, I was (after all) not just my personality (how I appeared), but rather I identified more with that "being" that created and drove the personality, which I called at the time the Soul.

And so began a lifelong Odyssey to know my own Soul. My personality never interested me (or others, LOL) that much; it was the Soul that I identified with and I wanted to know it better. I won't belabor that history here, but I ended up computerizing astrology for myself and freely sharing that with other astrologers all over the world. It eventually became a business. But it was not because I had a mathematical bone in my body or even an interest in the mechanics of anything. To me back then, I had the soul of a mystic, not that of a scientist. Nothing has changed.

And so, my journey into astrology did not end with computerizing the traditional natal chart and astrology as I knew it back then. I was into astrology more than a dozen years before computers appeared. It was seeking my own soul that drove me on and eventually I discovered for myself a map of the soul in heliocentric astrology. Of course, heliocentric astrology had been around since Copernicus, but it was seen by astrologers more as a part of science (astronomy), not of psychology or the stuff that interested astrologers. The helio chart certainly was never embraced by astrologers and, for the most part, remains unknown by most even today. However, I am getting too old to worry about that. I spent decades waving my arms and trying to get the attention of my fellow astrologers, to no real avail. Astrology (and most astrologers), whom I dearly love, are IMO, so it seems, inescapably behind the times, like by some 500 years. LOL. That's a fact, not an insult.

While the import of the heliocentric natal chart was a revelation to me (it changed my life) and amounted to a map of the Soul that I sought, this life-changing event did just that; it changed my life forever. There is

no going back from true transformation (what is called in dharma “realization”) and I haven’t. Nor would I want to. LOL.

Through the realization of the heliocentric chart, I saw not only myself differently; I saw the world and all other people differently too. It became clear to me that I was not how I appeared through my traditional astrology chart, nor were other people. “Things are not how they appear.” I knew that old saying, but had never realized it myself. Then I did.

To give an analogy, as Einstein pointed out, there are two trains running. At least that’s how I saw it. There was the train of astrology as I was discovering it. Yet, there was a second train, call it dharma, that was also running side-by-side and in time eventually passed that of astrology. And to my surprise, I was travelling both. And while I feel I speak fluent astrology, I gradually discovered that my native tongue or language was dharma, not astrology. Or, as my dharma teacher explained to me. “Astrology is one of the limbs of the yoga, but not the root. Dharma is the root.”

Although dharma was most native to me, I had never spoken it and so had to learn to do just that. And it was everything I always dreamed of. Certainly, while the dharma made the most sense to me, it was still difficult to learn, probably the hardest thing I have ever done, but also the most valuable and worthwhile. We might ask what did dharma do for my astrology? Good question!

I am still the astrologer I have always been and was born to be. Almost from the first I have known that I would play a significant part in modern astrology. I have won about all of the astrology awards one can have, yet I feel that astrologers still have not absorbed

my more important contributions. I can think of not even one astrologer who has realized my most important heliocentric work enough to have a real discussion with, much less ask me questions that reveal any mastery of the subject. I guess this is just life. I probably have not made it clear enough. LOL.

Yet, as I found out, the dharma is the very heart of astrology, what drives astrology and everything else for that matter. And while the astrologer in me is a chatterbox, the dharma quietly explains to me the mystery of my own soul or lack thereof – how the mind actually works. And I don't consider myself an expert in dharma as I seem to in astrology. LOL.

I use "LOL" a lot, but I wish there was a more gentle word or acronym. I am never laughing at anyone, but just laughing at the humor of it all. Or, trying too!

“ON SUCH A WINTER’S DAY”

November 11, 2018

Here is a handy PDF of all the substantial summer blogs, July, August, and September I have posted here on Facebook, some 65 articles in all. Some of you have asked for this as it is difficult to locate them online without a lot of searching.

DHARMA BLOGS 2018 SUMMER

<http://spiritgrooves.net/.../e-books/Blogs%202018%20SUMMER.pdf>

Other than that, some musings:

It’s cold now, down in the low 20s at night, with some snow, signs of ice, and too much wind for my taste. I have been doing my exercise indoors on our elliptical. I don’t like that as much as walking outdoors, but it’s still good for the body and I get to watch dharma teachings on YouTube. Winter life here in Michigan gets a little like the movie “Groundhog Day,” where every morning brings the same series of events – déjà vu all over again. LOL.

Today’s coming events loom pleasantly: the Michigan/Rutgers football game, a great two-day online streaming dharma teaching, and a babysitting gig with our granddaughter Iris tomorrow (she is almost five years old). I went to the hospital lab yesterday for a lipid blood-panel and it looks pretty good. As always, I have to lower my non-HDL cholesterol, but the rest of the panel is good. You never know with an aging body what will pop up.

And, as I mentioned recently in a blog, my mind these days is pretty loose -- fluid. I don’t feel too attached and yet I am taking care of some business that should

be taken care of, so I'm not totally idle. However, I am a little idle, which is a good thing for a break. I'm not looking for projects, although there are a few out there, but none I am currently pushing. I am definitely in a wait and see mood. Wait and see what?

The answer is to wait and see what change brings. I feel change in the air, but it's not yet tangible enough to quite get my mind around it. Anyway, I don't want to "try" to do that anymore, "get my mind around" whatever, but rather just wait and see what arises naturally. Trying to objectify everything is old hat – so tiresome.

As I get older, I am not so quick to draw conclusions. I wonder why? LOL. I would almost like to go with the change, get into the change, become one with the change instead of always popping-out to objectify what I am going through. "Realization" does not mean "objectification," but more being one with, "being part of" the solution rather than the problem – going with the flow. That idea.

Being the wizard behind the curtain is the wrong idea, always going too far or not far enough -- painfully dualistic. Threading the needle of Vipassana is all inclusive. The question is no longer "What are we going through," but rather the realization that WE are going through and thus get on with the going through. And not go through to get somewhere. There is nowhere to go other than the process itself of going through, etc. See: there I go again, objectifying everything.

How can we make it clear but leave no residue, as the Tibetans say, like the bird arcing across the sky leaves no trace. I am reminded of the lyrics from the song "Oklahoma," which go "... and watch a hawk making lazy circles in the sky."

Or the lines I wrote for myself:

“And in my sleep,
Awake am I,
So clear a bell is ringing.”
So much for musing.

JETSUNMA TENZIN PALMO

November 11, 2018

I don't stray far from my lineage masters and their teachings, which have been perfect for me for almost 45 years. However, since I have to exercise when it is too cold or icy outside to walk, I set up an old laptop and watch dharma teachings on YouTube while I put in time on the elliptical trainer. There are many kinds of Buddhism and I'm sure they all mean well, but most of the dharma videos I have sampled or watched just don't interest me. However here is one dharma teacher that did.

Searching around YouTube is how I came across Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo, known more popularly as Sister Tenzin Palmo or just Sister Palmo. And I picked her videos because she is in the Kagyu Lineage, not the Karma Kagyu in which I am in, but a sibling lineage, the Drukpa Kagyu. Close enough was my response.

And I landed on a four part series called "The Supreme State of Mahamudra" because I am a student of Mahamudra. I did not at first realize that the four parts added up to seven hours and forty-five minutes. That for me is a stretch, but since I listen to this while exercising on our elliptical machine, who's counting. I like to watch something.

Sister Tenzin Palmo was born in England on June 30, 1943, so she is two years younger than me, but we are roughly the same age. Sister Palmo gravitated toward Buddhism rather early on and, wasting no time, was ordained as a monastic in 1964 at the age of 21 after meeting her root teacher Khamtrul Dongyu Nyima Rinpoche. She later received the sramanerika

ordination in Rumtek Monastery in Sikkim from H.H. the 16th Karmapa in 1967.

Sister Palmo eventually went on to live in a cave for 12 years in India, where she practiced meditation. Later, she founded the Dongyu Gatsal Ling nunnery, where she works to this day, as I understand. In my estimate, she has paid her dharma dues. There are books about her for those interested.

That's a brief look at Sister Palmo's history. Now back to these videos. I was grateful to hear someone talking about Mahamudra and its preliminaries, so I settled back. Like with many teachings (and teachers) it took me a while to get synched in with her mannerisms and approach. Still, as mentioned, it was close enough to my training to be recognizable and interesting. Yet, it was still a lot of talking, something that my FB readers know I too well know how to do, being a talker myself. So, as with anyone, it took me a while to see beyond her personality to her realization. It's very consistently there.

What I found out, after a while, is that Sister Palmo is very much on point with what she says. Sure, there are lots of stories and attempts at humor, but beyond that, Sister Palmo lays out the basic points that all of us learning Mahamudra Meditation would do well to keep in mind.

I imagine that few of my FB readers have eight hours to spend listening to a Buddhist talk on YouTube. As mentioned, I fell into it by needing something to blunt the boredom of an exercise machine. However, I came away from those teachings with a real respect for Sister Palmo and especially that she stays on-point and lays out something very similar to what I myself have been taught from the almost 30 years of Mahamudra training I have received.

So, at the risk of scaring you with the idea of eight hours of Mahmudra teaching, here are the four parts of Jetsunma Tenzin Palmo's talk on "The Supreme State of Mahamudra." These talks are very understandable and good advice for anyone, dharma student or not.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EoL11k_T37g

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AhVDHz-Jv44>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nFvYw_rl7dE

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VeQqo_9rWI8

If you would rather read a little of Sister Palmo's teaching, here is a PDF with three teachings:

http://www.buddhanet.net/pdf_file/3_teach.pdf

THE DHARMA ADVICE I LIVE BY

November 13, 2018

We each have our cushion to meditate on, or a chair or something. Perhaps we have a corner or a whole room for meditation and a shrine. Some have whole buildings. Whatever the case, here we are, each one of us, somewhere in the world learning about and looking at the mind. I have benefited from the Buddhist way of looking at dharma, but dharma has no religion or sect. It is universally available to all sects, religions, and people. Dharma just is and we just are. The Buddha was kind enough to point the dharma out to us.

Each of us finds those words of life that we can live by, instructions that serve to guide us. When I was in my late teens, it was Khalil Gibran, the New Testament (The Gospel of John), William Blake, the Sufi mystics, Zen koans, and on and on. I very much depended on the words of poets and mystics to inspire and lift me out of my normalness and transport me anywhere but here. LOL.

Of course, in Vajrayana Buddhism (and the Karma Kagyu Lineage in particular) I found where I fit in like a piece in a puzzle. For me, aside from my root dharma teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, my special hero has always been the Mahasiddha Tilopa, and his great teaching called the “Ganges Mahamudra.” And the tip of the top of Tilopa’s teachings (for me) are what are called his “Six words of Advice,” also called the “Six Essential Points.” In Tibetan, these are literally six single words, but to make sense in English they have to be unpacked. They are:

Don't Recall
Don't Imagine
Don't Think
Don't Examine
Don't Control
Relax

Or further expanded:

Let go of what has passed.
Let go of what may come
Let go what is happening now
Don't try to figure anything out
Don't try to make anything happen
Relax, right now, and rest.

And my particular favorite rendition, the one I personally use only has the four main words of advice. I consider the 4th and 5th words recursive and part of Tilopa's 3rd word "Don't think." So the way I like it is this:

Don't prolong the past
Don't invite the future
Don't alter the present
Relax, as it is.

Of course, if you are not familiar enough to embrace admonitions, you can soften these and say something like "Let go of the past," "Let go of the future," and so on. For me, the word "Don't" does not bother me. I understand that I don't have to take this as a demand, but just as a suggestion. Still, each of these words of advice for me is like an arrow to the heart. Perhaps I like the "command" quality of these words of advice. To me, dharma is commanding. Use your own words. The Karma Kagyu Lineage that I practice in is traditionally called the "Command Lineage." The word "Kagyu" means "command" and each word of the

guru is to be interpreted as a command to act. Of course, you can use your own word, be it order, instruction, directive, direction, commandment, injunction, decree, edict, demand, stipulation, requirement, exhortation, bidding, request, suggestion, etc.

Since I still suffer from spending too much time worrying and anticipating the future, too much time reminiscing or deliberating in the past, way too much time monkeying with the present, and not enough time relaxing “just as it is,” these four reminders or (for me) commands are just perfect -- more important than I can emphasize in words. Would that we had single words in English for these. They would by necessity be in the imperative.

In my own training, I can't express how important these words of advice have been. It's easy to read them and nod your head, but their import expands to fill all available space. Talk about pith instructions. These are the pithiest of pith teachings, IMO, a grocery list to recognizing the true nature of the mind. I will be expanding on these main four thoughts in future blogs, as I can.

THE FOG OF THE PAST

November 14, 2018

[Notes: Continued cold. We are finishing up a stint of babysitting our almost five-year-old granddaughter, Iris. A good time was had by all. A massive effort at sorting through our house and the dharma center is on the horizon. The goal is to get rid of what we can and get better control and management of the properties. As time goes forward, we need to have less and less stuff around gathering dust and requiring maintenance.

The theory is simple. Take care of business now while we have the strength (before we get any older) and get the overhead and upkeep down to a gentle roar. To this end, Margaret and I plan to go through every room, cupboard, and closet with an eye to whittling down what is there.]

Following up on yesterday's blog on the great Mahasiddha Tilopa's words of advice, let's talk more about these pith instructions. It's an idea that each of us can check out for ourselves. Where is it that we spend most of our time? We can start with that first instruction, "Don't prolong the past."

When I actually take a look and am aware of where my focus is at, it is clear that I spend a lot of time anguishing about water over the dam, what is finished and done with. There is nothing I can do to put the toothpaste back in the tube once it has occurred. And post-mortem forensics, at least for me, is mostly an exercise in futility. In fact, I question rummaging in the past in all its forms, and this includes many types of therapy and methods that try to rejigger the past.

Yes, we can massage our view of the past and all that, but preoccupation with the past itself usually only strengthens its grip on us. It's just what our fears like. For me, I find it better to focus on what is happening now and create a new fresh "past" in the present moment than to constantly underscore what has already taken place, good, bad, or indifferent in hopes of making it OK. It's already history. In a real sense, it is written in stone. Our only option is to change how we view it and that is done from the present.

In fact, while we are at it, this has very clear parallels with karma. Karma, like the history of our past, is a done deal. Trying to erase or remediate karma is as close to impossible as possible, to play with words. Again and again, as I study the more advanced dharma teachings, it becomes clear that the way to atone for or remove what we could call "bad" karma, mistakes in judgement, etc. is not with an eraser. Instead, the suggestion seems to be: don't repeat it; don't do it again. You can't "fix" karma except by not creating any more of it. That is the fix. Don't make any more of it. LOL.

Sure, let's be aware of our past actions, take a lesson, so we don't repeat what was not helpful; simply noting what happened is enough. Anything more, I believe, is very, very difficult. It's like trying to sneak up on a mirror. Post-mortem analysis on our own past can't help but be morbid. What has passed from the present grows dim and shape-shifts so fast that, aside from noting what happened, it's like a hall of mirrors.

And, yes, I understand that we want to get a handle on what has happened in our life, but it is all about how we see it, changing our view, until we are comfortable. It's too easy to just rationalize until we

can stand to leave it alone. There are better ways to detach from the past and let it go.

In fact, it reminds me of the dung beetle that endlessly rolls around a little ball of crap. My personal view is that it is much easier (at least for me) to gain clarity and become comfortable in the present, thus creating in each successive moment a new and better past, one with a clearer view, and identify with that. It's about identification.

I find that if I can stay present and accounted for, thus creating a new past each moment, that the old troubling (and troubled) past soon is no longer that important for me. Sure, it happened, but I could care less and do. Whatever the case, I am no longer what I was. As a serious archivist (by trade) I am well used to handling past events in great detail and have worked hard to preserve what's important in their history.

Yet, as an archivist, I also learned early-on not to pass judgement or try to reshape the past, but to just note it to the best of my ability. The past is the past, but how we look at it changes with the times. If there ever was a shape-shifter, it is history itself. The past is ever-changing as we change, as the present changes. It seems that history is rewritten by every generation and our view of the facts and what happened changes as we change. And that's my point. The past is a moving target.

Like the dung beetle, who rolls that ball of crap around with his hind legs, undo emphasis and time spent on our past is time we don't get to live in the present creating (or maintaining) a new and more acceptable past. And, as mentioned, if we have clarity of mind, the past we create in the present soon outweighs whatever we have done in the past that

troubles us, which becomes (and always has been) quite forgettable. It no longer represents us and is not worthy of our worry. Of course, serious traumatic events often require remediation.

Yes, like the tar baby in the Uncle Remus tales, we can try to unstick ourselves from our past, blow by blow, but again, like the tar baby, we usually end up just emphasizing and getting stuck even further in its morass. One thing I have learned from dharma training is something like “Note it and drop it.” Yes, be aware, but don’t try to make the past aggregable to the present. It was another time, perhaps even another place, and we no longer are what we once were -- period. And to the degree we have changed (not to mention peering through the dimness of time), we can’t even remember what we are trying so hard to forget. That’s because it has already passed.

And I believe that whatever clarity we think we have of the past is more a product of this moment, shaped by how we see things now and not an accurate reflection of what actually was and happened. Clarity is always in the present and that by definition. It is the lens through which we see everything, including looking at the past.

And so, let the past be as it is. Take note, but don’t stir up a cloud of dust from an unhappy history. The clear and luminous mind of the present is more than enough. It’s all there is and, if we will rest in the present moment, we can make history (or her-story) afresh. Let history be history.

INVITING THE FUTURE

November 14, 2018

If I am not worrying the past, then most likely I am concerned about pushing the future. Even though I am an archivist, concerned about our popular culture (music, film, etc.), I am not all about history. Aside from being aware of it (and responding accordingly), I have little interest in what has happened and am, by nature, much more future oriented. Early-on in my mental training, I came up with my own mantra-like slogans for inviting the future, which are “For our dreams must be made to matter” or “Spirit must be made to matter.” That says a lot about who I am and what I care for.

We all know the future is out there somewhere, but it’s too dim to make out. Like Atlantis rising, the future has not yet arisen enough to see clearly, if at all. Some of us can see into the future better than others, but few to none of us with ordinary minds can really see the future. Yet, we do try because there is a bit of forever out there.

As mentioned, as a type, I tend to lean toward and hang out at the forward edge of time, as far into the future as I can peer. I am always priming the pump or trying to make what I imagine into reality – make it real. I’m one of the official welcoming parties of the future, so to speak, seldom interested in the past. And by that token, I have a gift for making a mountain out of a molehill, which I imagine is just another form of reification. “Making it real” is the process of reifying.

However, it’s not all a piece of cake. I also anguish and worry about, well, almost everything. As one example, I not only worry about driving on icy roads, I

worry about my family driving on icy roads; I worry about anyone (you for instance) driving on icy roads. Period. That's just a tiny sample of what I concern myself with. In other words, I spend way too much time in the future or agonizing on future concerns, most of which never materialize. But, that's just me.

Still, it makes me a bit of an expert on this piece of advice from Tilopa about not inviting the future. I do it too much. Obviously, the future will come. We don't have to invite it. And my sensing of the future is not good enough to predict the stock market or win the lottery, so what good is it? LOL. Another way to say this is that I am a sci-fi rather than a history buff. I'm into the future more than the past.

Yet, we can be forward looking without dwelling in a future that does not exist yet. It's called awareness, but all awareness is now and not about then or when. Of course, we cannot live in the future (or the past). Everything real that we do live is in the now.

These words of advice from Tilopa are simple, but they are not trivial. They are profound because they profoundly affect us every hour and day of our lives. You will have to decide for yourself how much of your time is spent in the future or the past and its value. Take a look. However much that amount of time is means you do not spend it being present in the moment, which is the only place that anything can actually be done.

Like a pendulum, many of us swing from past to future, only passing through the present at lightning speed as we swing from one to the other extreme. If you like puzzles, then puzzle how the present moment is infinitely brief (instantaneous), but yet is called the "eternal present." Now, that's a mystery!

And, it's not like the present moment is a sanctuary, either. The "eternal now," so to speak, is even more exacting in its demands than the past and future, which I will try to cover tomorrow or soon.

DHARMA: DON'T ALTER THE PRESENT

November 16, 2018

You would think that this would be easy, not to mess with the present moment, but in fact it is the hardest of all. Apparently, we have no idea as to how to just let things be as they are and rest in that state. The main problem is “reification,” our habit of gilding the lily, as they say, trying to make everything more real than it is.

Aside from obscuring the moment with the past or leaning into the future, we find it hard to just be in the present moment. We so easily slip into noodling the past or anticipating the future. And even if we do find the present, we can't help but mess with and constantly try to alter the present with our wishes, fears, druthers, and what-not. We don't realize that we are altering the present because we have never not-altered the present. If we have, we don't realize it.

This topic could fill a book. The obvious comment is to not desert the present for the past or future. We don't have to have the last word every time something untoward happens, especially if it means chasing the past to justify or get our mind right. We can just immediately let what is done be. Rather than put lipstick on a pig, we can let the pig be and not even give it lip service by vilifying it or rationalizing it. We don't have to give it our attention beyond the millisecond it takes to be aware that it is calling us to think on it.

Of course, the same goes to worrying or anticipating the future. Sure, watch your step and where you are going, but the future does not need us to walk it in to the present. It can present itself and will. And anything

short of being a fire alarm, we wait for. Our habitual tendency to worry everything (past of future) is just a bad habit. As I used to tell my dog when he came up with a dead animal in his mouth, "Drop it!"

And back to reification: If all we do in the present moment is reify this, that, and the other thing, feeling, or mood, that is like creating a cloud in an otherwise cloudless sky. Trying to make life (and the moment) more real than it is (reification) overpowers the pure signal of the moment with its noise. We don't need to pimp reality. As my first true dharma teacher used to say to me (many times. "Michael, my God is no beggar. He doesn't need me to make the ends meet; they already meet."

The purity of the moment cannot be embellished by our insecurities. That's the definition of purity. It's already pure and does not need our mental graffiti to look better. Let well enough alone. It's just a bad habit, our wanting to signature and leave our mark on everything. It's like kids writing on the walls. Annotating life with what we already know is oxymoronic. It's just a bad case of hiccups on our part, so to speak.

Or, our fear of silence and the need to endlessly fill every moment with inner chatter. That's just whistling in the dark on our part. I like that that old quote from Psalm 46-10 that says "Be Still and Know that I am God." That's the right idea, but as a non-theist I would have to say something like. "Be Still and Know the Nature of the Mind." LOL.

The present moment in its purity is not a white-board that is better for our mental scribbling, which brings us to the next and final word of advice from Tilopa, to "Relax, as it is." Rest, I will comment on that soon.

Simply put, the concept of “Don’t alter the present” reminds me of how the old folksong puts it:

“Take your fingers off it, and don’t you dare touch it,
You know it don’t belong to you.”

DHARMA: RELAX, AS IT IS

November 17, 2018

“Ahhh...

Tilopa’s final word of advice to us is to just relax and rest, just as it is. What could be clearer? I am struck (as I often am) by the way the Tibetan’s traditionally put things. One such image that I admire is that of a sheaf of barley straw that is tied by a string around its middle. In Tibet, at least the times I was there, there were no large agricultural fields. Instead, there were countless tiny plots of land, farmed by families I guess, mostly of barley.

At harvest time, instead of bales of straw, the Tibetans have sheaves of barley straw that they stand upright, each bound with a band of string around the middle. And they use those sheaves of straw analogically as a way to demonstrate how to allow the mind to rest. Sitting a sheaf of straw (vertically) up against a wall (or on the ground) they very, very gently cut the cord that binds the bundle. Instead of the straw flying apart as one might expect, when the cord is cut the straw just slumps ever so slightly. It is actually something to see in real time.

Anyway, that is how we are to allow the mind to come to rest. We can’t “Rest!” the mind by force or trying, but we can let our awareness come to rest, meaning our attention and, like the barley straw with its cord cut, ever so gently rest in itself, the nature of our awareness. That’s the idea (as I understand it) of “Relax, as it is.”

It was a real breakthrough for me, years ago, when I understood that when the sadhana text said to “rest the mind,” they did not mean some special kind of

spiritual rest, but simply to rest like we would watching TV, reading a book, or putting our feet up. I had never dared to try that, i.e. just plain old rest. But that is what was needed. I had to STOP trying so hard and just give it a rest. And there was nothing especially spiritual about it. Rest is rest. “Sacred rest” is still rest like water is water and air is air.

Instead of constantly milling around in the mind, darting into the past, cloying at the future, annotating the present, we can learn to just cease and desist – rest. We can let go, let whatever is arising and already going on... just go on as it is. We can allow our mind to come to rest, even if only for a millisecond. And, like the drop of water that falls into the still surface of the water of a pond, we can let that moment of rest expand, spread out, and enclose within itself that from which it arose until there is an all-rest. We can rest in the awareness that we are.

I hope you get the idea. It is as simple as resting.

To repeat, the Tilopa’s words of advice say:

Don’t prolong the past.

Don’t invite the future.

Don’t alter the present.

Relax, as it is.

I hope you have found these precious words of advice useful. I have.

DHARMA: BUILDING A FOUNDATION

November 18, 2018

Why do we learn Tranquility Meditation? That's a good question. For sure, the popular answer would be to get a little peace and quiet time. Another group of practitioners sees Tranquility Meditation as a form of relaxation therapy, as in "Take a load off." Perhaps there are other smaller groups, all of which are useful. And then there is why Tranquility meditation is taught to dharma students. That's my main focus here.

If you read the Vajrayana teachings, you will find scattered through them many admonitions NOT to take up Shamata (Tranquility) Meditation as an end or only life practice. Shamata is always considered a stepping stone to the more advanced practices like Vipassana and beyond. Even more interesting are statements such as the stronger the training in Shamata, the stronger the Vipassana meditation will be. How does that work?

In my experience, there are several poignant statements about Shamata that need to be sorted out into a single message. For example: it is interesting that traditionally in Tibet, Shamata Meditation is not taught to dharma students until after they have done at least one round of the Ngondro, what I call "dharma boot camp." And Ngondro is an extensive and time consuming practice that for many takes years to complete.

What this really boils down to, IMO, is that there are a series of platforms on which other platforms are built, all in an attempt to establish a firm foundation for the advanced meditation practices, a level playing field, so to speak. There is the Ngondro to level-out the

mind, emotions, and body. On that platform is then taught Tranquility Meditation (Shamata), which itself is the platform upon which (usually) Vipassana (Insight Meditation) is launched.

If we are to avoid a house of cards, then these two foundational practices (Ngondro and Shamata) have to be sound – firm. If they aren't, then anything built on top of them will be sketchy or fail. In other words, we can't just zip through Ngondro or Shamata by rote and get on to the goodies of Insight Meditation (Vipassana). Unfortunately, it does not work like that.

The whole point of dharma training is that “WE” train ourselves and if we skimp on it, well, our practice will be too unstable to support anything more advanced until it becomes solid. That's the idea. We are only hurting or inhibiting ourselves if we look for shortcuts or drone mindlessly through these practices. That's why there are the preliminaries, both the Common Preliminaries and the Extraordinary Preliminaries (Ngondro). They are foundational. They insure a platform, basis, and level playing field for what is to come.

It's a hard-bargain to come around to realizing that with dharma practice it is always a case of “garbage in, garbage out.” There is no grandfather clause and even the Buddha himself could not zap you on the forehead and you would be enlightened. The whole point is that each of us has to walk that path of dharma ourselves, by our lonesome. No one else can walk it for us.

It's like turning the crank on the little hand grinder that we have to grind up organic cranberries at Thanksgiving time. If you stop turning the crank, you stop grinding cranberries. Our dharma practice is like that. We actually have to do it. And if we do it once

over lightly, we come out with some awareness that is once over lightly and nothing more. We get out of our practice what we put into it and if we don't practice "for real" and with heart, we get next to nothing at all.

So, as I tell myself, in the beginning many of us go running into the cow pasture full-bore, but all of us (sooner or later) come tiptoeing back. Every dharma practice, mantra repetition, and so on has to be done very, very carefully and with heart. We can learn how to do that, to practice WITH heart rather than BY heart. Otherwise, we are just fooling ourselves and wasting time.

My impression is that there is not enough guidance of students by authentic teachers. Beginning practitioners, without close guidance, often are at sea as to what to do for themselves. That's the main reason for Vajrayana practice, working closely with an authentic teacher, someone capable of guiding us. In the Vajrayana tradition, by definition, we cannot recognize the nature of the mind without an authentic teacher to point it out.

SOMETHING OF VALUE

November 19, 2018

Truth is at a premium, if not politically in this country right now, at least in most of our lives. How could we get around without it? It would be like purposely taking the wrong route to the grocery store or having to remember where we lied. For me, truth is also where I learn: following out what is true (at least for me) in life. I have tried to follow my natural interest and love of things from my heart, especially in what I do for a living.

I am not totally clear when following my own interests, at what point I began to include other people, like sharing what I love and learn with others. Sure, sharing with my family was unavoidable and affirmational, but other people? Where did that come from? It must have been in school, wanting to have something to share in order to belong or get attention. Who knows? Anyway, it happened, but with me kind of gradually. I was never very popular and usually just busy with my own mind. School (and being taught) was more torture than not. I enjoy learning on my own.

And, while I followed my own personal interests, I did not think I had anything of interest to others until pretty late. I am ashamed to say it might have been as late as when I was around 26 years old before I really found myself, not like the “Self” is any great find. LOL. Before then, I was kind of going around with downcast eyes, afraid to look at others because I felt empty of anything authentic and worthwhile. In other words, I had low self-esteem as many young folks did back then and probably still do.

Certainly, no one was interested in my natural history studies and preoccupation outside of my family. However, in the late 1950s (and on into the early 1960s) my interests became decidedly more psychological and eventually philosophical. For one, in my late teens I read Dostoevsky with keen interest, all 52 of his books and short stories. I even took Russian language classes for a while.

Yet, it was not until I got seriously into music that I felt I had anything of importance to share. It probably was blues music that got my attention. Lucky for me, I ended up interviewing in person scores of great blues players and their bands. I loved Black music and their players, in particular the fathers (and mothers) of modern Chicago-style electric blues, players like Muddy Waters, Lonnie Johnson, Big Mama Thornton, Little Walter, Koko Taylor, Big Walter, and the list could go on for pages. The life wisdom of these great blues artists somehow filled in the gap of the grandfathers (both sides) I never had. For me, these great savvy beings told it like it is.

Of course, I went on to found and create the All-Music Guide, the largest collection of music artists, discographies, biographies, songwriters, etc. ever assembled. As an archivist of popular culture (music, movies, games, astrology, etc.), I finally felt I had something of value, something worthwhile, to share and contribute to the world, especially to my contemporaries and peers. Many of us love our music and movies; I know I did. And this study on my part (and performance) went on, of course, for years.

Yet, in the background and gaining on my music endeavors was the Dharma. If there was a learning curve for me with music (and there was), I was a rank beginner with dharma, not knowing my right hand

from my left. Without a doubt, dharma is the most difficult learning curve I have ever attempted.

And, with that preamble I am finally getting around to the point of this blog, which is sharing the dharma. If I ever wished for something of great value, a precious jewel (or something) that I could share and give to others, it has to be the dharma. There is nothing I know of, not in the entire world, that is as life-changing as the seeds of dharma when once sown in the mind of sentient beings.

Even these endless blogs I write here on Facebook (for those who can stand to read that much), are filled with the seeds of dharma that no-doubt will grow in the minds of those who can actually entertain them, just as they have in me. If there is a fiducial, a Rosetta or keystone to this life on earth we are living, the dharma is it. For me, everything else is secondary.

When the seeds of dharma come home to us, when we begin to “realize” them, our response is exponential and permanent. I write on dharma not because it comes easy to me but rather because it has been so unrelentingly difficult for me. If anyone else out there reading what I write is as dense as me, I want to do everything I can to be of help and to encourage perseverance in dharma practice, albeit in a creative manner.

And so, I do my very best to share dharma stories and teachings because the dharma has meant so much to me in my life. I have been advised by folks I respect to just write short blurbs and that what I write is too long, but I cannot seem to do that. Rather than take the path of entertaining you, I prefer to write for perhaps the very few who are internally hungry for the dharma as I present it and will respond to it as I have. I know that being exposed to the dharma, over and

over, has been (at least for me) the best way to learn. Dharma is like time-release capsules, yet like all seeds, it takes time for them to grow.

**PLEASE: WE COULD USE YOUR HELP JUST
NOW**

November 20, 2018

I do my best to give and share what I have with others. And I don't ask for anything in return, at least not often. Right now I am very sad to report that one of my dearest friends, astrologer Robert Schmidt suffered a severe stroke. To use the words that I read in the notice:

“This past week the beloved Astrologer and Researcher of Ancient Hellenistic Astrology, Robert Schmidt, suffered a massive stroke, which was likely caused by an advanced stage cancer that has also spread throughout his body. He is currently in a life-threatening situation, possibly preparing to pass over.”

I would like to share with you something of my relationship with Robert Schmidt and ask for any help you can give, especially financially because he needs it. In my life I have known a lot of astrologers, many of them friends. Robert has been a special friend and perhaps I can make that clearer by telling you how we met.

It was on July 21st of 1989, the start of the first Neo-Astrology Conference at our home and center here in Big Rapids, Michigan. I have never been a fan of lectures, so this conference was set up with a most distinguished panel of guests and those in attendance were also invited to participate.

Some of the panelists at the conference included Michel Gauquelin, Thomas Shanks, Robert Donath, Lee Lehman, Doug Pierce, Dr. Suitbert Ertel, Rob

Hand, Charles Harvey, John Townley, Mark Urban-Lurain, Ken McRitchie, Alois Treindl and, as I will relate, Robert Schmidt. Aside from the U.S., we had participants in attendance folks from Canada, Great Britain, France, Austria, Germany, and even three folks from Australia. At the time, I had never met Robert Schmidt.

However, that was soon rectified as my dear friend (and astrologer) John Townley pulled up in front of my house just before the conference started with Robert Schmidt and his partner Ellen Black in tow. I had to take John aside and ask him “Who is this guy? Does he belong on the panel or did he just come to observe.” “Put him on the panel, for sure” was John’s response. We did just that and it was great.

In a sense, Schmidt and I met each other in the middle of that first panel discussion. In those initial moments, I believe we both knew we had met one of those people in our lives with whom we not only have a strong connection, but that will require repeated meetings to satisfy whatever craving it is that draws people to one another. Schmidt, a theoretical physicist and mathematician, was not an astrologer at the time. His interest in modern Chaos Theory and his ability to turn the light of his mind on almost any problem made him an instant hit with the rest of the panelists, most of whom had known each other for years.

In fact, we had so much to go over that Schmidt and his partner Ellen Black decided to come back for a visit soon after the conference. When that happened, we then found so much to exchange that Bob and Ellen decided to relocate and become a permanent part of our staff here at Matrix for a number of years. Robert and Ellen became some of my very best

friends and still are. Robert told me that it was his time living at the Heart Center (and our discussions) that turned him toward astrology. I would guess that perhaps I am somewhat responsible for his becoming an astrologer.

And they lived in our center right next door, so we saw them all the time and took most of our meals together. People have asked me, well, what did Robert and Ellen do at Matrix. And while we did come up with some ideas, you know, it really didn't matter. Matrix was in its heyday and we had a number of folks there just because we liked them. Robert and I worked on chaos theory for a while and Ellen had plans to index our library, but that never really happened. Of course, they helped wherever they could. And Ellen made some incredible flatbreads (with chocolate chips) that we still talk about.

In truth, we all were just together for a couple of years before they moved on. It was after they left that Robert became a mainstay in astrological history by producing a series of historical texts (Latin, Greek, etc.) and welcoming many other astrologers to join him. "Project Hindsight," as it is called, is to this day a highlight of modern astrology. Robert and Ellen not only revitalized Hellenistic Astrology (Robert translated Greek), but he inspired a great many other astrologers. It reminds me of stories about the Impressionist painter Paul Cezanne, who complained that people came to him like ants to sugar to taste (and assimilate) his view on art and life.

IMO, it was similar with Schmidt. It is almost like people came to his conferences and took from them inspiration that the astrology community very much needed. I will tell you one story of one of Robert and

Ellen's conferences, because I was there as a featured speaker.

It was in July 27-August 2nd, 2007 and was called the "2007 PHASE Conclave: "The Astrology of the Mysteries." It went on for days, before and after the conference dates. Aside from the astrology, which is probably too technical to get into here, this event was also one big house party, and I mean big-time.

And when I say "house" I mean a mansion where Robert and Ellen lived, with something like ten bathrooms, three kitchens, and more rooms than you could ever get around to visiting. What most sticks in my mind is the open air back porch on the second floor that extended the entire length of the building. We were up at the level of the trees and branches, which were filled with katydids singing in the heat of the summer night as it got late. You could walk from one end of the porch to the other; it seemed like a city block because it was filled with small groups of astrologers talking and having fun. And there was plenty of wine and whatever. I have no idea how late it went, because I had to finally just get some sleep. The whole event was like a midsummer night's dream.

Right now, Robert Schmidt is very ill with, as mentioned invasive cancer and a massive stroke. He and Ellen need our support. They have given so much to the astrological community. If you can help, there is a "GoFundMe" project to help raise funds to support Robert Schmidt's rising medical costs. It is here:

<https://www.gofundme.com/support-robert-schmidt039s-medical...>

Please, my friends, I am asking you to do what you can.

TRIAL BY TRYING

November 20, 2018

[The following is pretty conceptual and I apologize for not being able to express it more simply.]

The realization on our part of what is called “process” is rare. To my knowledge, very few of us realize it for what it actually is, i.e. as the only “state” there is, the state of eternal change (not a state), what might be called Eternal Becoming and not as we might like to imagine, some sort of eternal being or Soul. In other words, not only is the “process” of life the only imaginable goal, if we yearn for something static like a Soul or some eternal state of being, it would have to be (as mentioned) the state of change itself. LOL.

The takeaway from the above comments is that concepts like “realization” and “enlightenment” are not goals, not places that we will ever get to (where we could stop and rest), but rather are themselves pure process (like breathing or the heart beating), the upkeep of which is the eternal state of change I referred to above. When the pith dharma texts say things like “unwavering awareness is the body of meditation,” they don’t mean that we take a peek at the nature of the mind every now and then. They mean just what they say, that we maintain the process of unwavering awareness.

If we consider the efforts many of us are making right now to be more aware, such as developing this “unwavering awareness,” it must take energy and application that we yet know little of. Either that or there are quantum leaps that at this point we cannot but imagine. I assume it is the later, because we all

are tired of trying and, as they say: “Trying doesn’t do it; doing does it.” Trying and trial we all know by heart.

It came to me as an enormous shock when I first realized that the pith dharma teachings were saying that escape from Samsara (this world of ups and downs we live in) was not escape to some place other than here and now, but rather Nirvana (enlightenment) was just this same old habitat of Samsara, but transformed by purification practices and a change in our view. In other words, we have to change how we see things. That thought was so overwhelming that I had to just go off and think about it.

In other words, as the dharma points out, Samsara and Nirvana are connate, meaning they are two sides of one and the same coin (joined at the hip), and enlightenment (Nirvana) is just a transformed view of the Samsara in which we are currently stuck. In that sense, nothing changes. LOL.

WE have to change how we view our mind and life. And even more earth-shattering for me is the thought, also in the pith teachings, that we (each of us individually) have to effect this transformation by ourselves. No one, not even the Buddha himself, can do it for us. Dharma is a do-it-yourself project from start to finish. And that means you and that means me.

Those two thoughts together, that Nirvana is just my transformed view of Samsara and that I will have to figure this out and walk-point by myself, were very, very sobering. So much so, that I had to call for a timeout and sidebar myself to figure out some of the ramifications as to what this meant for me. Well, that sidebar turned into its own path and my previous trajectory kind of evaporated because it was going,

well, nowhere. And I was on the train. I had thought (assumed) that there was a backdoor to Samsara and it led to Nirvana (enlightenment) and one day I would find it. LOL. That thought has to be funny. Anyway, those pith teachings closed a door that was never there anyway.

The reality of enlightenment and realization is more like a Mobius strip or torus, a closed environment or bubble in which everything has to be worked out -- the ultimate in recycling. "What goes around, comes around," as they say. And we will eventually come around to each transforming our particular Samsara into Nirvana, on-the-spot and in real time, so to speak.

If we can grasp the above concept for what it is, this can go a long way to closing the door to wishful thinking and give us the clarity we need to replace our current effort and trial with the certainty of conviction and confidence. That's how I understand it at this point.

LIBERATION THROUGH SEEING: PHOTOGRAPHY

November 22, 2018

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, "Inscapē." Inscapē was to Hopkins an insight, flag, or path into the eternal or the beautiful, literally the way or signature of the beautiful. I will explain.

I used to look forward to my trips out into the fields and woods. They offer me a chance to get my head together, to get relief from my day-to-day routine and generally to relax a bit. This is not to say that just going outside and walking in nature means that I am instantly relaxed. Far from it. For me, that usually takes time.

It is the same with taking photos. In the first ten minutes of a nature shoot I often don't see all that much to photograph. It takes time, time for me to slow down, open up, and to "See." and to let in the natural beauty all around me. It could be that I am still filled with all the everyday-worldly 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 day-to-day endless worrying and thinking affects my photography. And here is where the word 'inscape' comes in.

As I get out there and wander through the fields or just go up into my tiny studio at home, I gradually start to slow down and begin to see things that are beautiful, scenes that I might actually want to photograph. Slowly, like a flower, my view of the natural world around me starts to open up again and I begin to experience things differently. I begin to 'See'.

As mentioned, it takes time and seldom does it happen all at once.

This little pattern of leaves over here or the way the light comes through the forest canopy over there grabs me just a little bit; the chatter of my mind pauses and begins to slow down. As I 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, begin to center, and let go.

These little moments or signs that appear are 'inscapes', ways beyond my mundane world and into the beauty of nature or, more accurately, ways back into the state of my own mind or being. As I start to 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 of noting in the world around me.

These inscapes are signs or 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, to catch us in the turmoil of life, flag us down, and induce us to pull over and take a moment of rest, some time out. Without these timeouts I don't know where I would be. I don't expect to find them at the end of the line.

And 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 back into the beauty of the natural world, actually the beauty of our own mind.

Another way of saying this might be: what is beauty actually? What happens when we see something beautiful, when beauty appears?

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 see the beautiful. Beauty breaks down the rush of the everyday world and opens our heart a wee bit, making us vulnerable again, more open to experience and input. We let down our hair.

Through the natural beauty outside us, we go inside and experience the inner beauty of things afresh, which is none other than our own inner beauty. That is what beauty 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 busyness and distractions of our daily life. We forgot. We look outside in nature to see in here, to see into our own heart once again. That's how it is with me.

We can be sensitive to beauty in and through our photography. I would hate to tell you how many photographs I have of this and 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 -- direction-less.

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 "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 photographing 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. It takes me inside.

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, the inscapes through which we can relax and begin to 'see' photographically once again. We can listen to our own intuition. This process of inscape, of insight into the sublime in nature (the sublime within us) I find to be the key to good photographs 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.

EQUALITARIAN: LEVEL PLAYING FIELD

November 24, 2018

If you are looking for a level playing field and IMO the purest democracy among all people (and beings), then look no further than the dharma. I was raised and brought up in Ann Arbor, Michigan, which very much is a college town (actually a university town), with the University of Michigan in high focus. And so, not only is Ann Arbor very cosmopolitan (many creeds and races), but it is also full of smart people. More recently, it has a lot more rich people, as well, and almost nowhere to park. LOL.

And back then, being myself what in Ann Arbor is called a “townie,” as opposed to the transient college students (which we townies called “pinheads”), I saw firsthand how the rich, well-off, and intellectually endowed people had a leg up on those who were not so fortunate. I was raised in a middle-class family and so was lodged somewhere class-wise in-between.

My point in mentioning this is to point out the disparity as to equal opportunity in the world. At the same time, I want to point out that the dharma and its teachings is strictly an equal opportunity employer. Notice I say “dharma,” because the various forms of what is called Buddhism can be political as with everything else in this world. Rich or poor, smart or dull, educated or not-so-much, does not matter when it comes to realizing the dharma. I have seen the smartest folk, the most intelligent and educated people imaginable in the world, draw a blank when it comes to realizing the dharma. Smarts or position alone do not guarantee anything when it comes to the dharma,

which does not play favorites or have a “grandfather” clause. Everyone is equal before the dharma.

The dharma is not about smart, rich, educated, athletically endowed, brilliant, coordinated, etc. and so on. Neither does it belong to one race or one religion, not even to Buddhism. The dharma just exists and is there for the pickings or, as I should say, the realization. All we have to do is become aware of and use it. We can realize the nature of our mind at any class level: socially, politically, and athletically, beautiful, average, or plain, wealthy or not, and etcetera.

As the old rhyme goes, you can be a “Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Sailor, Rich Man, Poor Man, Beggar Man, Thief” and still be realized or enlightened. This is because the dharma is not something you can get and hang on to. Instead, the dharma is a path, a method or means of transforming our mind and how we view it and ANYONE can do this who is willing to practice. The dharma is something to use.

A realized laborer and a realized king have the same realization when they are enlightened. Many, even most, of the great Mahasiddhas were not monks, but common people. The great Mahasiddha Tilopa ground sesame seeds during the day and worked in a brothel at night. The realization of the nature of the mind is the great leveler. I can't think of anywhere else in the world this pure a form of egalitarianism exists than with the dharma.

My point is that all manner of individuals find the dharma to be totally egalitarian, a level playing field. All of the persona and personal Self of an individual are invisible when it comes to dharma, which is concerned with realizing the Buddha Nature within each sentient being.

Realization as to the nature of the mind is not about our personal appearance, our vocation, what class or walk-of-life we belong to, and so on. Any combination of the above can be realized, which is exactly what the dharma is all about. All people can come together and with some purification practice and proceed to realize the nature of the mind.

I hope I have made the idea clear that any of us can become realized. Whoever we are and however we are gifted (or not), we can meet one another as equals in the realized dharma. A realized beggar is as authentic and joyful as a realized king.

DON'T MIND THE AWARENESS

November 25, 2018

Working with the mind, at least in the beginning, can seem confusing and the instructions unclear. We need to be aware of awareness, which goes against our ingrained habit of being aware of something other than awareness. We use our awareness constantly, all the time, but we tend not to be aware that we are doing this. As mentioned, we are not aware that we are aware. We remedy this through what is called Tranquility Meditation (Shamata in Sanskrit).

It's important not to be vague or wishy-washy about being aware, so let's start there. Let's imagine that I am sitting in the room with you and I say hello. I ask you if you are aware that I just spoke to you. If you are, then that awareness that I just spoke is the awareness I am talking about. That's awareness.

If, on the other hand, if you are aware that you did not hear me speak, that too is awareness. And finally, if you are not sure whether I spoke or not, even that too is awareness. And so, there are no wrong answers. That which is within us that is aware of anything and everything is the same awareness that we need to be aware of in meditation. And it's the same awareness that we use to stay in the middle of the road when we are driving a car. There is only one kind of basic awareness and we all have it.

Now, let's talk about what we do with that awareness and it's not that difficult. Just be aware of what that awareness is aware of. It could be anything, a sound, an object, a feeling – whatever. It's just there. You can't touch, feel, or examine the awareness, either. It's not tangible. And most amazing is that it's always

pristine, clean, not tarnish-able, and unchanging. Our innate awareness can be aware of all kinds of things, but it never changes in its essence.

Even if you feel terrible, sick, or down. The awareness that is aware of our feeling bad does itself feel bad. It is pure awareness and is always non-attached to whatever we are feeling or going through. What it does is be aware of what we experience, not itself experience it. It is pure awareness.

Awareness is always right with us here now, for example, helping you read this sentence. Look directly at that awareness if you can. It's a little like putting two magnets with the same polarity together. It pushes back. However, we can very gently allow our mind to rest in or on that awareness. Try it. Don't expect much at first and only try it for brief moments, but keep trying. It will come in time. It is a process of allowing your mind to settle on that awareness.

We can speak of "my awareness" if we wish, but awareness has none of the personal attributes that we call our Self. It's not personal, but is somehow beyond that. It is just there and it is an awareness that we can use, but it's really not OUR person's awareness. It's just awareness. Like a flashlight, we can shine it anywhere and on anything. We can be aware of whatever arises in our experience that we can be aware of.

And that focused awareness is meditation. That's all there is to it, being aware. The caveat or Catch-22 comes with how long we can maintain awareness of the here and now. Our ingrained habit and history is to at best touch on awareness of the here and now only for a moment, but then we slip into thoughts of the past, the future, or just interpret and mess with what is happening in the present – anything but

remain aware in what the dharma texts call “unwavering attention or awareness.”

It is meditation if we remain aware of what is happening around us or whatever we set our mind on, but it is not meditation if we segue into the past, future, or muck up the present by second-guessing it. So, while meditation is easy, getting ourselves able to practice it may not be easy, and this is why meditation can be said to be difficult. It’s easy when we know how to do it properly. LOL.

Doubling-down on concentrating to maintain awareness ultimately is tiring and is abandoned out of fatigue. Meditation can’t be stormed by sheer effort. “Effort” is contrary to allowing the mind to rest. And so, while learning basic Tranquility Meditation (Shamata) is easy to do, trying to do it is not easy for most people because we have to work through our expectations, nervousness, and the fact that making effort to meditate is self-defeating. And that takes a while for most of us.

In fact, in Tibet, Shamata (tranquility) meditation was not even taught until the very extensive Ngondro practices were completed, what are called the Extraordinary Preliminaries – a thorough process of getting ready.

So, if you do not formally meditate, don’t imagine that you don’t know how because we focus (or are (aware) of this or that all day long. The difference is that, like the butterfly flitting from flower to flower, we don’t maintain awareness for any length of time. Instead, what we are aware of is flickering like a flame and changes from moment to moment. We have no stability of the awareness mind.

I will post more on this approach. However, the idea is that we cannot maintain awareness by sheer force of effort as this little poem I wrote long ago points out:

THE REST OF THE MIND

You cannot rest the mind,
But you can let the mind rest.
Just let go,
And don't mind the rest.

FINDING AN AUTHENTIC DHARMA TEACHER

November 26, 2018

This is such a tough question to offer an answer for. Back in the late 1950s, there were not many dharma teachers. Period. Even in the 1960s, when there were some dharma teachers, encountering them was seldom. You had to go to where they were and even then they were few. This cannot be said for the 1970s, when every kind of spiritual teacher showed up, not just from the East, but also home-grown varieties. They were everywhere and one could make the rounds in town and sample the current crop of those gurus who were visiting Ann Arbor at the time.

And beyond the 1970s there was only what could be called spiritual “fusion,” and to play on words, it was con-fusion at that. And today, here in late 2018 there are many dharma teachers, yet I’m not sure it is any easier to find and pick one. So, what’s a beginning dharma student to do?

There are many forms of Buddhism, so help your self. But for those of us who want to make some real progress (hopefully) in this life, it is very clear (at least in Vajrayana Buddhism) that without an authentic teacher we will not be able to cross the threshold into what are called the advanced teachings such as Mahamudra and Dzogchen. And to further complicate things, there are said to be 84,000 dharmas and perhaps 84,000 particular types of teachers. Does that mean there are 84,000 kinds of students and how likely are the twain to meet? For example:

Everyone knows of the 14th Dalai Lama and some even know of the 17th Karmapa. These are considered great dharma teachers. Even so, there is

no guarantee that even if you could get next to the Dalai Lama and receive instructions, blessings, and so forth, that this would be the teacher that you could respond and learn from. I met the Dalai Lama personally many decades ago and even offered him the traditional white scarf one-to-one. He was wonderful, of course, but nothing inside me gave sign that here was my dharma teacher. LOL.

Pardon this analogy, but it's not unlike going on a blind date, trying to apprentice ourselves to this guru or that. Who knows what will happen and since time is somewhat limited for all of us, how many teachers can we visit and vet to find the one that is authentic for us? This looks like a problem to me. However, there is what I consider a simple solution to the process of our finding an authentic dharma teacher, but of course it requires even more from each of us. LOL.

Instead of searching for the perfect authentic teacher, it is much easier to work on becoming an authentic student, a vessel or vehicle that can receive and soak up the advanced teachings. We all know the old saying, "When the student is ready, the teacher will appear." If the dharma rains down all around us, perhaps we can become receptive enough to receive it.

A close read of the various pith dharma teachings, at least the ones I have studied, points out that since we each have Buddha Nature within us even now, why have we not realized this? And the answer to that question is because our ability to respond to the dharma is not fine or subtle enough. Most any authentic dharma teacher will tell you this. We are not ready or able to receive. This is why most beginning dharma practices are one kind of purification or

another, trying get us to get our obscurations down to a fighting weight (so to speak) where we can sense and receive the more subtle teachings.

Just thinking we want to be enlightened is something most anyone with a brain would want. Like everything else we would like, wishing does not just make it so. I would like to win the lottery too, but I have never managed it so far.

My point here is that it may be much easier to become a proper vessel to receive the dharma teachings than it is to go around the world trying to find and vet an authentic teacher. Yes, you can groan that this approach is even harder than finding a good teacher, because we don't even know how to become a good student.

However, there are hundreds and thousands of books on how to get our act together, should we actually be interested in working on ourselves. I bet that most of us could figure out what to do if we wanted to.

With a little work on our part we can quite easily price ourselves right out of the cheap seats and qualify as a serious dharma student. And that puts us on the radar screens of all possible teachers. There is no such thing as a teacher who does not have students of one kind or another. Chances are that the authentic teacher you are looking for is also looking for authentic students, students who are ready and able to receive the teachings. In fact, the many teachers I have met are looking for little else. As Bodhisattvas in the making, authentic teachers by definition are looking for those few who can actually receive the teachings that they hold. This is just true in my experience. That's part of being a Bodhisattva, to help those students like us to be able to receive and hold their lineage.

In other words, if you want to find an authentic dharma teacher, make yourself a fit vehicle to receive the teachings. I would guess that authentic dharma students are as rare as authentic teachers. This blog is long enough already. If this makes sense to you, let me know and I will try to say more tomorrow or soon.

“REVULSION OF SAMBARA”

November 27, 2018

A huge obstacle to my learning the dharma was my basic unwillingness to renounce Samsara, even though I was not sure what Samsara actually was at the time. LOL. I will explain what that means. In Buddhist nomenclature, Samsara is this world of what appears to be vicious cycles of ups and downs that we seem to be stuck in. If we practice dharma, we all have some idea of what we think Samsara is. I know I did, even though it turned out to be wrong.

And opposed to Samsara, or so I thought, was Nirvana (enlightenment), the Buddhist surrogate for “Heaven” of one sort or another. Anyway, I knew that I wanted to get out of Samsara, like most folks, and into Nirvana (enlightenment).

However, not everything about this world of Samsara was all that disagreeable. For me, there was the undeniable beauty of Mother Nature and the natural world of mornings, sunsets, moonlight, and on and on – many good things about this life. And so, early-on, I was put off by the fire & brimstone Buddhist statements such that we should naturally have a “revulsion for Samsara,” which I took to mean this entire world that we all live in. I didn’t have that and I had seen the same kind of stuff in the Catholicism in which I was raised and didn’t like it there. I like life, for the most part. My ignorance of the nature of Samsara actually was dangerous in that it delayed my practicing with 100% heart.

I was so rapt as to my love for nature, its beauty, and all the critters in it (and a little grudgingly I included people too) that I was afraid that Buddhism was

asking me to throw the baby out with the bathwater. If I was supposed to feel revulsion for this life I was living, did that somehow mean revulsion for the beauty of this natural world? Was natural beauty somehow something I had to give up? I know it sounds stupid now, but that's the refrain I found myself echoing.

And I really had no one to ask about this or when I was around someone who could (like a high lama), I did not have the words or perhaps the courage to ask. I did not want to seem disrespectful for all the dharma that I had learned, and so I kept these fears to myself. That was a big mistake.

And this was perhaps most encapsulated (for me) in that fourth thought of the Common Preliminaries that turns the mind toward the dharma and in the words of that fourth thought (as I first encountered them), which were, and I quote:

“REVULSION AT SAMSARA: Just like a feast before the executioner leads me to my death, the homes, friends, pleasures, and possessions of samsara, cause me continual torment by means of the three sufferings. I must cut through all attachment and strive to attain enlightenment.”

That wording gave me pause for thought. And while I embraced the first three of the “Four Thoughts that Turn the Mind toward the Dharma,” that fourth thought hung me up for years. After many decades I did get all this clarified

It was totally helpful when I heard H.H. the 17th Karmapa say (during a teaching where I was operating a video camera in the room where he spoke) that in his meeting of westerners, what he found most difficult for us is to renounce the desire for

Samsara. We desire it. And he went on to add that the “renunciation of Samsara” might better be translated as the desire on our part for freedom from our obscurations and by that turning the mind away from Samsara. That translation of freedom rather than revulsion made much more sense to me. LOL.

I somehow felt relief. And I was even more relieved when the Karmapa said that the Samsara referred to in the teachings was not this physical world (with its beauty, etc.) we all live in, but rather the negative karma and emotional kleshas that keep us endlessly spinning around within our own mind, and not something (like Mother Nature) outside us.

It isn't the natural world in Samsara that is repulsive, but rather our attachment, fixations, and the resulting obscurations that prevent our being free from what obscures us. We can't see through them.

Obscurations are something that, when we realize what they do to us, ARE repulsive (our dumb fixations) and ought to be removed so that we can see clearly. Many of the preliminary dharma practices help us to pare down and remove our obscurations.

In other words, Samsara is not the physical world that we live in, but rather our own mental blockages that have kept us captive and confused since time immemorial. When I realized that, I gave a deep sigh of relief and like the old game of Pick-Up-Sticks, began to remove my obscurations one by one.

WAKING UP AND THE ABILITY TO RESPOND

November 28, 2018

On one of his visits to America, His Holiness the 17th Karmapa pointed out to a group of us that the word “Mahayana” means “great vehicle” and that the phrase actually means or carries the subtext of “Great Responsibility.” And before we fall into thinking of “great responsibility” as some kind of burden or obligation (i.e. something we HAVE-TO-DO), he said that it is more correct to consider it as those who have a greater ability to respond than otherwise. To me, that made sense.

When I think back over almost 60 years of contemplating and practicing dharma, one of the single standouts is when I heard from the Tibetan translator Daniel P. Brown that in the Four Noble Truths, the word “suffering” is better translated as “reactivity,” so we have the First Noble Truth not as “The Truth of Suffering,” but rather as “The Truth of Reactivity.” It made perfect sense to me because I could not always easily put my finger on the suffering in my life, but I am never far from my own reactivity. LOL. A lot fell into place for me with those words and that realization.

And, as I began to be aware of my own reactivity and worked to replace my reactions with the ability to, instead, respond appropriately, I found a much easier way (at least for me) to progress in dharma. It just worked. Becoming aware of our own reactions is key.

His Holiness the 17th Karmapa also pointed out that our sense of responsibility, becoming responsible, taking responsibility for ourselves, and ultimately for all other sentient beings is what we call Bodhicitta. Of

course, another word for utterly responding to the condition of sentient beings in Samsara is “Compassion.” Compassion, feeling responsible, Bodhicitta... whatever words seem most natural to us is what I am pointing at here.

True Compassion is not passive, but active, although it seems popular to consider compassion as being me over here being compassionate toward others over there. And it is easy to fall into considering compassion as relative (dualistic), as me being compassionate to you or to other beings, me the compassionate one and you the one I am compassionate toward. IMO, that’s missing a really important point, perhaps the only or main point.

In truth, Compassion (with a capital “C”) is rather taking on (undertaking) the responsibility for ALL other beings, putting it on our shoulders and shouldering it. It’s not an obligation in the imperative sense of the word (something we ought to do), but rather is all voluntary on our part. We are not showing compassion from a distance, but rather accepting responsibility for doing something about the situation of sentient all beings in Samsara. This defines what we call the Bodhisattva, someone with a total commitment to taking up this Samsaric situation and changing it.

Let me go over the steps again, slowly, to be clear. As a beginning dharma student, we start with our reactivity (knee-jerk reactions), that with increased awareness on our part, can be toned back and we gradually transform our knee-jerk reactions into more appropriate responses, thus “responsibility.” With increased responsibility (the ability to respond), we can naturally develop compassion. And with a marked increase in compassion, our “Compassion” becomes

what is called Bodhicitta (Awakened heart), and it is this powerful Bodhicitta that drives the Bodhisattva path. Bodhicitta is the hallmark of all Bodhisattvas.

It may be hard to find the words, but the idea is that Compassion (with a capital “C”) is not passive or contemplative, as in standing back and observing (just feeling empathy or sympathy for others), but rather is the pure activity of responding, embracing the situation we find ourselves (and others) in (Samsara) and committing ourselves 100% to transforming it and bringing all sentient beings (including ourselves) to enlightenment. True compassion is not “relative,” but rather non-dual. We are all-in.

I feel that I am still not being clear enough, so let me rephrase and run it past you one more time. The turning point in dharma practice for any Vajrayana practitioner is when we decide to go all-in. Life is not a ballgame that we watch, but one where we pitch-in 100%. We are not looking for others to do something first, but instead decide to do something ourselves. The question is: where do we get the hutzpah, courage, and confidence to take charge of our own dharma process like that?

And the answer, as far as I know it, is through that pivotal event called “Recognition” of the true nature of the mind. That event changes everything 100%, which means Absolute Bodhicitta and the perpetual desire to benefit all beings. After we have negotiated the Common Preliminaries and the Extraordinary Preliminaries (Ngondro), then an authentic dharma teacher may be able to point out to us the actual nature of the mind, which is what is missing. That is the event called “Recognition”. With Recognition comes what I understand as Absolute Bodhicitta, the

oomph or untiring desire to share our realization with other sentient beings. We can't help but go for it.

IMO, the bottom line here is that it's all a matter of the awareness of responsibility, our ability to respond to Samsaric existence (and other sentient beings) in a way that transforms our (and their) view.

HEAR MUSIC!

November 28, 2108

Something I have always wondered about and people have remarked and even teased me about is my penchant for remaining still, even expressionless, when something intense is taking place. This was very clear when I used to go to music concerts (or play music on stage). I have listened to some of the greatest jazz and blues musicians play live. For some reason, instead of tapping my feet or swaying with the music, I tend to remain completely still, like frozen in time. However, I am not tense, but relaxed. I'm all ears, so to speak.

As mentioned, others have remarked on it and even teased me that I am not feeling the music, not emotional enough or something. Nothing could be farther from the truth. I am actually totally concentrating on the music, not missing the slightest nuance (if possible). If I ask myself where this comes from, the answer seems to be that I acquired this habit from watching Mother Nature, something like in rapt attention – taking it in. It started very early-on.

I'm perfectly still inside as I listen to the music with total attention. Yes, I can tap my feet or move around, but for some reason I find that a distraction and by totally surrendering myself to the music, by listening, at least in attention, I can hear more and better.

Yes, I can follow the argument that hearing music fully may include dancing, moving, rhythmic motion, etc. I get it and sometimes do move, but that's not how I generally listen to music, at least the music that fully gets my attention. I have been kind of watching myself in all of this. And the same goes with my not

feigning a smile unless I feel like smiling. I just don't do it. Sorry. LOL.

Other people really don't like that or at least that is what I have been told. Their view is that we should smile even when we don't feel like it.

People like to ask me what I sounded like as the lead singer and amplified-harmonica player for the Prime Movers Blues Band. Here is a sample of the few tapes that have survived the years. You asked for it. LOL. This includes a song by our drummer at the time, James Osterberg, later known as Iggy Pop.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sZO5bsagUqY&t=1s>

FOLLOWING WHERE WE LEAD

November 29, 2018

I was a naturalist from about the time I was six years old. Living way out in the country with no other houses or children around; the most interesting thing for me was the natural world that surrounded me, especially little critters of all sizes. Over the years from then until I was an adult, I raised or cared for about anything I could get my hands on. Of course, we had dogs and loads of puppies. But I also had as pets (or temporary pets), to name just a few: baby rabbits, squirrels, skunks, mice, hamsters, raccoons, deer, pigeons, doves, blue jays, robins, hawks, and any bird that needed help. And also, every kind of snake, lizard, frog, toad, and salamander. These would include rattlesnakes, copperheads, anoles, iguanas, geckoes, boas, etc., not to mention ants, walking sticks, praying mantis', and on and on. You get the idea. I loved sentient beings. As for humans, them too, but they have been somewhat of an acquired taste. LOL.

As for photographing them, I didn't really get into that until I was about fourteen years old, but from then on there was lots of nature photography. When I was a sophomore in high school, I did a photographic study of the marine life of the North Shore of Boston and won the biology award for my high school and was sent to MIT to display it. And so on.

Early-on, my idea of nature photography was producing an image fit to go into a nature field guide. I was all about realism and realistic images. So, as I grew older and had a family, it was a surprise for me to discover my photography moving away from what I

would call “field-guide” nature photos (sort of a stark realism) compared to the much softer more ethereal mood of many of my current photo styles. At first, I didn’t know what to think. I was doing it, of course, but I was also watching it happen and was surprised.

For a while, I was afraid to look at any of these leanings even myself, much less to post them for anyone else to see. They were like a secret forbidden pleasure. LOL. However, left to my own devices (which I was), that softer, more dream-like trend didn’t abate, but only continued to overtake the realism. Grudgingly, over time, I had to admit and accept that hidden behind my hard realistic nature-photos was another me, with quite another take on life. And that thought was what I might call the “mystic” in me, that part of my love of nature that transcends hardcore realism and is free to be dream-like, even to the point of being “dreamy.” Heaven forbid! LOL.

It was not just a change in style that I sprung on my world of photography; it was one that I sprung on myself. Intrigued, I had to not only admit it, but also follow it out to see where it led. And ultimately, it led to my combining realism with some form of transcendentalism, so the finished photos would have a lot of out-of-focus areas which photographers call bokeh (or bouquet) punctuated with other areas that were in strikingly sharp and pristine focus.

And by that, at least to myself, I mixed my natural science background with the natural mystic propensities within me, i.e. the illusory nature of life. And that’s where I am to date. I mention this because it occurred to me and because you probably have seen few to none of my early nature photos. That, and its winter, so it seems easier for me to wander off the reservation of my day-to-day life. LOL.

PARITY: ME, YOU, AND WE

November 30, 2018

The teachings point out that there are three general types of practitioners or approaches to the dharma and they are usually presented in a hierarchy from lower to higher, from least-best to best. There are practitioners that are only concerned with their own welfare. And there are practitioners that are mostly concerned with other's welfare. And, best of all according to the teachings, there are practitioners that are concerned with both the welfare of themselves and of others.

The least useful is to practice only to benefit ourselves, which most of us cannot help but do. Better than that is to practice to benefit others and not worry about ourselves. And best of all, it's said, is to practice to benefit both ourselves and others. Why both? Because we need to be enlightened to best be able to help others.

In my life I find myself trying to emulate the third type, benefiting both myself and others. I find that trying only to benefit others (and not myself in the bargain) does not go very far. I am not that selfless. I want to get my daily bread, so to speak. In the back of my mind for many years has been the refrain from the popular song that goes "I want to be in that number, when the saints go marching in." I too want to be in that number and included. That's how it works best for me.

I believe I understand this principle or approach. I try to benefit others, but I always keep my hand in, so to speak. In other words, I try to get some satisfaction or encouragement for myself as I go along, as opposed

to what I call “pie in the sky,” getting a reward somewhere down the line. I like to be paid and encouraged as I go, so to speak, even if this approach takes longer. Otherwise, I too easily lose my direction along the way. How does this appear?

In my opinion, it’s not always a pretty sight. LOL. As an example, if you tell me something of your experience and, if something similar happened to me, I want to share that with you right on the spot. I get called out on this for being too selfish, but it seems quite natural to me. You share something, it energizes me because I agree or have had the same kind of experience, so I tell you my similar story. We exchange experience.

In that way, I’m neither holding back nor sublimating, but from my point of view we are just having a conversation. In other words, I do my best to exact from my day, my daily bread, so to speak. I get paid as I go along rather than at the end of the week, year, or lifetime. I don’t claim that this is particularly noble on my part, but I don’t hold grudges and you don’t owe me anything because I’m paid for our exchange as we go along. Does this make sense? Does anyone else do this too? I’d like to know.

You want to talk about yourself, fine. I will do the same and in the bargain we come out equal, IMO. I like not being obligated and don’t mind if you do the same. I tend to be generous for the most part and appreciate the same from you. If I don’t get it, neither do I worry for, as mentioned, we are all paid up. I have already extracted from the situation what I need to be satisfied and hope you have done the same. There are no debts to burden me or you. Make sense?

To me, there is a certain clarity and “cleanness” in this approach. No residue or baggage.

SELF-DENIAL

December 1, 2018

Yesterday, my friend Leesa Chenoweth had an interesting question related to my post about giving our selfish ego a break. IMO, we have to keep in mind a couple of things. One of those is the fact that, although there is a popular mistaken notion that Buddhism does not believe in a self, Buddhists believe there very much is a self. We all have one and if we did not, we would have to invent one just to get things done or move around. LOL.

What the teachings do say is that we have no “permanent” Self as in the notion of a Soul that reincarnates from life to life and that what we call our persona or self is left at death’s door. When we leave this life, we turn out the lights to that self, and move on armed with awareness (and our karma) into the bardo. That could be another discussion.

So, we each very much do have a self. The second point is that our self (as in selfishness) is not new to this life (except in its particulars). Those selfish desires and karma traces go back infinitely (so the teachings say) and we draw water from that seemingly endless selfish-well with every rebirth. That’s what we use to fashion a new self when we are reborn. The self in each life is like our command center or personal secretary and should help us, not control us. It’s the dummy; we are supposed to be the ventriloquist.

However, the tendency to be selfish (and so on) is habitual and is as deeply seated as we are in time. And so, sweeping our Self under the rug or any kind of self-denial is, IMO, kind of futile if not vain. Who are

we kidding, each other? Yet, the question remains, just what are we to do with this ingrained grasping and selfishness? That's something I have thought long and hard about.

We all know that socially, being selfish is taboo, a no-no and not something to be revealed, much less trotted out for everyone to see. Yet, we should know that we all have it in there somewhere. So, what are our choices?

Personally, I don't feel comfortable pretending I don't have a self and am not to some degree a selfish person. I am. My family could testify to this. At the same time, I have met great rinpoches where the Self is not obvious, if there at all anymore. It no longer is an obstruction. However, I am not a rinpoche. LOL.

And yes, the various dharma preliminaries are designed to pare down and not emphasize the Self, but that is a process that takes time, IMO. In the meantime, I see no reason to deny or hide what is (apparently) perfectly natural and totally common, that we each have a selfish component. You may (and I will try to respect this) not feel comfortable revealing your selfishness, yet please allow me to acknowledge my selfishness and I will try not to feature it. LOL.

In the process of reducing the negative effects of the self, which takes time (and lots of it), I prefer to put my Self on a diet and feed it just enough of what it wants to not fall into self-denial, which I find uncomfortable and hypocritical. In other words, while I whittle away at the negative effects of myself, doing my best to purify them, I don't feel honest pretending they are not there. After all, our selfishness is often (socially) the elephant in the room. At best, I find self-denial amusing, but mostly I see it as just another obscuration to be removed.

Which brings me to my point yesterday, that I don't hide my selfishness, but rather tether it. In social conversations, as mentioned, I don't believe in self-denial, but rather in exchange, and to each his or her own. If you want to tell me about what you are doing, I often want to share with you what I am doing. I consider this a fair exchange. Yes, I like to talk about what I am interested in and while I may not be all that interested in what you are doing, I understand and respect your sharing it with me. And I might be interested. To me, all this is just obvious. Why deny our selfishness while we are taming it? If anything is understandable, selfishness is. Beautiful? No, but to me self-denial (denial of selfishness) is a lot uglier.

What could be more common than the obscuration we call selfishness? Is it a surprise or a stranger to public life? I don't think so. Why be ashamed of it? My approach is to keep selfishness down to a dull roar by taking it for a walk as needed, while I gently work on reforming and training it. I can't believe that I am the Lone Ranger in this.

In fact, years ago I wrote a little poem about just this problem.

ME AND YOU

The fact that,
I like 'me',
Does not mean,
I don't like,
You.

There is room,
For you,
In me.

And,
You can like,
You too.
You too,
Are,
Like me.
I like you too!

THE SIX PARAMITAS: GROUNDHOG DAY

December 3, 2018

When I first saw the movie “Groundhog Day” years ago, I immediately recognized it as what I call a “dharma movie” and flashed on all the things I have to go through each day. It accented the practice of one of the classical Six Paramitas (Six Perfections) of Buddhism, in this case “Patience.” The Six Paramitas are Generosity, Discipline, Patience, Diligence, Meditative Concentration, and wisdom. Traditionally, the Six Paramitas are actually five in number and the sixth (Wisdom) is separate, something like the result of the other five being considered. Consider the five main paramitas as a hand with five fingers. They all work seamlessly together and to not have one is like not having a finger on a hand.

If I review my life as to the six paramitas, I seem to have a bit of generosity, some discipline and diligence, and am getting better at meditation concentration. The zero for me has always been patience.

The 17th Karmapa (Ogyen Trinley Dorje) teaches that each paramita has a demon or dark side that we must become aware of. In the case of the paramita of patience the obstacle called “The demon of too much struggling” or “too much forbearance.” We should not struggle to be patient, but allow it to arise naturally through our understanding. In the classic text “The Thirty-Seven Practices of a Bodhisattva,” as regards patience, it is written:

“For bodhisattvas aspiring to a wealth of virtue,
Anything that harms is a treasury of jewels.

Therefore, never turning aggressive or angry,
To be patient is the practice of a bodhisattva.”

The Karmapa adds “Excessive forbearance is also a problem because we must clearly know the reasons for what we are doing and not just blindly continue without reflection, especially if it concerns something we find objectionable... the proper way of practicing patience is that it must be a response that comes from deep within.”

I can't help but totally respond to this, especially that last sentence. The repetitiveness of life hounds me; no doubt. I believe we each have enough of those things we must do each day and endlessly march through the list of what we have to do every morning or as we can. For some reason, I am very sensitive to having to do rote stuff and am of a mixed mind about how to handle it. I would rather work through what I cannot avoid, but with awareness, bit by bit.

Yet, there is another side of me that does not want to do anything by rote at all. However, there are things I have to do, which comment should read “Things I HAVE to do.” Many of them can't be avoided. I just have to do them, but I am slowly learning to like it... slowly. Like it or not, I do them nevertheless.

Ever since I was a young person I have had this mantra-like phrase going through my mind, something like “Do not do a thing.” I'm not sure where that came from, but I resonate to it although, as it so happens, I have done a lot of things (at least stuff) in my life. I have been busy.

I do know that the beginning dharma practices, what are called the Preliminaries or purification practices, can be kind of difficult. However, if we want to remove obscurations, then it takes work of some kind. And it's

true that the advanced teachings intone just the opposite, “Do not do a thing,” “Don’t meditate,” “Don’t imagine or procrastinate,” “Don’t meddle with the present moment,” and so on. So there are two trains running – the preliminaries and the advanced practices.

There is no doubt that one part of me just wants to be free to do whatever I want. This has been there from early-on, since I was a kid. Although, once free, often I just turn around and look for something to do. That’s my particular Catch-22. And so, the alternation of these two extremes inescapably finds me always aware of what I HAVE to do. In other words, given my freedom, I end up negotiating and working with the things that I have to do, that stand in the way of that freedom and that I otherwise find obstructive. There has to be humor in that.

Yet, that does NOT mean I like or look forward to these things that I have to do. They just stand out or become obvious. There they are and here is my attitude, with mixed feelings about having to do them. Just to make clear how trivial this can be, things I have to do can be like brush my teeth, take a shower, do my sit-down dharma practice, make food, and most especially daily exercise. These things don’t spring to mind as something I can’t wait to do. However, I do them.

On my best days, I steal a phrase from Chris Cuomo of CNN and tell myself “Let’s get at it!” and on my worst days it is more like “Can I skip this today?” No, I can’t is the answer, so I might as well get on with it. I wish I had more noble stumbling blocks, but there you have it. My challenges are very mundane, although I am sure somewhere in there are more philosophical dilemmas. LOL.

If I look back over my life, especially my workaday life, I have tackled some of the most demanding, tedious, and could-be-boring tasks imaginable. In some remote karmic sense, I have challenged this sense of tedium head-on since an early age. It is humbling when I catch a glimpse of the fact that very simple changes in our attitude can take a lifetime to work on! To me, that is mind-bending but true.

Computer programming requires patience. Video editing requires patience. Cataloging and documenting all recoded music and all recorded film takes patience. Archiving many tens of thousands of books, magazines, and what-not requires patience.

So, it would seem to me that “patience” is the keystone or the cornerstone of my life, although I might point to anything but that if you asked. In other words, patience is the hardest thing for me to learn in life, so I labor away at it for 77 years. LOL.

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without reflection, especially if it concerns something we find objectionable... the proper way of practicing patience is that it must be a response that comes from deep within.”

I believe I have spent my life proving that true.

ATLANTIS ARISING

December 4, 2018

Well, I'm in the midst of working through a few things in my mind, as usual, so I may blog somewhat incoherently for a day or two. I'm sure you all have other fish to fry and for those who want to join me in this ride, welcome. I will start from an oblique angle.

I have always been intrigued by the stories of ancient Atlantis rising from the sea and revealing itself. Of course the legends are interesting, but IMO what is most interesting about Atlantis rising is that as it rises into view, all the tributaries (not of water, but of the city) can be seen as connected. It all begins to make sense.

To continue with Atlantis as a simple example: the spires of the tallest buildings or hills of the city may be seen rising here and there above the waters. And, as the entire city continues to rise and is revealed, it begins to appear as a monolith and what perhaps was seen before as separate are ultimately revealed as interconnected like one being. We get the big picture.

I feel the same way about the dharma and its discovery by me in my life. Overall, the larger shape of the dharma also slowly rises into view. What were at first seen as unconnected and separate practices or concepts are, in time, revealed as (in essence) the same story told over and over and over again. I am trying to put this together in my own mind and some of you may want to join in.

The pith instructions for basic Tranquility Meditation (Shamata in Sanskrit) all seem to point out the basic awareness behind everything we do. By that I mean the awareness in our mind that is aware of whatever

happens and takes place each day. I'm not talking about what takes place in our personal life or even what we feel or think. Instead, I am pointing at only the awareness behind it all that is aware of anything, including everything we do. It is this awareness (clarity and lucidity) that allows us to read this sentence right now; the two one and the same.

We are touched by our personal mood swings, what we feel and think, and a myriad of other emotions. However, the awareness that is aware of all of our mood swings and life events is not itself touched by those emotions. Our intrinsic awareness remains pristine and unchanged regardless of what it is aware of. It cannot be stained, even by us. LOL.

For example, we may hurt our leg or feel sick, but that within us that is aware of the leg or the sickness is not broken or feeling sick. It just is an awareness that is aware. Like a tool, it is neither for nor against us. It is just there and we can use it.

And, if we study the pith teachings, we find that the various beginning meditation practices require only that we are (and remain) aware of or note the existence of what we are aware of, not that we should make any attempt to take action and do anything about it. It appears that simply being aware and noting it (what we are aware of) is enough. Awareness alone (of whatever) is not a call to action or remediation.

Years ago, when I first realized that in the dharma practice called Reaction Tong-Len, we do the same thing. We simply become aware and note when and at what we react during the day and let it go at that. That simple awareness of our knee-jerk reactions is enough to initiate the process of toning back our

involuntary reactions until they eventually subside and become acceptable or appropriate responses.

And so, I can't but notice the similarity between noting our involuntary reactions and noting what we are aware of in basic mindfulness training. They both call upon our innate awareness, the searchlight within each of us that is always turned on and available, to witness or note what comes to our attention. And the texts speak of "unwavering attention. That is what Shamata (Tranquility Meditation) is all about. Shining the light of our awareness on what we are experiencing seems to be a powerful and common technique, perhaps "THE" technique that ultimately we learn to use in mind training.

In either case, no direct action is suggested or taken other than being aware of what happens. It's a matter of training the mind to unwaveringly concentrate on whatever: breath, stick, stone, or nothing at all. I am laying the groundwork for the next couple of blogs. Here we see that basic Tranquility Meditation (Shamata) is working with our awareness to be aware (ultimately unwaveringly) of whatever arises in the mind naturally or as we direct it to.

I am trying to put all this together and see a little bit more of the larger picture. More to come.

THE ONE BEYOND TWO

December 5, 2018

Yesterday, we looked at the basic mindfulness meditation commonly called “Tranquility Meditation” and more traditionally called Shamata (Sanskrit).

The terms “mindfulness” and “awareness” are often used interchangeably, yet they are very different. “Mindfulness” involves effort as in maintaining or being mindful and is a relative technique.

“Awareness” is just that: being aware and remaining aware. “Unwavering awareness” is a term often used. Making effort to be aware must be some kind of an oxymoron, but nevertheless it is a desert we each must cross. It can take effort to stop making effort, which is a Catch-22 that must be negotiated.

The way I would like to use these two words here is that mindfulness takes vigilance and effort (being mindful), while awareness is just knowing and being aware, awareness of whatever is taking place.

Most beginners in meditation use mindfulness to become aware, but it is the awareness that is the point, not the mindfulness, although here we have another Catch-22. Mindfulness is how we become aware (the process) and awareness is what we become. We become aware.

Yet, awareness is not a state that is static, a place we arrive at and rest, but rather is itself the process of remaining aware. And so, it is circular. It’s like going on a journey where the destination or place we are trying to reach is how well we travel -- that idea. And now for my conundrum:

What puzzles me is that with Tranquility Meditation we are not encouraged to do anything more than be

persistently aware of what is taking place around us, using any object or no object at all for support. Be aware of it, maintain constant awareness, and let it go at that.

I came up with the same scenario myself when working with my own reactions. It was not necessary to be aware of a knee-jerk reaction and then also do something about it like take remedial action. The awareness of the reaction itself was itself the whole of it. It's like taking a snapshot of our reactions, but not putting them in our scrapbook. The fact of being aware was enough to bring about change in my behavior. This approach is different than how I was brought up, which is to be aware of something and then take remedial action to help stay on track or course. This has become a question for me. When do we stop feeding the fire by correcting our course? Does that become an obstacle?

Perhaps it was just my reactions being exposed (and my awareness of them) that gradually made me inured or familiar enough with my reaction to stop reacting and to instead just respond more naturally or appropriately, as in: relax and let happen. Anyway, just being aware when I react seems to be enough to bring about a change in my behavior, without having to make a point (to remind or further school myself) about the reaction experience as to what the spontaneous reaction was all about. Perhaps remedial action can be like punishment, which seldom helps – trying too hard. Perhaps, in general, remedial action should end when the purification practices end.

In other words, what initially seems kind of passive, just being aware and taking it in (as in taking note of it), can actually result in an automatic activity (like pickles working in brine), that develops my situation in

a positive manner. And this is true in basic sitting meditation: simply being aware sets in motion a process of meditation or more to the point: the awareness itself is the process of meditation. That point requires some attention.

And all along I thought meditation was doing something to help, rather than not doing something. Or, perhaps meditation is the awareness itself and that is all that needs to be done. That is the theme here.

According to the old saying “Monkey see, monkey do,” I am used to witnessing something and then taking corrective action. Yet here, in both meditation training and reaction training, the accent is on being aware, with no suggestion of requiring further action based on what we are aware of, i.e. doing something about what we are aware of. That lack of action kind of gives me an uncomfortable feeling, as if I am not doing something I am supposed to do. It’s as if somehow I’m being “bad” by not taking action myself for what I witness and aware of. In other words, the Pavlovian reaction (call and response) is missing. Do we always need it or does this remediation itself become an obscuration?

I am so used to the sequence “see something, do something about it.” I guess I resist considering being “aware” as an action in itself and kind of am waiting for the other shoe to drop, so to speak. Maybe not doing something is like ironing out the wrinkles in time that reactions cause or consist of and instead just relaxing. The history of my adult life is one of taking note of something wrong and doing something about it, rather than the taking note of something being the action itself. Period, end of event.

Perhaps we don't need to underline or underscore what we are aware of or make efforts to remember or remind ourselves of what we are aware of. We have to trust. This old-school habit of mind is like a bad clutch; it results in a jerky flow in time. All of the advanced awareness techniques emphasize relaxing or leaving things be just as they are, rather than taking remedial action. This is something I have to think about and think about for a while.

Indeed, I am totally habituated to responding to everything I see in one way or another, especially if what I am aware of seems to demand remedial action on my part. If something is off-track, correct it, so there is something remedial about how I historically have acted. This seems to be the crux of the problem in a nutshell, the suggestion: Do not do a thing.

Instead, simply noting what I am aware of, not noting down or recording what I am aware of, but just being aware itself is the only action required. It's all about awareness! It seems to me like taking my hands off the steering wheel, but that hands-on steering may itself be a big part of the problem. Our attempts to steer or remedy may be what the teachings call altering the present, and the slogan is "Don't alter the present."

Yet, just being vigilantly aware seems so passive, like a bystander or witness and not a participant. Up to this point dharma and dharma practice has been so remedial, endless purification, getting in line, straightening myself out, so that suddenly just being aware seems not what I'm used to.

I am used to constantly correcting my course, taking myself to task at every turn, and staying on track or trying to. Perhaps a track is a track because it is natural and ultimately needs no remediation. It's like a

driverless car; we are just along for the ride. Now that thought is a puzzler.

If all this is so, it would require a complete rework of how I approach life, turning everything upside down, so to speak. It is these changes in attitude or inclination that shield us from the secrets of the dharma until we are ready to round that corner.

TRANSMIGRATION HOW

December 6, 2018

Our basic awareness is a tool we all are familiar with. Without it we could not live and function. It's what allows you to read this page or me to write this sentence. From birth we begin to learn to use this awareness as a tool because it is obviously there and available. It just is. However, most folks do not directly look at this awareness or get to know it close-up, much less identify with it as other than a tool, i.e. something we use.

Instead, we identify with what we call our Self, which is nothing more than a collage or collection of all our current attachments, pro and con. It has been said that the sum total of our attachments are the glue that holds the self together. And the great Buddhist masters point out that the fact we cling to the Self rather than to awareness is a simple mistake, made long ago, but one with real consequences.

This vivid awareness that shines from within us has been called Buddha Nature and many other things, although it may not be fully apparent to us at present because it is mostly hidden by the many obscurations that we have accumulated over time, not only in this life, but as the teachings point out, over innumerable previous lives.

Simply put, the dharma as taught by the historical Buddha is a method for removing these obscurations, thus revealing to us the brilliant nature of our own innate mind. There is no difference (absolutely none) between the nature of the mind of a Buddha and our own nature, other than that the nature of the mind of a Buddha is fully revealed, while ours is mostly still

hidden. Otherwise, they are identical. And the nature of the mind of a Bodhisattva is said to be already partially revealed, but ours, not so much.

The process of removing what obscures the light of our Buddha Nature involves a series of what amount to purification practices called the Common, Extraordinary, and Special Preliminaries. They are pretty straight-forward and involve first becoming aware of and then removing what obscures this natural awareness. To do this, like carving wood or stone statues, there are techniques for rough-cutting, followed by increasingly finer or more subtle practices until the true nature of our mind begins to shine and be revealed. Some say it is like polishing a mirror.

In the revelation process, over time and with practice, the light of our own inner nature (long ignored) begins to shine much more brightly than does that from our Self (which we are so used to), so that gradually our identification transmigrates from the Self we are used to onto this innate awareness. This can be very gradual or take place more suddenly. It depends on our abilities and the skill of whatever dharma teacher we work with.

Once we recognize the true nature of our own mind, we have what is known as “realization,” at least some, and the process of purification-refinement itself at this point becomes more refined. Following “Recognition,” we begin these more advanced techniques, what are called the “non-dual’ practices, meditations like Vipassana, Mahamudra, Dzogchen, and so on. We are no longer working on the mind with hammer and tongs, so to speak, but allowing the vividness of our awareness itself burn away whatever dross remains. This transitioning of technique is what I am focusing on in this blog, this changing from what are called

relative (dualistic) purification techniques to absolute (non-dual) techniques; and the two methods are very different from one another.

From this point forward, we actually are said to “meditate” and this meditation process itself expands, extends, and further purifies our realization.

“Recognition” is a threshold event, one from which there is no return or going back, a one-way trip. We are launched, so to speak.

Meditation means different things to different people. And here by “meditate,” I mean that we learn to use our innate awareness, “THE” awareness we all have, but in singular fashion. Finally being able to hold our awareness in more of an unwavering and stable fashion, it illuminates not just the world around us, but shines into all the nooks and crannies of our mind, revealing the nature of what is there in a unique fashion, directly, one beyond words that are unequivocal -- beyond a doubt.

The nature of the mind is inviolable, beyond perfect, and perfectly pure. I am reminded of the old Greyhound bus slogan “And Leave the Driving to Us.” By that I mean that with “Recognition” we stop fiddling with perfection and instead allow the nature of the mind to reveal to us what we need to progress, rather than hard-scrabble to cull what has to be removed as we have done in the past. We have been there, done that. Of course, we continue to clean up edges where they want, but the light of the mind, our Awareness itself, will burn away the clouds that still obscure. And like flying in an airplane, at this point, we are committed. We can’t go back to being “unrealized” no matter how small the realization.

The point or gist of this blog is to highlight the difference between practice before and after

“Recognition” of the true nature of the mind. We could simply say the first is relative and the second absolute, but too few understand these rather awkward terms, relative and absolute. To me the “relative” practices (Ngondro, Lojong, etc.) have us working on ourselves to help purify our obscurations. And although some of that purification continues after “Recognition,” of course, what are called the “absolute” practices are (to use a tautology) not relative. LOL.

In the realizations that result from “Recognition” of the true nature of the mind, those relative terms (subject, object, and action) collapse and are merged into a singularity; they have “gone infinite.” We are launched on a Magical Mystery Tour that will last until we reach enlightenment. We can shine the searchlight of Awareness anywhere we question and be confirmed in that search by an answer and one (at least for us) is without a doubt. This is totally different from before, where our questions, hung out to dry, lingered for decades blowing in the winds of change, going unanswered.

IMO, transmigration of our identity from our Self to the nature of our mind’s awareness can begin to take place in this life whenever we are ready to work at it.

DHARMA: THE PARALLAX PROBLEM

December 7, 2018

The extant dharma literature is not just books of rules and prescriptions for us to follow; far from it. The teachings and commentaries are indeed wonderful; don't get me wrong, but they pale in comparison to the living truth of the dharma and each of us is living that truth. And while there is a system, the requirements of each student (by necessity) bend and "try" that system to fit their needs. So, there is no "one size fits all" when it comes to dharma and students, other than perhaps very, very generally.

I find this concept of fitting textbook ideas of realization to our personal reality hard to communicate, because even if the instructions worked word for word (and they seldom do), they would still not embrace everyone. As written, there are 84,000 dharmas, and perhaps 84,000 kinds of teachers and the same with students.

From what I know of it, dharma realization, at least when we get past some of the preliminary practices, is very much a tailor-made sort of fit. Remember that we are talking about "OUR" take (the students) on the dharma and that may vary wildly. The formal dharma teachers (and teachings) may be perfectly expressed, but how we are able to take and interpret it varies wildly. And it's not that we just have to bend and fit our knowledge to the dharma; the dharma also is very flexible; it bends to accommodate us as best it can. However, ultimately the student must be ready, as in properly prepared.

Another way to phrase this is that we can only grasp the dharma given our own particular set of abilities,

experiences, and understanding. Sure, as mentioned, I believe that if the student reaches out properly, dharma can accommodate us and bend to fit our needs, but not as much as we might wish. We still have to make sense out of the dharma based on what our natural abilities and experience will allow and how well we are trained to receive. Like a sieve, we can only catch (or get) what we are capable of retaining at the moment.

I do believe it all works out in the end, but this whole problem has always troubled me because the process is not one of business-as-usual by any means. My fear is that while the dharma literature and teachings may get us into the ballpark, that last mile to our doorstep and actually fully getting our attention (dharma-wise) seems like a miracle to me. “Close, but no cigar” comes to mind. The ends have to actually meet, not just come close. The nature of the mind has always been as close as our heartbeat and breath, but we have failed to realize it. In other words, ballpark is not close enough. We have to actually get it.

So, even if I follow the written and spoken rules of the teachings to the letter, that is no guaranteeing that those crucial synapses within me will fire and realization will ensue. It’s a bit of a crap shoot, IMO. And so, I ask: how can we maximize the chances of the two becoming one and avoid teacher and pupil (as far as realization goes) being just strangers passing each other in the night?

I don’t see any easy solution, either. About the only advice that immediately comes to mind is be prepared to walk that last mile yourself and not wait around hoping to be found or for something magical to happen. We have to do the fitting, to make ourselves

fit. As I like to say to myself: go to meet your maker. The other idea that comes up is to grasp that these realizations (at least to my knowledge) are never a carbon copy of how the written or spoken teachings present them. It just does not work like that. They depend on what we can interpret and absorb of the teachings. In the end WE have to wake up and realize.

There are countless ways to write out rules and comment on the dharma, but pretty-much only one way you or I happen to be at the moment that could actually connect and receive them. So, don't look to the written or spoken words alone to be familiar in your experience or make sense. Instead, translate the various dharma instructions into your own language, and I don't mean English or Spanish. Dharma has to make sense to each one of us on our own terms and with our particular limitations. Even if we do connect, it will be in the language of OUR personal experience and not just as the books say. Remember, it is our filter that filters here!

To give an example from my own experience. Years ago I had a very strong dharma experience, enough to turn me right around. However, as glad as I was to have it, for the life of me I could not place it or figure out just what was happening to me, try as I might, even though (or especially) because I was living it. It took a visiting lama who had done two three-year retreats to figure it out and explain to me what was happening, after which I understood. I was wandering around like a babe in the woods. As it turned out, it was in fact my personal way of realizing a classic dharma experience, yet it was not anything like what the textbooks point out. I was too much in the vortex of it to see the big picture..

That time showed me how far apart the textbooks can be to what we actually experience, although once understood, it made perfect sense. It was not that the textbook experience was wrong, but that my take on it was my take on it. I finally got it. It was, in fact, my way of experiencing a classic dharma experience, but it was not anything like what the textbooks described. The dharma finds a way.

I share this because that time showed me how far apart the textbooks can be to what I actually experienced, although once understood, it was perfect. If you have any realizations, you can see how far afield they are from the textbook descriptions. LOL.

And so, if you are waiting (and on the lookout) for a textbook experience to arise, think again. If it happens, it will not happen outside of your totally personal way of understanding. In my case, it was so personal that I did not even recognize the “textbook” in it. Someone had to point it out to me. LOL. Only then could I say “Aha!”

ALAYA WISDOM: POLISHING THE MIRROR

December 9, 2108

Something that has always been fascinating to me about Buddhism's look at life-after-death has been the Alayavijnana or "Storehouse Consciousness."

Alayavijnana is comprised of two words, "Alaya" which means "all-ground" (and is often translated as "storehouse" or substratum) and "Vijnana" which means awareness or consciousness. And so, we have the "All-Ground Consciousness," often is just called the Alaya or Storehouse Consciousness.

And "Alayavijnana" is the eighth of the eight levels of consciousness as suggested by the Yogacara school of Mahayana philosophy and is vaguely similar to what in the West we call the subconscious.

Some sources say that the "Alayavijnana" is the seat of Buddha Nature (tathagatagarbha) and point out this is not something we "have," but something we "are." In other words, they say that it is not that we "have" Buddha Nature; rather, we should say we "are" Buddha Nature. However, in my experience, it is quite common to say all sentient beings "have Buddha Nature."

Anyway, all of our karmic impressions (our every intent) are stored in the Alaya as seeds (Vasanas), from which develop all the karmic components for what we call our Self with its desires and attachments. Karma is stored in the Alayavijnana until our rebirth(s) where it is ripened or otherwise eliminated. Mostly it ripens.

His Eminence Goshir Gyaltzab Rinpoche explains in a teaching on Rangjung Dorje's (the 3rd Karmapa) "Aspiration Prayer for Mahamudra" that the

Alayavijnana actually contains two areas or types of storage. The first and better-known one is the methodical storing of our every intention and trace of action, which is recorded in the storehouse Consciousness and then somehow moves through time like a great barge from rebirth to rebirth, where we draw on it to repopulate and rebuild our personality and karma at each rebirth.

However, there is a second (and lesser known) storage area in the Alaya reserved for “Wisdom,” where “nothing” is stored. LOL. Instead of accumulating karma, the Wisdom component reflects our ability (or lack thereof) to listen to and hear dharma as well as it receives all our kind intentions, well wishes, etc.. Instead of adding to the storehouse as in the usual idea of recording our karmic traces, the wisdom area removes or takes away, bit by bit, our obscurations. It erases. So this accumulation of Wisdom is more like polishing a mirror.

Instead of something being added on, with “wisdom” something is taken away or removed allowing our natural awareness or Buddha Nature to shine through. Again: there are said to be two different areas in the Storehouse Consciousness (Alayavijnana), (1) the recording and accumulation of our karmic traces and (2) the Wisdom component, which erases our obscurations, line by line with kind and wise activities.

In every description of the Alayavijnana that I have read, and I have read a lot, it is stated (although never too clearly!) that the Alayavijnana is not stored in a serial fashion like a running account of our life in its every action, but rather (and this is where the lack of clarity creeps in) as some kind of random-access-like

method, like many typical random-access computer databases.

As a database designer myself, I have always wondered just how that works. It's almost as if the Storehouse Consciousness is a vast SSD (Solid-State Drive) of unlimited scope. Is this a lossy or loss-less method of storage? Just how efficient is the mind? Are our karmic imprints stored only individually or does each of us have an individual component and also share in the mass of our common karma with others with similar karma? Is this common-karma pooled, so like DNA and chromosomes, we share common karmic seeds with others and also have some outriding personal karma.

In summary, we can't access the Alayavijnana and pull up our individual profile, like to read the "Story of Michael" in his last life or previous lives. Apparently, there is no serial or time-based organization. Yet, it is these karma traces that are accessed, if only randomly, at rebirth, the seeds of which blossom into the karma (and fuel the personal self) of us at rebirth.

In other words, instead of organizing our karmic imprints sequentially, like a biography, they are stored in the Alayavijnana by some other order, like by potency, importance, or simply which traits have been underscored the greatest number of times. Be that as it may, it is from this palette or assemblage-of-karma from which our personal desires and traits are drawn at a rebirth to create our new persona and set in motion the building of a new self-image.

Our old Self, which is the result of karmic ripening, is abandoned at death, while the karmic desires and traces that are still virile in our Storehouse Consciousness persist and remain to contribute to the

forming of our next Self at each rebirth. I find this fascinating to grasp.

“LIMITLESS” AND “GREAT” BODHICITTA

December 10, 2018

The Buddhist dharma is said to have more written literature by an order of magnitude than any other “religion,” even though I don’t consider the dharma as a religion. The word “religion” came from the Latin “religare,” which means those things that tie or bind. So, in other words, religion is about those things that last or last longest. I can agree with that, but I still don’t think of the dharma as religious.

And Buddhists are at the top of the list of those “religions” that make lists. LOL. What I am getting to is that, considering ALL the many words that are important in dharma practice, the single most important word in all of dharma, IMO, is “Bodhicitta,” which translates to something like “awakened heart.” I know; the word “Buddha” means “aware,” so that must be the most important word, and Bodhicitta is a form of awareness, albeit heartfelt awareness. Bodhicitta is also a very special form of compassion.

There are traditionally two main types of compassion, what is call “Limitless Compassion,” which means the compassion for all sentient beings, and “Great Compassion,” which means unreserved compassion for all sentient beings without any being excluded. The two may sound the same, but in the dharma tradition I practice in they are differentiated by stating the “Limitless Compassion” is more of a mental aspiration, while “Great Compassion” is the determination to take upon ourselves the responsibility to free all sentient beings from their suffering right now and from this day forward.

In a similar way there are two basic forms of Bodhicitta, relative and absolute. Relative Bodhicitta (like Limitless Compassion) is more of a wish to attain enlightenment for oneself to benefit of all sentient beings, which Absolute Bodhicitta (like Great Compassion) is a direct insight into the true nature of the mind and our response, mainly the response.

If this is still confusing, these two have been described as the aspiration to awaken and the actual application. And finally, the simplest distinction is that Relative Bodhicitta is like wishing to go on a long journey and Absolute Bodhicitta is like actually making the journey. Relative Bodhicitta comes before Absolute Bodhicitta.

As for me, my understanding is that Absolute Bodhicitta arises after the student recognizes the true or absolute nature of the mind. It is not just a thought or aspiration as much as it is a visceral full-body response to share the dharma with all beings, not just through a wish but by action in thought, word, and deed, 24x7, until all beings are realized.

Absolute Bodhicitta is an overwhelming desire and avocation to bring all sentient beings to enlightenment based on actual realization rather than mental constructs. It is meditation in action. One is all-in, which is why it is absolute rather than relative. There is a big difference.

MUCH ADO ABOUT DOING NOTHING

December 11, 2018

In dharma practice, at least in my experience, on the one hand there are flood times of insight and knowing plus, while on the other we have ebb tides of fog and not knowing. Obviously, I prefer the times of insight and knowing and find myself sluggishly wading through the flood-plains at ebb-tide with less clarity than I would like. This reflects the cyclic nature of Samsara and I believe is usual for most dharma practitioners, at least for me. I still go up and down more than I would like. LOL.

However, there are more subtle problems that await practitioners, even after we enter the more advanced practices like Mahamudra and Dzogchen. And, as unwelcome as the ebb-tides of cycles can be, it is even worse when it is we who initiate the ebb tides ourselves. LOL. This will take some explaining, so let's see if I can even do that.

The problem has to do with “effort” on our part and the fact that at some point in our dharma development, we have to stop trying too hard, so to speak. It is clear to me that the many purification practices found in the Common, Extraordinary and Special Preliminaries involve effort and trial – trying. Effort is proper for the preliminaries, which are relative practices, meaning they have a subject (you) who attempts (verb) to do this or that practice (object).

And so, not only are the subject and object distinct in the relative practices, but there is effort and “doing” involved between them. This is not true after the student recognizes the actual nature of the mind and undertakes what are called the realization practices,

which are said to be “absolute” in that there is no subject, object, or action. Those dualisms collapse and become one because we go all-in. By that point, we have actuated.

At and after that point, making too much effort is like stirring up a muddy pond; the effort itself becomes an obscuration. And so, where before (in the preliminary practices) it was standard procedure to make effort and drive progress forward, in the realization practices that same habitual effort becomes an obstacle to progress. Instead of always putting out effort, we have to learn to receive, listen, and allow realization to naturally occur and appear to us.

It would be an understatement to say that this switch from pushing to receiving is easy to do because, as a 180-degree flip, it is like turning our life upside down. Instead of always making our point, we have to instead allow the point to be made by revealing itself to us. This is a complete turn-around and it either happens to us in slow motion or it happens suddenly and we adjust to it in slow motion. Either way, it is a “grand” gesture or mudra -- the Great Seal by definition.

In summary, unlearning “effort” is required and we have a good teacher, the fact that after a certain point in our training, nothing else will work but relaxing and letting go. Continued effort will not only not-work, it will impede or even possibly damage us. We no longer need to concentrate ourselves; we have been there and done that.

Instead, we have to just relax and let go of effort. And that’s the way to expand and extend our realization; allow the mind to rest. However, it takes practice, but not more effort. Indeed, we need to lighten-up, relax, allow our mind to appear just as it is, and rest in that.

[Photo taken by me.]

MY FIRST DHARMA REALIZATION (A STORY)

December 12, 2018

I am reminded of having dogs and raising puppies. I can never forget those newborn pups (before their eyes were open) fumbling around trying to find their mom's nipples. I feel that is how I was years ago with the dharma. How could I know what the dharma was before being exposed to it, studying and practicing it, but nevertheless I must have sensed its importance because I was drawn to it. But in all fairness, I should share with you how this all came to be. Let me tell you about my first actual realization. That was in 1964, but please allow me to set the stage so you have some context. It is also somewhat of a generational thing. For me, it started in the late 1950s.

Perhaps it was the romance of Zen and the Japanese culture, the immaculate teakwood floors, sliding paper doors, and carefully raked sand gardens. Or was it all the Akira Kurosawa movies that I inhaled? For sure, it was the whole Asian gestalt as compared to what I felt was the claustrophobic-state of Western philosophy and especially psychology. Before I finished high school (which I never finished) I had read all 52 novels and short stories of Fyodor Dostoevsky and that was more my kind of psychology. I also was learning Russian.

I am talking about the late 1950s and early 1960s, years before the hippie and counter-culture revolution. I was already mesmerized by the Beat Generation, its authors, poets, and way of life, like: something (anything) other than the crewcut, square, for-me-meaningless, environment and manner of the 1950s in which I grew up. How did I (a kid who knew

nothing) know to rebel other than by Pavlovian response, the same kind of involuntary reflex that makes us throw up. I don't recall thinking things through or planning anything. Whatever rebellion within me was as natural as seeking oxygen, the simple need to breathe. Apparently, there was a whole generation having the same feeling.

Anyway, I was pre-hippie, steeped in the works of the Beat poets and authors (I read them all), jazz, folk, and classical music, and if nothing else, we were cool, at least the Beats were. Although I became (by age and experience) a leader of the Sixties revolution, personally I was embarrassed by the lack of sophistication and education in the liberal arts the hippies displayed. Where the Beats were night people, somber, contemplative, and, as mentioned, cool, the hippies were full-sun, bright music, and totally dance and fun oriented. The drugs of the beatniks (Dexedrine, Bennies, pot, codeine, heroin, and alcohol) gave way to the pot and psychedelics of the Sixties and also alcohol.

The so-called Sixties of the hippie variety did not begin until the summer of 1965, as I know well. I spent the year of 1964 in Berkeley, California which (unknown to me) was already assembling all the ingredients for the coming alternative culture, which at that point was less than a year away. The Bay Area in 1964 was a totally different culture than my Midwest upbringing, even though my home town of Ann Arbor, Michigan was no slouch -- anything but typical. For one, I dropped LSD in Berkeley, California on May 6th, 1964 and that was to change my mind forever. Thank God!

Although my first true dharma teacher was still some years away from appearing, LSD taught me more

about myself and “how it is” than any physical teacher or person I had ever met. For one, acid perfectly demonstrated to me the dualistic fallacy of subject and object, that they were two separate things. On that night in 1964, on acid, I realized that those classic two (the subject in here and the objective world out there) were in fact in league with one another such that what I thought was my private inside was projected and painted outside in the world I experienced and the outside world was not separate or “outside,” but was very much colored by my insides. This came as a total surprise to me!

That was my first experience of non-duality, if only fleeting. And it was an incredible realization for someone who had always assumed that subject and object were separately isolated and that “never the twain shall meet” and all that.

To have this dualistic mental veil suddenly rent asunder, as they say, was for me epochal -- life-changing. Talk about a glimpse of non-dual “realization” for a young person lost in a dualistic desert his entire life, this was it. Yes, it took many years after that experience to put all the Humpty-Dumpy pieces that were me back together in some proper order. I was shattered beyond any quick recovery that might allow me to forget what I had experienced and return to life as I had known it up to then. I never forgot and every single day from that time forward was spent making sense (or trying to) of what I experienced with acid on the night of May 6th, 1964.

I can't help but bring to mind that incredible song “Happy” by Pharrell Williams and the lines “if you feel like a room without a roof,” because I was perhaps happy for the first time in my life, happy in a dharm-

sense because my lifelong fears of others and the gray world outside me was blown off by the realization that it was all me (inside or outside) and best of all that I could do something about that. If it was all me, then it was up to me, and that was workable. I never before knew it was up to me! I had felt more like a victim of the external world than a participant.

And so, when dharma masters speak of a glimpse of realization as to the nature of the mind, in 1964 I was not sophisticated or trained enough to put it all together, but it was not lost on me that the iron-straightjacket of the closed dualistic mind that I was raised in was shattered forever and that I was free to work on myself as a whole, both inside and outside. I could get my arms around that. Why and how?

Because the “me” in here and the “you,” “them,” and “world” out there were not hopelessly separate as I had always assumed, but were in fact united -- a unity. For some reason, I could never understand the “two,” much less do anything about it, but if the two were one and the same (which LSD demonstrated), that is something I could handle and do something about. THAT was workable.

Well, of course, such a realization imprinted me so deeply that I found it hard to think back or remember anything before that acid trip. It just was not important. Time for me began and was measured from that night I dropped acid. And of course, like the proverbial tar baby, I became so attached to that realization, that I couldn't let it go. It was as if I had inhaled my first real breath of air and insisted on holding it. It was too precious to exhale and let go.

Of course, like the doctor who spanks the baby's bottom when it refuses to breathe, life had to knock the breath out of me a few times before I could just

breathe normally as I should and let go of the pivotal life-changing experience I had on acid. Yet, in time I finally did. It was like learning to drive a car with a clutch, for those of you who remember.

We all know that when it comes to dharma realization, it is absolutely easy to become attached to it so that we don't have another realization, but like a hawk in flight with too large a prey, because of this we plummet to the ground. I did that and spent years too attached to my acid realization to move forward, much less have another realization. That's just how it works with attachment. I could write a book about it. LOL.

And while it is considered impolite socially to speak of any dharma realizations we have had (I have never understood why), it is easy and totally acceptable to speak of a realization such as I had on acid that first trip. And there was nothing hallucinogenic about the "realization" I experienced on acid that night. Yes, LSD is a hallucinogen, but what was realized (that realization) was almost totally what led me to the dharma in the first place and it is as real today as it was then, indelible and unforgettable. It was a true realization of the nature of duality and of the fact that the nature of our mind is non-dual. I actually realized that and it changed the course of my life.

Fast-forward to now: I have studied and practiced dharma enough years (decades) to put that realization in perspective and see it clearly, but the nature of duality which I saw that summer night for the first time was true and real. I am not suggesting that anyone take LSD, but I am saying that we can also have realizations on hallucinogenic drugs that are in fact true realizations. I saw that then; I see it now. Nothing has changed, except now I can breathe a bit and have other realizations, even more important for

my inner-life direction than that first one back in 1964.
LOL.

WHO HAVE I LEARNED DHARMA FROM?

December 13, 2018

People ask me who have I learned dharma from in person? I wrote about my first “realization” yesterday, which was courtesy of LSD. LOL. Of course, I have studied many books and teachings as many of my readers have, but more important has been learning in real-time and in-person from teachers directly. And so, for those interested, here is a short list of those dharma teachers I have most learned from in person. Let’s start at the beginning.

It was the mid-1960s and I was lunging ahead blindly in my life at full speed when I met my first dharma teacher, Andrew Gunn McIver, who had been a traveling Rosicrucian initiator and knew Buddhism well, but was now retired. He had also been a lumberjack in Canada.

I was not used to trusting and taking advice or direction from anyone, if only because at the time I did not trust anyone but myself. However, Andrew (as a dharma teacher) was IMO a true master and perhaps only he could have flagged me down and got my complete attention. At least, he was the first to ever seriously do so. Basically, I was afraid to take from other people lest I end up with the bathwater along with the baby.

At the time, I was quite used to trying to figure everything out for myself, even if there were a lot of gaps or holes in my patchwork world-view that I could not explain. The idea that I needed or could benefit from an external life-teacher had never occurred to me. As mentioned, at the time I was not that trusting

of other people, especially when it came to instructing me.

If I have had any good fortune in life, it has to be my deigning to allow someone external to me to instruct me in life. I am so lucky that I was able to finally do that, initially thanks to Andrew McIver. And from that first encounter, like skipping a flat stone on the calm surface of a pond, I jumped from great teacher to great teacher to where I am today, working with the same dharma master going on 36 years now. It has been about 50 years since I met Andrew McIver, my first dharma teacher. I have never won the lottery or any kind of game of “luck,” but with dharma teachers I have been nothing but incredibly lucky. Fine with me.

So, how did it happen that my very first dharma teacher Andrew McIver got my attention? It was very simple. It became clear to me soon after meeting him that this teacher cared more for my welfare than I knew how to care for myself. No, it was not like family love, that of a parent or siblings. It was in valuing my potential, who I was, and what I could be that with Andrew bridged the gap between me and “others.” In other words, finally someone saw me as I saw myself. Before that I felt unknown and unseen in the world. There is nothing like being found and recognized. LOL.

In fact, Andrew was a better “me” than I was and I could see and feel it. Andrew earned my respect and devotion by his actions and what he stood for. And he was nothing if not direct. If only I could be as aware at that age. He was 82 years old when he died.

My Facebook friends well know I like to write and talk, but the many days in the years I spent with Andrew McIver, I seldom if ever said a word. I just listened. And I listened and listened and listened, some days

almost stumbling home at night to collapse because I was so exhausted from listening so deeply. Andrew would tell me that he was tuning me like you would an instrument and that someday I would respond to these teachings he was placing inside me. And I did, but that's another story.

Because of Andrew McIver, I acquired a taste for fine life-teachers and the dharma early-on. And so, like that flat stone skipping across the still pond or the hummingbird sampling flowers at dusk, I have studied and absorbed teachings from those I consider the very finest dharma teachers, at least for me the finest.

After Andrew McIver died in 1969 (I saw to his burial, his things, and designed his tombstone), I was next to personally meet the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche in 1974 where I served as his chauffeur for a weekend and who almost from the time I picked him up at the airport took me in a small room, sat me down, and taught me how to meditate for an hour or so – life changing. And that same year I also met H.H. Rangjung Rigpe Dorje (the 16th Karmapa). And it was not too long after that I met my Tsawi or Root Lama, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche. It doesn't get better than that.

And under Khenpo Rinpoche's guidance, I also took teachings and empowerments from the Karmapa's four main Kagyu Heart Sons, H.E. Sharmar Rinpoche (before the split), two years of Mahamudra teachings with H.E. Tai Situ Rinpoche, empowerments and teachings from H.E. Jamgon Kongtrul Lodrö Thayé Rinpoche (Kalachakra and others), and I traveled all the way to Sikkim, India to meet and take a particular empowerment from H.E. Goshir Gyaltsab Rinpoche, just Margaret, myself, our son, and good friend and translator Ngodup Burkhar.

I have also taken teachings and/or empowerments from Ven. Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche (3-year retreat empowerments and many teachings), Ven. Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso Rinpoche, Ven. Traleg Kyabgon Rinpoche, Ven. Lodro Nyima Rinpoche, Ven. Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche, Lama Namse Rinpoche, and others. And of course from my dear friend Lama Karma Drodhul.

I have travelled to Tibet to meet (1997) and taken empowerments with H.H. Ogyen Trinley Dorje, the 17th Karmapa, and have had yearly 10-day Mahamudra intensives with Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche for going on 31 years consecutively. Hopefully, that should be enough to get me started. LOL.

Also, along the way I have learned in person from and respect many other teachers such as Roshi Philip Kappleu, Roshi Bodhin Kjoldhede, Baba Ram Das, Swami Chetanananda, Swami Prakashanada, Alan Watts, Ken McLeod, Unity Minister Iotis Wilder, and so on. And I am very grateful for Lama Yeshe Gyamtso, who has translated from Tibetan to English for my root teacher for the last 29 years or so. I consider Lama Yeshe the finest translator I have ever heard.

And so, there you have it, those main teachers from whom I have learned in person, in particular my flawless teacher (and Root Lama) the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, whom I can never thank enough. I practice in the Karma Kagyu Vajrayana tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, where working with an authentic teacher is not only important, but necessary for certain particular teachings such as the pointing-out instructions as to the true nature of the mind. And so, that's my curriculum vitae as to dharma teachers I have learned from.

REALIZATION AND EFFORTLESS EFFORT

December 14, 2018

In dharma discussion, “Realization” with a capital “R” typically is reserved for the advanced realization practices such as Insight Meditation, Mahamudra, Dzogchen and other practices. That is how I am going to be using it here, as distinct from intellectual or conceptual thought, which is by definition typically dualistic or relative in nature, i.e. having a subject, an object, and an action. As mentioned, “Realization” is usually reserved for the more advanced practices that are non-dual that we take up after we have recognized the nature of our own mind. In those practices, we are, so to speak, all in – fully extended.

I am sure it is possible for non-dual realization to occur immediately and universally (in a flash) so that we realize the whole enchilada all at once. However, perhaps more often is the case that we get a glimpse or foothold into realization, our foot in the door, so to speak. And that realization or rather glimpse of realization (because it is partial) can and must be gradually expanded and extended to increasingly include within it (progressively) more and more of our life. And that is the process of realization which continues after Recognition of the nature of the mind (usually for many lifetimes) until we reach enlightenment.

In my own case, my introduction to the realization of Insight Meditation (not in theory, but in actualization) came not through my on-the-cushion dharma practice which I was working on for decades, but through the one area in life with which I was most familiar with, Mother Nature and the natural world of plants and

critters. Although a total surprise to me at the time, this makes sense because perhaps I am most comfortable or familiar with my love of nature and small beings, etc. and this familiarity with nature has been there since I was six-years old.

And so, what was a surprise to me (what I call a breakthrough in grasping the dharma) came for me not, as mentioned, sitting there on the cushion, not studying dharma texts, or reciting mantras, but outdoors in nature (with the wide-open sky above me) crawling around in the wet grass on my hands and knees while taking close-up photographs of micro-worlds and other sentient beings. I was not (in any way) expecting it, but that's just how it went down -- surprise, surprise.

Suddenly, there I was doing Insight Meditation using nothing but a camera and lens (and of course my mind). I didn't even label it at the time (or care to!), but was totally immersed in it. Yet, when I went back home each day after photographing out in the wilds, my mind was quite ordinary once again. The upshot of this (and here is a main point) was that if I wanted the incredible clarity that is part of Insight Meditation, I had to grab my camera, go out in nature, and take close-up photos. And so, I would do just that. And soon, I was out there shooting photos much of the time. That's how addictive Insight Meditation is, way more than any drug I have ever had.

And just to underscore how unusual this was for me, that year from the month of May until late in the fall when it was too cold to be outside, I was out in the meadows (mostly on my hands and knees in the dew and wet grass) before dawn taking photos and watching the sun come up. I did this for many months and it probably had been decades since I last was out

early enough to watch the sun rise. And then I did that every day it was not raining for half a year or so. When was the last time you watched the sun come up? Answer that question and you get my point.

My first taste of this kind of realization was like nothing I had ever known and I have written about it extensively as some of you well know. My message in this blog is simply that whatever glimpse of realization we have (small or large) is not the end of anything, not a place we reach and stop, but rather just finally the beginning of our many life-long journeys (through rebirth) to enlightenment.

The process of extending and expanding a glimpse of realization reminds me of when we hold a match under a piece of paper. There is that first point where the flame burns through to the other side and then it gradually expands in all directions until the whole paper is consumed. The main difference between that and realizing Samsara is that in the realization practices, what is consumed is Samsara as we know it, which is transformed; however, the extension and expansion of our realization is a practice (and often a very slow one) that takes real time (and time without effort) on our part. Joy is a factor.

And to complicate things, this expansion and extension of any realization is not achieved by effort (like we make with the purification practices), but rather just the reverse: very careful practice to NOT make effort and yet still painstakingly extend and expand our initial realization. And with this effort-less practice that glimpse of realization opens like a flower to include more and more of our samsaric life until we have realized it entirely, which would then be enlightenment, many life-years away.

TAKING YOURSELF TO TASK

December 15, 2018

I grew up with a habit of keeping an eye on myself, being my own monitor or policeman. My own critical view of myself helped to keep me on track and prevent me from wandering off the reservation, so to speak. In fact, I could not imagine life without my own little dharma-superego sitting in the bleachers and taking stock of me. It's hard to be perfect. LOL.

But like a wound that never heals if we pick at the scab, there comes a time when we need to have faith in ourselves and the confidence to go cold-turkey as far as being self-critical. Yes, of course, self-monitoring has gotten us this far and probably has become habitual as well. It is part and parcel of the preliminary purification dharma practices. Yet, there comes a time in dharma practice when our own self-criticism and the constant monitoring itself can become an obscuration. That time is when we start the more advanced realization practices.

One of my favorite analogies is that of the bobsled run at the Olympics (I like the Olympics). At the top of the course-start we run and push like hell, but when we reach the point of no return from pushing, the athlete stops pushing, jumps in the sled, puts his head down and only guides the sled. No more pushing.

In the dharma practices, this is also true. In the various Dharma Preliminaries (Common, Extraordinary, and Special) as well as in Lojong, great effort can be required. For example, it takes actual effort to do 100,000 full-length Ngondro prostrations on the ground, as I well know, having done Ngondro twice. When we have completed these purification

practices to the required degree of clarity, we can begin the actual meditation practices. In particular when it comes to something like Insight Meditation (Vipassana), which is non-dual (we can't double-think it), success is no longer measured by effort, but rather by the reverse, the extent that we can relax and allow the mind to remain just as it naturally is. In these practices, effort is NOT helpful.

And the same goes with hedging our bets by being too self-critical. Let's not confuse vigilance in our practice with constantly riding shotgun on ourselves. With the advanced (realization) practices there is no monitoring because they are not dualistic practices (with a subject and object), but rather are non-dual by definition. In practical terms, what this means is that self-monitoring and other relative (dualistic) practices prevent something like Insight Meditation from taking place. Self-conscious Insight Meditation is an oxymoron – an impossibility.

However, let's not confuse self-monitoring with clarity. Clarity is the essence of Insight Meditation. And so, my point here is that much like the line in the old song "Down by the Riverside" that goes "I'm going to lay down my sword and shield," there comes a point in our dharma practice when the sharp incisor of the mind's monitoring itself prevents Insight Meditation from taking place. By that time, we are supposed have to have stabilized our tendencies to drift off course, which is what Tranquility Meditation (Shamata) is all about – concentrated attention.

In other words, our self-monitoring and criticalness is a tool and not an end-state or result. And like any tool, when its job is done, we lay it down and move on. And this is especially true when we feel obligated or compelled to follow the train of every wild thought we

have to make sure we are not making a mistake. At this point, just because when we have a critical thought about ourselves does not mean it merits that we open up a whole case-inquiry and vet it to make sure we are not “getting away with something.” And this point is crucial for the realization practices and for realizing anything for that matter.

However valuable our vigilance has been in monitoring our own actions up to now, it becomes a bad habit that has outlived its usefulness when we begin the realization practices. Trust and confidence in ourselves is required to accomplish realization practices like Insight Meditation, Mahamudra, Dzogchen, and other advanced practices.

If we are constantly turning on our critical warning light, the gate to the clarity of Insight Meditation will continue to be closed to us. If you trust your own intent and have basically stabilized, turn off that red light of criticism and you may find that your self-criticism is what’s obscuring your natural sense of clarity and ease.

“NO POT TO PISS IN”

December 16, 2018

My first dharma teacher used to say that a lot, that he had no pot to piss in, no place to unload. He was not complaining, just pointing out a fact. I'm sure I heard him say that scores of times over the years. If we are walking point in our own lives (and this can at times be unavoidable), then we can't expect others to be ahead of us or even be aware of us, except perhaps of our wake. We have to work things out for ourselves. That's the point of walking point. We are out front; either that or we are bringing up the rear. LOL.

And so, there is no place to unload our anger, our irritation, or any of the myriads of emotions that we have, but we can learn from them. Our frustrations can't be laid on anyone else but ourselves (without incurring obscurations) and they are not even helpful to us either, except in the advanced practices as fuel for Insight Meditation; otherwise, our overloads (if we offload them) are just one more obscuration added to the pile that we already have. So what does this tell us?

Perhaps that is why we have the “Six Paramitas” (Generosity, Discipline, Patience, Diligence, Meditative Concentration, and Wisdom), which in main are five in number, with “Wisdom” being something of an add-on or result. And the paramita of “Patience” has always been the one I most need to learn.

What should we do with our indignation, fed-up-ness, feeling sorry for ourselves, anger, and occasional feeling lonely or sorry for ourselves, and all of that?

Literally, we too “have no pot to piss in,” no place to unload what builds up inside us so that it will not further obscure us. Yet, just as our body absorbs water on the hottest days and we hardly pee at all, we have to somehow absorb our own complaints or not make them in the first place. There is just no benefit in holding them and no safe place to off-load them either.

Most of us reach the point where we are fed up-to-here with whatever we are fed up with. The best dharma advice I know of as relates to this problem is to not get on that train of thought in the first place, to not follow those thoughts, but just look directly at them, take note when they occur and drop them. End of transaction.

Obviously, the fear here is that if we ignore the signs or signals that we are “out of line,” have gone too far, are getting carried away, or whatever the criticism is, we will create further bad karma for ourselves. Yet, it is up to us to become stable enough in virtue (six paramitas, etc.) to trust ourselves, to have confidence that we have the right intent and to not (by way of fear) go off on sidebars or wild thought-excursions at the expense of a clear mind. However, to endlessly check on and NOT trust ourselves can itself be a problem – an obscuration. Instead of searching ourselves for faults, we can learn to use awareness to be aware and alert us as to what needs to be added or removed. It is a matter of trust as in “trusting ourselves.” We have to grow up sometime.

By nature, we are limited sentient beings and it is easy to sometimes see the glass as half empty instead of half full. We may be personally limited, but the Buddha Nature that is our nature is not limited. Yet, even the Buddha must have taken a particular

kind of body and form at any given time. And it may be popular to look like this or look like that, to speak this way and not that way, and so on and etc. There is little to no point in getting sidetracked by our (or other's) imperfections or differences so that our time to just be present is Bogarted by criticism or by worrying what we don't have, don't like, or are irritated by. As a music critic, I can assure you that no one likes a critic. LOL.

In other words, there comes a time in our dharma practice when we have to set aside this habit of self-criticism, if only to properly do the more advanced practices that require non-dual participation by us – unequivocal attention. How are we going to get to that without suspending our disbelief and endless criticism of ourselves and others? If we think that self-monitoring cannot be an obscuration, guess again.

And it's hard to give up this self-criticism that we are so used to and the fact that it's mesmerizingly habitual, yet still just another kind of obscuration, a filmy cataract covering the very clarity we have worked so hard to develop. Ultimately, our "try-so-hard" (which was helpful in the purification practices) becomes one of the main obstacles to realization. Our eyes, squinty from peering to see faults in the search to find clarity, actually obscure what's there to see, a perfect Catch-22. I can never forget my favorite quote from the German philosopher Hegel" "We go behind the curtain of the self to see what's there, but mainly for there to be something to be seen." That's what I'm talking about here.

When we complete the preliminary practices or, to put it another way, when the preliminary practices have hewn us aerodynamically so that we can take the winds of samsaric change, we must be able to trust

ourselves (and life) at least enough to put away our critical magnifying glass, rest the mind naturally, and allow our eyes to gradually open.

THE ALCHEMY OF SAMBARA

December 17, 2018

I had been reciting this part of the Karma Kagyu Mahamudra Lineage Prayer for years (decades) when I finally realized what I was saying. The words:

“Grant your blessing that the inseparability of Samsara and Nirvana be realized.”

What? Come again? Just what do they mean by “inseparability?” These two are opposites, Samsara and Nirvana. Samsara is this world of reactivity in which we endlessly cycle up and down and Nirvana is complete enlightenment from it, the Buddhist equivalent of heaven. How can they be inseparable because they are so totally different? They are separate!

Are they inseparable because opposites attract or what? As it turns out, what the teachings say (the fine-print) is that Samsara and Nirvana are connate, joined at the hip, two sides of the same coin. You can't have one without the other. And there is a huge difference between the Christian concept of heaven and the Buddhist Nirvana.

And my jaw, figuratively speaking, dropped lower yet when I grasped that Nirvana was not (as I imagined) some place we go to when we are enlightened but rather Nirvana is exactly Samsara transformed. In other words, after we reach Nirvana (are enlightened), we are still right here and now in this same world! There is no escape, no heaven in the sky, not a change of venue or place, but rather a change of view and attitude on our part. WE HAVE TO DO IT!. Nirvana is alchemically speaking “realized” Samsara. Go figure! And I did.

In other words, Samsara is not just going to up and go away, but has to be transformed a piece at a time by someone very familiar to us, like ourselves. And it was further sobering to discover that the advanced realization practices are about just that, our alchemically transforming Samsara into Nirvana. And, in these practices this Samsara that I often find so painful is considered a precious opportunity to do just that.

In short, like a cow turned out into a field of new mown hay, in the advanced realization practices Samsara is valued and seen as nothing but opportunities for transformation into Nirvana. Not a scarcity of richness, but rather an ocean of opportunity. In fact, there is nothing else out there! So, it's not "Water, water, everywhere, nor any drop to drink," but open season on Samsara and its help yourself. And here is the closer: we have no choice but to make this transition, later if not sooner! It's a singularity.

It may well be that the parts and parcels of Samsara that we choose or find ourselves realizing are individual, perhaps karma related. For sure, it's a free-for-all, much like Uncle Scrooge McDuck in his money bin, meaning we are all knee-deep in Samsara and every last bit of it is there to be realized. It's a smorgasbord, with all you can eat and who could be hungrier for relief?

And so, of course, that first glimpse of realization, what is called "Recognition" of the true nature of the mind in the Tibetan system and "Kensho" in Zen Buddhism is by way of Insight Meditation, which is precious beyond words. "Recognition" is the keyhole through which we leap down the rabbit hole and enter

the realization practices, where everything Samsaric begins to be transformed and we the transformer.

Of course, unless we are very, very unusual, the process of transformation is slow going, with our gaining ground in realization only a bit at a time. However, like the single thread that unravels the carpet, in Recognition we have at last found the thread, this very special form of Insight Meditation that is part of Mahamudra practice.

DHARMA: PRESENT AND ACCOUNTED FOR

December 18, 2018

[This is a long one, so if you are not interested in the details of dharma, I suggest you pass on this one. I could break it up into two posts, but what's the point? Only those who actually are working with these ideas will read it and perhaps find it useful.]

The special form of Vipassana (Insight Meditation) that is part of Mahamudra Meditation has been said to be crucial, even life-changing as far as dharma practice goes. Since it is one of the non-dual realization practices, by definition it is beyond words and therefore cannot be described, but I can't help but try anyway. To start with, this form of Vipassana (Insight Meditation) cannot be anticipated. It's not just the end-result of The Preliminaries (the relative-truth purification practices), but also the beginning of the non-dual realization practices, practices without relative self-consciousness and doubt.

Because Insight Meditation is non-dual, there is no second-guesser monitoring the mindstream, making comments and talking to ourselves. It's like really being left alone (maybe for the first time) by our recursive chattering-Self, separate and singular; it's beyond the Self. However, by singular is not meant "lonely," but rather it's just totally refreshing to have no second thoughts and doubt. The sense of certainty and vividness of Insight Meditation is the very definition of empowerment personified.

I don't know just how to put it, but this form of Vipassana is "not logical," not the result of anything predictable, but rather just totally immersive. You are in it before you realize it and only realize it

dualistically when you come out of it. Yet, you were never absent, but instead totally “there” more than ever. The immediacy of Vipassana is more important than any of the endless chatter and self-commentaries we are used to. It speaks louder than words and yet no words can express it.

There is so much written in the dharma texts about reification, our trying to make things more real and permanent than they in fact are, but the clarity and vividness of the Mahamudra Vipassana is beyond any sense of reality we could ever imagine or yearn for. It is immediately present. To quote the correct dharma term, it is indeed “beyond elaboration.” How pristine and refreshing the present moment is!

However, once achieved, Vipassana realization requires careful practice to extend and expand. And, as I have shared here many times, I dropped into this form of Insight Meditation quite by accident after years of training in The Preliminaries. And more surprising to me yet, it was not on the cushion as I had always assumed, but out in nature, crawling around on my stomach in the wet grass at dawn taking photos of little critters in their small yet perfect worlds.

And so, here, I would like to emphasize once again the process of extending our realization once we have had a glimpse. As for me, expanding realization is a work in progress and I have made some progress. Of course, I am still working on it.

Just as I was originally limited to practicing Insight Meditation with a camera and lens out in nature’s fields while photographing small worlds, I have gradually (over the years) extended that kind of realization to other activities like writings things such as these blogs. In fact, at present I do my main

practice of this superlative technique (Insight Meditation) by writing. And I'm a little addicted to that as well, which is why I write so much! LOL. There is nothing complete and satisfying, IMO.

Is it that there has to be some focus and repetitive technique that must be exercised (like striking flint steel) to spark the vivid awareness that we call Insight Meditation? Must we be doing something repetitive in order to meditate with this technique? When in the pith teachings they speak of extending and expanding our realization, just how does that work?

I know well how difficult and time consuming this kind of extension of realization can be from personal experience, like: VERY. But do we always have to extend realization via "something," as in doing some "thing," be it using beads, prayer-wheels, mantras, etc.? Or, can we extend realization to formless mediation by doing no-thing and just how would that work? And by "expansion," do the texts mean the same thing as extension? I understand "extension," because I have experienced it; we extend something to something else and embrace that with the same technique, much like a mother hen takes her chicks under her wings.

Does "expansion" then mean just expanding our sphere of meditation to include more and more until we embrace all of Samsara? That would be my guess, but just how do we do that? I have yet to see texts with much practical instruction as to just how we extend and expand realization. As mentioned, I know a little from my own experience, but there must be an easier way than how I do it. It takes years! LOL. I am reminded of the old Mad Magazines when I was a kid and the figure of Alfred E. Neuman and the phrase

"What, me worry?," only here it would be "What, me hurry?"

Realization with Insight Meditation (in my experience) is like grasping at thin air unless I have a practical hands-on technique to give me more of a purchase. Camera and lens? Yes. Careful writing? Yes. Just sitting on the cushion? No, not yet. If I add mantras to the cushion-sitting, then Yes, but I have not made much of a point of that yet. Formless meditation? No idea. It must be possible, but in my practice this may be above my pay-grade at this point. I would need instruction.

This must be why in this special type of Insight Meditation (as part of Mahamudra practice) the use of thoughts is so important. Thoughts are something through which we can directly look at the nature of the mind, individually, and we do. I get the impression that our thoughts and all of that which troubles us or causes us suffering eventually become the fuel and food for realization. I can't think of anything else! LOL. Just as a web is what a spider crawls across, so thoughts and the web of our own confusion has to be the means to our eventual realization. What else is there? You tell me.

It seems that we need relative truth, some form of dualism, to achieve non-dual realization – if only as a springboard. Well, we have that in spades right here in Samsara, so what's the problem? I guess it would be: do we have the training for looking at and using our own thoughts as a means to realization? It is an acquired taste, part of Insight Meditation and training, a practice that is very important for each of us to learn.

I guess all this comes up, as mentioned, because I am getting (or have) a bit of a handle by writing blogs

like these as a focus of Insight Meditation. Where do I go from here? I get it. Like the Zen practitioners point out, the next step is washing the dishes, motorcycle maintenance, and what-have-you. That's the obvious answer to my own question. And to do that, I just have to relax more and treat each instant (and whatever I am doing) as the opportunity that it is for meditation using our basic or bare awareness. Everything is fuel for realization. Everything!

We don't have to go far or search hard for the means to enlightenment. There is nothing here but means and we are right smack-dab in the middle of it all. As mentioned, it is just a matter of relaxing and taking life a moment at a time and realizing it. Or, perhaps it's like the reggae tune by Jimmy Cliff "You Can Get It If You Really Want".... and the lyrics:

"You can get it if you really want
You can get it if you really want
You can get it if you really want
But you must try, try and try, try and try.
You'll succeed at last, mmh, yeah."

As for "trying," with Insight Meditation "trying" means not to try, but to just (as they say) "relax as it is." We all know that "trying to relax" is an oxymoron and those involved in the "realization" dharma practices know that "trying doesn't do it, doing does it." Insight Meditation is not subject to trial and trying, which will get us nowhere. Instead, we have to surrender and give up that kind of effort in favor of allowing the present moment to be exactly what it already is. How's that for no effort?

Our effort becomes non-effort. We have to catch ourselves out in every effort and turn that inside out (or upside down) so that it's no effort at all. And this is 180-degrees from the effort it took to get this far in the

first place. We make effort to make no effort, but we can't even do that because that's also too much effort. Just "let it be" is the answer.

And so, to summarize: dharma "Realization" is what it's all about, but what is realization? Realization of what? For starters, with realization there has to be something to be realized. That's the long and the short of it. And the only thing in this world around for us to realize is this Samsara that we are stuck in, writ large or small. Therefore, all realization practices are busy realizing Samsara or some part of it. We can't realize "realization" (if we have it) because it's already been realized. You can't salt the salt, so to speak.

So, I try not to let myself get too much "pie in the sky" about these things. If its realization (and eventual enlightenment) we are after, then we will be realizing Samsara in all its nooks and crannies. Samsara is the sole focus and the means to realization for all sentient beings. Don't leave home without it. LOL.

And to throw just a little pie into the sky, wide swaths of time conflate into the present moment through practice, because everything hangs on that immediacy. What depends on this present moment is worthy of realization and we all know that the "expanded present" is the stuff of legends.

If you have gotten this far you are a "rare avis." Ask some questions and talk with me about these idea please.

DHARMA: EXTENDING REALIZATION

December 19, 2018

In the previous few blogs (with examples from my life), what I hope you see is that the realization that can come with Insight Meditation is not in any way enlightenment. In fact, in my case the point (and eventually sphere) of realization was limited to doing Insight Meditation through close-up photography and at first nowhere else. This is why the advanced dharma teachings on Mahamudra (which include Insight Meditation) say we must not stop at our initial realization but must very carefully expand and extend it, which is what this blog is about – expanding and extending our realization.

When I examine what little I know about this extending of realization, a couple analogies emerge. One is like kneading dough when we make pizza. There is a lot of stretching and extending that goes on to expand the dough into a pizza. In other words, initial “Realization” is a beginning and not the end. Ultimately, enlightenment is the end, but that is far down the road of lives for most of us. However, even if we can recognize the actual nature of the mind and have some realization, that is not the end of anything other than the effort to do just that – reach that point.

“Recognition” and the realization that results are like passing through the keyhole duality of Samsara into realization, which is non-dual. That glimpse, view, or even landscape of realization has to be both expanded and extended, thus the analogy to kneading dough. It typically can take years of working with our realization to do something as simple as

transferring that clarity and ability for insight from one area of our life to another. Years!

It's like learning to walk all over again or recovering from a health setback, IMO. Yes, initially there is some realization, but since that realization has to come from somewhere within our life, it can at first be limited to just that area where it first arises. Any realization is wonderful, of course, but more often than not (at least at first) we have no idea how to expand or extend our realization from where it initially occurs to other areas of our life where we would like it to be.

In other words, our realization may not immediately be universal (that would be VERY rare), meaning it's not like a flashlight that we can shine it here, there, or wherever we wish. Extending takes time and work on our part. As mentioned, it is like we are at first a one-trick pony, yet would like to extend our realization to include other areas of our life. I am reminded of "If wishes were horses, beggars would ride." Wishing does not make it so. Making it so makes it so.

For example, and I can only draw from my own experience (since I have no other): when I had what I would call some kind of breakthrough from relative truth to what is called absolute truth, it did not come while sitting on the cushion or anything having to do with what I at the time thought was "dharma." Although I had sat on the cushion for decades, the powers that be did not work that way. This is how individual or personal realization can be, so please take note because I am trying to communicate something important here.

For me, realization came in an area I was very familiar with, but for a long time after it occurred, if I wanted to practice Insight Meditation, I could only do

it with that particular area and through that method, in my case photography. And here is why I am writing this:

It gradually became very clear to me that I wanted to have the same clarity and lucidity I found in Insight Meditation (through photography) elsewhere in my life, instead of what I would call being mentally “ordinary” in those areas. It took me a year or so (and that is a significant amount of time) plus a lot of gently working with my awareness to extend and expand my Insight Meditation through photography to include other things that I did in a day. And the first of these was “writing,” including writing this blog. It was not the physical writing of the blog that I had to learn, but rather it was the using of Insight Meditation to look directly at what my mind revealed to me about any given topic. Finally, it boils down to having confidence, not wishing to have it.

I am sure that different individuals will differ here, because I very much believe that the dharma is tailored to (and limited by) our abilities to grasp and receive it, but what I would call the torch of certainty that is Insight Meditation is conformational and unequivocal. What Insight Meditation delivers may be partial or incomplete, but it is always direct and true without a doubt.

Be that as it may, it took me somewhere around two years of dedicated practice to extend my Insight Meditation to include something other than photography. Intellectually, I could (of course) instantly see that Insight Meditation can work on everything in and about my life, but ACTUALLY actualizing this on the ground level, so to speak, was difficult and took real time and constant practice.

And the point of this story is to buffer any tendency to think that realization is instantaneous and universal. Of course, realization IS instantaneous, but our faith, confidence, and surety (at least in my experience) are not. Changing my habits was like walking on a giant magnet with steel boots. Every move was difficult because my mind was not flexible enough and did not know how to “believe” or trust. Thinking it so does not make it so is my point. Please consider this and then make allowance for change not only to take time, but for the fact that it’s not just going to “happen” to you one day; we have to make the changes ourselves. LOL.

DHARMA'S ANDY ROONEY

December 19, 2018

That would be me, my friends. I don't consider myself a dharma teacher and resist efforts to make me one. I consider myself more of a dharma "sharer." I am enthused by the dharma enough to practice it and want to tell others about it. I like to think of myself as one of the Andy Rooneys of dharma, if you remember who Andy Rooney was -- the closer for the show "60 Minutes." Rooney was an enthusiast who said a few words on this or that. Only, I can't say just a few words, as you well know. LOL.

I don't have the demeanor of a dharma teacher or want to be expected to appear like one. That would be embarrassing. I am just a regular person (ask my family!) like many of you reading this, but who has studied and practiced the dharma for some 45 years. There is no mistaking me, especially if you meet me, for anything but a sincere student of the dharma, but not one you would take for being perfected. I'm just that guy who can't stop sharing everything he knows (which may not be all that much!) about the dharma. LOL. And it would be nice if some of you pitched in, asked questions, and we had some meaningful discussion. I'm tired of just posting. I learn from exchange, answering questions (if I can) and asking them too. That being said, let's talk some dharma.

To get started in learning the dharma, we first have to locate and become aware of our innate awareness, which is not that hard to find; we all have it. Simply put, it is the awareness we are using to read this sentence. Not the awareness of what this sentence is

about, but the awareness that like a light illuminates the mind so that we can read anything at all.

While making a point of watching that we ARE aware and of that awareness itself, not to mention WHAT we are aware of may be good for a start. The “making a point” of it (as in effort) is just one more example of effort that, while initially helpful (even necessary early-on), if made a habit of, eventually just further obscures our view. Any kind of effort and trial (trying) is like scaffolding on a building, whose usefulness will eventually expire and need to be removed or at least toned back. In dharma practice, at least as I understand it, when it comes to effortful practices, there are rough, medium, and fine purification techniques depending on our obscurations.

In the beginning we rough-cut what obstacles we can, in the middle we use gentler techniques to shape our behavior, and when we have things down to a gentle roar, we use finer and finer practices to finish up purifying our kleshas (emotional blocks, etc.). However, when the purification practices have done their job and we are in respectable shape, the techniques are set aside. These purification techniques are not meant to be sustained past their general usefulness. Eventually we move on to the realization practices which take effort of another kind.

To continue to purify ourselves forever (just on principle) is not recommended. That’s a form of self-sadism. As the old country song says “We have to know when to hold them and know when to fold them.” In other words, we can learn how to get rid of our bad habits, but the habit of getting rid of bad habits itself has a shelf life. That too can be a bad habit, one that needs to be set aside when we reach the point of no return with it.

Ultimately, very little has to be done or, to put it another way, we have to be careful what we do and whatever is done is done very, very gently. As my first dharma teacher use to say to me. "My God is no beggar! He does not need me to make the ends meet. The ends already meet." My more crude way of saying the same thing is "When we are young we may go rushing into the cow pasture of life, but we eventually will come tiptoeing back out." The farther we get into the dharma, the less we see that any doing needs to be done and the more careful (and gentle) we become.

Life is not perfect, but how much of that is our own view and attitude? If we subtract our prejudice and bias from the equation, what remains is what naturally is there. We have no choice but to deal with that. Of course, multiply our own missteps by those of all the people in the world and we get something pretty unnatural that will take a lot of work to solve on all our parts. Nevertheless, we can each only start where we are and work on what we have at hand. Do you see the problem?

In my own life, like many of us, early-on, I cast about and asked myself how best to live and put my life to good use. I didn't want to be wasted. And, for me, the eventual winner was The Dharma. I believe, as mentioned above, that change starts with each of us, one by one, and while I have done other things in my life that hopefully have benefited, I cannot think of anything more worthwhile than doing my best to share dharma as I am doing here and to work side by side on the same thing myself.

SIT-DOWN PRACTICE ON THE CUSHION

December 21. 2018

This blog is concerned with the dharma practice we do each day while sitting on the cushion. Typically we do it in the morning (aspirations) and evenings (dedication), although both are done at each session. A lama once told me that her practice was like an old shoe, so familiar was it. I will second that analogy, but add that our daily sit-down practice is also a perfect thermometer to take our temperature as to where our mind is at in the moment.

Now, what follows may sound critical to some of you, yet that is not the main intent. Rather, the intent is to look at some of the difficulties of regular, repeated, daily dharma-practice. As mentioned, such practice is like a mirror, perfectly reflecting our state of mind, as they say, the good, the bad, and the ugly.

I do my sit-on-the-cushion practice willingly each morning and some in the evening too, but that does not mean I never struggle with it. LOL. Sit-down-on-the-cushion practice for most dharma practitioners is routine, orderly, and by this design. For most of us, it's anything but improvised, so it can at times (quite often for me) have somewhat of a straightjacket (claustrophobic) quality to it, this sense of reciting things by rote. I don't always look forward to it, but I always do it nevertheless. If it's not something I look forward to each day and rather (in its own way) is a bit of an ordeal, why put ourselves through it? The answer I believe is a little complex, so bear with me.

My first dharma teacher had one of his fingers, the last joint of one of his pinky fingers, which had a slight bent to it. He would say that this imperfection was the

only thing keeping him here with us in this world. I had no idea at the time as to what he was talking about, but through perhaps osmosis I eventually got the sense of what he meant, at least somewhat.

I believed him, of course, because he was so present, almost like a hologram; here was a sentient being with no shadow, like a waking dream, a pure apparition. Talk about emptiness personified! Although he could at times (like all protectors of the dharma) be wrathful when he confronted those who harmed others, his fire never burnt. But, I digress.

Anyway, I feel the same way about my daily on-the-cushion practice, prayers, and mantras. They are a little too formal, too by-rote for my taste, so that feeling spontaneous and free within such a confined context that we have to march through is, well, difficult for me. There could not be much point in rattling through sadhanas and texts just to complete them, saying words that are not mine and that I may not be in the perfect mood to recite. Even holding my attention on this rote stuff is sometimes difficult. I wander. And then the recitation process itself has its flaws, etc. and so on and etc. Sitting practice can be uncomfortable, so why do it?

The answer is that I do these daily practices because I have committed to do them. It's all voluntary on my part, but why do them if they are uncomfortable? To me, these on-the-cushion practices are like the tail on the kite, the anchor on a boat. They give me balance and a sense of gravity in the weightlessness of my shifting inner-space; artificial gravity perhaps, but like astronauts in a space station, they orient and help to keep me upright. Can you makes sense of that?

I always do my best to put my heart into my practices, but like any effort, that effort itself often obscures the

practice. I try. However, for me, finding the right balance between covering the basics and doing it with heart is a challenge. I drift in and out of being present in a way that features my effort as much as anything else. LOL. Each part of the practice has to be articulated so that I am not painfully watching myself do them or waiting to get through them and on into my regular day.

I must confess that I am often glad when I finish these practices, most times that I do them, yet somehow they help keep me from floating away. They tie me down like a string with a weight on a balloon that no one is holding. Somehow, that orients me.

It's the same with my exercise machine. I never (or hardly ever) look forward to a session, but without it, where would I be? I always feel better for exercising. In the same way, the sit-down dharma practice that I do each day on the cushion is seldom easy for me either. Somedays I am more with it than others and I can't help but regret when I can't get into it fully. That's the reality for me and it can be hard to accept reality. LOL.

These sit-down practices include intrinsic parts of dharma practice that are crucial, like making aspirations when we first sit down for the morning session and dedications of merit when we end a session (and at night before bedtime), and so on. We are free to make up our own aspirations and dedications, but most (or many) dharma practitioners recite ones written by great dharma teachers. I was taught to do them in Tibetan, so that is yet another step removed! LOL.

No, these texts may not be in our own words, but they cover what should be said and perhaps say them better than we could ourselves. Still, they can be

anything but spontaneous and we run the risk (our risk!) of just rattling through them, instead of being able to say them from our heart or even understand them that well. There is often this sense of getting through them, which is not helpful.

In general, these practices are meant to cover the traditional bases through our recitation, but they are of limited value if we just drone through the words without understanding or meaning them. And the world of meaning, at least in my opinion, has infinite levels and varieties. Even when I make up the words myself, instead of reading a text, it does not take long until they too fall into place as a habit. Sure, I made them up, but how long ago? Even if spontaneous, since they have to cover certain points, within a short while they too quickly become habitual, often too stale for my taste, and yet I am free to do them however I wish. Ruts are easy to get into.

Any routine is, well, routine, no matter how you spell it, at least after some days, months, years, and decades. LOL. The act of making an effort to keep it fresh is just another effort that is self-defeating. Like Neil Young's album "Rust Never Sleeps," so does the boredom of not being fresh and spontaneous. It creeps in no matter how we twist and turn to make it fresh. That's just the way it is and not something to panic about, but indeed something to consider.

I don't like reciting words that are not fresh and of the moment, especially if it is dharma. Dharma is precious and unspoiled, but my rendition of it may not be so fresh.

I would like to hear how others deal with their on-the-cushion time? Are you dharma practitioners out there any different and if you are, how is that?

Which brings me back to my metaphor of sitting practice being some kind of ballast or gyroscope that keeps us balanced and oriented, even if the process is not perfect. I wish there was a more spontaneous freely-expressed and joyous way of doing these more routine practices, but certainly that would be up to us, in this case up to me. I'm still working on it.

Aside from my sit-down practice (which I do faithfully), the great bulk of my practice these years is off-the-cushion. And these realization practices are more free-form and spontaneous, so I have no real problem with them.

This blog is getting long, as usual. I will try to go over what are the most common daily prayers and texts most dharma practitioners depend upon in another blog.

KARMA THERMOMETER

December 22, 2018

[I am posting my blog earlier today because I am heading out of town to hear my daughter May Erlewine and the Motivations play tonight at Sping Lake, Michigan for a dance party. Not sure how much dancing I will do but I can listen. LOL. Here is the link for any of those who might want to join us. Spring Lake is not far from Grand Rapids, MI.]

<https://earthworkmusic.com/events-ind?i=2449>

The word “Karma” has become a part of our modern English vocabulary and perhaps because of its popularity it has been untethered from its traditional meanings. People use it in all kinds of ways these days. “Karma” is a Sanskrit word that simply means “action,” as in “actions speak louder than words” in the effects they produce and they certainly do.

In the dharma tradition, our karma (our action) is very much linked to our intent. They go together like hand and glove. In fact, the way karma is introduced in some of the Tibetan traditions is by looking at our intent and the actions that result. There are said to be four possibilities and their way of presenting it is in terms of White and Black, where “white” means good and “black” means bad.

(1) We can have a WHITE intention and a WHITE result. This is the best of the four – good intention and good result.

(2) We can have a WHITE intention and a BLACK RESULT. This is the second best because at least we had a good intention, even if the result was bad.

(3) We can have a BLACK intention and a WHITE result, where a bad intention leads to a good result.

(4) And lastly, we can have a BLACK intention that leads to a BLACK result. This is the worst of the four, where a bad intention produces a bad result.

We may start out like a bull in a china shop, paying very little attention to our intent, which can lead to all kinds of results, unintended or not. As we learn more dharma (and it can also arise with age), we learn to be more and more careful about both our intention and the results.

I have attended I don't know how many dharma teachings by authentic masters, hundreds of teachings at least. And karma comes up often in these teachings. However, the teaching on karma that most affected me, the one that grabbed me by the short hairs, so to speak, was given by my root lama, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche to a group of us.

And it was one of those teachings that was very direct, so direct that twist or turn as I might to rationalize what he said, it was like quicksand. I just sank in deeper. There was no avoiding his message, so I will share that here with you to wrestle with.

I don't have his exact words on hand, but simply put, the idea was that our every intention, in fact our every thought, word, and deed falls into one category or another. At heart, and by this Rinpoche meant that if you trace it down, what we say and do is either beneficent (beneficial to ourselves and others) or it is maleficent (harmful to ourselves and others). Like Occam's Razor, if we get down to the nitty-gritty of our thought, words, and deeds, they are either beneficial or malevolent.

Yes, perhaps I was just joking or fooling around, kidding or trying to be funny, but if I examine what I said and then, trace it down, it is either one side or the other, either WHITE or BLACK. Now, I have tried this concept extensively, because Rinpoche's teaching hit me like a ton of bricks and I kind of like to be funny and have a good time.

Yet, when I traced back some of my jokes as to "funny-ness," I found at heart that a lot of them were just not that funny. Or, it was funny at someone else's expense, which also harmed me too because the intent was bad (even though slightly) and I didn't even realize it. If not really bad, it was poor judgement on my part, and not worth saying or doing. I had to back right up. There is plenty to say and do (and even be funny) that is not maleficent.

Now, that's the teaching and you have the right to check this out for yourself in what you think, say, and do. You may be able to gloss over this concept or just shake it off, but I found that hard to do. Rinpoche was right, way more right than I could ever have imagined. Examining our own thoughts, words, and deeds as to whether they are beneficent or maleficent is a perfect thermometer

This is dharma talking. How do you fare in this regard? Let's discuss.

THE SCOPE OF DAILY DHARMA PRACTICE

December 23, 2018

In America and the western world in general, there is basically the one word, meditation, to cover all of the hundreds of methods people call “meditation.” I see this everywhere I go; many people “meditate,” but their idea of meditation, when I ask, is nothing like what the historical Buddha taught.

Mostly, in this country, people think that meditation is basically a way to relax, so there are scores of what we might call relaxation therapies and practices. If they ask, of course, I point out that these relaxation therapies are fine as a way of seeking to be more comfortable in our lives, trying to unwind and so forth. However, this is not what the Buddha taught or intended.

Traditional Buddhist meditation techniques are all about waking up, becoming more aware, not only getting more comfortable in our current samsaric situation, although relaxation of our muscles and mind can be important too. However, this is not the kind of meditation taught by the various forms of Buddhism. The dharma seeks to transform samsara, not just get comfortable in it. That would be like the old saying “rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic.”

There also are many forms of Buddhism, each based on the one dharma. And even among a single lineage there can be a wide variation as to what prayers are said or practices are done each day. However, most practitioners have certain bases that are routinely covered. This is not the place to go into elaborate detail as to each of these different sections of a

typical daily dharma practice, but it might be helpful to at least point out what is usually included.

A traditional daily sitting meditation session generally starts with an aspiration to remind us what we are doing and why, such as going for refuge in the Buddha, his dharma teachings, and in the authentic teachers that carry this lineage forward. That just means that for those who practice what the Buddha taught, the dharma is the ticket, the path they have chosen. It certainly is for me.

Going for refuge is an aspiration, which is then followed by reminding ourselves of Bodhicitta, the desire on our part not only to practice dharma for ourselves, but to help all other sentient beings learn how as well. And there are two types of Bodhicitta, relative and absolute. Relative Bodhicitta is more like having the intention to help other sentient beings, while Absolute Bodhicitta is actually taking on the responsibility by committing ourselves to helping others by doing something about it 24x7. I'm sure there are other ways of stating this.

Many folks also include what is called "The Four Immeasurables" in their daily practice, which are specific aspirations on our part to help all sentient beings, large and small. I always say this text each day myself.

Then, in our lineage we do what is called the "Mahamudra Lineage Prayer," which is a summary of the lineage masters historically and of the various profound main practices within the lineage. To me, this is an incredible piece of writing and I always enjoy reciting it each day.

Following that can be various special prayers given to us personally by our dharma teacher. These vary and some are not even public as far as I know.

And then, it can be recommended to recall and bring to mind the various great teachers in our particular lineage by name. In the Karma Kagyu Lineage which I practice in, we have what is called the Golden Rosary, which are all of the main teachers in the lineage that have vitalized and transmitted the Mahamudra lineage all the way back to the primordial or Adi Buddha Vajradhara. These can be many, but they usually number at least a few dozen or so. Some practitioners look at an image of what is called the Refuge Tree, which is actually a family-tree-like-graphic with tiny images of each of the main teachers. Personally, rather than a group image, I like to recite the Golden Rosary individually, bringing to mind each of the lineage lamas while carefully reciting their names out loud each day. I could use their blessings and help.

Following this, we can do whatever particular sadhana (main practice) we are working on or just do some rounds of mantras with a mala (rosary). This would take a lot of explaining because there are many practices.

When this is done, there remains the dedication of merit to perform, which is considered very important as closure for the session. This can be brief or more elaborate and basically locks-in and prevents any merit accrued from the session from dissipating by offering it to benefit all sentient beings.

And that, in brief, is roughly the flow of daily practice, at least my own.

This on-the-cushion practice, which is generally called “meditation,” is followed by what is called Post-Meditation or off-the-cushion practice, being what we do the rest of our day and night. Depending on what main practice we are engaged in, in post-meditation, we carry on practice off-the-cushion and on in everything we do. At the very least, it is suggested to bring what we can from our formal sit-down practice, if only we bring something like the scent of formal practice. However, in the realization practices (Vipassana, Mahamudra, Dzogchen, etc.), they are designed to be done off the cushion as well or all the time, if we can.

As to when we should do our daily practice, IMO I have found that the best time to do my dharma practice is in the morning, as early as possible. I find that if I don’t do it first thing in the morning, various circumstances can intervene and before I know it, I don’t have time for practice that day. Actually, that was for me decades ago when I ran a business. Since I have retired, and for many years before that, I always did (and still do) my daily sitting-practice, but I do tend to do it first thing. Period. And most practitioners also do a short practice in the evening. If we keep a small shine, as I do, we empty the offering bowls and do various dedications of merit.

My point here is that there is a difference between various relaxation therapies and the traditional kind of practice (and practices) taught by the Buddha.

LET US NOT PERFUME THE DHARMA

December 24, 2018

The light, clarity, and luminosity of Insight Meditation are part of the important dharma technique called Mahamudra Meditation. It's a brilliant (literally) practice and can be used anywhere and with anything in this world of samsara. What's the message here?

I am saying: let's not get all "churchy" with the dharma. It is as natural (or more so) than gravity or sunlight, so it's best not to sidebar dharma into some special place or put it on a high shelf where is if far from us. It already is special without our help. We can't improve dharma by putting it on a pedestal. Don't get me wrong. I totally respect the dharma, but I respect it for what it is, not for what people like to make of it. I'm not sure I am communicating here, so let me say it another way.

The dharma does not need a suit & tie or the approval of anyone. It does not only belong to the various sects and kinds of Buddhism. It's universal and any group or person can access it; the laws of dharma are the same for anyone. The pith texts and great dharma teachings call this pure nature of the mind we all have and share ("Tamal Gyi Shepa), the Tibetan phrase for "ordinary mind," our natural state, which to most of us at this point in time is not all that natural, meaning we are not even aware of it. Awareness of the actual nature of the mind is the "sine-qua-non" of dharma practice. It's why we practice, to fully realize the nature of the mind which is connate with the arising compassion and Bodhicitta – the care for all sentient beings.

Practically speaking, as the Zen Buddhists point out so well, everything we do (everything!) can be grist for our dharma realization, whenever, wherever, and whatever we do. Like cupping a candle-flame with our hands against the wind, we start out in dharma practice seeking a quiet spot or corner to meditate in, but the dharma is much stronger than that. It's we who have to find the confidence and strength for dharma to become for us a way of life and not just another path to follow along. The dharma requires that we take possession of the dharma by finding it within ourselves. It's already there, so we don't have far to look, given the right techniques.

As we realize the dharma, what it is and how best to use it, of course we still enjoy the peace and quiet of the cushion. But in what is called "post-meditation," when we are off-the-cushion so to speak, we can and also have to continue practicing dharma.

We don't glorify or put gravity and other natural laws on a pedestal and worship them. We do obey them in the sense that we don't break nature's laws; they break us. The nature of the mind and laws of dharma (and karma) are similar to natural laws. IMO, we ignore them in our ignorance and at our peril, which is why samsara is of such long life.

I am not writing this to state a threat of fire and brimstone, but to say something like: please let's not "perfume" the dharma or distance it from ourselves artificially, so that we are the great unwashed and the dharma is somehow perfect and beyond or outside us. The dharma is not only part and parcel to us; it is our very nature, and all the teachings tell us to become familiar with our own mind – to get to know it. Its family and is not meant to be a stranger.

We are not sitting on a cushion in a quiet spot all the time or reading dharma texts, learning Tibetan or dharma terms, or what-have-you. Most of the time, we are moving through our life, doing this, handling that, and on and on. It is in all the time we are off-the-cushion that we are free to (and need to) bring dharma to bear on what we are doing each and every minute.

“Taking refuge in the dharma” means that we are developing what is called Bodhicitta, the wish, desire, and eventually the responsibility to benefit other beings. Bodhicitta is what drives us and informs how we behave in everything we do. However, we still have to do what we do on our own, using our intelligence, our particular set of skills (or lack thereof), and everything we can bring to bear on the issues that we face. The dharma is a method that can but inform and guide us in this; the nitty-gritty is that we have to do it ourselves, warts and all.

That’s the rub, so to speak, especially if we think as we are learning the dharma that we are importing or getting the dharma from outside us, when it’s already part and parcel of who we are inside. It’s not a matter of importing the dharma, but as all the dharma teachings point out, one of discovering and realizing who and what we already are here, inside us. An analogy that is often used is that of polishing a mirror or a lens – removing obscurations.

The process of dharma is spiritual alchemy, one of transforming ourselves by removing what obscures our own intrinsic nature.

As mentioned, even though the dharma brings guidance, what has to be done ultimately comes down to us doing it and doing it as well as we can. The subtext here is that the great percentage of our

activity is up to us to figure out, so there is no point in trying to pretend the dharma will do the work for us. We will do the work and it's up to us to stay within the guidelines of the dharma, if only by trial and error.

What this means is what is called dharma-in-action, with the dharma as guidance and the action as our responsibility. My emphasis here is that we are free to be creative and use all our intelligence and skills. In fact, we have no choice! And I remind us again of the Zen art-of-this and the art-of-that, like for me, it might be: The Art of Dishwashing. LOL.

Dharma is not just mental prayers, well-wishes, and other out-of-the-body goings on at arm's length. It also (and especially) is the hands-on nitty-gritty implementation of dharma in the flesh. And that we all can (and must) do, if we will just develop the awareness to do it.

So, as I tell myself, don't press that Auto-pilot switch in the brain and zombie on through stuff. Instead, we can be aware of each thing that we do. We can articulate instead of being automatically articulated.

THE FUTURE OF THE PAST

December 30, 2018

I should have known that a trip to my home town, the place where I grew up would be more than simple. I just didn't think. Some of my kids are here, with birthdays going on with their kids (my grandchildren) and, of course, memories going about as far back as I can remember. That kind of thing.

And so many things on this trip have gone wrong that I had not imagined; so that was a lesson right there. The AIRBNB turned out to have a mattress with medical liniment that had been soaked in, making it not possible to breathe the air if on the bed, forcing us out in the cold and rain, after having hauled everything down outdoor stairs and across to the other side of the house, and so on. One of my tires blew out, with our having to replace the whole set. And the fun goes on, but I will spare you the list. It's no big deal, but it was a hard thread to follow at the time, just logistically, aside from whatever we imagined the trip would be like. LOL. After all, this is still samsara we are living in, at least I am.

There is a whole story, of course, but it does not add up to anything all that interesting, informative, or uplifting. More important to me is the sequence of understanding and any realization that comes out of this trip for me.

Obviously, for one, it is difficult to go home again and to find solace in the past, not that that was my intention. There are plenty of books on that theme. I can but chime in, add my aye, confess my yes and move on.

And a number of the people I had hoped to see in Ann Arbor were for one good reason or another not available. I reached out, but found only air. Again: LOL. As a dharma student, I should have expected the not-expected.

One thing that came up is how reclusive my life is, not unlike that I am in my own personal life retreat. I had not thought of it like that, of course. And I found it disturbing how little interest I have in just banging about town, even my old haunting grounds. It was like I was a ghost, invisible to what is going on around me. Ann Arbor is very busy these days, so much more modern and aggressive than I remember it while growing up. And so many of my friends are gone, unavailable or have actually just passed on.

My thought was that I could be just very Zen to everything going on around me, and I did pretty well for quite some time. I don't mean to be vulgar, but I can't help but remember that old saying, something like "I got my shit together, but I just can't lift it," which is more like that I have it somewhat together, but I can't move it around, like take it on the road, so to speak. It's not that portable yet.

Well, actually I have done pretty well, but there was a come-to-Jesus moment where I had to admit to myself that, although I would like to have fun, I was not having all that much fun. And worse, I didn't care about all of that very much. Certainly, I don't want to harm (or bum out) anyone and it is great to be with my family (as usual), but restaurants with bad food, or food with MSG or additives that cause you to wake up with a headache, swollen glands, and burning eyes are not something to look forward to. And just all of the "fun" things folks do just don't interest me all that much. I try, but if I am honest with myself, I really

could care less about going here, doing this, and seeing that.

At the same time, I don't want my state of mind to put someone else out or to just be a big party pooper. That's not what I intend, but there you have it, an involuntary party-pooper. LOL.

And the cherry-on-the-top or "pièce de résistance," in my case let's just call it the piece of resistance, something I have to get over is to believe the past can be reanimated in any real way. I did have a good time with a friend and with my extended family, but I have to admit to myself that I am not such a fun person. LOL.

Oh yes, surfing the wave of modern life is possible, even mandatory, but to me it is a mass of distractions that point away from what I feel is important for me to live, what IMO is life-giving to me. This is personal.

I'm sure some of it is just age on my part, but some of it is not that simple. If left to my own devices, which for the most part I have been, it is the Mind and the state of my own mind that interests and is important to me. And of course, the Dharma is all about just that. I guess that is enough for me. Anyway, it's most of what I think about.

And while I don't want to get out-of-step with what's going on in modern life, I find myself increasingly pointing inward and not preferring all the distractions that are available to me or that are everywhere. LOL.

And a poem by my favorite poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, comes to mind, which I will share here:

HEAVEN-HAVEN

"I have desired to go
Where springs not fail,

To fields where flies no sharp and sided hail,
And a few lilies blow.

“Where no storms come,
Where the green swell is in the havens dumb,
And out of the swing of the sea. “

As lovely as this poem is, it does not jibe with Samsara (of course), but it also does not fit with the dharma truth that each of us has to transform samsara into nirvana and that, right now, it is a little difficult (to impossible) for us to (get, as Hopkins puts it, “... out of the swing of the sea.”)

I’m not looking for the peace of a cemetery, but the hectic distractions of modern life seem to just lead on, but not to any destination in particular, at least not one I want to go toward. Its endlessness personified.

As mentioned, I don’t want to be a party-pooper, but at the same time I can’t follow all the distractions either. Not interested. To quote one of my favorite shows, I just have to “Curb My Enthusiasm” for the high-speed-chase of going nowhere and take an inner direction more than any more misdirecting distractions. They just don’t go anywhere but onward.

Maybe I won’t go on to “there,” which is not saying that I don’t want to live, but rather what the dharma informs me is to look beyond or through the distractions to what is really going on, or as Shakespeare said, “Much Ado about Nothing.” I believe that.

And finally, as Margaret and I looked at tonight in a conversation, there is no point in being bound to the past, good, bad, or indifferent, just because it happened to us. We don’t owe to the past our future. We can acknowledge that past as having been present, but there is no point in throwing good money

after bad as far as what's only too forgettable, like some of the events of the last few days, to use a petty example.

We can (if we can) forge in the present a new past with a future more like we can imagine, rather than honor a past that has passed and has no future. Do I make any sense?