

Dharma Blogs 2018 Summer



by Michael Erlewine

Dharma Blogs
2018 SUMMER
By Michael Erlewine

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 Summer of 2018 posted on Facebook and Google+.

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NEW MEXICO'S RED CHILIES

July 2, 2018

Another scorcher here in mid-Michigan, 96-degrees. I did manage to cook a bunch of food in the morning: I peeled potatoes for a cooling Potato Salad Margaret made. Also steamed and fried up some marinated Tempeh, and (as usual) cooked up my standard pot of black beans, which consists of chopped onions cooked until translucent, black beans, diced mild green chilies, and some New Mexico red chili powder. I eat the beans with tortillas, fresh tomatoes, avocado, and Salsa Verde. I eat this most every day.

I also tried doing a little photography today, but the tiny studio I have on the top floor of our house was so hot that the heat had me soaked to the skin in minutes, twice. Still, now that the sale is done, I'm getting back into photography.

Outside, the hot breath of the heat comes right in the window. Not sure where any cool is, although we have fans on, but fans just kind of move the hot air around. We don't have air-conditioning, because we seldom need it, don't like it, and would rather roast than be refrigerated.

And, in the midst of this heat wave, I'm watching lots of internal changes that are going on, but it's still too early for comment; yet, they are not trivial. It's amazing how, once life moves, it just rolls on carrying me (whatever I am) along with it. Some things that I set in motion long ago, like planting a seed, are just ripening now. Of course, that's karma in a nutshell.

It reminds me of the old Greyhound Bus commercials, with the refrain "Leave the driving to us." Good and bad karma take but a few seeds to be sown and then

the effects eventually arise and act on a will of their own. It's also the same with the seeds of dharma practice. Once sown, they continue to develop and gain momentum, always overshooting any mark I may have set, carrying me beyond my expectations into fresh experience, plunging me into the immediate moment. As the great Mahasiddha Tilopa said "Don't invite the future."

I'm always surprised to see my inner landscape changing around me, carrying me beyond anything I might have imagined or myself known how to wish for. It just happens. There is something about walking point for ourselves that is refreshing, although at times a little terrifying. In other words, at least in my case, life does not disappoint me by falling short of whatever goal I might have set for myself. On the contrary, the tides of life always push me beyond any expectations or anticipations that I might have imagined. Expectations are by their very nature mostly not accurate. The mysteries of life are inviolate and come mostly as a surprise.

The reality that arises through change (by definition) needs no reification by me; it is real enough to get my attention, just as it is. And, although I am usually initially aware of some loss in the status-quo (i.e. that I have changed), it always takes me time to get used to and comfortable with the new or renewed set of data points that describe my life – what I am aware of.

When I finally do manage to get back on-point (on my contacts intuitively) and can once again consciously articulate my renewed sense of reality, I seem to always learn to manage my situation more efficiently than before. Either that or I cannot remember how it was like before the changes changed things. LOL.

To me, all of this seems to be part of one kind of purification practice or another, with the resulting rearrangement of my life resulting in a cleaner articulation of who I am. And it's kind of minimalistic, in that a subset of the previous set of points (before the changes) are all I need to posit everything I need to feel that I am "on my contacts" as the psychics say. We become our own hologram.

I got some criticism (here on Facebook) recently for talking so much about my state of mind and I hope folks understand that, although I talk about my personal situation (which is what I have on hand, LOL), I believe that aside from what individuates each of us, we share in a common set of changes in life (and this world) that are going on around us. I feel many of you reading this are also negotiating the same general changes that are in the air as I am and that talking about these changes is useful for all of us.

In particular, the inner solar changes of consciousness from the Sun belong (and are shared) by us all and are worth articulating to the degree we are aware of them. As the Mahamudra Lineage Prayer states "Unwavering attention is the body of meditation."

STAR-TIME: READING THE MIND

July 2, 2018

I have been monitoring and writing about internal mind-changes almost forever. I had a daily radio show in the early 1970s in Ann Arbor, Michigan called “Star*Time,” where I essentially did each day what I often do here on Facebook, describe what’s going on internally with me. I recorded a week’s worth and took it to the radio station and they played them each day. And there is a funny story about the Star*Time show.

You know me; I was not above tuning in to listen to my own voice on a recorded broadcast. LOL. Well, one day I was in for a shock. As I tuned in to the radio show to hear myself (I believe it was 9 AM each morning), I heard the opening music theme of the show (something I had pulled out from the rock group “Camel”). As the music came to an end and switched to my voice for the daily reading, to my surprise it was NOT me reading, but someone else, a voice I had never heard before.

Without even telling me, they had hired someone new, not to mention someone with a deep and sonorous voice, something I don’t have. How disappointing that was! And to make it worse, this new guy not only had a real radio voice, but he was smart and knew his astrology. In fact, his astrological nuances were at least as good as my own, maybe even better. Ouch! I was crushed.

I felt really badly, bad enough to call the radio station and ask them why I was never even notified of the change. Well, as it turned out, there was no new astrologer. For some mechanical reason, it was my own voice slowed down to a lovely radio-voice – a

simple equipment malfunction that sent me on a wild goose chase of panic. To me, that is a funny story for a number of reasons.

Story aside, the main point of this particular blog is that I have been monitoring my own internal changes and sharing those thoughts publically for going on 50 years. For that matter, I was monitoring my spiritual experiences since I was in grade school. That's long enough to learn something. It has always been my belief, backed up by decades of my own research into the present moment, that aside from what makes us different (our individuation), we also share not only the air we breathe and the water we drink, but the sunlight and all the inner goings on with the sun that we are just now learning about. The political mood of this country and our inner state of mind changes as the sun (and who knows what else) changes, and we are the living reflectors or expression of that change.

It's not as if we can just subscribe to some inner newsletter for updates, either. However, we can learn to monitor our own internal changes and state of mind. That's what I do. How is that done?

Well, we can learn to be aware of what's changing within us. Trust your intuition. As the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa used to say "First Thought, Best Thought." Don't doubt what you feel and see, but accept that first registering of an insight. This is a process that we learn only through constant repetition, not by being not-trusting or shy. If we repeatedly accept and respond to that initial insight, over and over and over, our shyness or insecurity falls away and we become confident in what occurs deep within us.

Sure, it might help if someone like me with observations primes the pump, provided that what I'm feeling and going through makes sense with what you

are feeling and going through. And, of course, provided I'm still posting. There is a lot more that we all have in common than just where we differ, but awareness of that is key. That's what Buddhism is about, awareness.

Follow the lunar cycle. Follow the solar cycle of sunspots, solar flares, and CMEs (Coronal Mass Ejections). Follow what you feel and, most of all, follow your heart! It is easier to write our own book than it is to read on forever from someone else's.

That's what the word "Buddha" translates to: the awakened one. So, let's wake up. As the Buddha pointed out, we each have to do it ourselves, but we can all do it together and share our experiences.

That's what I am trying to do.

YIDAMS AND THE 84 MAHASIDDHAS

July 3, 2018

Here is one of those blogs where I tell you more than you want to know and still not enough. LOL.

As a dharma practitioner of many years, I had a terrible time with what is called Deity Practice. For me, it was just very, very difficult. And the same goes for Yidam Practice. I never could quite understand what a Yidam was or which, what, or who was my personal yidam.

I finally settled on a wrathful form of the Bodhisattva Vajrapana (Dorje Tumpo), as described in a series of empowerments by the 9th Karmapa, Wangchuk Dorje. I even travelled all the way to India to request the empowerment from the current emanation of Vajrapani in our lineage (Karma Kagyu) and received it.

I then did that practice for many years. But, you know, this was still not my yidam. And I was way too taken with the power and fierceness of the wrathful Vajrapani for him to be my yidam – whatever that was. I just had a crush on Vajrapani. My teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, and I even had a good laugh years later, when we talked about it. He knew exactly where I was at all the time.

So, long story short, I just could not get with the program to find a yidam. Eventually, after years of waiting for my yidam to appear, I just went with my gut, with what I loved. And the one historical figure that I most totally identified with was the great Mahasiddha Tilopa. He has been the closest thing to what I imagined a yidam is that I could find. Historical figures also can be yidams.

In fact, I loved the whole bunch of Mahasiddhas, all 84 of them. Some years ago, I believe it was in 2009, Margaret and I traveled to Toronto, Canada to take a very special teaching on the 84 Mahasiddhas from the Ven. Thrangu Rinpoche. My teacher Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche was also there, along with the wonderful Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche.

It was sometime later that I decided to make my own little practice pecha (Tibetan rectangular book) of the 84 Mahasiddhas, which I share with you here. I designed the pecha and had it printed at my local Staples store in full color. I thought some of you might like to see it. I made it pretty. But Tilopa was still not my yidam. LOL.

However, as for yidams, I finally did find what for me sufficed as a Yidam. It was, oddly enough (and I should have expected it) no less than Mother Nature herself, who is called in dharma terms “The Lama of Appearances.” As it was explained to me (I had no idea) by a knowledgeable lama, there are several traditionally distinct kinds of lamas (I thought there was only the one lama), which I will enumerate.

Of course, there is our “Root Lama” (Tsawi Lama), and then there is the “Lama of the Scriptures” (the written dharma teachings), and there is also the “Lama of the Dharmadhatu” (which is too difficult to explain here), and finally (and this is my point), there is what is called “The Lama of Appearances.” I had never heard of it in all the writings I had read.

It was this Lama of Appearance that turned out to be, for me, what was effectively (it worked) my yidam. And, of course, Mother Nature is the most profoundly true and accurate lama of appearances. And “I should have known,” because I was trained from early-on (6 years of age) as a naturalist, so it’s no stretch to say

that I was primed to receive teachings directly from Nature herself, and as it turned out I did.

And so, I write this to point out that a yidam is not this, that, or some other thing, but always only what effectively actually transforms our mind so that we get a glimpse of what is called “Recognition,” being the recognition of the mind’s true nature.

For me, this little glimpse came (after a personal loss and shock) from working closely with nature with a camera, peering through some very fine macro lenses at tiny pristine natural dioramas. Keep in mind that a yidam is whatever it takes (the means) for us to recognize the nature of the mind. I had had what are called the “pointing-out instructions” as to the true nature of the mind and while I grasped it conceptually, I had not realized it actually, a common problem.

And please don’t think that I am telling you here that I am any kind of enlightened. That’s not the case. Everyone who knows me could tell you different. LOL. I had just a glimpse of the actual nature of the mind which glimpse, like smelling salts, was enough to wake me up a tiny bit. And that waking up (even that little bit) was transformational and the first real step on the very long road to enlightenment.

And so, If you too are searching for your yidam, for what will transform your mind, please know (at least IMO) that a yidam is not something we find out there in dharma-land to worship, but rather something to use, and always something we find in-here, within. And the yidam is not a thing, object, or image in itself, but always a means, “THE MEANS” to recognizing for ourselves the actual nature of the mind – a simple realization.

Dharma friends: my advice is not to look outside ourselves for a yidam. It has to be closer than that, part of what we already know best and are most acquainted with, like our best friend. A yidam is the catalyst in the alchemy of our particular dharma transformation. It is “HOW” (the actual or very means and not an end in itself) through which we finally become familiar with the mind, so that we can relax. As the Beatles wrote:

“No one will be watching us ...”

THE MYSTERY OF THE YIDAM

July 3, 2018

There seems to be some question as to what a “yidam” is in dharma practice. This is totally understandable because of all the dharma terms I am aware of, none of them are as foggy as “What is a yidam?”

And there is a reason for this, as we might expect, and that is because the term “Yidam” is linked to more advanced dharma terms like “Recognition” of the true nature of the mind or even “Realization.” These all are terms that we cannot KNOW except by realizing them, and that by definition.

Since the idea of a yidam marks the doorway to Recognition and realization, it too is shrouded in the veil of the “not-realized-yet” and is mysterious for that reason. Most dharma practice, at least in the many preliminaries of dharma practices, is like a graduated series of roughly equal steps which we work through, one by one. Another term for this might be relative-truth practices.

However, Yidam, Recognition, and Realization all harken (and depend on) what are called the realization practices; they are not relative-truth practices but non-relative or absolute practices like Insight Meditation and particularly practices like Mahamudra or Dzogchen Meditation.

In other words, this apparent veil of secrecy or cloudiness is not anything mysterious or forbidden by design, but rather it is self-secret, closed to us not by intent but by our own lack of realization as to what they are about. And, for the most part, the advanced realization terms are not a graduated path like we are

used to, step-by-step, but rather a path closed to us by an event we have not experienced, an event called “Recognition” of the true nature of the mind.

Recognition is itself a realization and, like all realizations, recognition is like a switch that is off until turned on. And this is where the term yidam comes into play, because in most Vajrayana training, the yidam practice is how we turn the switch from off to on and thus attain Recognition of the true nature of the mind. So, like finding a light switch in the dark, finding our yidam can be hard because we don’t understand (by definition) what it is and how to use it... not yet.

In other words, finding our personal yidam is not just more dharma practice as usual. It is a distinct and demarcating singular event like no other we have known. But, like trying to hit a piñata blindfolded, it’s anyone’s guess how to hit the mark. And that is exactly why in Vajrayana Buddhism the bond between guru and student is so important. It is the teacher’s sole job to point out to the student the true nature of the mind so that the student snaps-to and recognizes the nature of the mind on their own. That’s the deal, the whole enchilada, so to speak.

And so, this whole concept of finding our yidam is not a slam-dunk kind of affair. In fact, there are many ways this can happen, including allowing “chance” to determine it by casting an indicator to choose which Buddha Family we belong to. In other cases, our guru tells us what our yidam is. And the list goes on.

However, perhaps most often it is left up to the student to find his or her way to their natural yidam. For example, students may choose whether this or that Bodhisattva or deity practice works as a yidam for them. In my case, as mentioned in the previous blog, I

chose a wrathful form of Vajrapani. I knew I was very attracted to the Bodhisattva Vajrapani, because directness is part of my own makeup. However, I was just doing the best I could, like making a stab in the dark. As it turned out, that choice did not materialize for me the results that yidams must produce to be yidams. To be successful, a yidam has to lead us to the recognition of the true nature of the mind. That's the sole function of the yidam.

In fact, most of the various yidams I chose or leaned toward did not (at least in the beginning) work out for me. It could just be me. LOL. What did work was nothing as artificial as my going eeny, meeny, miny, moe and picking something with my intellect -- far from it. And this is where this discussion gets a little more serious, where the rubber meets the road.

It's not like I just fell into discovering my particular yidam as part of my business-as-usual life. That would be wishful thinking. For me, it took a profound shock to my system to wake me up enough to allow change to appear. I have written about my story many times, so I don't want to lay it all out here. Basically, the idea was that I suddenly lost my job, my way of making a living and providing for my family by a layoff of some 10,000 people by my employer at the time, which was NBC. I was a senior consultant.

It's to my denseness and obscurations that it took such a profound shock to spin me off the treadmill and send me into six months of solitude, not only physically (to a great degree), but mentally and spiritually almost totally. And it was in that break from punching the clock of time that I was able, without at first even realizing it, to find my true yidam, a yidam that actually functioned as one.

And with all of the Tibetan paraphernalia I had surrounded myself with, it is remarkable how non-Tibetan my actual yidam experience was. It was more like I regressed back to the security of childhood and found an environment that was so familiar that I finally felt secure enough to relax and let go of, well, almost everything, if only for that brief time.

And it was in that very special time-out that I forged what was a unique extension of myself, one that moved beyond my dualistic habits and discovered the non-dualistic type of “Seeing” that typifies the special form of Insight Meditation that is a part of Mahamudra Meditation.

My point here is that rather than find my yidam in all of the Tibetan milieu I had gathered around me (and was walking point in), it was in Mother Nature (with whom I had been deep friends for many decades) that I was able to wake up in. It was like I was in Mother Nature’s arms once again.

I’m not saying that my experience is typical. I have no idea other than the way it worked for me. That’s all I have to go on. However, my take away from that whole epoch in my life, which took two or three years to first play out, is that a yidam is as close to us as we ever get to ourselves, the perfect friend in a time of need or when the time is right.

And in that imprinting time, my extension into the moment was so singular (and the situation I was in was so stark or dire, IMO) that I abandoned myself to the nature of Mother Nature 100%, a nature I had known deeply since childhood. And in that singularity, instead of just seeing what I usually saw, I saw for the first time the Seeing itself, regardless of what was being seen. To be more exact, I became the Seeing and not just what was seen.

That process, being out in nature with a camera and lens watching the sun come up each day for six months straight, was my “yidam,” was what it took to push me beyond my habitually conceptual self into pure realization as to how the mind worked rather than just having more spiritual experiences.

At crucial times in my life, close friends have appeared and, even if just for the moment, took on the role of initiating me in myself. This happened here as well and a close friend (a lama) appeared on a visit and helped me to more fully grasp what I was already realizing. And from that time, from that initial “Seeing,” I began to expand and extend my realization, day by day. And so it goes even today.

And so, my take on Yidams is that they are the bridge and the differential between the Preliminary Practices and the Realization Practices, between relative and the absolute truth, and between dualistic and the non-dualistic dharma practices. Indeed, yidams are individualized and tailored (like skin on flesh) to our exact needs, as unique to us as much as anything can be unique. They are close.

So, of course we can search for our yidam in the Tibetan retinues and perhaps find it, but there is nothing particularly Tibetan about yidams. Instead of looking outside for a yidam, it is best to look within ourselves to where we live, to our awakened heart which in the dharma literature is called Bodhicitta. Bodhicitta is the key to finding our yidam and Bodhicitta is how what inside us responds to what is outside of us, especially to other sentient beings.

Our ability to respond and the compassion that arises from discovering our innate responsibility is the heart that drives Bodhicitta, which once ignited fuels our enlightenment.

Some of you dharma practitioners reading this must also have yidam experiences. Why not share with us your approach and experiences.

THE SEVEN POINTS OF MIND TRAINING

July 4, 2018

Traditional Lojong Text

Notes by Michael Erlewine: These seven points and 59 slogans are part of what are called the Lojong or mind-training teachings. I consider them to be (along with “The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind to the Dharma”) the quintessential teachings for any beginning (or advanced, for that matter) dharma student. They certainly helped to change my life. Please consider them as precious as I do and imprint them in your consciousness.

These points and slogans were composed by Chekawa Yeshe Dorje (1102-1176) and have been celebrated ever since. In my own entry into the dharma, they were essential in bringing home and making clear to me certain very important concepts.

I did manage to learn to read Tibetan and, armed with a stack of dictionaries, tried to translate... for a while. It became obvious to me that it would take many years of study to become very good at it. LOL. I was not willing to spend that kind of time, so I took another approach.

As a dharma student trying to understand the rudiments of the preliminary practices, I find it helpful to examine different translations from Tibetan into English to see how they differ and they do differ to a marked degree. I did my best to compare what translations of “The Seven Points of Mind Training” as I could find to see where they differ and where translators find their differences. This kind of

comparison helps a lot to grasp the gist of each slogan.

There are a great many translations readily available online for comparison. I have gathered a few together here so that we can compare. I found the Western lama Ken McLeod to be very dedicated to sharing this particular information and, early-on, McLeod's book "The Great Path of Awakening" (which covers these slogans) was (and still is) one of my most treasured dharma books. We invited McLeod to our dharma center to teach years ago. It was great to be with someone who totally cares about these slogans and has done as much to share them as McLeod has. Below are the traditional texts in several fine translations for "The Seven Points of Mind Training."

If you don't have his book, it is invaluable IMO. One needs to read the commentaries and related materials. Here it is:

The Great Path of Awakening (translator Ken McLeod)

https://www.amazon.com/Great-Path-Awakening-C.../.../ref=sr_1_1...

Another, equally good, translation is this one:

"Training the Mind" (translator Chögyam Trungpa)

https://www.amazon.com/Training-Cultivating-L.../.../ref=sr_1_1...

TRIANGULATING TRANSLATIONS

Here are The Seven Points of Mind Training (59 slogans) in different translations. By reading them against one another, I can usually pull out the main meaning or gist of each slogan. Give it a shot. And do search out the entire teachings (and get the books), which are not presented here.

Point One: Preliminaries Which Are A Basis For Dharma Practice.

#1

First, train in the Preliminaries. (T, NT, G)

First, learn the preliminaries. (M, KM)

First train in all the preliminary practices. (SF)

Point Two: The Main Practice, Which is Training in Bodhicitta.

#2

Regard all dharmas as dreams. (NT)

All dharmas should be regarded as dreams.(T)

Think that all phenomena are like dreams. (M)

Regard all phenomenon as dreams. (KM)

Consider all dharmas to be like a dream. (G)

Consider all phenomena as a dream. (SF)

#3

Contemplate the nature of unborn insight (T)

Examine the nature of unborn awareness. (M, KM, NT, SF)

Examine the nature of the unborn mind. (G)

#4

Self-liberate the antidote (T, NT)

Let even the remedy itself go free on its own. (M)

Even the remedy is freed to subside naturally. (KM)

The opponent itself (is free) on its own ground. (G)

The remedy itself is released in its own place. (SF)

#5

Rest in the nature of alaya, the essence. (NT)

Rest in the nature of alaya (T)

Settle in the nature of basic cognition, the essence. (M)

Rest in the nature of all, the basis of everything. (KM)

Place the essence of the path in the state of the foundation of all. (G)

Place (your meditation) on the nature of the foundation of all: the essence (of the path). (SF)

#6

In post-meditation, be a child of illusion. (NT)

In the post-meditation experience,

One should become a child of illusion. (T)

Between sessions, consider phenomena as phantoms. (M)

In the post-meditation practice,

Be a child of illusion. (KM)

In the meditation break, be a creator of illusion. (SF)

#7

Sending and taking should be practiced alternately.

These two should ride the breath. (NT)

Sending and taking should be practiced alternately.

That alternation should be put on the medium of the breath. (T)

Train in joining sending and taking together. Do this by riding the breath. (M)

Train in taking and sending alternately. (KM)

Practice interwoven giving and taking.

Ride upon the moving breath. (G)

Practice a combination of both giving and taking.

Commence taking progressively from your own side.

Place these two astride the breath. (SF)

#8

Three objects, three poisons, and three seeds of virtue. (NT)

Three objects, three poisons, and three virtuous seeds. (T)

Three objects, three poisons, three bases of virtue. (M)

Three objects, three poisons, three seeds of virtue. (KM)

Practice on the three objects, three poisons and three

roots of virtue. (G)

There are three objects, three poisons,
And three sources of virtue. (SF)

#9

In all activities, train with slogans. (NT)

Train with these sayings in all activities. (T)

Train with phrases in every mode of behavior. (M)

Use sayings to train in all forms of activity. (KM)

In order to remember this,

Recite it in words throughout all activities. (G)

Practice every activity by these words. (SF)

#10

Begin the sequence of sending and taking with
yourself. (NT)

The sequence of exchange begins with oneself. (T)

Begin the development of taking with yourself. (M)

Begin the sequence of exchange with yourself. (KM)

Begin taking with yourself. (G)

Commence taking progressively from your own side.
(SF)

Point Three: Carrying Whatever Occurs in Your Life
Onto the Path

#11

When the world is filled with evil,

Transform all mishaps into the path of Bodhi. (NT)

When the world is filled with evil,

All mishaps should be transformed into the path of
bodhi. (T)

When evils fills the inanimate and animate universes,
change bad conditions to the Bodhi Path. (M)

When evils fills the world and its inhabitants, change
adverse conditions into the path of awakening. (KM)

When the world and its beings are evil, transform the
negative conditions into aids on the path of
enlightenment. (G)

When the container and the contents are filled with evil, change this adverse circumstance into the path to full awakening. (SF)

#12

Drive all blames into one. (NT, M, KM)

Drive all blames onto oneself. (T)

Place all the blame on one thing alone. (G)

Banish the one object of every blame. (SF)

#13

Be grateful to everyone. (T, NT, M, KM)

And meditate on kindness to all. (G)

Meditate on the great kindness of all. (SF)

#14

Seeing confusion as the four kayas is unsurpassable shunyata protection. (NT)

Seeing confusion as the four kayas is supreme shunyata protection. (T)

The unsurpassable protection of emptiness is to see the manifestations of bewilderment as the four kayas. (M)

To see confusion as the four kayas,

The protection of emptiness is unsurpassable. (KM)

Meditate that all confused appearances are the four Buddha-kayas. The best guardian is emptiness. (G)

#15

Four practices are the best of methods. (NT)

Four applications are the best method. (T)

An excellent means is to have the four provisions. (M)

The four applications are the best method. (KM)

Having the four activities is the supreme method. (G)

Possess the four preparations, the highest of means. (SF)

#16

Whatever you meet unexpectedly,

Join with meditation. (NT)

In order to inspire unexpected bad circumstances onto the path, whatever you meet should be joined immediately with meditation. (T)

In order to bring any situation to the path quickly,

As soon as it is met, join it with meditation. (M)

In order to take unexpected conditions as the path, immediately join whatever you meet with meditation.

(KM)

Meditate on whatever occurs. (G)

Utilize every immediate circumstance for meditation.

Point Four: Bodhicitta Practice in Life and Death.

#17

Practice the five strengths,

The condensed heart instructions. (NT)

The synopsis of the essence instruction is contained in the five strengths. (T)

The concise epitome of heart instruction: work with 'Five Forces'. (M)

A summary of the essential instructions, train in the five forces. (KM)

The essence of this teaching abbreviates into the application of the five powers. (G)

Gather together the abridged quintessence of this advice. Blend the practice of one life with the five forces. (SF)

#18

The mahayana instruction for ejection of consciousness at death is the five strengths: how you conduct yourself is important. (NT)

The instruction for how to die in mahayana is the five strengths. Therefore, one should practice them. (T)

The instructions for transference in the Mahayana are the "Five Forces". Behavior is important. (M)

The mahayana instructions for how to die are the five

forces. How you act is important. (KM)

The Mahayana precept of transmigration lies in these five powers. And cherish the death posture. (G)

The instruction for the great vehicle transmigration of consciousness is to apply those very five forces, lying in the perfect position. (SF)

Point Five: Evaluation of Mind Training

#19

All dharma agrees at one point. (T, NT)

The purpose of all Dharma is contained in one point. (M)

All Dharma has a single purpose. (KM)

All dharmas condense into one theme. (G)

All Dharma collects into one intention. (SF)

#20

Of the two witnesses, hold the principal one. (NT)

Of the two judges, hold the principal one. (T)

Grasp the principal of two witnesses. (M)

Of the two judges, rely on the principal one. (KM)

Hold to the chief of the two witnesses. (G)

Retain the two witnesses of foremost importance.

#21

Always maintain only a joyful mind. (NT)

Continuously apply only a joyful mind. (T)

Always rely on just a happy frame of mind. (M)

Always have the support of a joyful mind. (KM)

The mind constantly relies upon joy alone. (G)

One is always accompanied by only joyful thoughts. (SF)

#22

If you can practice even when distracted,

You are well trained. (NT)

You are well trained if you can practice even when distracted. (T)

Even though you are distracted, if you can do it, it is still mind training. (M)

You are proficient if you can practice even when disturbed. (KM)

If there is ability even when wandering, this is a sign of progress. (G)

One is trained if one is capable, although distracted. (SF)

Point Six: Ethics of Mind Training

#23

Always abide by the three basic principles. (NT)

Practice the three basic principles. (T)

Always observe the three general points. (M)

Always practice the three general principles. (KM)

Constantly train in the three general points. (G)

Always practice the three general points. (SF)

#24

Change your attitude and relax as it is. (T)

Change your inclination and then maintain it. (M)

Change your attitude, but remain natural. (KM, NT))

Change your attitude while remaining natural. (SF)

#25

Don't talk about injured limbs. (NT)

Do not proclaim about injured limbs. (T)

Do not discuss defects. (M)

Do not talk about weak points. (KM)

Do not speak about weakened limbs. (G)

Speak not of the shortcomings of others. (SF)

#26

Don't ponder others. (NT)

Do not ponder others' weak points. (T)

Don't think about anything that concerns others. (M)

Don't think about the affairs of others. (KM)

Do not judge others. (G)

Think not about whatever is seen in others. (SF)

#27

Work with the greater defilement first. (NT)

Work through the greater defilement first. (T)

Train first against the defilement that is greatest. (M)

Work on the stronger disturbing emotions first. (KM)

Purify the strongest delusion first. (G)

Purify first whichever affliction is heaviest. (SF)

#28

Abandon any hope of fruition. (NT)

Give up any possibilities of fruition. (T)

Abandon all hopes of results. (M)

Give up all hope for results. (KM)

Abandon all expectations. (G)

Give up all hope of reward. (SF)

#29

Refrain from poisonous food. (T)

Abandon poisoned food. (M)

Give up poisonous food. (KM)

Avoid food mixed with poison. (G)

Abandon poisonous food. (SF, NT))

#30

Don't be so predictable. (NT)

Don't be predictable and Guileless. (T)

Don't be consistent. (M)

Don't rely on being consistent. (KM)

Do not be lenient toward the wrong object. (G)

Do not serve the central object leniently. (SF)

#31

Don't malign others. (NT)

Do not disparage people. (T)

Don't make wicked jokes. (M)

Don't be excited by cutting remarks. (KM)

Do not mock weakness. (G)
Be indifferent towards malicious jokes. (SF)

#32

Don't wait in ambush. (T, NT, KM)
Don't wait for an opportunity. (M)
Do not lie in ambush. (SF)

#33

Don't bring things to a painful point. (T, NT)
Don't strike at the heart. (M)
Don't make things painful. (KM)
Do not strike sensitive areas. (G)
Never strike at the heart. (SF)

#34

Don't transfer the ox's load to the cow. (T, NT)
Don't transfer the cow's load to the bull. (M)
Don't put the horse's load on a pony. (KM)
Do not put the load of a dzo on a bullock. (G)
Do not load an ox with the load of a dzo. (SF)

#35

Don't try to be fastest. (NT)
Don't sharpen your competitiveness. (T)
Don't back the favorite. (M)
Don't aim to win. (KM)
Do not hurry. (G)
Do not compete by a last-minute sprint. (SF)

#36

Don't act with a twist. (T, NT)
Don't have wrong views. (M)
Don't revert to magic. (KM)
Do not be treacherous. (SF)

#37

Don't make gods into demons. (NT)
Don't bring down gods into demons. (T)
Don't fall for the celestial demon. (M)

Don't reduce a god to a demon. (KM)

Do not turn a god into a devil. (G)

Do not bring a god down to a devil. (SF)

#38

Don't seek others' pain as the limbs of your own happiness. (NT)

Don't seek others' pain as the limbs of one's own happiness. (T)

Don't seek sorrow for spurious comforts. (M)

Don't seek pain as a component of happiness. (KM)

Do not rejoice in sorrow. (G)

Do not inflict misery for possession of happiness. (SF)

Point Seven: Guidelines Of Mind Training

#39

All activities should be done with one intention. (NT)

All activities should be done with one attitude. (T)

All absorption are effected in one. (M)

All active meditation is done in one way. (KM)

Practice all yogas in one manner. (G)

Practice all yogas (or activities) by one. (SF)

#40

Correct all wrongs with one intention. (NT)

All suppression of perversion should be done with one attitude. (T)

One method will correct all wrong. (M)

All corrections are made in one way. (KM)

Face all discouragement in one manner. (G)

Practice every suppression of interference by one. (SF)

#41

Two activities: one at the beginning, one at the end. (T, NT)

At the beginning and at the end, there are two things to do. (M)

At the beginning and at the end, two things to be done. (KM)

Engage two practices: One at the beginning and one at the end. (G)

There are two duties: at the beginning and the end. (SF)

#42

Whichever of the two occurs, be patient. (NT)

Whichever of the two occurs, it should be resolved into patience. (T)

Be patient, whichever of the two occurs. (M)

Whichever of the two occurs, be patient.

Maintain patience for both. (G)

Endure whichever situation arises, either (good or bad). (SF)

#43

Observe these two, even at the risk of your life. (T, NT)

Observe two precepts even at the risk of life. (M)

Observe these two, even at the risk of your life. (KM)

Guard two things like you would your life. (G)

Guard both points more previously than your life. (SF)

#44

Train in the three difficulties (NT)

Practice the three difficulties. (T)

Learn the three difficulties. (M)

Learn the three difficult points. (KM)

Train in the three difficult practices. (G)

Practice the three hardships. (SF)

#45

Take on the three principal causes. (NT)

Practice the three leading points of cause. (T)

Take up the three parts of the principal cause. (M)

Take up the three primary resources. (KM)

Cultivate the three principal causes. (G)
Attain the three principle causes. (SF)

#46

Pay heed that the three never wane. (NT)
Practice the three minds that won't diminish. (T)
Meditate on the three things not to be destroyed. (M)
Don't allow three points to weaken. (KM)
Meditate on the three unmitigated qualities. (G)
Meditate on the three undeclining attitudes. (SF)

#47

Keep the three inseparable. (NT)
One should have the three inseparables. (T)
Make the three inseparable from virtue. (M)
Make the three inseparable. (KM)
Possess the three inseparables. (G)
Possess the three inseparables. (SF)

#48

Train without bias in all areas.
It is crucial always to do this pervasively and wholeheartedly. (NT)
Train impartially in all areas. Always do this thoroughly -- pervading everywhere. (T)
Train impartially in every area; it's important to have trained deeply and pervasively in everything. (M)
Train in all areas without partiality. Overall deep and pervasive proficiency is important. (KM)
Practice without bias toward the objects. (G)
Always practice with pure impartiality on all objects.
Cherish the in-depth and broad application of all skills. (SF)

#49

Always meditate on whatever provokes resentment. (NT)
Always meditate. especially on your sore points. (T)

Always meditate on specific objects. (M)
Always meditate on volatile points. (KM) Constantly
practice on special cases. (G)
Always meditate on those closely related. (SF)

#50

Don't be swayed by external circumstances. (NT)
You should not depend on external conditions. (T)
You should have no concern for other factors. (M)
Don't depend on external conditions. (KM)
Do not rely upon external conditions. (G)
Depend not upon other circumstances. (SF)

#51

This time, practice the main points. (NT)
This time, practice the main point. (T)
Therefore, apply yourself to other factors. (M)
This time, practice the important points. (KM)
Immediately accomplish what is important. (G)
Exert yourself, especially at this time. (SF)

#52

Don't misinterpret. (T, NT))
Don't do things backwards. (M)
Don't make mistakes. (KM)
Avoid wrong understanding. (G)
Do not follow inverted deeds. (SF)

#53

Don't fluctuate. (T)
Don't vacillate. (M, NT))
Don't fluctuate. (KM)
Do not practice with irregularity. (G)
Do not be erratic. (SF)

#54

Train wholeheartedly. (T, NT)
Train as though cut off. (M)
Train whole-heartedly. (KM)

Practice with confidence. (G)
Do not underestimate your ability. (SF)

#55

Liberate yourself by examining and analyzing. (NT)
You should liberate yourself by examining and studying. (T)
You should find freedom by means of both examination and investigation. (M)
Find freedom through both examination and investigation. (KM)
Think deeply with insight and analysis. (G)
Be liberated by two: examination and analysis. (SF)

#56

Don't wallow in self-pity. (T, NT)
Don't brag. (M)
Don't wallow in self-esteem (KM)
Do not become familiar with vanity. (G)
Do not be boastful. (SF)

#57

Don't be jealous. (T, NT)
Don't be consumed by jealousy. (M)
Don't be caught up in irritation. (KM)
Do not respond with arrogance. (G)
Do not retaliate. (SF)

#58

Don't be frivolous. (NT)
Don't act with fickleness. (T)
Don't act capriciously. (M)
Don't be temperamental. (KM)
Do not be inconsistent. (G)
Do not be fickle. (SF)

#59

Don't expect applause. (NT)
Don't expect more. (T)

Don't expect thanks. (M, KM)
Have no expectations. (G)
Do not wish for gratitude. (SF)

Note:

(M)= McLeod translation,
(KM)= 2nd McLeod translation,
(G)= Glenn H. Mullin translation,
(T)= Trungpa translation,
(SF)= Advice from a Spiritual Friend,
(NT)= Trungpa from Training the Mind.

Assembled for comparison and discussion by Michael Erlewine. Please obtain the actual book from one of the above sources.

If you would like to download this for study:

The Seven Points of Mind Training

<http://spiritgrooves.net/p.../e-books/NEW%20Seven%20Points.pdf>

ZONING THE MOMENT

July 7, 2018

A break in the heat wave allowed for a brisk early morning walk through the local cemetery, where a small raptor (looked like a sharp-shinned hawk), screaming all the time, made some not-even-close dive-bomb attacks on me. It must have babies near. And it was actually chilly enough that I wore a vest. The crispness of the cold felt great for a change.

And in the early morning air and dampness, I can get back to weeding the flower gardens; perhaps not this morning, but soon. It has been quite a while I have been working on the studio sale and other physical stuff around the center. It's hard to feel just now what I really want to do. I am kind of numb to much that I was more sensitive to.

For one thing, there now finally seems time-enough again for some photography. For me, the way I photograph takes lots of time. You can't rush it or it gets rushed. LOL. The beauty is not just in the photo images you see posted here; that is the least of it. The process of photographing is a zone that I miss if I am not in it often enough. However, like all things involved, it takes time for me to really get down into the details of the photographic process until time just expands.

For example, how many of you are familiar with stretching plastic polymers like polyethylene? You take a thin sheet of plastic and by pulling at both ends, the pulling causes the polymer chains to begin to line up and the sheet of plastic stretches. Changing right before your eyes, the strip expands and

becomes much stronger and develops a much higher tensile strength.

Sorry for such an elaborate analogy, but it is very apt to what happens when I commit myself to the somewhat arduous process of photographing the kinds of images I do. For example, take this photo of a young sunflower from my garden. This photo is actually 192 separate photos, each taken at a minutely different focus-distance that, when combined, create a single photo very much more in focus than any single-shot photo.

The result is a photo in which your eye is not automatically drawn to a single spot on a plane of focus, but rather the eye is liberated to focus wherever it wants to, not bound or led by a single plane or point of focus. You probably can't see the difference between this and a single-shot photo, but your eye can feel the freedom and appreciates the enhanced clarity. Or not; some people don't like this approach.

My point is that, aside from the resulting photo, the process of creating the photo is very involved and takes a lot of care. The subject (this flower) can't even move a fraction of an inch or the photo is ruined or marred. As I joke to myself, the process is very Zen-like and the effect of the finished photo is also a bit Zen or at least psychedelic. Your choice. LOL.

I hope you can see my point here. I have to actually enter the process whole-heartedly and complete it, step by step. During that somewhat complex process, like the polymer chains in the strip of plastic, my internal orientation gets changed (or zoned) and my mind can stretch out, becoming very clear.

Readers here get to see the result of the process, but the photographer has that too, but perhaps more important for me is the state of mind that arises from the photographic process itself. That you can't experience without doing it. This kind of detail is perhaps a bit inordinate, but the result is a kind of map of the process, so to speak.

So, I am once again beginning to get back into photographing. As explained, it is not as simple as taking a snapshot and sharing it. Look carefully at this photo and perhaps you will see what I am talking about. You may have to click on this image and it as far as your computer will allow. The original is some 8256 pixels wide.

Is it as good as drugs? Much better. LOL.

DHARMA PURIFICATION'S WAKE

July 7, 2018

“Purification,” such an important part of dharma practice and it has byproducts we should be aware of. It's not like we purify ourselves and are the same as usual. Hardly. Purification changes us; that's the whole point of going through it. Purification purifies. It is as simple as that.

And as we are purified, we don't take the same wooden nickels that we used to. We are, well, purer now. Our tolerance for impurity becomes less; we are less tolerant of our attachments as we become more and more sensitive and aware.

In the process, our excesses begin to dry up. They no longer satisfy, because we have become more purely refined. This was real easy for me to see in restaurants and food. I used to eat Big Macs at McDonalds and loved them. Same with those McDonald's French Fries that last about 14 minutes before they turn to stone. Now, they do not even taste good, nor the sugar-laced French Fries.

And the same goes with most all restaurants, better ones than McDonalds, IMO. It is also and especially true of dharma purification practices. They tighten up our ship and we cease to be satisfied with what we used to be satisfied with. Our attachments begin to dry up and become inert. Gradual they go void. We stop reacting and stop attaching.

Purification is a graduated and progressive process, getting ourselves down to a “fighting weight” where we can begin to see through our obscurations, which gradually become increasingly transparent.

The key takeaway here is that as we are purified, our appetites and propensity for attachment change. In a sense, we can't go home again. The result of purification is increasing awareness and with increasing awareness, what once satisfied us no longer does. We begin to see the wheat from the chaff, so to speak. And so, if we lose our appetite for excess, and come up empty of that, this is to be expected. It's actually a good sign.

And the same eventually proves true of our Self and selfishness. And our self no longer satisfies or comforts us as it once did. It too begins to empty out and that emptiness or void can leave us, well, empty feeling. We feel different.

There are all kinds of things that kick in as the emptiness wears on us, as we get used to not being always so full of ourselves. We start to wake up. It's a lot like when we go on a diet, when we empty out and can appreciate the clean, lean feeling of eating less once again. However, we have to empty out first. And that's what the purification dharma practices are for.

And so, if we begin to go void in our sense of Self, that is a sign of real progress, not something to worry about. We will have to learn to find comfort in clarity and lucidity rather than in our history of attachments. It's not that we no longer have a Self or a self-full of responsibilities and whatever. It's that we no longer identify with our Self to the point of attachment. The Self is just what it is, secretary or scheduler. We can appreciate how useful the Self is, but we don't worship it as an entity. The Self is the dummy and we the ventriloquist and not vice-versa; the Self is entirely a construct created by us for our convenience, and that includes me, myself, and I.

DHARMA AUTHENTICITY

July 8, 2018

Finding authentic dharma or finding dharma authentically is a two-edged sword. It often means unlearning what we habitually are so used to, our own attachments and distractions. Initially, there may be uncomfortableness in the process of discovering authenticity, but it is a path all dharma practitioners must eventually tread. Let me explain:

For example, the present moment is the most authentic source of dharma there is. Learning to remain there in awareness is very difficult in the beginning. We are so used to being distracted in our endless noodling and reification so that we always “feel good.” As the Mahamudra Lineage Prayer says so succinctly “Unwavering attention is the body of meditation.” Getting in the groove so that our attention is unwavering, at least for most of us, is not just a walk in the park. It takes time and relaxation at a profound level to accomplish realization. And the admonition to hurry up and relax is an oxymoron.

I am reminded of the classic jazz song by Les McCann, “Compared to What,” punctuated with the urgent sax of Eddie Harris and the incendiary trumpet of Benny Bailey, along with these lyrics:

“Trying to make it real, compared to what?”

I love that line! Every music lover should hear this tune at least once in their lives; it’s a little long for those in a hurry, but worth it:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kCDMQqDUtv4>

Being present in the moment is not, ultimately, an option, but rather a requirement for successful

dharma practice. It is a groove that we naturally gravitate toward. Learning to get into that groove (and stay there), instead of falling back out of it, is part of dharma practice.

The pith texts all point out that spending time either in the gilded cage of the past or the inviting lure of the future is not authentic. Ultimately, it cannot satisfy. There is far too much noise and not enough signal. The present moment, if left unaltered by us, is the very definition of authentic.

The great Mahasiddha Tilopa said it most clearly in one of his classic “Six Words of Advice:”

“Don’t Alter the Present.”

Conceptually, this point is not that hard to understand. Let things just be as they already are. There is a line in a famous jug band tune:

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

Experiencing, we all do, but fully realizing what we experience, that is not so easy. Remember that the dharma is all about (100%) realization and realizing.

I believe we could all agree that authenticity is something most of us yearn for. This need for the authentic is what drives modern media, if not social life itself. It appears so important. And it seems there is never enough to go around, yet the present moment, like a drinking fountain, is always right there waiting for us to latch on.

Every thought, word, and deed originally came from the mind through the present moment and nowhere else. This eternal present is rich beyond measure. The Tibetans call it “the wish-fulfilling gem.” However,

we would have to be able to access it more often than we now do, in fact constantly -- unwaveringly.

A question I ask myself a lot is: what's really worth doing in this world? The good news is that each of us can learn to breathe spiritual oxygen of the present moment, but to do that takes instruction and lots of practice on our part. It's worth it!

THE UNREALIZED LIFE

July 9, 2018

“Revulsion of Samsara,” as mentioned in the fourth of the “Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind toward the Dharma” does not necessarily mean that this world we live in is going to make us retch and be revolted. It can and sometimes does; however, I find life generally more subtle than that. As for me, I am no longer satisfied by what used to satisfy me. As the Rolling Stones song says, “I can’t get no satisfaction.” That’s more like what I experience.

The search for authenticity in dharma takes over where attachment left off. And nothing is more authentic than this present moment, so those who meditate, at least with the realization practices like Vipassana and Mahamudra, spend more and more of their time just being present. And “being present” does not leave much room for anything else. It’s almost like the old saying “Idle fingers are the devil’s workshop.” LOL.

So, for me it is not so much “revulsion,” but more like “That dog won’t hunt” any longer. My first dharma teacher used to say “I’ve got no pot to piss in,” which says the same thing. This is why in actual meditation we increasingly turn to the present moment for inspiration; it is always as fresh and authentic as it gets. There is nothing habitual about the present moment other than our need for it.

And there is something else that I feel is important to understand. For me, the very beginning of actual dharma practice did not did not take hold when in the late 1950s I became enamored of the Japanese Zen aesthetic of minimalism; you know, rice-paper

screens, stark teak floors, and carefully raked sand gardens. That was just an infatuation.

The first dharma that really grabbed me were what are called “The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind toward the Dharma,” which are also called the Common Preliminaries because they are just that, the common point of entry for many to the dharma. At least they were for me. I won’t go into detail in this article about “The Four Thoughts,” but here are a series of articles on them for those interested:

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

Even on my first encounter with the Four Thoughts, it was like reading my own mind. I had been thinking pretty much the same thing naturally for years, all by myself. Briefly stated, the “Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind” are:

(1) Precious Human Life. This human life we have is so very precious. Don’t waste it. Even as a teenager I used to pray that my life not be wasted and (as I put it back then) that I be “completely used up for some good purpose.”

(2) Impermanence. This life is as fragile as a soap bubble. Impermanence is the only certainty.

(3) Karma. Our every thought, word, and deed is responsible for the effect that it draws forth, which we call karma. Observe this attentively. Tiptoe.

(4) Samsara. This cyclic world of up and down experiences is inherently undependable. In other words, we will never get our ducks all in a row.

Now, those first three thoughts were as natural to me as rain in spring, but that fourth thought, the one about the inherent instability of cyclic existence took me a long time to grasp. Perhaps this was because

the first rendition of it that I encountered was phrased. “The Revulsion of Samsara.” I was not revolted by the world I lived in; just the opposite. I loved the world. So that was a puzzler for me.

And there are a couple more pieces to my personal puzzle which I should share with you. The first is that the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, during a short time when I served as his chauffeur back in 1974, took me into a room and personally taught me to meditate. That’s another story in itself, but at the same time he explained to me about “The Four Thoughts” by pointing at a poster I had designed for his talk in Ann Arbor. On that poster was a woodblock print of a Tibetan dragon flying in the clouds, with each of its four paws holding a precious jewel.

Trungpa explained that as long as the dragon could hold all four gems in his paws (and didn’t drop a one), he could fly. If he dropped even one, he fell to the ground. He was talking about the Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind and making it clear that we have to keep all four in mind.

And the second piece of the puzzle is that, years later, when I had finished the Common Preliminaries plus did a couple of rounds of what are called the Extraordinary Preliminaries (Ngondro), and was beginning to study and learn to practice what is called Mahamudra Meditation, the first thing the instructions for Mahamudra required was nothing less than the “Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind” all over again. Hmmm.

In fact, I then spent the next three years basically studying just that, the Common Preliminaries. I mention this to point out that the Common Preliminaries are not just for beginners. They are intrinsic to dharma practices. Period, end of story.

It could be important for some readers here to understand how important “The Four Thoughts” are in dharma training. They are not just something we learn and then move on to better things. Instead, they are fundamental and, like breathing air to live, have to be maintained perpetually. They are that important. Dharma practice is a process as is enlightenment; enlightenment too is a process, not some static state.

So, in summary, dharma authenticity is a two-way street. The dharma is already, by definition, authentic, which leaves us holding the other end of the equation, being as authentic as we know how to be. Can we realize the authenticity of the dharma? That’s always been the crux of the situation, realization. Our intent can be good and intent is very, very important in dharma practice. Yet, how do we transform from an intellectual and conceptual understanding of the dharma to actually practicing it and thereby beginning to accumulate experience in dharma practice?

Even with the accumulation of experience with the dharma, to be of more than passing value, we have to realize our experience and realization is the ultimate goal of any dharma practice. If we consider that we have been surrounded by the dharma all our lives, but have been unable to realize what is right before our eyes, then the scope of the problem begins to dawn on us.

Living an unrealized life is pretty common. We don’t even realize we are living an unrealized life. LOL.

As one high rinpoche said to a group of us: “We are the stragglers, the ones who from all the time immemorial up to now have never realized the nature of the mind.” There was a point to what he said and all of us present got a whiff of it. Living wrapped up in

a daze all my life and then dying is not my idea of a life well lived, but a sign of just another unrealized life.

JUST SAY NO!

July 10, 2018

Well, that piece of advice has wider applications than just the obvious. And I should add that it's not only a yes or no choice that we make, but one that can be made for us by our very constitution. Our whole makeup can also reach a point where it rejects what is not authentic. This happens in health-related cases all the time. As they say, we are fed up. Some things may no longer appeal or get a rise out of us. They are DOA, so to speak.

When this happens, our usual hyperbole and mindlessness may just draw a blank, i.e. get no response from us at all. We are sick of ourselves or we just outgrow ourselves... eventually. We finally begin to see through our own obscurations a bit to what is beyond our "persona," beyond what we know of and call our "Self." Our own selfishness gets old, even to us. And that which is beyond our self, which is called the actual or true nature of our mind, begins to be seen behind our self and it is much more revealing and life-like -- authentic. It's always "in the moment."

When we get tired of our Self (and its endless grabbing at attachments), this does not mean we are tired of life. The Self is not our life, but just a personal secretary or gopher that we have come to depend on, and perhaps too much so at that. At the point when we begin to see through the veil of our own selves (our particular hyperbole and constant agendas), things may go a little flat, as if the "juice" has been sucked out of us. We are disappointed in ourselves. If this happens, the sage advice is a very simple: wait a

while. Give it some time, but while you are open and non-attached, do look around!

I love the old Bible phrase “This came to pass... that came to pass,” and so on. So, let it pass. It didn’t come to stay; it came to pass, so don’t panic. If we are looking for a new attitude, our old one has to first dry up and blow away; and when that involves our self that is being vacated, it gets real-personal quick. It’s an actual vacation. LOL.

So, let some time flow by and whatever new in the way of attitude or change that is out there for us will gradually resolve and come into focus. That’s been my experience, but like an expectant father, sometimes I can’t help but worry as I wait it out, wait for my Self to reform and come back. LOL.

And to repeat, I’m not talking about when we can consciously and deliberately just say no, feel revulsion, etc. but rather when our body or the body of our involvement physically says no for us; it’s like we are just along for the ride. This perhaps is what the lamas call the “revulsion of samsara” in the “Fourth Thought That Turns the Mind toward the Dharma.”

My point in writing is this, and I repeat: we assume that “we” will be repulsed by samsara or (whatever), but in reality we may be already well past that point and not even know it. Instead of it being a decision we make (or are even aware of), we just may have already lost what we are habitually used to in the way of “being game” (or feeling game), i.e. we are tired of business as usual. Things just appear to have gone void, leaving a feeling of being empty of interest in just about anything in the world as we know it. This happens to all of us when we lose a loved one or something totally untoward happens, but it also happens quite naturally.

In either (or any) case, the remedy is the same: give it some time, but don't waste this emptiness. Don't be alarmed at having lost your feeling for mundane life or find that you just don't feel as you used to feel about something. Give yourself time to renew, regroup, time to let your energy-well fill back up again. It will come back; you will be renewed, but there will be a difference.

What I am describing here happens (and this has happened to me) every so often, usually sending me into some kind of panic mode. That's just a big waste of time and does no good. Just wait it out and the tides of self and attachment will come back in, no doubt. In the meantime, enjoy the vacation.

Remember that what we call the Self is a construct, one totally made out of our attachments (pro and con). And these attachments are constantly changing. When we were a kid, we might be all about a new bike. When we are older a new car, some golf clubs, a wife, a family, or what have you? The Self is the sum total of our current attachments. In fact, our attachments are the glue that holds the Self together. When we loosen our attachments, the self becomes transparent and we can see beyond it.

So, when the Self goes south or is shattered by this or that serious life-event, then our going void-of-Self is to be expected. It's the old Humpty-Dumpty syndrome. The Self cannot be put back together again as it was, but has to be regenerated anew as our attachments and habitual appetites reassert themselves. It's like waiting for an Internet site to load.

So, enjoy while we can any time out that comes our way, any "void-ness," knowing that our clinging-ness and tendency to grab on to (or push away) is not gone for long. Given a little time, the Self will be completely

regenerated, with perhaps a little reorientation; usually not all that much that it makes a difference.

The Self is by nature a conservative; it suppresses and obscures seeing beyond itself by the very nature of its attachment to the status quo, to reinventing itself. When time is kind enough to shatter our Self like a piñata (sending us into momentary shock), take advantage of that empty space or void-ness to look around at what's beyond you. You can be sure that sense of emptiness will be gone soon enough and things will be back to usual (and tight-as-a-tick or thereabouts) as the Self regenerates all of its attachments. Time out.

PIG BOARDS AND DHARMA

July 10, 2018

Attachments are restrictive by definition, binding us to our own biases, where otherwise we could remain free and clear. As our attachments fade through dharma practices, our path becomes less of a straightjacketed luge-run and more cling-free.

Margaret and I live in a rural community in western mid-Michigan. The yearly county fair highlights the 4H Club and farm animals. We took an early morning walk today through the country fairgrounds just as all of the animals were being cared for. I have always been amazed at how the 4-H'ers move pigs from pen to pen. They use what are called pig-boards, large plywood boards with cutout holes for handles. Pig owners, each with a pig-board, line up and (using the boards) form what amounts to a gauntlet through which the pigs run. The boards are used to physically block the pigs as they run and shunt them this way or that. It is something to see, often with the pigs squealing at the top of their lungs as they run.

Our personal biases and attachments (clinging and grabbing as we do) act like pig-boards of the mind to confine us to recursively defining our limits to the straight and narrow of our own prejudices. It is a perfect Catch-22, restricting our horizon to the status quo of our own likes and dislikes. The net result is that we seldom get out of the box anymore.

This conceptual logjam we ourselves create has to be broken up and that takes more than just a few mental exercises. This is why many of the dharma preliminaries are as physical as doing 100,000 full-length prostrations on the ground sort-of-thing. And

that takes some doing. It's not easy to fake a prostration and honestly look at ourselves in a mirror.

And it's hard to get by without greasing the way with our usual hyperbole and rampant expectations. We like to keep our own personal bubble intact (and inviolate) from anything we don't like and approve of. No outsiders need apply. We remain insular.

The remedy for all this is what, in dharma practice, are called the Extraordinary Preliminaries (Ngöndro for short). And yes, here is where we get to do 100,000 prostrations on the ground, among other things. Like molding clay or kneading dough, Ngöndro physically, psychologically, and mentally works us into dharma-shape through a process of transformation. I call it "dharma boot camp."

When serious dharma students enter the closed three-year-retreat, where they sleep upright in sitting-meditation position for three years (never lying down), the first thing they do is another Ngöndro, another set of these extraordinary preliminaries. They have already finished one set to qualify for retreat. And that's just for openers.

My point here is that the Tibetan Buddhists, through their centuries of dharma practice, have decided on the Ngöndro as a fit introduction to mind training. That ought to tell us something that we need to know, i.e. that it takes more than concepts to move us toward enlightenment. The rubber has to meet the road somewhere. Those who excuse themselves from such a showdown (or rationalize the need for them to do this) only tread water. No one is going to badger you to go further. Only you can make that decision.

We might ask: what ever happened to just using our mind to get enlightened, without all this heavy

physical stuff? Well, that “all-mental” approach is still available, of course. There are many kinds of Buddhism, but only one dharma.

The Tibetan Buddhists acknowledge that we CAN get enlightened through just conceptual means alone. That’s the good news. That bad news, so to speak, is that it takes innumerable kalpas of lifetimes to do it. Each kalpa lasts about 4.32 billion years, so it will take a while, but apparently it can be done. LOL.

So, which approach to enlightenment we prefer (if we prefer any at all) is up to us and no one will do it for us. Even the Buddha himself could not zap us on the forehead and we would be enlightened. The dharma is totally a do-it-yourself project. We each have to turn the wheel of our own dharma and we have to crank it by hand.

IMAGES SPEAK LOUDER THAN WORDS

July 11, 2018

When push comes to shove, I use images instead of words. As they say, a picture is worth a thousand words and this seems true to me. I work hard on my words, but when words fail me, photo images are my refuge.

And while the written word is a mental body that I inhabit and often live in, when the bird flies, so to speak, it is in photography or graphics where that flight takes place, if you get my meaning. I have been away from doing much photography most of this spring due to the business of various responsibilities, but I'm just now finding my way back to photography, which I had to set aside for a while.

And out of sight was out of mind, almost, although I miss the special clarity that comes from the particular form of Insight Meditation that I do using photography. However, over the years I have managed to separate the insight meditation from my photography and extended it to other areas of my life, like writing these blogs. Realization of any kind, once it has occurred, has to be extended and expanded infinitely, meaning constantly. However, this is no sacrifice, because expanding realization is the most enlightening thing we can do.

As you are perhaps tired of hearing me repeat, dharma realization is not like spiritual experiences, which we all sometimes have. However, experiences by their very nature come and go. To quote from a classic bit of Black Gospel music by one of my favorite groups "The Mighty Clouds of Joy" in their tune "You'll Never Know:"

“You may be up today, but you may be down tomorrow. You’ll never know.”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mtXoWx-yzZU>

Experiences are like that, up and down and on around, but “Realization,” once realized, remains realized from that point onward. Yes, it can be extended and deepened, but unless you let it lie fallow, realization never dies away.

So, many times I would see my Rinpoche (dharma teacher) each year for a short interview. I would tell him of my dreams, visions, and glorious spiritual experiences, and he would always respond with something like. “Those are just experiences. Pay no attention to them. Just keep practicing.”

Spiritual experiences go up and down. They are here one week, but two weeks later they are no more than memories that we try to remember, try to keep in mind, and hope to repeat again.

Realization, however, is like the Pole Star. Once we have found it, it’s always there to guide us, like a light turned on with no off switch. Realization of the true nature of the mind is what the Buddha taught.

SAMAYA: THE TEACHER/STUDENT BOND

July 12, 2018

In answering a question posted in yesterday's blog, I was reminded of something we hear a lot in dharma circles, which is the genuine gratitude a student feels for their authentic dharma teachers. This is the heart-essence of Vajrayana Buddhism, the incredible Samaya or bond between teachers and their students. Why is this so and how does it work?

I met my first true dharma teacher in the mid-1960s. His name was Andrew Gunn McIver and he was from Glasgow, Scotland. He had recorded the dead in the First World War, been a lumberjack in Canada, a traveling initiator for a Rosicrucian order, and had retired to Ann Arbor, Michigan where I lived; he also had a deep knowledge of Buddhism. Andrew first appeared in my life as any person new to me does; suddenly, there he was speaking to me on the University of Michigan Diag (where students hang out) and I was responding.

What I did not know consciously was that back then I was almost entirely insular, an island in a world of other people, none of whom I really trusted all that much. Andrew cut through my isolation like a knife through butter and it did not take long for me realize that here was a person "Other" than me who cared more for me than I knew (at the time) how to care for myself. That had never happened to me before, except with my family.

Andrew was on the inside track with me before I could lock him out and by that fact opened the floodgates that led to my mixing with the rest of the world and ceasing to be an island unto myself. As they say, "The

dewdrop slips into the shining sea.” He marked the end of my fear and distrust of the “Other,” as in “other people.” He also recognized me as his student, which had never before happened to me.

Andrew appeared to me late in his life and died only a few years later at the age of 82. I was the only one around and had to see to his things, his burial, and even designed his tombstone. It was only about five years later that I connected with the great siddha, the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche and began to seriously attempt to practice the dharma.

And it was only a few more years from there before I met my root guru, the Very Venerable Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche and became his student, which continues on until today. Rinpoche is now 95 years old. Our “root guru” is the one person in the world who first introduces us to the actual nature of our own mind... and we get it.

Rinpoche has said “No” to me more than he has said yes. He said no to me when I first asked to do a more advanced practice than he had in mind for me. He said no to me when I asked him (since I was already an astrologer and “spiritual”) if I could kind of skip meditation 101. LOL. When I would tell him my spiritual visions, dreams, and hopes, it was Rinpoche who pronounced them as just passing experiences and to think nothing of them. “Just keep practicing,” he would say.

In other words, Rinpoche was always direct and told me the truth about myself. And he was always right, although it sometimes took me time to realize it. Basically, there is no easy way out of life, especially when it comes to dharma. Rinpoche made sure I always knew that and never fooled myself. When I finished the quite arduous Ngöndro practices

(100,000 prostrations, and four other 100,000 repetitions), it was Rinpoche who gently told me to do them all over again. LOL. And he did it so kindly.

When I told him I had finished and asked what more advanced practice I should then do, he asked me if I wanted to know what he would do if he were me. When I said yes, it was then that he said that he would do another Ngöndro, which I then did. Ha!

And Rinpoche always treated me and my entire family with loving kindness. Of course, he treated everyone else the same way, which I found harder to understand. LOL.

But all of his students well knew that he could say “No” when he had to. As a student, I only needed to hear someone say “Rinpoche has that look today” and I knew exactly what they meant. His care for us was such that he did not hesitate to ask us to do the difficult, if it was what we needed to grow. And he did ask, but he always left it up to us if we wanted to do it.

I can remember very well in the summer of 1997, during our brief yearly interview with Rinpoche, when pretty much out of the blue Rinpoche told Margaret and I to go to Tibet and see His Holiness the Karmapa. And when I (a confirmed homebody) began to blather on and say that I intended to do that one day, Rinpoche simply said to go now, this summer. And it was already summer! We went within a month and took most of our kids with us!

I really didn't say no to Rinpoche, because he never asked anything of me but for my own welfare. Of course, seeing the Karmapa up close and in person changed our lives forever.

I am sure each person has their own unique relationship with their guru. I am just sharing some of

my thoughts on this topic. My gratitude for the stability Rinpoche has brought to my life knows words. I shudder to think where I would be had I not met him when I did.

[Photo of Andrew McIver and his tombstone that I designed, which has the symbol of the Sun on it. Andrew was all about the Sun, which I believe he passed on to me.]

DHARMA: NO PARTICULAR PLACE TO GO

July 17, 2018

Society is polite or tries to be. Convention is just that, conventional. How we fit into that can be like putting a square peg in a round hole. This is also true of the conventions of dharma, perhaps even especially so.

If we don't necessarily easily fit into the social graces of the community surrounding us, why would it be any different with the dharma community? There is some organization of dharma practices available for learning dharma, basically a progressive path of learning. Its purpose is to guide us, but to where?

That is a useful question and the answer, IMO, is that, like herding cats, the best that most programs can do is get us into the general ballpark of where dharma practice wants us to be. Beyond that is it up to us. Yet just what are we supposed to do?

Just as a train or bus can get us generally where we want to go, it does not always take us to our own doorstep. We have to go that last bit ourselves, all by our self. And I believe that in dharma practice, that last little bit of the way (which is absolutely important) is confusing to a lot of folks. It's similar to when we buy a suit; it usually has to be tailored to fit. In other words, there is a point where we have to get off the train and walk the rest of the way. That is my concern here.

There has to come a point where we use our common sense as to what we respond to and how. Etiquette may require that we use this fork for eating salad, that fork for eating dinner, and another for desert. We may or may not know about forks and how to use them. What are we to do?

Well, the answer is that we have to eat, so pick up any fork and have at it. Just eat. Enough of the analogies and metaphors. That is the kind of common sense I am talking about here, doing what is needed or comes naturally. All of our dharma training and the general approaches they are embedded in are still very, very general. They are conceptual to a marked degree and require some stepping-down (transformation) from that to the reality of any particular one of us as dharma students.

It's like the infant trying to find its mother's breast. The mother can guide the baby as best she can, but at some point the baby has to just latch on to the nipple. That last little distance to latching-on is what I am talking about here. It's up to the baby and not just to the mother. And here the baby is the dharma student and the nipple is recognizing the nature of the mind and how it works.

There is no map or dharma text I know of that avoids our having to rise to the occasion of using our innate intelligence (common sense) to walk that last mile. Texts and dharma practices can drop us into the ballpark of realization, but each of us has to sink or swim as to making the final connection, to having the "Aha!" and realizing for ourselves the actual nature of the mind.

This is why we have what are called the "pointing out instructions" because they can but point out how to go about recognizing the nature of the mind. The student has to do something to make it the rest of the way on their own. We each have to latch on by our lonesome.

So, it's this last leg of the journey that I am focusing on here, what is required of the student. Like an infant's first breath, the dharma student has to inhale and learn to breathe on their own. And it is here that

all of the work of both teacher and student comes together or does not.

From all accounts, it can sound like such a simple transition, but the reality of it seems to be much more physical or down to earth than that; there is more of a taste of blood in the mouth. So, you can do everything right as far as the conceptual instruction goes and still end up not grasping the mind's nature. How can that be? It's easier not to get it than to get it.

And it's the difference between conceptual understanding of our every personal spiritual experience and actual realization. We can get plunked down in the ballpark, but still not realize where we are. Just like a baby sometimes has to be spanked by the midwife to get it started breathing, so each of us may need to be jarred or shaken a little into grasping the mind's nature, to actually latching on.

We can lead a horse to water, but we can't make him drink. So, in the pointing out instructions, we can have them pointed out to us many times and still not grasp what they are pointing at. It's like the old image of the guru pointing at the Moon, but the student only sees the finger pointing and not the moon.

My point is that there is a crucial point or step where, like a child learning to ride a two-wheel bike, we are turned loose and we either latch on or we don't. And there is no shame in not getting it.

I had the pointing-out instructions many times before I got even a glimpse. I had a very, very high rinpoche take me in a room, sit me down on a chair, and then with his face only inches from mine try to point out the nature of the mind. And, to my utter embarrassment, I

could not for the life of me get it. Yet, I lived through the experience. LOL.

I had a close friend point out to me that I am too long winded in my writing of these blogs. I apologize for that, but I don't write to save you time or give you a quick read. And I write for the very few that may understand me more than just conceptually, who are actually close to getting it, and those folks will not mind the extra time it takes to follow my words.

Yes, if I could say it in a short poem, I would, but chances are that would not help. You too have to be ready; and if you are close to that, reading through a longish post like this will be a treat and not keep you from your other work. You will have no other work more important. LOL.

FINDING OUR DHARMA PULSE

July 19, 2017

Something that I find important for dharma students to understand is that in our dharma training we are used to looking outwards at books, teachings, and for instructions. Yet, that approach can only take us so far. We eventually have to turn around and look inward to our own mind to actually realize anything. And only we can do this. That reversal of attention (or direction) is crucial, yet I find it hard to communicate this well enough so that folks realize this has to happen to each of us and just how to go about it.

What is it that is being pointed out in all these dharma instructions? Most important IMO is the fact that we already have everything we need (right now) to realize the nature of our own mind. It's not that there is something that we don't have and somehow must first get from somewhere, but rather it's something that we already have, the thread of which we just have to grasp and follow-on. In other words, it's already there by default or necessity and it's we who at this point don't realize it. And that's what dharma is all about – our personal realization.

What makes us happy is what makes us happy. That's our clue. It's unmistakable. And I mean by "happy" what Pee Wee Herman might say, what makes us "Really, really happy?" Follow out your thread of true happiness, no matter where it takes you. What other choice do we have? It's what's already working for us. Instead of dwelling on what we don't like, being critical and holding back, flip it, and follow the reciprocal, what we do like. It's also right there, so learn to follow the thread of our heart's

happiness, whatever and wherever that is. It's our "yellow brick road."

If we are by nature critical, that is, if we know what we don't like and are reactive, this automatically means that we also must know what we do like or certainly know when we encounter it. We like what we like.

This sense that we DO know what we like or are looking for (that which makes us feel alive) is what we CAN seize upon to find our actual dharma direction, which is called our yidam. This "IS" our true direction or at the very least an indicator of it.

Like an internal compass deep within us, we just have to relax, let it point the way, and follow it. After all, it's what we already like, what makes us wake up in the morning and take notice. That's what dharma is all about: waking up. Pay attention to what wakes you up, i.e. what spontaneously arises as happiness. For example, whenever I see animals like dogs (or whatever), happiness arises in me. I just smile. That tells me something. We all have something like that.

This is part of what the pointing-out instructions (as to the nature of the mind) are all about, however (to play on words), it's not about just pointing them "out," but rather also about pointing "in"; this is what has to take place. I don't know how better to say it than that. This sense of poverty that so many have, i.e. that we now have nothing and need to get something from outside ourselves before we can begin, is simply short-sighted -- myopic.

We already have everything that we need to awaken at hand; we just have to recognize that and put it to use -- start to use it. We can't just remain passive waiting for our prince to come and we must be careful not to confuse learning to relax the mind with inert passivity.

As mentioned, we need to stop always looking outside ourselves for something we feel might be missing, something we have to somehow get and add on or for that one more book we must read. Don't wait! Instead, we have to learn to use what we have on hand right now, however much it may appear to us as inadequate. It's NOT inadequate because what we have is the only means we HAVE to transform ourselves (what we have right now) and the good news is that we already have it! You know: start where you are (with what you have) and go from there. That's the basic idea.

In other words, the key to recognizing the actual nature of our mind (recognition and realization) is not an idea or concept that we somehow need to grasp. The actual key is a byproduct of what makes us happy, especially when our compassionate heart wakes and when we follow (or find) how deeply we actually care and love. It's interesting that the key to realizing the nature of the mind comes through an awakening heart, what the Buddhists call Bodhicitta.

Many years ago, when I first met the 17th Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje, at some 15,000 feet in his ancestral home of Tsurphu Monastery in Tibet, I was not sitting there realizing how great was this being before me (which of course he is), but instead, in and because of his presence, I realized for the first time ever that at heart I am very deeply compassionate. It's all compassion! That kind of realization in his presence (which was a total surprise to me) is why he is the Karmapa and why he is considered an emanation of compassion and loving kindness!

It's in us; we have it.

DHARMA: EMBRACING THE YIDAM

July 19, 2018

Most, if not all, of the preliminary dharma practices are purification oriented, clearing out our obscurations before anything else is possible. This is what the Ngöndro practices are all about, a kind of dharma boot camp. If you have finished The Ngöndro, that says something. LOL.

It is after the Ngöndro that we can begin to search for our yidam and venture into yidam practice. Our “Yidam” is a difficult concept for many to grasp. The yidam may be a particular Buddhist deity or not; a yidam is not as much a thing, whether it be a deity or whatever, as it is a means for us to recognize the actual nature of our own mind. One definition of a yidam I found on the Internet is:

“The state of being indestructibly bonded with the inherently pure and liberated nature of the mind.”

Well, that quote covers the result, but not so much the means and path. And while yidams are intensely personal, I see no reason for them to be secret. A yidam represents our particular (personal) means of awakening, what it takes to wake us up, i.e. whatever is finally required for us to awaken – the means or method.

The Tibetan concept of yidam is very similar to the Native American tradition of having a totem or power animal. A yidam is something that we totally identify with to the point of its being able to transform us “alchemically” from relative to absolute truth, from our dualistic habits to the realization of non-duality. And the final result of yidam practice is a realization and this process is irreversible – a one-way

transformation. There is no going back. It's like in the Olympics when, after running and pushing like mad, the bobsled driver hops into the bobsled, tucks down his head, and rides. Realization is something like that.

Just as once we “realize” how to turn on a light by flipping a light switch, we never go back to not knowing how to do that; that's a realization. So, in dharma training a yidam is the means for us to achieve realization, exactly what it takes for us to recognize for the first time the true nature of the mind. Once realized, always realized. The worst we can do is let our realization go fallow and not extend or expand it, but even then, its imprint on our mindstream remains.

Yidams are perhaps most frequently associated with deity practice and not so much with other forms of realization practices like Mahamudra or Dzogchen, but yidams can occur in both. Yidams are, as already mentioned, whatever means it takes for us to identify for ourselves the true nature of the mind – what actually works.

For some practitioners, their yidam could be Chenresik (loving kindness and compassion) or Medicine Buddha (healing). In my case, although I did seriously undertake deity practice, using a wrathful form of Vajrapani as my yidam, it never took. As it turned out, my yidam, what effectively worked for me, was my lifelong love and connection to Mother Nature. What a surprise, but it should not have been, for nature has been my inner-ticket since I was six years old. In the end it came all that way around and back to that. As they say, “Who woulda’ think it.”

Here I was trying as hard as I could to make Vajrapani my yidam and then, through a series of unfortunate incidents in my life, I found myself

plunging back into Mother Nature for refuge and that was, for me, like a fish into water. And it just took, without my having to take or grasp at all. I put myself out in it to the exclusion of second-thoughts or self-consciousness. And in that total eclipse of the Self, all the stars came out and I at least glimpsed the nature of the mind. That's some hyperbole, but it was real.

As a friend-lama pointed out to me at the time, I had discovered what is called the "Lama of Appearances," that nature too can point out the nature of the mind to us and THAT effectively became my yidam by the fact that it just worked. However, in my case, although I had tried hard to jump-start a yidam with Vajrapani, Mother Nature was as natural for me as falling off a log. It was where my heart wanted (and always wants) to go.

It took no "trying" at all, but it did take a serious life event to bring me down to earth enough for me to immerse myself fully in the natural world once again. I had done so as a youth, but the visible pain and suffering that Mother Nature presents (she does not pull her punches) had kept me from going there too often in my adult years. Nature was just too painful to behold, despite all its pristine beauty.

Yet, when an untoward life event plunged me into personal pain, I suddenly had nothing to lose and I did not hesitate to embrace Mother Nature to the hilt once again, and lost any self-consciousness I had in her embrace and I could take nature directly and at full strength. And it was that full immersion (to the exclusion of thought) that finally separated me from my dualistic habits long enough for me to become familiar with my own mind. As they say, I took it "neat," without my habitual dualistic chaser.

And so, while I am not lama-trained in all of this, I can at least offer some useful suggestions that could be of use. I have said it all above, but perhaps (for once, LOL) I can boil it down.

Look for your yidam within yourself, nestled in what you already know and love, not something somewhere outside you as an add-on. What you already hold precious and inviolate, where you are confident to the exclusion of doubt (or even any second thoughts) is where you can find your yidam. Yidams are only secret in that they are our “secret” love, perhaps even unknown to ourselves until realized.

Just as all the books and songs say, “Love is the answer.” Who and What we love alone can free us from clinging to ourselves in separateness -- duality. True love is not separative; it is unconditional and thus has no conditions or limits. It even accepts the exceptions.

Ultimately for each of us, “the dewdrop slips into the shining sea.” It’s only a matter of time.

DHARMA IMPRIMATUR

July 20, 2018

For me, my writing always has a use-by date. If it is not published promptly, it's like milk that goes bad in the refrigerator if left too long. And this is because everything is of this moment. And that fact points out that there is nothing wrong with the writing itself since it is always going to be just writing, but rather what changes is the purity of my intention and the quality of my state of mind in the moment which allows or permits that writing to be written in the first place. In other words, I have to have my mind right in order to write and I have to write to get my mind right, so that is a Catch-22 that I like and that particular state of mind changes over time, sometimes even overnight.

Looking back at anything I have written, in hindsight, it's obvious that it is the product of the moment I wrote it and was only allowed to be written because my attitude or view permitted it. If a blog sits too long before publishing, it just naturally spoils because the moment is gone and has passed. I can no longer edit it because I'm not there in that space anymore. Some writings, of course, are salvageable, but then again many are not and I throw them out. This fact highlights the particular importance of not only the purity of our intent to ourselves, but also the general moment and state of mind we get ourselves in.

Perhaps all this is not apparent to other people (like my readers); they may or may not like the blog, now or ever.

And I always bring to mind that one line from Franz Kafka's diaries "Each line I write, it already has perfection." Why, because his mind was perfected so

that, like a die-stamp, everything he touched was imprinted by the nature and state of his mind. Kafka did not so much concentrate on improving his writing technique, as on improving his state of mind. To me, understanding this point is very important indeed. It's the true secret of writing, IMO.

This is like what, in the more advanced dharma practices, Mahamudra Meditation is all about. Mahamudra, the Great Mudra or Great Seal is the signature of everything – everything's signature. Mahamudra is an imprimatur that signifies everything perfectly – the perfect state of our mind.

So, if I get my mind right through writing and then write, that writing is in a way sealed by the moment and the signature of the purity of my intent is what seals or imprints it. And something (anything) made in that state of mind is sealed and this is true by definition. In other words, it lasts and is as pristine as my state of mind is perfect: if the moment and mind is clear, like a pure diamond, it lasts in time.

I don't want to get into a deep discussion just now of what "lasts" because for me it is a big topic that I could spend days just unpacking its various meanings. However, the idea is simple. What is made well (like a fine guitar or a Stradivarius) lasts longer, plays better, and is sealed in time as perfectly as it was originally created.

My only point here is that our present state of mind is so very important. The purity of our intent (and whatever degree we may attain with that) may be the only difference in the world, all that separates perfection (as perfect as we can get) from our ordinary state of non-realization.

And so, it makes a huge difference as to what we have realized because without realization there is no Mahamudra, no signature, seal, or sign – no mudra.

And to me, mudras or signs are all that we have to wave at eternity or as I like to put it to myself: my writings (for me) are prayer-flags gently waving in the chalice of the mind – a signature. As the poet William Butler Yeats wrote “The grass cannot but keep the form where the mountain hare has lain.” So true, but the imprimatur of our realized mind (such as it may be) flies in the face of that quote.

I write, not only to be read, but that my mind may be clear and that writing exists like a mudra, a signature or seal of the moment in time.

Essentially, these blogs are me clarifying myself. When you ask questions that are on topic, we can have a real conversation.

MEDITATION: RELAXATION OR AWARENESS

July 21, 2018

[Note: Just finished two and one-half days of babysitting a four-year old, preceded by the family reunion, preceded by a year-long preparation for our bust of a studio sale. I'm ready for some downtime. LOL. The photo is of a summer squash plant taken in our front yard. With the help of my sister-in-law Joan Erlewine, we have discovered that you can turn these squash into vegetable spaghetti and fry them up with a little oil and basil. Wow! Really great.]

I'm not sure how to jump into this topic other than to do just that, so here goes.

Sentient beings (including other people) have always been important to me. What can I do to benefit sentient beings is something I ask myself. I'm sure that many of us aspire to do just that each day; I know I do. I write my daily blog and it is my intent that it be of use to at least one or a few readers, but I'm not sure that is always true either. At least it is always of interest to me. LOL.

Each blog I write is a byproduct of meditation. For me, writing itself involves a special form of meditation, which in my case is a carefully learned form of Insight Meditation, something I originally did to clear my own mind. I had to learn to bring Insight Meditation to bear on writing and it took me quite a long time to do that -- a year or so.

And, I have done it for so long now that it is a habit and just part of my meditation practice each day. I look forward to this kind of daily writing more than anything else I do in a day, not so that I can

pontificate and create a blog (although I'm pretty didactic), but if only to clear my mind.

The process of writing for me is itself a form of meditation and I don't mean contemplation -- musing or noodling. One of the byproducts of writing, of course, is this blog that I post. However, the primary byproduct of that process is the clarity of mind and ideas achieved through the practice of Insight Meditation. I almost feel guilty for loving this practice so much; I said almost. It gives me joy.

There are many forms of meditation (or what is labelled meditation) in America these days, although many (or most) are forms of relaxation therapy that have been called meditation. Having only one word for "meditation" in English is confusing.

I am not trying to put down whatever anyone else does for meditation; I just worry that when the winds of time blow, whether having practiced relaxing (and not awareness meditation) will be enough of a help to stay the shock of death and entering the bardo. I just don't know. You tell me.

In my opinion, learning something about the type of unwavering-awareness meditation that the Buddha taught (i.e. waking up) might be more useful, but it too takes familiarization and practice to be effective. And they are not mutually exclusive. We can do both types of meditation (relaxation and awareness), but we would have to do both. I admit that I favor awareness meditation of the type that the historical Buddha taught. In the more advanced forms of awareness meditation, being able to relax (just as it is) in the nature of the mind is also of crucial importance. That is where I practice my relaxation.

GREEN GROW THE RUSHES, O

Jul 22, 2018

I've been super tired the last couple of days, after all of the preceding weeks of events. So, I tried to go to bed early tonight (about 6 P.M.) and just catch-up on my sleep.

Well, that didn't work. I almost fell asleep and for about maybe an hour I kind of drifted in and out, but finally I drifted back in and there I was staring at the ceiling and god knows I hate that. And it was in that kind of twilight zone that my interest in plants came to mind.

I'll sing you one, O
Green grow the rushes, O
What is your one, O?
One is one and all alone
And evermore shall be so.

Perhaps it was because today I weeded over 100 feet of flowers and plants after the rainstorms we had overnight. The ground was all soft and damp, perfect for weeding. And the beds really needed weeding. With everything going on lately, the weeds were almost eclipsing the flowering plants.

And so, I rolled down my sleeves (to keep the mosquitos off my arms), put on a hat to keep the flies off my head, strapped on a couple of knee pads, and went at it. Wouldn't you know it; I had just put on fresh pants that morning and was all clean and everything. Well, a couple of hours on my knees in the garden and I was dirt deep in mud, my pants were filthy, and I was soaked to the skin from the heat and work. I should have seen that coming, but I didn't bother to think. I didn't want to think about anything. LOL.

I probably came close to having a little heat exhaustion and the pile of weeds left in my wake, stretched 100 feet and looked like an unrolled green carpet. After they dry a bit, I have to rake them up tomorrow. I had to shower and put on fresh clothes.

Anyway, I got to remembering when Margaret and I went into the green plant business. It was just after we got married in the summer of 1971. I sold most everything I owned, principally a large collection of books and records; I then did something I thought I would never do; I left Ann Arbor, Michigan (where I thought I was a permanent part of that town) and moved up north a couple of hundred miles to Ewart, Michigan and went into the green plant business.

I don't feel like telling that story again, but for those of you interested, the link is here, with photos:

https://www.facebook.com/MichaelErlewine/media_set...

Right now, I just want to noodle on a bit on plants and stuff. Yesterday afternoon, Margaret and I visited an organic farm a few miles from where we live, which was holding an open house. It was kind of lightly raining on and off, but we strolled through various garden beds and hoop greenhouses, taking it all in. They had a good selection of Asian greens and all kinds of vegetables. I didn't realize it at the time, but I guess it brought to mind (but not consciously) the time when we ran greenhouses, both here in Michigan and down in Florida – some 19,000 square feet of greenhouses. I'm connecting the dots now.

Readers of my blog know I love flowers and photographing them, but I also love plants of all kinds. I've been thinking lately of making some short videos for fun, just stuff around the house and property.

Margaret and I are slowly getting ready for the yearly 800 mile (one-way) drive to our monastery in the mountains above Woodstock, NY. This will be the 30th consecutive year we have made the trip to attend the Mahamudra Meditation 10-day teaching with our teacher the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche.

At the beginning, I used to convert each 10-day teaching from audio to written format (typing it out and editing it) and help publish them. They would fill up a shelf of spiral-bound books probably four feet long. I did that for years, and later helped finance others helping, and so it went.

In recent years, Margaret and I have run the cameras that video the teachings, making sure the files are copied and permanently stored. I'm an archivist you know. Their video system is getting old, so this year I am going to bring my own camera system and everything we need for videoing the teaching.

So, to help do that I just bought a Sony SF5 XDCAM 4K camcorder and I already have various lenses (and what-not); I will be bringing it along to video the teaching. Yes, and I just may get into a jag of making videos too and post them here on FB. There are a few dharma instructional videos that might be worth doing, like one on the various kinds (and types) of rupas (statues) of the various deities, etc. That could be fun for me to film and for others to watch and see the variety that are out there.

So that, my friends, is what's on my mind this summer night while I sit here waiting to get tired enough to actually sleep. I'm already way tired enough, but you know how it is. We can't always sleep when we are tired.

[Photo of Margaret and I at our greenhouses in Evert in 1971. We were growing tropical houseplants. The business was a flop and we ended up in Florida running 19,000 square-feet of greenhouses there.]

THE FORM OF THE FUTURE

July 24, 2018

Lately, video has been on my mind, and I don't mean putting together some video podcasts for YouTube, but rather shooting fresh video. I have not done it for a while and kind of thought I had given it up. In fact, I sold off a great amount of my video equipment acknowledging that fact.

However, in the back of my mind there has always been that itch or gnawing feeling that I am not done with the process of capturing video images, even though it is a great amount of work. And with the need to help out at our monastery with shooting video, videography pops back up again. To me, it's a sign of some kind.

And so, I am kind of preoccupied with pulling together a video kit to take to the monastery, but not just that. I've also had some glimmerings that I could take some very detailed video that might be useful to others, in particular as relates to dharma. As mentioned, I am not crystal clear on all this, but there is something out there in the hinterlands of the future that is taking shape, so I'm interested to see what that might be.

And, I believe I can transfer my use of Insight Meditation in photography from still life to movement (video) and perhaps achieve the same kind of clarity I am used to in still photography. I just may have to find out. I'm taking it a day at a time, but I am already sculpting the future into the present.

And I know this because in the back of my mind, the wheels are turning and I find myself solving various video problems in almost serial fashion, one after

another. And all of that adds up to something new. Of course, I don't know quite what, but like the headlight of a train in the distance, I feel something is lumbering down the track. LOL.

This has happened a lot in my life and it resembles those ancient myths of Atlantis rising into view. In this case, nothing is yet fully into view, but I'm already working on some quite elaborate details. I'm knitting all of this together into a flow, shaping it like clay, molding it into a single piece of work.

In other words, I'm preoccupied and well on the way to being occupied. I told myself: No More Projects! I've a lifetime full of them already and there is something obsessive about them that I don't like, being involved to that degree. I should be too old for that or might need the space and time for better things, whatever they are.

Yet, I also know me enough to see that some signs are already in place; I'm being flagged down by something within me and waded into some kind of project. I can only tolerate this if there is a LOT of space involved and enough time to carefully articulate the process so that it is liberating in some fashion. Otherwise, it is just a waste of time.

So, I am extending these extenuating circumstances, lining them up so that they articulate clearly, step by step, like dominoes arranged to move each other to the end. I'm giving myself room, but not too much room, trying to keep in mind that walls are what make homes possible.

In other words, I'm already into it and trying to police myself enough to insure that this is mainline (an actual dharma path) and not just a sidebar or an excursion with no reason. Life is not just a vacuum,

an empty cathedral, but rather consists of enough activity to be meaningful, but not enough to be overwhelming. At my age, I guess the word is “pace.”

Like the three bears, I’m looking for enough, but not too little or too much. And I guess it’s up to me not to be carried away by all this, but to pace myself, one foot in front of the other, like a walk in the park.

Does anyone out there know what I’m talking about or are these just echoes that I hear? LOL.

AN EXHALATION OF WORDS

Jul 25, 2018

This blogging routine seems to be closing in on me, getting more and more self-restricting, channeling me (voluntarily of course) down ever more narrow (and hopefully reality-based) corridors. That's if I want to be authentic according to in my own sense of me and not turn into an entertainer. I write these blogs for myself and to share with those few Facebook friends who are interested.

And while I love to write, I seem to be adverse to my own exhalations of words, always preferring to move on then to stay still, although I admit that there is no place to go but right here and now. In other words, I'm like a crop-duster going over the same patch of land again and again from every angle. Learning dharma is nothing else if not repetitive.

To me, in my own mind, I'm happy when I can capture the moment in words that I understand, words that speak to how I feel in that moment, where I'm at just now. As I keep saying, tomorrow I'm almost sure to feel enough different that I have to write another blog, rather than let today's blog sit there for a while.

We tend to believe that words sit forever on a page or in a book, but really they are quite ephemeral in their own way. The words may not change on the paper, but the mind of the reader and the social environment around us in which we live changes constantly.

Our words cannot but capture and be creatures of the moment, try as we might to make them "eternal." Just as there is no permanent soul to Buddhist thinking, so words have no permanent soul, either. They change as the wind blows (as we change) and have to be

written afresh, generation after generation. With any kind of lineage, no more than the same is certain and a sign of success.

Words always carry the stamp of the times they were written in and the imprint of the mind that created them. To me, it seems our words are authentic to the degree they reflect the moment and time period they are written within. Shakespeare is as good a wordsmith as I have ever seen in English, but over the centuries even his words require a longer and longer stretch of the imagination to make them live again, IMO. It's a reach and not yet a bridge too far.

"Give us this day our daily bread" goes for words too. A fresh batch of words, at least for me, are far more authentic than one trimmed of the local time-stamp they were conceived in to make them "last longer." Day old baguettes are about worthless. IMO, freshness is a key issue in dharma – this moment.

However, I don't feel that what I write will be of no value in the future. Far from it. Many of my blogs are plenty durable; it's just that my state of mind changes, so I tend to endlessly write the same idea in many ways. This is proof to me that I write to clarify my mind. If you want to read it once and move on or if you want it short so you can get on with what you are doing, then this Facebook blog is not your ticket. LOL.

While I know you have lots to do and little time to do it in, I can't afford to worry about that. I'm not about trying to save you time so that we all can continue on as we have been. I'm trying to share information with you that allowed me shape my life more toward what I have always wanted to do and not what life and circumstances would force me to do to survive – the rat-race.

What amazes and motivates me every day is that I realized that the dharma does not require any special intelligence or talent, but works equally well for all types of people. I guess I write this blog for those who are on the tip of change and need a little encouragement (and perhaps suggestions) in persevering with waking up. As for me, I'm working on it!

REALIZATION DOESN'T MATTER

July 26, 2018

I will explain the above title, so don't panic. I can see that I'm, to some degree, trapped in my own habits; we all are. Of course, necessary habits like breathing are unavoidable, but other habits can be good, bad, or indifferent; however, one thing all habits share is that they are habitual and this by definition.

Likewise, we are also trapped in our bodies.

"Trapped" is not a nice word for, without a body, we would have no point of reference. Lightning has to go to ground eventually. As they say, Samsara is made up of being or not-being, neither, and both.

Or, as the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa put it:

"The bad news is you're falling through the air, nothing to hang on to, no parachute. The good news is, there's no ground."

And, as we in the West put it, "We are caught between the devil and the deep blue sea."

Indeed, we are caught somewhere in the middle of extremes, however we want to spell it; it's the middle-way that works -- avoiding extremes. It's fluid; we can move. And we can learn to swim or at least tread water. At the very least, we all are floaters. LOL.

I can't worry about the water that's gone over the dam, but I am interested in the water that's here now and going over the dam, especially when it rains and the water rises to flood stage. Then it all goes by so fast; I do my best to hang on to whatever makes sense, but over the dam it goes regardless. I am (we all are) left with whatever I have realized. Realization

does not matter, meaning it's not material. It's the only thing that stays with us when all else is gone.

How do we communicate and what's communicated? Probably nothing, since realization is only pointed out (or at) and even then not directly. So, what's being pointed out? The answer is that a lot is being pointed out, but obviously not well enough for us to realize it for ourselves. This samsaric world is like a sea of pointers, pointing every which way, but those myriad of pointers are not properly schooled so that they all point in the same direction like a school of fish. That has to happen. Eventually, everything (all the pointers) have to line up and an authentic dharma teacher can do that so that we realize the true nature of the mind.

For sure, it's a two-way street. The pointer-out (the dharma teacher) has to be authentic enough to actually point out the true nature of the mind and the devoted student of the dharma has to be purified enough of obscurations that they can see through themselves (the shell of the Self) enough to see and take the directions.

Just because a dharma teacher is famous does not mean he or she can point the true nature of the mind out to us, not because THEY are unable, but more likely because we are not oriented properly so that we can learn from them. I met the Dalai Lama many years ago before he was so famous. I loved being with him and personally meeting him, offering him a white scarf, getting his blessing, and so on. However, bells did not ring or light shoot out of his eyes. My point is that we can only know that a person is a dharma teacher if we find ourselves learning from them i.e. learning the dharma. They have to raise the hair on the back of our neck. That's the whole of it.

I have had many dharma teachers that I have learned from, some of them famous, but only two that grabbed me by the short hairs, raised the hair on my neck, and worked with me for an extended period of time. My current teacher has been with me for the last 35 years.

STILLNESS IN MOVEMENT

July 27, 2018

[I don't share much of the technical processes I work with because not that many are interested and I don't want to bore anyone. But I will make an exception here because for me this is a bit of a change and some of my Facebook friends follow photography.]

The last thing I expected, but something that makes perfect sense, is that the next step photographically for me is into video! As a still photographer (since 1956) and doing close-up work with focus stacking since digital cameras first appeared, this is a big departure. No one could be more surprised than me at my move. And I am not new to video work; I just have not done anything lately. Here is my reasoning for all this:

My focus stacking (which I share here often) typically reaches into the hundreds of individually focused frames collapsed and integrated into a single image, so it's just a hop, skip, and a jump into the very many frames needed for full motion, but I never thought of it that way. If I speed up the succession of image frames I end up with video. All these years, nothing moves at all in focus stacking and then, suddenly, I'm working with full motion, where anything and everything moves. It makes common sense; however, as mentioned, it came as a bit of a surprise to me.

In a way, it's like an old-time cartoon, where all my still-life photography starts to break out into song and dance. LOL. Still-life photography is just that, still, and video is all about movement. For many years I have concentrated on lenses and apochromatic (highly-corrected) lenses, the most highly corrected lenses

that can fit the Nikon F-Mount. And so, with video, it's still about searching for clarity, but this time the clarity is within movement.

If I am not carefully stacking 100 layers of images, what am I carefully doing in video work? Anyone who knows much about video and video editing knows that it is more time consuming than any form of still photography that I know of. I have made many hundreds of videos, so I know this from experience.

So, what am I getting at here? Well, there seems to be something emerging out of the fog of the future that commands my attention. I can feel it in my bones, but I just can't totally see or get my arms around it... yet, but it's coming. So, what does it feel like?

As mentioned, it feels like that with video it is still "clarity" that interests me, in this case that clarity is within motion. That's what it feels like. It feels like, instead of freeze-framing with focus-stacking, I am just letting the wind blow, which in my still photography I have never been able to do. Michigan, where I live, is so flat that the wind always seems to blow. So, now that I am getting back into video and movement, I say "Let the wind blow." What is the equivalent of stillness in video? That's the crux of it, right there and I know that sounds to me like an oxymoron.

So I say to myself: what there is that remains "still" in movement is perfectly clear as in: perfect clarity. I've been fanatical about clarity in stillness (still photography) through focus stacking. Now I can try to learn to have the same clarity within motion. Why not? It will be harder to do in video because of many factors. For one, video technology is just now getting large enough frame-wise to see all that can be seen

more clearly. 4K video is barely enough; 8K will be better. And then there is the question of raw.

As a still camera user (and I am not giving that up), I am used to grading in raw and can't imagine not having it. However, with the advent of Apple ProRes RAW, we are getting into the ballpark where, with raw footage, some remarkable video can be done in post, which is what "raw" is all about. Raw footage is just what comes out of the camera's sensor, with no attempt to clean it up in-camera. Raw footage is cleaned up in post-production, where we have more computer power, time, and what-not.

If Adobe would just add ProRes RAW to Premiere Pro CC in post-production and exporting, this would be like a dream come true. Then I could work with color in post-production with video as I already do in Photoshop with still-photography. Then, there is no reason not to migrate from still to video and perhaps use still and video in combination for enhanced effects. It would require that short videos become as common as still picture are now.

I have a good sized collection of APO (apochromatic) lenses. Many, if not most, of my highly corrected lenses can be used in video with the correct camera adapter, so what's the problem? Would I be surprised to see my still life come alive and move? I can live with that. LOL.

As mentioned, as of this writing, Apple ProRes RAW cannot at present be exported in Adobe Premiere Pro CC and the PC, so I may have to wait for that. This is Apple's fault, not Adobe's. Those with Apple computers can edit and export Apple ProRes RAW today with Final Cut Pro X and an Atomos Shogun Inferno recorder. I'm hoping that Adobe Premiere Pro may have that capability soon, but doubters say Apple

will continue to bogart ProRes RAW so that they can make more money. Of course, they will.

As for cameras, I'm going with a middle-of-the-road 4K camcorder, the Sony SF5, which can produce broadcast quality video, is small, yet very powerful.

I don't believe that this is just another crazy idea I am having; rather, I am having this idea because it is emerging from the future (at least for me) right now. In short, IMO, video will embrace (and engulf) still photography in the coming years. Still photography will come alive, so to speak.

THE ENDS OF LIFE

July 29, 2018

[Notes: We are still working through all the mess, clean-up, and insurance problems relating to the water damage at our center. It's clear that it will take months to remove damage, air out, and then build and restore the areas once again. I don't plan to write about this all that much; it's a problem we have to sort out here.

However, it is still so new that little else is getting my attention. In the next few days we hope to meet with the insurance adjuster, finish vetting contractors, and hammering out a plan for moving forward with the restoration. We are getting there.]

It's interesting how external events can overshadow (or suppress) whatever is going on inside us. I don't feel numb, but I do feel that everything going on just now kind of obstructs and eclipses the more intuitive or sensitive areas of the mind. I can see how going into retreat makes sense, getting out of the rat-race, if only to get our bearings.

I have to remind myself that we live in what the Buddhists call Samsara, a cyclic world, a world of cycles of ups and downs that endlessly repeat themselves. I don't have downs like depression or getting down-in-the-dumps, but certainly I oscillate from feeling very much present and engaged in life, to what I can only call a more "fringe" state, not one of simply feeling "bad," but whatever we could call the far end of our pendulum swing, a point of stasis just before things turn around and go the other way. I get stuck in those cul-de-sack moments and, I hate to say this, I don't much like them.

Again, it's not so much that I feel bad as it is that I don't feel all that good. Perhaps it would be better to say that I have temporarily run out of directionality; my inner compass does not "point north and glow in the dark" as it usually seems to, so to speak.

In a word, i feel uncomfortable and probably for no good reason that I can put my finger on. I guess this state is traditionally called ennui. When I look up "ennui" in the dictionary, none of the synonyms really fit, i.e. definitions like melancholy, sadness, languor, tedium, weariness, or apathy.

Well, words like uneasiness come closer, my own particular kind of "the blues"; and perhaps just saying that I have the blahs is pretty accurate. Again, as mentioned, it could be as simple as that I am addicted to directionality, to a linear progression toward something; it doesn't matter much what direction or that I will ever get there, or even that I know where I am going as the fact that "I'm going" somewhere. Directionality is my comfort blanket.

I consider this state of ennui (or whatever we could agree to call it) my problem or a problem that it is up to me to solve by learning to be comfortable in this state. I imagine that an enlightened view or person would be able to respond to the end-of-the-pendulum swing as well as to any other part of the cycles that are in Samsara. After all, cycles are just circles that go around and around and around.

No part of a circle is more important than another, so I guess it would be more correct to say this is more of an ellipse which has two distinct ends, what we could call our turn-around points. There is the end when good times start to fade and on the other when bad times (whatever we might call them) start to go into solution and get better. My daughter May, a

songwriter, penned the line “You know, trouble ain’t built to last.”

I guess that perhaps I feel that as a dharma student I should not have these turn-around points or mood swings, but rather just always be of one mind and temperament; yet, that is not how I am. Yet, that does not quite make sense either. I live in Samsara; that’s for sure. and Samsara is cyclic or so they say.

So, it is not that there should be no cycles and that we should always be in a static state, but that our ability to respond to each part of life’s cycles, the ups, the downs, and their turnarounds, should be the same. We should be able to effortlessly handle whatever part of life’s cycles present themselves. Of course, like all of us, I try to do my best, but I also know that “trying” doesn’t do it; only doing does it.

And this includes “ennui” in all of its many forms. I would like to relish and savor each twist and turn Samsara demands of me, rather than to not be able to respond and just flat-line and twist in the wind every now and again. I should be able to roll with whatever part of life’s cycles that appears.

And I have a couple of questions for you reading this, the first being: do you know what I am pointing at here, what I am referring to? Do you experience these same states? And second, how do you handle them? Do you too just wait them out (as I do) or can you respond to them (no matter what they require) and just how do you handle them?

I might liken these pendulum swings (and ellipses), with their turn-around ends to what in astrology we call planetary retrogrades, where a planet gradually appears (in the sky) to come to a complete stop, is stationary for a while, and then very gradually begins

to move again in the opposite direction. And there are two of these points, stationary retrograde and stationary direct. These are the two ends of the apparent planetary cycle or ellipse.

Now, the accent is on the word “apparent,” as in the actual solar system the planets only ever move forward. It is only from Earth (our Samsara, so to speak) that they seem to stop and go. Using the retrograde analogy, I feel I have the responsibility to realize these turn-around points in my life (and they happen all the time) with the same enjoyment as I like the linear sense of always moving and heading somewhere. I shouldn’t have favorites and, in truth, more and more of the time I don’t.

However, since I notice these times of ennui, rather than just happily eat them too as part of life’s diet, I assume that I will eventually master all parts of these circle-like ellipses with their stationary points. Yet, are these stationary points the only things that keep us awake at all? Would we otherwise just groove on mindlessly? Are these cycles like breathing? Do they keep us alive?

THE INSEPARABILITY OF SAMSARA AND NIRVANA

July 30, 2018

“Second star to the right, and straight on ‘till morning,” a line from J.M. Barrie’s “Peter Pan,” is classic advice, to put one foot in front of the other. Keep going! I believe we all try to just do that, but what happens?

We are ambushed along the way by time’s cycles of ups and downs, which remind me of Shakespeare’s Hamlet, where in his soliloquy Hamlet says:

“And enterprise of great pitch and moment,
With this regard their currents turn awry
And lose the name of action.”

We mean well, but the ups and downs of life’s constant cycles push us this way and that, rubbing us up against the grain, always revealing our sore spots. Just when I get up a head of steam in what I feel is a positive direction, life steps on the hem of my garment (so to speak) and sends me headlong into the briar patch. LOL.

This is no more obvious than in any exercise program I set up for myself or eating regime I intend to follow. The least little thing derails me and it can take days, weeks, and months to reestablish any similar direction, especially if I have health problems. As they say, from some point in life and onward, it is a downhill slide. We all know this.

These events are what are called “experiences” and all experience (or so the Buddhists say) go up and down with the tides of time. They are cyclic. We are up one day, but we may be down tomorrow. We are walking with the gods one week and crawling in the

weeds not long after. This is the very nature of samsara and thus why the Tibetan Buddhists continue to point out to us that we must realize this. We must realize the actual nature of our experiences.

In my many decades of dharma practice, there was no pith statement that struck me to the core as hard as this one line of supplication in the Karma Kagyu Mahamudra Lineage Prayer:

“Grant your blessing that the inseparability of samsara and nirvana be realized.”

One day that line hit me like a 2x4 to the head. Talk about an imprint or a seal! That single line, that samsara and nirvana are connate (two sides of one coin) cauterized a lifetime of hope and expectation in an instant. Wham!

That one line cut through my Catholic upbringing and the remnants of my thoughts of heaven and pie-in-the-sky like a knife through butter. The concept of interdependency and reciprocity suddenly loomed large in my mind and sealed those never-never lands with the realization of their inevitable absence. And that was a good thing -- healthy.

The absolute seal of the true nature of the mind is definitive. Everything else is Will-O'-the-Wisp and evaporates like fog in morning sunlight.

That reality is like a hologram is no joke.

THE EXTRAORDINARY PRELIMINARIES DHARMA BOOT CAMP

July 31, 2018

This blog is for those who are practicing dharma or thinking about it. The only point in writing this is to point out that our experiences, the continual slideshow that we experience day in and day out, has eventually to be realized and by no less a person than ourselves.

It's easy for us to acknowledge that rinpoches and Zen masters are realized, but as for the rest of us, good luck. Yet, eventually that is exactly what has to happen. Perhaps worse yet is that we have to make it happen all by ourselves. No one else is going to do it for us (or can). Ask yourself: just how is that going to happen?

I don't consider Buddhism what society likes to call a religion, but I do ask: how are we going to "get religion," so to speak, when it comes to realizing that we are not yet realized? I have spent decades working with teachers on my own dharma path (I am still on it), wending my way as best I can, but how about you?

Unfortunately, we can't just throw a switch and be realized. And a dharma teacher (not even the Buddha himself) can do that for us either. My point here is that there has to be a plan and that is what the whole network of dharma practices is all about – a method and progressive path.

I spent years not even giving a thought (or a care) about trying to get more realized. I didn't even have an idea as to what realization is or why I might need it. Talk about a slow progressive path: my realizing

that I need to realize came about as slow as possible. I just wanted to be happy and find some meaning in life.

And it was only when I finally began to “realize” that the happiness I sought was interdependent with everyone (and everything else) around me that I even began to consider my whole life situation (including other people, and even my family, etc.) into the equation. You know what I am talking about here. It’s like the old folk song “Dem Bones.”

“The leg bone's connected to the knee bone,
The knee bone's connected to the thigh bone,
The thigh bone's connected to the hip bone,
Now shake dem skeleton bones!”

Everything and everyone is connected and that’s called “interdependency,” a key dharma term. We are all connected and it’s all about connections. When that dawned on me (and, mind you, it was slow), then realization of the actual situation I was in became more possible. Until then, I was flying blind, so to speak.

It’s an obvious fact that the highway of lifetimes around us is filled by many vehicles, some going here, some there, and at different speeds. Dharma does not interest everyone; that is clear to me. “Realization” has taken an untold number of lifetimes for all of us to get to where we are now and we still are not realized. As my dharma teacher once said to a group of us “We are the stragglers, the ones who in all the time up until now never got it!” Well, yeah. That appears true.

If we are not interested in “getting it,” in having some realization, there is no blame. Just continue on as you have been. However, for those of us (however few)

who don't want to wait virtually forever (lifetime after lifetime) to become more realized, there are things we can do to encourage realization to dawn in this lifetime. As I like to joke with myself: we can go to meet our maker, like at least halfway. It's up to us.

There was a clear point in my own dharma practice when I realized that I was not progressing with meditation in what I understood to be a normal or fast-enough way and I became more open to suggestions. OK, what COULD I do to speed this process of realization up? And the answer that I found was that early-on I had taken a pass on doing what are called the Extraordinary Preliminaries (Ngöndro), which I like to refer to as "dharma boot camp." I had done and taken to heart the Common Preliminaries (The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind toward the Dharma), but somehow I had felt the more difficult Ngöndro practices were, well, too much trouble for me to consider. "There must be an easier way" or so I thought.

Well, as it turned out, there was NOT an easier way that I could find, so eventually I found myself backtracking and knocking on the door of the Extraordinary Preliminaries, what is called the Ngöndro. Up to that point, as I mentioned, Ngöndro seemed just too time-consuming and too arduous for me to consider, but when I actually stopped to consider that I was not getting anywhere otherwise, I reconsidered the possibility of my doing Ngöndro. Of course, Ngöndro had been suggested to me before, but this time it was my decision to entertain the possibility. This was a pivotal moment, because previously I had considered Ngöndro as quite Medieval, something perhaps out of the dark ages. Gad, it was so physical, like doing 100,000 full-length

prostrations on the ground! Me do that? The dharma had been, for me, more of a mental or philosophical nature than physical. LOL.

I had previously thought of Ngöndro as some kind of diversion (going out of my way), a kind of sidebar practice that was purely optional and that (since I was on the fast track) might even slow me down or stand in the way of my realization. Anyway, that was my rationalization.

So finally I understood that Ngöndro COULD BE a path to better prepare the way for me to attain realization. The humor in all of this is that not only was Ngöndro necessary for me, but after I finally had finished Ngöndro, I was asked by my dharma teacher to do it all again – years of work. LOL. That is what a hard nut to crack I am.

And so, each of us has to measure how resistant we are to the process of our own realization. And, of course, we don't have to do Ngöndro (or anything) and can continue to sail on just as we have until now. It's up to us whether we can trust ourselves to know what's best. I couldn't. LOL.

We have taken the easy way out all the way up to now by just bumping along and may not have attained much realization at that. Our ignorance of the reality we are in is an ingrained habit and there is no one who will force us to do otherwise. That too can be a scary thought, i.e. that we are left to our own devices and might well have a finger on our own scale. We ignore what we find too difficult.

On the other hand, if we are tired of the wear and tear on our minds from Samsara, Ngöndro is another way or method to prepare us for realization, just as in exercise or dieting there are programs we can

undertake for either, that is, if we want to go to the trouble. Well, I reached a point where I actually wanted to go to the trouble. Imagine that! I was finally serious about waking up. Or, as the old saying goes, I realized that with samsara, “The screwing I was getting was not worth the screwing I was getting.”

I don't mean to be vulgar, but to me that is a very apt saying.

THE TIME IT TAKES TO DO THINGS RIGHT

July 31, 2018

I get questions about the traditional set of dharma practices called Ngöndro that Tibetan practitioners undertake that is relatively long and arduous. Even the thought of it is enough to scare off many Westerners. I know I thought it was something out of medieval times when I first heard about it. There was no way that I would ever do it. It was not my “kind” of dharma practice. LOL.

Ngöndro is one of the ring-pass-not thresholds in dharma practice. It hovers before us like a cloud (although it is a blessing) until we put it behind us by actually doing it. It is the doorway to the advanced practices, not because we should go through it for tradition’s sake, but rather because unless we do Ngöndro, we can’t do the advanced practices. Why? Our mind will not be refined enough to grasp the more advanced practices. In other words, Ngöndro is valuable for its results. I call it the dharma boot camp. We don’t leave samsara without it or an equivalent.

Of course, finally deciding and making up my mind to do Ngöndro was not simply the end of it. Hardly! I still actually had to do it. Ngöndro is very difficult for most Westerners to do and it takes a long time, at least at the pace I was able to do it. I had a family and worked full time, seven days a week, 12-14 or more hours a day, and squeezing in an hour to do Ngöndro each day was not always easy, especially if I did not always feel like doing it. And I didn’t.

Any regime, whether it be health-related or dharmic, can appear optional (at least we think so) and too often I would choose the option not to do Ngöndro that day. Oh, of course, I was brilliant in my rationalization as to why it was better to put off to tomorrow what I just did not feel like doing today. However, that only slowed Ngöndro down, so that it took even longer. Funny how we stretch out what we consider painful. LOL.

Yet, I did do Ngöndro and eventually it was done. Sometimes I even would do two sessions a day, one in the morning and another in the late afternoon, but that was probably only when my inner machine was running smoothly. The least wrench in my gears and one of the first things to go out the window on such a day was my Ngöndro practice. And it can get worse.

I did my Ngöndro as religiously as I could, but I did it kind of in a perfunctory manner, which is to say I just did it because I felt that I had to do it. I didn't always "like" doing it and, as it turns out, that mattered. In other words, it is not enough to just do Ngöndro; we have to like doing it too, which means having the right motivation or intention. Watching the clock, so to speak, is not the right attitude, as I found out.

Doing Ngöndro by the numbers, which amounts to a series of five practices, each done 108,000 times, is not enough, nor is doing Ngöndro for some given amount of time, like three or five years, etc. Ngöndro has to be done sequentially, but we have to want to do it and have the correct intent and attitude or so I found out. LOL.

Because, when after a number of years I finally finished Ngöndro and went to my dharma teacher to request one of the more advanced practices that are given to a student after they complete Ngöndro,

Rinpoche had this to say. “Do you want to know what I would do if I were you, Michael?” Of course, I said yes and Rinpoche then said: “I would do another Ngöndro.” And that was that. Of course, I did another Ngöndro because the one thing that exemplifies what is called Samaya, the bond between dharma teacher and student, is implicit trust in the directions given to us. Our root guru knows what is best for us better than we do. That’s the whole point.

I have had many people learning dharma ask me: “Do I have to do Ngöndro? I am happy doing what I do now” And, of course, the only answer to that question is “Of course you don’t have to do Ngöndro. Keep doing what you now do.” And this is because Ngöndro is something that we must want to do and we even have to request permission from our teacher to do it and be given permission. That exchange to undertake Ngöndro itself is a contract and bond.

I’m not going to try to talk anyone into doing Ngöndro, because what is the point? Have it your way. Not everyone may need to do Ngöndro and certainly not everyone wants to do Ngöndro, although I can’t remember ever meeting any Westerner contemplating dharma practice that did not IMO need to do Ngöndro. LOL. It reminds me of the classic movie “Cool Hand Luke” and the phrase “Cause you’re gonna get your mind right. And I mean RIGHT!”

It’s the “wanting” to do it that has to be there. When we are not satisfied or no longer happy with just humming along with our dharma practice, but sense that we are, at best, just treading water and NOT getting to where we imagined we would like to get, then THAT is when the thought of doing what are called the Extraordinary Preliminaries (Ngöndro) comes to mind. We have to be in an extraordinary

state of mind to want to undertake such an arduous practice. That, my friends, is what it takes.

GETTING OUR MIND RIGHT

August 2, 2018

The rain of dharma wisdom is already (and has been) out there and the sunshine of great dharma teachers too. We have everything we need from that end to grow our practice. What is missing?

Well, the answer to that could be a multiple-choice question with more than one correct answer. But among the right answers (and probably Numero Uno) is getting our mind right. That is up to us and how do we get our mind right if we don't even realize that it's not right now? Dharma is all about realization and we may not have enough realization to even realize we need more. That's what's called a stumbling block.

This idea of pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps is the concept here. It is by nature difficult to get much momentum when we have none. And with most of us there is a natural amount of resistance to doing anything that we have to first overcome. It's out of our way and mostly unknown, which is probably why we are exploring it in the first place.

And the tendency is to "go for the gold," so to speak, to try to achieve the result we want rather than to concentrate on the process of getting there. And that is a problem many dharma practitioners have, not treating the process as part of the goal.

In other words, it takes time to reach a goal and with dharma that time is endless if the process is not considered properly. We can't win an archery contest without learning to shoot. We can't win a race without learning how to pace ourselves, and so on. Well, with dharma how we get there is where we are going, so

to speak. We will never achieve realization unless we first master the process of realizing, which is what?

In the society we live in today, lip service can take us a long way. We can nod our heads and wink at the same time. In other words, we can go along to get along and people do just that. It's part of politics.

And while there is politics in any spiritual organization, when it comes to personal dharma practice, there are no politics. As I like to put it: as smart as I am, even I can't sneak up on a mirror. And that's exactly what happens when to start to look at our own mind.

We can't fake it because there is no one to fake out except ourselves and our intent is already known to us. Intent is the one area where we can't really be dualistic or double-minded. Again: we can't sneak up on a mirror.

And by "intent" I don't just mean that I intend to do a difficult practice like the Ngöndro. Intent is not a one-time thing, but has to be meticulously maintained throughout the entire practice. With dharma, our attitude is everything. In fact, if we can maintain the proper intent and attitude, the outcome of our practice is assured to be successful. If we don't, all bets are off. In fact, our chance of failure is 100%. So, what is a bad attitude and how bad is "bad?"

"Bad" is like a thermometer and our results directly vary accordingly. And it's just a physical or scientific thing, like if we try to put a bolt into a nut, it has to be exact or it won't work. Our dharma attitude is like that. There can't be any slippage or slack. Again, we can't fool ourselves or, anyway, not with dharma. Sooner or later, that bubble pops and we are back where we started from.

And so, with dharma practice, which can have a final goal like with Ngöndro (we do 100,000 of this and a 100,000 of that), concentrating on just getting them all done will not do it. It is HOW we do those 100,000 prostrations (or whatever) that determines our success or failure. And again, the reason why is because the practice has to be done properly for us to receive the proper effects of that practice. Trust me; I know, because I had to do the whole thing all over again because I missed this point and originally just did them to get them done and not with the proper attitude. I was just going through the motions.

Keeping track of a practice like Ngöndro is one thing, but that is not “doing the practice.” Counting iterations or time-spent is purely mechanical. For instance, I used to do 100-200 iterations of a practice (like doing prostrations) or I would practice for an hour (or whatever) and write down how many I did in that hour. There is no grace in that.

What matters is not how we keep track of (as said) iterations or time, but rather how each of those iterations is performed. Simply put, our heart has to be in it. If not, there is little to no benefits being accrued. So, how do we put our heart into it, so to speak?

Well, one helpful tool is to bring the “Common Preliminaries) to mind, what are called the “Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind toward the Dharma.” The Venerable Chögyam Trungpa has a story in his biography of when he was young he watched someone cruelly kill a puppy by smashing it with their heel, and this moved him deeply to compassion.

Years later, if he wanted to touch into his compassion, he would remember that incident and that

compassion would come back to him. That's just an example, but the general idea is simple.

There is no point in marching through a practice just to get it done and out of the way. Instead, we have to deeply feel where we are coming from afresh each instant. Obviously, that is not always easy to do, so any step in that direction is better than reciting mantras by rote with nothing behind them, i.e. with no clear intent.

Our compassion in my experience is like a deep well within us. We may not be in touch with it often and we may have to kind of pump it up from the well a bit, i.e. prime the pump. I can say this from experience. Deep within each one of us is a well of the water of compassion. Never doubt that, because it's there. How we reach that has to be up to each of us. Just as Trungpa Rinpoche brought the story of killing of the puppy to mind, we will have to find our own surrogate for that.

This is why, before any practice, it is advised to sit down and contemplate something like the Common Preliminaries for a few minutes, to kind of get the juices flowing, so to speak. I know this may sound artificial, but not as artificial as having no intent in mind at all and just rattling off the practice to get it done.

We need to realize that our attitude and intent on each iteration of the practice is the only thing that guarantees results. The mere recitation, without these, does nothing but waste time. Better to not do a practice than to do it without intent and heart; nothing is achieved and we run the risk of staining the practice with our attitude, making it harder to enter into it the next time.

We know (at some level) when we are being ineffective or doing things without heart and feeling. Or worse, as mentioned, is doing it and not wanting to do it at all that day, thus running the risk of staining the practice so that we develop an increased resistance to doing the practice at all. It is easy to stain a practice and those kind of stubborn stains are very hard to remove. Doing that to our practice so that we no longer like it is what is called a mistake.

POINTING AT POINTING AT

August 3, 2018

My respect for the dharma and its authentic teachers is as profound as I get. Personally, I have found it difficult to do many of the dharma practices, but I deeply respect them nevertheless. It's like physical exercise; I don't always like that much either, but I always feel better for having done it.

We have to move and exercise our body to be healthy, but the same goes for our mind. And, IMO, most folks don't know how to go about exercising the mind. It's not a lack of the faculty, but just plain garden-variety ignorance and lack of experience. No one has ever shown us how to do it.

Furthermore, we live in a society where there is very little opportunity to essentially train our mind. Yes, society teaches how to USE our mind as a tool to get things done, but to most folks that "tool" is a black box. We know how to use the mind, but virtually nothing about the mind itself and how it works. It's painful for me to say this, but sitting meditation for a few minutes a day, while not harmful, is but a gesture toward what it takes to know the mind. It does not even amount to a preview of what it takes. This can be a problem.

Of course, I am not trying to discourage people from whatever meditation practices they do. That's not my intent. I am, however, pointing out that it takes more than going to church on Sunday for an hour to get to heaven. At least, that's my opinion. In meditation, we have to extend that kind of awareness we work to achieve sitting on the cushion throughout our entire

day and life for it to amount to anything that can move the dial toward realization.

Yes, it is good to keep our hand in and set aside some time each day to meditate. But that's just a bookmark to hold our place until we can manage to extend our awareness throughout everything we do in a day. Just as it takes total effort to become a master of a musical instrument or a sport, the same is true for meditation and the realization that can result. A little bit of awareness is not enough to achieve realization. It just isn't. That's all.

And it's not just more and greater effort that is required; realization of any kind depends on our intent, our orientation. It's like sailing a boat; where we end up depends on how we set the sails. 90% of dharma training is orientation. That's what takes time. The Buddhists call it "Bodhicitta," which roughly translates to something like "Awakened Heart." Our heart has to wake up to compassion. Acquiring the proper attitude or orientation of Bodhicitta, without effort, is not easy to do, but is absolutely essential.

So, all of the great many dharma practices exist to fine tune our approach to the mind. It's like an elegant form of Tai Chi, a most subtle gesture through which we can invoke the nature of the mind from the universe. All of the pushing and pulling of the various dharma practices exist to make us malleable enough to take flight and sail in the winds and channels of the mind.

It's like the most perfect kite taking the sky or carefully setting the sails on a boat that will guide us through the troubled waters of Samsara. Dharma training starts out with a formidable series of exercises, but ends up fashioning the most delicate leaf that can sail

in the winds of time. It is a process of refinement. And it's we who are being refined.

Instead of fashioning something for use in this world, like every other method we know, the dharma embraces and realizes the ENTIRE world as we know it, in total, leaving nothing out, including even the embrace. That's "Realization."

POINTING OUT

Pointers,
Themselves,
Can just point.
They never are,
What they're,
Pointing to.

They always are,
Beside the fact,
And never facts,
Themselves.

However,
When a pointer,
Points at itself,
The intellect,
Short circuits,
And the mind,
Can rest.

And that's a fact.

CLARIFYING THE SELF

August 4, 2018

The Self is a wild and crazy beast, something we are encouraged to hunt down and exterminate here in the West and we do, yet still it's nowhere near extinction. LOL. In Asian countries, like Tibet, the Self is no big deal. Yes, it exists there and is well and happy, but there is nothing like the preoccupation with it that we find here in America, where the Self is almost always on our mind.

And the Self is a very simple creature. It invites what we like and pulls it closer and blocks what we don't like and pushes it away. The Self reacts. Yet, upon that simple reaction are built elaborate sand castles of self-aggrandizement and loathing in the mind. For sure, I could write scores of blogs and several big books just on the Self and how it works. That's not what I want to do here in this blog.

I believe that the difference between how they consider the Self in the East as opposed to the West can be contrasted. It seems to me that understanding the self and how it works in Tibetan dharma is old-hat and is well-understood, while here in the West the Self is our enemy, something wild that we have little control over, like a mythical beast that we just can't seem to put down. This is a big preoccupation.

In America, the Self is almost a matter of a life and death struggle, while in the East it is almost as tame as a pussycat around the house. I believe the function of the Self is the same here as it is there and the only difference is a matter of our reaction to it. To Tibetans, the Self is a wily secretary, our personal gopher that we have to keep our eye on, while here in

the West it is a runaway train that jumps the tracks at will.

Americans seem to confuse the ventriloquist and the dummy. Our mind is the ventriloquist and the self is the dummy, not vice-versa. In other words, the Self is entirely our own creation, our own little Frankenstein, and it is nothing more than the sum total of our attachments and aversions, which acting together are the glue that holds the Self together.

If we removed all our attachment to it, would the self just go away or be invisible? Neither, but it would not be the preoccupation or obstruction that it is now. We can learn to use the self for what it is designed for, our personal planner and secretary; however, we have to keep in mind that it works for us and not vice-versa.

And the Self is not our “friend,” although we can be friendly with our self as we would any other person. There is no point in trying to talk to ourselves; it’s a case of the blind leading the blind or if we realize the self, simple neutrality. The Self is something to appreciate how helpful it can be (and to be kind to), but not an object of our love and attachment.

If our self is so benign, then what’s the worry? You would think there’s nothing to worry about, but we all know that’s not true, at least in this modern society. I don’t want to spend the rest of this blog pointing out what’s negative about the self. However, let’s just look at a few of the cons.

Obviously, the Self is a major center for reification, you know, gilding the lily, so to speak, i.e. falsely elevating our Self in our own estimation. It’s a kind of incest that we should know better than to enjoy. The Self is our own creation, the sum total of our

attachments and aversions and not something to have a love affair with or to place before others. All the “good books” tell us that.

The key to getting over and realizing ourselves is what I call Reactivity Training or “Reaction Tong-Len” and I have written about it here many times. One series of articles (and a free e-book) on reaction is [here](http://michaelerlewine.com/viewforum.php...).

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

In summary, the idea is not to remove or stamp out the Self, as many fundamentalist white-papers suggest needs to be done. There is nothing wrong with the Self (as in our self); it is an integral part of who we are and if it were not there, we would have to invent it in order to get anything done.

What we can do is to begin to understand, experience the Self actively, and develop some realization as to what the Self actually is. At that point, we stop focusing on it so much and just let it do its housekeeping tasks. With practice, we can start to see beyond the Self and into the nature of the mind. In other words, while still being right there, the Self becomes transparent to us for all practical purposes.

As I used to say to myself (yes, I have talked with myself. LOL), I just put my Self out to pasture like you would an old cow. I give it enough hay and sunshine (plus kindness) for it to be content, but otherwise I have stopped focusing on it. It can go about its business for all I care.

I’m not saying that I don’t sometimes wake up and realize that I am once again reifying myself or having approach or avoidance reactions to whatever pops up in my viewfinder. I still do. However, generally, I am not concerned about my Self as much as I used to be

or, for that matter, care what people think of it. And I am not ashamed of myself for appearing selfish if I do. What would you expect? Mind your own business is my way of looking at it. Years ago I wrote this little poem about all this.

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 MEMBRANE BETWEEN US

August 5, 2018

Just what are these blogs about that we all read on Facebook, both mine and perhaps yours, attempts to contact or be in touch? I'm not particularly lonely, but there are parts of me (and topics) that get no airing-out other than here on my Facebook blog. Using that definition of loneliness, it's less "lonely" if I blog. In fact, it's exactly like talking with someone, unless all I get in response are echoes of my own voice. LOL.

I can't expect folks to be exactly on the same wavelength as I am. There are many different stations on Facebook's radio and, although I have a lot of Facebook friends, few tune in enough to my blogs to actually respond. However, I appreciate those who do read and like my blogs and if you actually enter the conversation, so much the better.

We are each alone with our self all the time, a kind of solitude or retreat all of its own in life. And my Self is not my favorite conversation partner. We all have a bubble that is or is not that osmotic or permeable. Do vibes flow from my writing to you and then back? They certainly can and do, but not everyone is so comfortable that they can jump in the swimming pool and find out.

And then, there is the sheer busyness aspect. People are going a mile a minute and very, very few have enough time that they can slow down long enough to read my blogs. As my own brother told me, "you are long-winded." And so I am, which is why my readers have to be hungry for the particular topic I'm writing on. LOL.

I always wished I could just be a poet and say it all in a few words, but the powers that be made me an essayist and a didactic one at that. I would never have guessed that I would write essays. I didn't choose this. That's just how it turned out. LOL.

And how impervious is the membrane separating us on Facebook? In my experience, that seems to vary with each of you. Some of you are right there with me, eyeball to eyeball. You get my drift, so to speak, You say so and I hear that. Others just "Like" and still others lurk. I never hear from you except when something unusual or untoward happens to me or to all of us. Well, maybe on my birthday I might hear from you, which I appreciate, but an actual conversation would be so much better. The appreciation of contact seems to be an individual thing.

A few of you have what I would call a symbiotic relationship with me here on Facebook. The membrane that separates us is very thin or hardly there at all and it goes both ways. I can feel you and you me. Some people say that Facebook friends are not real friends, but for me that's ridiculous. I feel close to a lot of my Facebook friends and what happens to me in a day happens to you at the same time in your own way -- resonance.

My first true dharma teacher Andrew Gunn McIver, a traveling initiator for a Rosicrucian order, was so sensitive toward the end of his life that events that happened locally (or even worldwide) would show up in his personal life in resonance on a real-time basis. His membrane with the world was very, very thin, if it was there at all. As far as I could tell, he was a realized being, the first that I had ever met.

Some of us are in lockstep; others perhaps not so much, and still others prefer to be strangers -- incognito. It takes all kinds. My own penchant is toward the spiritual, with a dash of the mystical, but with my feet firmly on the ground. Spiritually practical is what I am, not practically spiritual. LOL.

What I like best is when a topic I write here resonates with a few of you and we share thoughts with one another. Our reverberations can build until we are pushed out of our ordinary state of mind and partake in a kind of online celebration of sorts, if only for a day, and we have a time-out from whatever other busyness we each are locked in.

Eternity is found just in time. I'm grateful for that.

RUNNING ON EMPTINESS

August 7, 2018

How to get started? People perennially make the mistake that they have to “get ready” to practice dharma. And by that I mean they feel that they have to have the right environment. Or, they have to move to the right place and the list goes on and on. They want to set the stage for dharma practice.

I can remember when all I had was one 4x5” photo of a Buddha and I placed it on a book shelf and sat on a cushion before it. Next, I had a single small Buddha statue made of some kind of composite something. I sat before that. Of course, over the years I have collected so many dharma trappings that I could start a mail-order business.

However, with all due respect, my point here is that all of this is also a bit of window dressing to make us feel better or to get us in the mood. No harm done, but we don’t need all that, but without it we might feel pretty naked. So, I totally understand why we want to build a little nest or an inner-sanctum. I did the same thing myself.

As for spending time working to appear “cool” with dharma, what can I say? That would be a total waste of time and missing the entire point of dharma practice. Dharma requires our complete attention. We can’t waste it trying to prime the pump.

Yet, the bottom line, when all the chips are down, is that the only thing one needs to practice dharma successfully is the right intent, the will and desire to do it. And that includes wanting to benefit yourself and to be of greater use to other people. This is called

“Bodhicitta” and it is the sine-qua-non of dharma practice.

However, we can't just dial up Bodhicitta and have it. It is a product of naturally arising compassion within us and compassion is a byproduct of our grasping the nature of emptiness, the holographic nature of reality. It's all about actively experiencing the interdependency of all things and thus, as mentioned, realizing that reality is somewhat of a hologram.

“Emptiness” is not empty like an empty cup; emptiness is empty like, as mentioned, a hologram. We are empty of any permanent entity like a soul. We are ephemeral, Will-o'-the-Wisps, flicking in time like a candle flame in the dark fed by karma.

To me, the important fact is that we have never, in all the time immemorial, been any different. Buddhism does not, like Plato's allegory of the cave (original sin), believe that we once were something and have fallen from that state. Buddhism does not think in terms of states, but rather of an ongoing process that will never amount or arrive at anything permanent (like an eternal soul), but nevertheless exists in its own manner.

Perhaps this is why we can't help but reify ourselves with veneer, trying to make reality more real than it actually is. The great rinpoches and lamas endlessly tell us to look upon reality as we would a dream or magical illusion, for that is the substance of which our lives (the stuff of dreams) are made of. In other words, when we wake up, we clearly wake up to dreams – Will-O-the-Wisps.

I have devoted much of my life to music and used to play music myself for years. And I have four wonderful kids, and each knows music. One of my

daughters is a professional musician full-time. I have learned a lot from my own daughter May's song writing. Great songwriters are very rare. I often find my own innermost thoughts and experiences embedded in her songs. Perhaps the apple never falls far from the tree (LOL), so I see myself in her writing. Here is a song May wrote early on that I have always liked; it is about our being barely there.

"BARELY THERE"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V20v1zjnjY4>

NO TIME LIKE THE PRESENT

August 8, 2018

Perhaps yesterday I was unclear. It happens. My point was that we can't wait forever to begin. Literally, there is no time like the present. None.

It's true that I am a huge proponent of waiting for just the right signs to make a move, i.e. no wine before its time and all that. The signs have to be there, but that alone is no excuse to not act. Now is the time we each have.

My point is that we can't wait forever to begin, either. It's not that we are helpless or don't have exactly what we need at hand right now. We do and it's always there because what we have at present is what we have to use to make any change at all. We are right in the middle of what we have, by definition. It's what we have to use here in the present to make any move, warts and all.

And that is the idea I was trying to communicate in yesterday's blog, not that we should not attempt to get our ducks in a row or our dominoes lined up if we can. It's hard not to attempt that, harder yet to do. Instead, my point was that (by definition) we are imperfect and cannot wait for perfection before we begin. That's the idea and the "why" of dharma practice. We have begun. We are already in route.

Beginning now (today and here) with what we have is my point. Dharma practice is a process of continuing refinement, which means that we start out with something less refined -- whatever we have on hand and however we are. A better or more perfect situation may be in the works, still forming, but in the

meantime, we don't just wait to get started. We are already started.

"Pie in the sky," a future and better situation, is desirable, but not if it paralyzes us in the here and now so that we end up waiting instead of acting. As the great Mahasiddha Tilopa said "Don't Invite the Future." Our expectations are no substitute for the present moment and what can be done with it.

Perfect this moment now rather than try to repair or rejigger the past. Acknowledge the past with our awareness of it, good, bad, or indifferent, but as Tilopa also said "Don't Prolong the Past." Don't dwell on it.

Instead, we can create a new past from the freshness of this moment now by setting our course properly. Water over the dam, what is past, is already done and gone. We can't get it back or seriously change it.

We can but take note of what happened (our past) for what it is and let it go at that. It is what it is, but it need not define us. As the Mahamudra Lineage Prayer so succinctly says 'Unwavering attention is the body of meditation.' It's the "unwavering" that I am pointing at here. Don't bother to look back or dwell in the past. Like in Genesis, Lot's wife looked back and became a pillar of salt.

I don't know about that, but I do know that time spent on the past is time not spent in the present creating a new and more useful past. In other words, IMO, it is far easier to create a new past than it is to rectify what has already passed into history. We can't change those facts, but we can create new ones.

And the same goes for the future. Time spent in expectation and looking forward, assuming that the future will be better, is also time better spent in the

present. Tilopa's famous words of advice are pure upadesha, pith instructions of great importance.

And so, of course we look to and prepare for a better future, but not at the expense of the present. That's the point. There is nothing wrong with the present as it is right now for practicing dharma – ready or not. So, yes, we look for all the auspicious signs to appear, for our ducks to all be a row. However, in the meantime, now is the only time we will ever have to engage in dharma-practice.

Years ago, when leaving the monastery of the great Bokar Rinpoche in West Bengal, India, saying goodbye to Bokar Rinpoche, he said: "Tomorrow or next life, whichever comes first."

Today, right now, is essential.

ROUNDING LIFE'S CORNERS

August 9, 2018

In my life, there are always corners and I'm always trying to get around them. This may be a problem that I tend to have that others don't, i.e. contending with the thick and the thin (ups and downs) of life in endless rotation. Things are good, things change, and things are not-so-good, etc. Or, is this just the way Samsara is for all of us? You tell me how it is with you.

Does dharma practice help? It does; it helps a lot, but my patience still times-out if the tight-times go on too long. And it's not like becoming impatient solves anything; it's just the opposite. LOL.

We learn in dharma teachings (and practice) to bring whatever occurs (no matter what it is) to the path – good, bad, or indifferent. And I am very sensitive to “indifferent.” I would rather be feeling the good or doing my best with the bad than just feeling nothing at all but ennui; that's just me.

Partially, what I am saying here is that for me the rewards of dharma practice take time; they are not exactly sudden, but rather slow to manifest. However, manifest they eventually do. For example, the very complex way I stack focus in my photo images can be so grueling that it teaches me patience. It's only because I like to photograph nature (which I enjoy) that I put up with the inevitable hassles involved with this kind of photography and thereby learn patience.

For me, it's all dharma all of the time. It used to be just dharma practice on the cushion (which I still do), but that amount of time is a pittance compared to engaging my path dharmically all day long, which

nowadays I mostly do. With my kind of obscurations, dharma cannot be a part-time job. I have full-time obscurations. LOL.

Engaging, as I pointed out, means bringing whatever appears on my mind-scope during a day (with no exceptions) to the path. It's not rocket science because whatever arises "IS" my path, so I don't get any special congratulations for doing the obvious. I learned a long time ago that I would never get to heaven, so to speak, going to church for an hour on Sunday. LOL.

And by "Take whatever arises to that path" means just that, facing it head-on and being aware of it. Being aware of what is happening to us is the first step. The second step is observing our reaction to whatever arises. As I used to tell myself, "it was permitted" to happen to me, right now, here in my life. My reaction can be accepting, responding appropriately, but it also can be reacting negatively (whether involuntarily or not) or just indifferent.

My reaction to what arises determines the course of action I have to take. As mentioned, if I can roll with it and simply respond naturally and appropriately, that is a good thing. If I find myself wincing or pulling back, that requires some negotiation with the event; I need to tone my reaction back and I do this by simply noting my reaction clearly and then dropping and letting it go afterward. That awareness itself is enough to tone down the reaction, especially if I repeatedly go through the process as it relates to a particular cause of reaction.

Punishing or scolding me never helps. In fact, any kind of time spent dwelling on the reaction, trying to pinpoint its cause or whatever, only muddies the water. It is enough to be clearly aware when we react

(instead of respond) and then let it go at that. Note it. Toning down our reactions is an iterative process that takes time. This has to be practiced.

As for indifference, that is a lot more difficult, at least for me. In my case indifference seems to accumulate and pile up, even if I am aware of it. I'm still working on that one, which usually means waiting out an indifferent reaction or a time-of-indifference, which in my case eventually accumulates as "ennui."

For me, waiting for change that has not yet come, probably because of my acknowledged problem with impatience, is the most difficult. Life seems to kind of flat-line and I am left suspended in some kind of limbo until the eventual change finally rolls around and happens, after which I am relieved. I don't like staring at the ceiling in the middle of the night because I cannot sleep either.

I'm sure that each of us has his or her own tendencies regarding the above. I am just sharing what happens with me. Stuff happens; I'm aware of it. I note it and work with it to tone it down. And I am still working to have the courage not to flinch when ennui strikes, but instead to graciously wait out those empty or void times (some of which are quite long) until life blossoms again. Of course, I like the blossoming. I love flowers. LOL.

However, I am (very slowly, mind you) learning to like or at least not flinch so much when hard things happen or when nothing happens at all.

In all of this I do my best to maintain clarity.

BRINGING IT TO THE PATH

August 9, 2018

When I was first beginning dharma practice, perhaps the one book that I depended on, that always made the most intuitive sense to me was a text brought to Tibet in the Eleventh Century by Atisha called “The Seven Points of Mind Training.” This seminal text is an integral part of what is called Lojong practice or basic mind-training. It has within it 59 dharma slogans that left an indelible mark on me. In this pith text dharma is proclaimed as vast as the sky.

I would like here to focus on just one of these, slogans #16, which translates to “Whatever you meet, instantly join it with meditation” which is often paraphrased as “Bring adversity to the path or as the Ven. Thrangu Rinpoche says “We bring unexpected circumstances to the path.” Here is a free version of these slogans (with commentary) on the Internet for those interested by Ven. Thrangu Rinpoche.

<http://www.rinpoche.com/teachings/sevenpoints.htm>

How do we bring adversity to the dharma path that we are on? And we are all are on a dharma path, whether we know it or not. Taking what comes to the path is not so hard. We just first learn to be aware of and then work with whatever arises in our life each day. Instead of ignoring what we face and pushing it aside or out of our mind, we work through it.

And by “working through it,” this means that we learn to become familiar and comfortable with what otherwise we might ignore or even run from. This is no more apparent (in my experience) than with whatever bit of dharma practice I do in a day.

Sometimes, dharma practice goes easier and at other times it's like pulling teeth. We don't feel like doing it or we are just beside ourselves for one reason or another, instead of being engaged. We are going through the motions, but we are just reciting it while being distracted and somewhere else. We all do this.

Or we may just feel out of sorts. If that's the case, then it's this uncomfortable or "unwanted" feeling that we take to the path. That's the place to begin. It is a classic dharma statement that the whole idea of meditation is simply one of becoming familiar with our mind. And they mean getting familiar. Being familiar with another person we all can understand. Familiarity with our own mind is something that for many of us has to be acquired.

And we have to start somewhere, so the here and the now are perfect for becoming familiar. As mentioned, some days sitting practice is smooth, but there are other days when it is rough. Our obvious distraction sticks out like a sore thumb to us. We are not present. It's that sore-thumb-ness that we have to become more familiar with, the not wanting to practice at all or waiting-until-it-is-over-ness.

True dharma practice is always about right here and now; the more uncomfortable we are the better to work with it. It can be as simple as a bad mood or an off day. Waiting out a bad mood is just a waste of time. Better to become familiar with the bad mood, i.e. make friends with it until we are familiar with it. Managing our moods always involves engagement on our part, i.e. becoming familiar. It's like the old advice: if you have lemons, make lemonade.

The thought that I like to keep in mind when I feel somewhat out-of-joint is that the very fact that I'm aware that I don't feel right, THAT awareness itself is

not out-of-sorts. Taking note of that tells me I'm just fine and this other mood that makes me uncomfortable is going to evaporate sooner or later, so why not sooner. In other words, I'm identifying with the one who realizes I am in a bad mood rather than whoever it is that is in a bad mood. That realization alone can be enough to turn as around, causing us to reintegrate and not be of two minds.

Working with the mind is not for the shy of heart; it's a hands-on affair, much like we would work with pizza dough or limber up raw clay. We can't stand back and watch, but must jump in with both hands and massage out the doubt. Whatever double-mindedness we may be troubled by can turn around in a flash and there we are: totally integrated once again.

BEHIND THE EIGHT-BALL

August 11, 2018

I just don't have enough time to write my blog these days. What I mean by that is that although I have enough hours in the day, my mind is too busy about other things (I am too uptight) to feel like writing. Once again, I'm under the gun, so to speak, so busy that there is not enough relaxation to be inspired to write, even though here in the middle of the night I have the hours to devote to it. Understand?

In other words, I have the time, but am just too tightly wrapped at this point to relax to where I can reach into the place where my writing comes from. I can only laugh at myself for always managing to get into this kind of pickle. This is not the first time, mind you.

In this case, what has got me busy is preparing camera equipment to take to our monastery next week. I'm not just taking the usual cameras, but spending a few days at a dharma center along the way, where I am being asked to take both still pictures and some very high-resolution video.

In this case I'm looking at a new technology called Apple ProRes RAW 4K video and I'm trying to figure out whether I can properly learn to use it before we go. For example, shooting raw video at high resolutions takes special SSD drives. And I have managed to order the wrong kind of drives twice already, so I'm on my third order and have to wait until next Tuesday to even begin testing all this out.

Anyway, for me the dharma in my words today is realizing that when I get too busy like this, behind the

bell curve and thinking and worrying too much, that worry or busyness suppresses my intuition to the point that my well-of-words just dries up. Well, it dries up enough that I can't get beyond my own double-mindedness, my worry and the one who is realizing that I'm worried. They are like two very different people. I guess it's my Self worrying and my more realized awareness that is realizing all of this. That makes two of us! LOL.

Usually I am single-minded, but right now I'm (I do this a lot) beside myself with things to do and think about to the point that there is very little point to what I am writing. LOL.

So, I am writing about writing. I will try again to tomorrow.

INVIOATE

August 12, 2018

“Ineffable” is the word I’m after, meaning “beyond words.” That’s where I find myself these days, but how did I ever get here and how do I get back? I’m not speechless (we all know that), but rather, right now making any effort at all to write un-rings the bell of truth for me. Words can’t express what I’m feeling. Yet, I still ask myself what is this all about? That’s just me.

IMO, I realize that this is about going to see Rinpoche. It’s happened before. Coming events do cast their shadow and many years, when I am getting ready to travel to see Rinpoche, I’m already there with him. It’s like that famous quote from the poet Gertrude Stein “Before friendship faded, friendship faded,” only here it is more like “Before I’m with Rinpoche, I’m with Rinpoche.” And when I’m with Rinpoche, I am usually silent. LOL.

And I can’t find the hat I put on when I write this blog. It would seem that any effort on my part to communicate is now somehow off the mark, and so I fall silent. The words don’t fit; they don’t do justice to where I’m at. It’s like just having respect for who I am at heart. We all know that everything is not about money, so this is true for words too. Everything cannot be expressed and shouldn’t be tried. There are some doors we pass through naked of thought or comment. We all know that’s hard for me. LOL.

I’m not trying to express how I feel, but rather I’m expressing how I can’t express. And I can’t because I won’t. That’s the point. Even I have limits, lines I won’t cross, because to cross them does not ring true and,

as they say “The truth will set you free.” I believe that and none of us like to go against what is the truth for us. “Straight is the gate and narrow is the way” comes to mind.

I also know from experience that (like all things) this condition too will pass. I was brought up before TV ever existed. Back then we had radios and the radio announcers used to give their call signs with “We now pause for station identification.” I’m doing something like that now, even if my conscious mind (the one that writes this blog) does not like it. LOL.

In my own way, I’m receiving the blessing of my guru, and to do that even I have to be quiet for a while, which as you all know is hard for me. To repeat, I can’t speak because I won’t violate the purity that has to take place. It doesn’t feel right.

I won’t look at what I can’t see without effort. And thus, I can’t describe it.

STILL AT IT: AN UPDATE

August 13, 2018

I'm doing what I have been doing for days now, learning more about the ins and outs of high-end videography, starting with the white papers and moving through many hours of tutorials and then right into handling the equipment itself. And I'm doing all this with an eye to using it on my forthcoming trip to our monastery Karma Triyana Dharmachakra (KTD) in the mountains above Woodstock, NY. Of course, I have shot video there for years, in particular at the annual 10-day Mahamudra teaching that is coming right up.

This will be the 30th year Margaret and I have driven to this same teaching, although early on I was transcribing these 10-day teachings and various other tasks and not yet videoing. I have also shot a lot of still photography at KTD, including putting together two books of my photos of His Holiness the 17th Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje.

<http://spiritgrooves.net/e-Books.aspx#Other>

As my Facebook friends know, I do a lot of still photography (and have for years), as well as having put together some 200 videos for YouTube. In other words, I have done video for years, but not at the broadcast level. I'm upping my game and doing my best to bring a higher level of video work to task. It's been a steep learning curve, but I finally have my head above water; it has been a while since I learned something this complex in such a short time.

I have a handle on it now, but for a while there it was overwhelming. I love good equipment and it takes time for me to organize it all (physically and mentally),

figure out how to pack, arrange, (not to mention using it) so that everything is accessible. It's coming together and while not rocket science, it is not a walk in the park, either. I am working with state-of-the-art, bleeding-edge, video, the recently released Apple ProRes 12-bit RAW codec as shot on the Sony SF5 camcorder and exported to the Atomos Shogun Inferno recorder, with all the bells and whistles – sliders, dollies, focus pulling, excellent audio, etc.

Getting all the switches, cables, and settings configured just right, which is what it takes to get the job done, is a trip. Once I master it, no problem. High-end video is very different from still photography, although video has yet to catch up to still photography in size and its working environment – color grading, etc. So, I've had little time for anything else.

“Keep your mind to the grindstone and your head down” is what I tell myself. I'm not saying ignore anything, wear blinders, or stick my head in the sand. That's not it. Being of one mind and purpose not only gets things done, but it cuts down on unnecessary confusion as well. In other words, mind your own business is my point to myself. And I have been.

Margaret has also been learning much of this right along with me. It takes two of us to get this done right. And that's my update.

CAN YOU HEAR THE MUSIC?

August 13, 2018

I'm in a story-telling mood. Perhaps it's because I spent two hours in the dentist chair today and that wore me out.

Anyway, that's the way I feel these days, lost in the stars of what I'm doing. I'm reminded of the old song lyrics: "The music goes "round and around, and it comes out here."

My daughter May Erlewine has an even better quote from her tune "Heart Song," which she did years ago, before she was very well known. The girl is a song writer.

"Everything goes round and round,
And up and down,
And side to side.

My heart is a rodeo clown,
Distracting the pain so that I can just ride,
Ride on by.
So, that I can just ride."

It's even better when May sings it, so here it is:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch...>

May today is a well-known singer, who has appeared on "A Prairie Home Companion," opened for acts like Lyle Lovett, plays from coast to coast, and is well known in the Midwest, especially in Michigan where she lives. I have mentioned this story about May before, but I will tell it again here. It's a favorite.

When I was young, I too was a musician, traveling (hitchhiking) with Bob Dylan in 1961, opening for Cream (Eric Clapton) at the Fillmore in San Francisco in 1967, jamming with Jerry Garcia, hanging out with

the Everly Brothers, Iggy Pop was my drummer, and so forth. In other words, I know something about music.

As the founder of the All-Music Guide, the largest database of information about music (biographies, discographies, tracks, albums, etc.), I had frequent visitors to our center and dealings with major companies like Amazon, Microsoft, Blockbuster, Corel, Musicland, Borders, Phillips, and on and on). I also founded the All-Movie Guide and started Netflix out with our movie data for years, before they could afford to make their own data -- things like that.

With all the visitors, we would often put them up at our center and sit around my large kitchen table in the evenings talking and getting to know one another. Since I loved music, I always wanted to share the very best music with my guests, so I would play them tunes that they had never heard before, hoping that they would hear the music.

Yet, these guests could never seem to listen, try as they might. When what we call the "hook" for the song (the best part) would roll around, these guests would talk right over it almost every time. To my sorrow, they just could not hear the music. I found this very frustrating, but I would do it, year in and year out. And so it went.

Then many years later, I think it was in a radio or video interview May had (but she might have just told me directly), my daughter May said that all those years when I was showing the very best music I had ever found to strangers, May was sitting there taking it all in. SHE could hear the hook; SHE could hear the music and these many nights around the kitchen table (when I was serenading my guests), I never noticed that there was one person in the room that was

hearing it all. That was May and it amounted to a kind of musical education from her dad, who was oblivious to what was going on. LOL.

I feel that is one of the most wonderful stories I have ever heard and hearing about it was a deep lesson for me..

CLEAR BLUE SKY

August 25, 2018

I am now in the mountains above Woodstock, New York at Karma Triyana Dharmachakra monastery (KTD), where I have been coming since 1983. This particular teaching is on Mahamudra Meditation, a ten-day intensive that has been going on since 1989. Margaret and I have been to every one and this is the 30th year it has been held.

Too much water has gone over the dam to ever sum up all that has happened until now on this trip. Suffice it to say that I have been very busy, busy not only photographing projects with a still camera and a powerful video system, but busy as well connecting, practicing, and spending time with my dharma brothers and sisters. And of course, there has been precious time with Rinpoche, who is now ninety-five years old. Talk about walking in the clouds, which I actually have done in Tibet, this has been a walk in the light of the dharma with those practitioners dearest to me – my dharma friends.

They all are here, including of course Rinpoche himself, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, but also my close friend Ngodup Tsering Burkhar, who has been traveling with His Holiness the 17th Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje. Ngodup has a few days off and so is here at the monastery with all of us.

I will skip over the flurry of technical video stuff I have been absorbed in and all of the things that have gone wrong or threatened to. For example, I spent four and one half (intense) hours yesterday afternoon trying to fix a single bug in the video setup. That's the way some of the technical problems have been, but what's

new? For me that has gone on since the early 1970s, when I got into computers and media stuff.

There is so much that I would like to share, but it would have to be on a one-to-one basis, since some of it is too personal and sensitive for a public forum. Margaret and I had an opportunity to spend time with Rinpoche and receive instruction and of course his blessings.

As mentioned, we are now at the monastery. I am told that bears are a problem this year. Here, on the mountain, is where they live and I am told they have been wandering right into the courtyard of the monastery, especially one big black male. So, we don't go walking at night.

However, I do go walking very early in the morning, just as the first light dawns, so I had better keep my eyes open. Margaret and I take a walk that is almost two miles long, going down a long and very steep hill and then basically climbing back up. It is a bit of a workout.

The photo here is of the stupa that is on the retreat land where we stayed for a few days. A stupa is a Buddhist monument that represents the mind of the Buddha for all to see, including animals. Here is a shot taken early in the morning, when the mist was rising from the nearby pond. Rinpoche and a few of us come down to this stupa and Rinpoche recites various offering prayers while we circumambulate the stupa. Then he joins us in the circumambulation.

So, I am doing all of this and, of course, still thinking about whatever is on my mind. Mostly, what I think about is how to share and communicate what little I have realized about the dharma. It's on my mind just about all of the time. What I wish most of all is to

share with folks like you what I can about what the dharma is all about. And I don't mean just ideas we read in books, but how do we, just ordinary people, take hold of the dharma and have it work for us. This is what I care most about.

In the tradition I practice in, we work with an authentic teacher who kind of supervises our practice, helping to keep is on track and headed in the right direction, if possible. Of course, we do all of the crazy stuff we have always done and Buddhism is not about coercion, so no one makes us do anything. It's all voluntary on our part and up to us if we want to practice and learn any dharma.

And, as I have written about many times before, most of the preliminary dharma practices are all about purification. Much like the old game of Pick-Up-Sticks, we very carefully remove one obscuration after another until we get down to a "fighting weight" where we can begin to see through our obstacles, what obscures our mind. It is at that point that an authentic dharma teacher is most precious.

There is a time when we have done about all the general study, thinking, and even practice we can and are ready to actual take hold and grasp the dharma more directly. All the pith teachings say that we cannot do this by ourselves, but an authentic teacher can, working with us, perhaps manage to point out to us the actual or true nature of the mind to us for the first time. There is no guarantee that we will grasp it.

Appropriately enough, this event is called "Recognition," because this is the point where we may be able to, with the help of our teacher, recognize for the first time the actual nature of the mind, this mind that we have always been using, but have never properly looked at the nature of.

This event has been likened to one of those figure-ground paintings, where embedded in an image is another, hidden image, that actually has to be pointed out to us by someone who has seen it personally. However, once we can see it, we can always see it from that point onward.

While no description can describe what I am explaining here, it can be pointed out by someone who has personally see it. And that is why, in the kind of dharma practice I do, this is called the “Pointing-Out Instructions.” Our teacher, actually our guru, may be able to point out to us the true nature of our own mind so that we can grasp it for the first time. That is the idea. The Rinzai Zen tradition does the same thing using haiku with a trained teacher.

An analogy that I find useful is this. All of the texts, books, and teachings of the dharma, by definition, are somewhat general. We have to have a general understanding before we can understand a more detailed explanation, much less have the nature of the mind pointed out to us. So, my analogy is like a bus that we all ride to get home. It is very rare that a bus will take us to our doorstep. Instead, a bus will let us off at a “bus stop” and we each walk from there to our home.

In the dharma tradition, as I understand it, that last block or mile from the bus stop to home is very individual. Otherwise, we would all end up at the same home, etc. In the tradition I practice in, that last mile from the bus to our doorstep is call our Yidam. A yidam is what it takes each of us for the dharma to get from the generalization we get from teachings and texts to the specific form of practice we need to achieve recognition of the actual nature of the mind – that last mile.

Think of it as a pair of tailor-made shoes that only fit us, but that will take us from the bus to our home. It is the task (the main purpose) of what for us is an authentic teacher to link us from our general understanding of the dharma to what it will take for us to snap into seeing that picture within a picture. This can be (and is for most of us) very difficult, which is why only an authentic teacher can hope to bring us to our senses enough for us to take charge of our own mind. That's the idea.

For example, my yidam is very personal. Often it is said that one's yidam is secret and must be kept secret. However, I see this differently. It is not that a yidam is "secret" so much as that my yidam will not and cannot (probably) work for you. I can tell you how I walked that last mile to home (to the degree I have), but if you did what I did, you would just end up at my house, not your own.

So, an authentic teacher does not burden you with how their yidam worked for them, but tries to keep their own personal path out of the way, and assists you to fashion your own yidam and thus walk that last mile successfully. I hope you get my point.

Since I don't consider myself an experienced dharma teacher, I have spent far too much time on this blog telling you about my yidam, because that's pretty much all I know about. I need to not-bludgeon others with my personal trip as much as work to help others find their particular yidam without burdening them with my own trip, the way it went down for me.

Of course, for each of us, our yidam is everything, the missing link that finally helps us recognize the nature of the mind. As they say: Eh Ma Ho! How wonderful indeed. But that and a bus ticket will get you a ride on the bus, IMO. I too am learning as we speak.

And so, I do not consider a yidam so much a secret as that talking too much about my personal trip and yidam can easily be an obstacle for others in finding their own yidam. I am actively working to remove the baby from the bathwater and to become more useful (if I can) in helping others to walk that last mile to home, which is then only the beginning of realized dharma practice.

Your thoughts?

MEMORIES OF TSURPHU MONASTERY AND TIBET

August 28, 2018

It's three AM and I'm up as usual, just like as if I were home. I slept pretty well. It is very warm out and sitting here in the small "social" room at tree-level, the katydids are singing me awake. It is supposed to be something like 93 degrees out today; the main shrine hall will be a sweatbox. Can't tell without going outside if it is already too hot to walk down the mountain for a mile or not. We will see.

The gentleman you see in this photo I first met in 1997 at 15,000 feet or so in Tsurphu Monastery in central Tibet. He is the personal attendant to the 17th Karmapa, the head of our lineage. His Holiness, the Karmapa, is in the U.S. and very active here in the New York area. His attendant (I'm not sure how to say his name in Tibetan, but it is something like Asha or similar), is staying here with us at Karma Triyana Monastery (KTD) for a few days.

As mentioned, I originally met him in Tibet with the young Karmapa, so it is wonderful to see him again, although we are both 21 years older. I have some thoughts that I want to share with you, but they are still formulating and are not clear enough in my head for prime-time. So, instead I will share here a little of the story about when I took most of my family to meet the Karmapa at his ancestral monastery and this man. Here goes.

We waited out the three days in Lhasa until we could head toward Tsurphu and to His Holiness. That was to give our bodies a chance to adjust to the high altitude. I still had altitude sickness, but it was now

time to go on with our trip's schedule. We headed northwest out of Lhasa in a large van. The road was paved, but it became progressively bumpier, especially at sections where it consisted of huge squares of rock laid together. I asked about the bumpiness of the road and our guide replied that the road "gets a little bumpy" when we turn off this road just up ahead.

Gets a little bumpy? What is it now, then? I wondered. But he was so right. It did get bumpier. After some time, we made a sharp left turn, going across a very narrow bridge above a river, and began to head up the Tolung Valley—on almost no road at all! We soon got used to the steady pitch and roll of the vehicle, as it moved very slowly up the valley trail. It was like traveling over an endless series of speed bumps that had been placed side by side.

Bumps and sickness aside, the 3-hour journey up the Tolung Valley toward Tsurphu was brilliant and fresh. It was early autumn, and all the barley fields were golden ripe and ready for harvest. The barley from the Tolung Valley is reputed to be the best in Tibet, and there are hundreds and hundreds of small fields and patches. We moved slowly along the rocky road toward Tsurphu, mile by mile, so there was plenty of time to see. Everywhere, mountain streams rushed by, over, under, and even on the road itself. At places the road became a stream bed. As we moved farther upstream, yaks appeared, both close up and far off—at times scattered on the mountainside all around us.

As for other cars, there were none, no traffic at all. As soon as we crossed the bridge from the main road we were just out there, by ourselves. Every so often there were small villages, and everywhere people were working in the fields. Harvesters and workers waved

to us and children raced toward us, waving and shouting “Hello,” perhaps the only English they knew.

We continued on, heading up the valley toward where the two mountain skylines converged, always moving very slowly. After crossing the arch of a lovely stone bridge, our guide pointed to a speck on a mountain in the distance. “Tsurphu Monastery,” he announced. And I could almost see it, something sparkling on a mountainside. As we moved on, time was slowed by our eagerness to arrive, but that speck grew steadily larger...now I could see golden roofs reflecting in the sunlight...yet, it was still so far away! And then, even that view would be lost for yet another long while, as we went around yet another curve. Would we ever actually get there? We were ready.

At last, we were just below Tsurphu, passing by the Karmapa’s lovely summer palace and having less than a half a mile to go. Winding up the last of the trail, we passed through a narrow walled-road into the courtyard of Tsurphu, arriving before the large stone steps of the monastery itself.

It was an imposing and welcome sight. We came armed with many letters of introduction: from our own Rinpoche, from Tai Situ, Rinpoche (acting head of the lineage), etc.—letter after letter. We also brought a Western doctor to treat the ailing Drupon Dechun Rinpoche, who was suffering from advanced diabetes. He was the man who, single-handedly, had seen to the rebuilding of the monastery after the Chinese had destroyed it.

The monks gathering around us now, though, must still be wondering who we were. We proceeded to seek out monks who would seek out still higher monks, etc. until we found someone we were able, at last, to present all of our letters to. We laid them

before a small tribunal of monks in the corner of a very dusty room. From the letters, the monks would learn just who we were, and understand we presented no danger to Karmapa. We weren't even searched for weapons, as I have been told most are. A family of five, with two additional women—we obviously seemed harmless enough.

Our group was led inward, then, to an open courtyard, and from there we climbed to a second level and into a good-sized room. It was here that we were first served the legendary Tibetan butter tea. We were thrilled to be there, waiting in that room, with the sun pouring through the thick almost opaque windows. We were anxious to know if we would be granted an interview with His Holiness, and, if so, when. We sat on low bed-like couches; each covered with a Tibetan rug and slowly drank our tea. Every few sips of tea found the monks filling our cups, again, to the brim, as is the custom. This strange salty buttered tea was a new but satisfying taste for me. I almost inhaled it. And there were, also, the ever-present sugar-filled cookies and candy.

It was a little cold up here, at 15,000+ feet, and smoke from the kitchen, downstairs, found its way into our room, mostly through the open doorway that, due to the constant coming and going of the Tibetans, was impossible to keep closed. Faces peered in on us (some of whom were monks, but most of whom were lay persons) wondering who these Westerners were.

And then there was lunch, brought to us in large bowls. There were noodles and a big bowl of dried yak meat that seemed (by the one taste I gave it) a little funky and old. But food of any kind was good after the long drive, and we were thrilled to be getting what apparently

was VIP treatment. We ate and then just waited until a monk came and told us that we would see his Holiness that day, at least briefly. We were to hang loose and would be given notice later. Until then, we could just relax and wander around the monastery a bit.

And there was a lot to see. Soon after our arrival, a long procession of monks poured forth from main shrine hall and down the front steps of the monastery. Wearing tall curved red hats, they carried large flat drums held up sideways. Here was a ceremony, but for whom? We were hours and hours from any city and there were few, if any, local people witnessing the event.

The answer, which was so hard for my modern-world mind to grasp, was that they were doing it just for its own sake, just for themselves. How odd!

Outside of the room where we had parked our stuff, along the inner face of the second-story courtyard, was a whole series of small shrine rooms dedicated to the fierce Tibetan protectors, the dharmapalas. Nailed above these rooms, and stretching the length of the courtyard, were a many carcasses, mostly yak heads, as well as the bodies of other local animals, all in various states of decay. I was given to understand that these animals had been found dead, most having been killed by poachers, and that they were here to receive prayers, and also to be an example of what should not be done.

The effect was eerie and smelly. And so, along this upper courtyard, beneath the carcasses, were the small shrine rooms—dark, candle-lit, and usually smoky. In each room was a lama or perhaps a lama with an assistant monk or two, all busy making tormas (food offerings), practicing puja, or just watching over

the place. It looked as if some of these lamas and monks might live in these rooms, for there were bed-like couches in most of them. I wandered from room to room along the open corridor, finally deciding to attempt some practice in a room which had my particularly favorite protector in it—the fierce form of Vajrapani.

Using hand gestures, I asked if I could sit and do puja. I was motioned to go ahead and take a seat. Everywhere in Tibet, when I practiced like this, monks would surround me. Perhaps they had never seen a westerner practice before. They would sit close—right next to me, often on both sides, behind me, and most disturbing of all, just in front and facing me, looking right into my face—less than a foot away! It made for a difficult practice, to say the least, as I am used to practicing in a room by myself.

In this particular case, the resident lama (a lama is a monk who has done the traditional 3-year solitary retreat) wanted to see me do the vulture posture, which leads to the dissolution of the deity of the one doing the visualization (for those of you who understand this sort of thing). He showed me how he did it, looking for all the world like Rigpe Dorje, the 16th Karmapa. Then he took off his watch, handed it to me and asked me to time him while he held his breath in the traditional vase-breathing position for as long as he could, which turned out to be about a minute and a half. Of course, he wanted me to do the same. I am afraid (particularly with the low oxygen) that I did not put on a very good performance, not to mention that I was not exactly in a competitive mood. I had to laugh. It was all in good fun, but a bit crazy too.

Inevitably, in all these kinds of situations, I would end up showing the monk(s) the small photo album I had brought with me, the one having pictures of our Center, our lamas, our place of business, and, of the house we lived in. They couldn't get enough of looking at these pictures, and would crowd around until the small picture book would always end up floating out of my hands and into theirs, taking on a destiny of its own. I would wait to get it back. And they all knew my teachers: Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche and Bardor, Tulku, Rinpoche. In fact, often you could hear one monk pointing out to others that 'We' were Khenpo Karthar's. I was amazed that they knew who he was, as he had been gone from Tibet for such a very long time, and was now so very many thousands of miles away from them.

All of the monks liked Michael Andrew, my 11- year old son, and I don't mean just a little. Monks surrounded Michael, shaking his hand, putting their arms (or robes) around him, taking him off walking with them—whatever. We just got used to it. Perhaps it was because he was so young and a male. Perhaps it was because he had his mala with him and used it. Who knows?

This is getting long and it is long. For anyone who wants to read more of the stories from our pilgrimage, here is the whole account:

<http://spiritgrooves.net/.../e-bo.../Our-Pilgrimage-to-Tibet.pdf>

THE ALCHEMY OF REACTION

August 29, 2018

Very hot day yesterday indeed. Went walking down the mountain for about a mile (and back up!) around 6 AM, but it was already quite warm and coming back up was pretty sweaty. There is an almost trance-like state that takes place in an all-day teaching when it very hot. I kind of like it.

After lunch yesterday, Lama Karma (our good friend) brought a baby yak to the monastery to be blessed by Rinpoche and others. It was so cute. Dozens of us gathered around in the heat of the day while Rinpoche did the honor. I will try to get a photo and post it here, but don't have one just now. To me, the funniest part was when the tiny yak, walked around the corner of the monastery where there was shade and the rest of us followed. It knew to get out of the heat. LOL.

Otherwise, a typical day at the teaching, meals, rest periods, and teaching throughout the day. I did have some thoughts about being with so many people, which I will share here.

I can't help but remember that phrase from the Bible, "For he shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways. They shall bear thee up in their hands, lest thou dash thy foot ..."

No, I can't claim any such thing, but there is truth to the concept that our dharma practice is a buffer against the winds and changes of Samsara. And no, this may not at first be apparent at the beginning of practicing dharma, but given time and with practice, it is true.

The place to begin, IMO, with dharma practice is with our own involuntary habitual reactions. And this is not more true that with the basic Lojong mind training practices and the practice called Tong-Len. And I am not talking about the form of Tong-Len that we do with others, the more familiar kind, but rather first a type of Tong-Len that we do with ourselves, with our own reactions. And it is so easy.

We can do Tong-Len with our own reactions and we don't even have to lift a finger or move a muscle. Our own reactions do all the work. We react. If we look, we will discover that we automatically react from dawn to dusk and even in our dreams. We can't help it. And I don't just mean react to the car honking outside or the door slamming nearby, but micro-reactions, the endless wincing we each do to anything that we question or don't like. And I also mean trivial things like: "I don't like that shirt" or "He has a big nose," etc.

More energy is lost and wasted in reactions than in any other way. It is deeply habitual. Everything seems to move us, like fat in a frying pan, pushing us this way and that until we are worn out or overwhelmed. The amount of energy spent this way is phenomenal. And most are not even aware of it anymore.

Even here at the monastery, which is in many ways a peaceful place, there is so much to react to. I'll put aside positive reactions for the moment, although in some future blog we should discuss them too. Our involuntary and probably mostly potentially "negative" reactions are legion. If they are not coming directly from us, then we are reacting to others or to other's reactions to us. It is a hall of mirrors, in which we wander, like the funhouse at the carnival I used to go in at the county fair as a kid.

I have practiced what I term Reaction Tong-Len for so many years that this is almost totally automatic by now. I note my reactions as they occur, own them as entirely mine, and let them go. I don't dwell on each and every one as I used to before learning of this practice, spending hours trying to figure out why so-and-so did not say hello or gave me a hard look. I can't speak to the cause or meaning of other's actions, but I can own my own reactions and tone them back.

It's a bit like walking on air, this instant response to what otherwise would arise as reactions on my part. Yes, I note the potential on my part to react; I own it, and then I let it go. I drop it. I don't follow each reaction out to speculation as to what it portends or might mean. I maintain the purity of my own mind, learning as I go, but not wasting energy, throwing good money after bad, adding insult to every injury that I might perceive.

It is important to understand that I am not shutting out my reactions, but transforming them into more natural responses that don't violate my inner space. Yes, I could wring my hands and wonder as to what each thing I react to portends, but I don't. I simply note this or that sensitive area, sometimes laugh at it, but almost always suspend any inquiry into a probable cause. I don't react or if I do, that reaction is receding each time more faintly into history. Reactions are transformed into normal or appropriate responses. In a very real way, it is like walking on air.

At this point in my own practice of this most useful technique, I hardly ever react as I use to, being pushed this way and that by my knee-jerk reactions all day long. And I don't mean the big reactions; I am talking about the winces and inner grimaces that take

place, the micro-reactions. They are the great energy suck.

Yes, there are vestiges of what my reactions use to be like, but mostly they are beyond arm's length now, so to speak, like some distant heat lightning. Do I still do the more traditional form of Tong-Len, exchanging myself with others? Of course I do, but this reaction Tong-Len or reaction toning-back of reactions is what takes place with me the most.

Like so many dharma principles, we first take care of our own inner reactions before working with those of others. If you want to try this form of Tong-Len out, here are several articles on it that I put together and a small e-book called "The Alchemy of Reaction."

AWAKENING THE HEART

August 30, 2018

In these blogs, I always end up with whatever peaks my interest, in this case it is that I am amazed at how personal and tailor-made the dharma for each of us must be by necessity. I know. I have blogged about this a number of times lately, but that is only because it's on my mind. Why is this so important?

I can't help but wonder and try to understand why it is so difficult to fully awaken what is called Bodhicitta. For those that may be new to this term, Bodhicitta is a natural drive to want to assist others; its often called "Awakened Heart." I'm not talking about what might be called perfunctory or the intellectual wish to "help" because we think we should. I am talking about wanting to do whatever we can to point out to others how to connect with the dharma.

Intellectual dharma is where most of us start out, reading and thinking about it. I can remember reading about dharma back in the late 1950s. We would stay up late drinking nasty instant coffee (with powdered creamer), smoking cigarettes, and talking about topics like Buddhism, Existentialism, and so on. We were driven by ideas and not by something from the heart. At that time, I was still years away from that.

Purely intellectual dharma is very hard to sustain other than perhaps for brief periods of time. Doing what we "think" is right intellectually is worthy of course; it just does not have the teeth or staying power of Bodhicitta, which empowers our whole being. So, there is a difference.

And so, the obvious question is: how do we engender Bodhicitta? I am sure there are many ways that I am

not aware of and I would like to learn of them. And “sounds like” solutions, although perhaps well-intentioned, are just that, beside the point. I’m afraid I only know of one way to arouse Bodhicitta and that is by recognizing the true nature of our own mind and that is not a simple task.

It’s not like we can just go out and get a book that will point out the actual nature of the mind to us or subscribe to one method or another. As I know it, an authentic teacher is required to point out to us the nature of the mind and finding one and making that happen probably takes time. Perhaps more important, and this is the key, we have to be ready to receive the pointing-out instructions or they just go in one ear and out the other. I know this from experience. LOL.

So, it comes down to how do we prepare for such a pivotal event as having the nature of the mind pointed out to us? Where do we begin? I’m sure that the answer to that question varies. But I’m certain that for most of us this requires considerable purification on our part to be able to be open to such an event.

As it turns out, there are many key dharma practices that are purificatory, that can help us reduce our obscurations so that we can better see through them. To begin with there are what is called the Common Preliminaries, “The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind Toward the Dharma,” sometimes called “The Four Reminders.” That’s where I started out, with the Four Thoughts, but many years later, when I seriously began to practice Mahamudra meditation, the first thing that was required was, once again, the Four Thoughts. I spent a good three years just on those thoughts, so they are not something to just review and put out of your mind.

And to back that up, of course, there is the Ngöndro, what I call the dharma boot camp. This series of five practices, although very intensive and time-consuming, are the most expedient way to reduce our obscurations that I know of. But, as mentioned, they are difficult to actually do and require 100% effort on our part.

Remember, we are talking about jump-starting Bodhicitta of the life-changing kind, awakening our heart, and not just some intellectual well-wishing, which I imagine we all do. Bodhicitta is a natural byproduct of “Recognition,” the recognition of the actual nature of the mind. We can’t realize the nature of the mind without automatically wanting others to have it too. And that is Bodhicitta. And when I say “wanting others to have it too,” I can’t help but think of PeeWee Herman and how he would phrase this, like we “really, really, really” want others to have it too – something like that.

A taste of emptiness, the hologram of our entire existence, is the direct cause of compassion. In fact, emptiness and compassion are connate, two sides of the same coin. Compassion and emptiness arise together, simultaneously. And that form of compassion is what I understand Bodhicitta is.

It’s not an intellectual thing at all; the compassion of true Bodhicitta is deeply visceral, enveloping us entirely, and directed outward toward others exponentially.

If this appears almost unreachable or unattainable, it’s not. However, it does take putting one foot in front of the other and working through whatever purification is required of us to grasp the actual nature of the mind. I found that I had to stop idealizing the dharma and just roll up my sleeves and get with it – blood, sweat, and

tears. And of course, we have to find an authentic dharma teacher, one who has recognized the nature of the mind and can point it out to us. This is not impossible, but it does take on the character of a mission for us. It's not likely to just "happen" without real effort on our part. But, what is worthwhile in this life?

And it probably will take time, so we have to prepare for it, plan ahead, and do what it takes for this to happen. There is a bit of a Catch-22 here. We are living our life and think we might want some dharma, which is perfectly natural. Yet, we aren't about to drop everything we are doing and just do dharma. We want to try it out; taste its fruits, so to speak. Yet, as sure as dharma is effective, it is also usually slow to manifest its rewards. That's just the way it is.

So, who among us is going to risk everything we have going for us, even if it's only going around and around and around in samsara, and leap full-blown into the dharma? Not many. Yet, at some point this may be required. The alternative is to try dharma out, a little at a time. This too works, but slowly. And who among us is that patient? More serious is the likelihood of letting the opportunity to practice slip away because of the lack of any observable results. Anyway, you get the idea.

The whole instruction process that leads to Recognition of the true nature of the mind is not happenchance. It is the result of centuries of common dharma experience. It already is the most efficient and definitive way to achieve full Bodhicitta. If it seems arduous, you can be sure it is not as difficult as any other known method.

The dharma is there already; it just waits on us.

ASKING THE TEACHER

August 31, 2018

Each day here at KTD monastery has a pattern and schedule. We have teachings in the morning and in the afternoon, at least for this year, we also have teachings in the afternoon, with (perhaps) some questions and answers in the latter half of the session. We have a period where dharma students like myself get to ask Rinpoche a question or two through the translator. As an example, here is a question I asked of Rinpoche yesterday. It went like this:

Michael: “Rinpoche,

“I have a question about meditation. I’ve been meditating seriously since the Ven. Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche taught me to meditate in 1974 and I have been trying to do that all this time, learning Shamata and I finally did. In recent years I have mostly been interested in Mahamudra meditation and in that, Rinpoche has always suggested many short sessions; and I’ve followed that. But lately, I feel that I want to sit longer. I have nothing better to do. I don’t want to only sit and do Shamata longer. I don’t want to do mantras longer, particularly, or any particular sadhana or practice.

“I just wonder what Tibetan saints like the yogi Milarepa...what do they do when they sit for days? What I want to do is kind of like what I do with Mahamudra, which is to rest the mind and just rest. And, what should I be doing? How do I get introduced... how do I get introduced to wanting to sit longer, not just forcing myself to sit, which would never be very helpful.

“What is it that one does? Or perhaps is there some lama that has come out of retreat that you could recommend that I could talk to about it or perhaps maybe you could just give me some suggestions as to how do I enter into that. “

RINPOCHE ANSWERS:

“There isn’t any separate or additional instructions needed for this. The secret of development here is that first you see the nature of your mind, as you’ve done. And then you begin with short sessions of looking at the mind, brief sessions, for two reasons... so that you have enough freshness and energy that you can see it clearly and also so that it is not too difficult for you to avoid being distracted from it by the intervention of other thoughts.

“But as you described in your question, after a certain point it starts to become naturally desirable to lengthen sessions. And so, in a sense, the question contains the answer in itself. You simply naturally lengthen the periods of looking at your mind, bit by bit and you lengthen them as long as you can without either losing the lucidity or clarity or becoming distracted by the intervention of thoughts. And Rinpoche said, that’s basically it. It’s just a question of gradually prolonging the meditative state.

“In addition to that, however, sometimes it may help to practice Guru Yoga and sometimes it may be helpful to pray to the root and lineage gurus, because those things will intensify or strengthen your meditation.”

MICHAEL: “Thank You Rinpoche”

Ideally, we might ask questions of Rinpoche in a personal interview, but those can be brief and interviews are not always available. So, these Q&A times allow us to ask and get answered what is on our

mind, as long as we don't mind sharing our questions with everyone present. In that way, we all learn from each other's questions.

Meanwhile, back in the jungle (as we used to say) I won't dwell on some ongoing technical problems that seem to continue with video and/or sound, but otherwise things are good. I have some upcoming personal interviews to do with video for a possible documentary Sunday and on Monday, there is an all day intensive practice to remove obstacles by doing the Heart Sutra. The ten-day intensive, which seems endless at the beginning is already showing signs of coming to an end in a few days.

RELATIVE AND ABSOLUTE BODHICITTA

August 31, 2018

The 10-day intensive marches on and yet it is filled with activity like a whirlwind. I am busy and catch naps as I can. And it is only going to get more so. After the intensive ends, the following day is a dawn to dusk puja, the recitation of the legendary Heart Sutra by a large group of monks to reverse and remove the four maras. Margaret and I are staying for that. As for me, I am still considering Bodhicitta so this blog continues those thoughts.

In reality, it is Bodhicitta that drives our practice, at least my own. When whatever dharma experiences we have wax and wane, what keeps it all from just dying out? In my case, the answer to that is Bodhicitta, the urge to share dharma with others, like all sentient beings. When everything else gets thin, Bodhicitta keeps me going.

Absolute Bodhicitta is not a mental concept or a thought; I don't believe it can just be drummed up, either. In other words, in the beginning dharma practice we kind of fabricate or make up something like Bodhicitta of the "sounds like this" variety. This is normal and is called Relative Bodhicitta. Yet, Absolute Bodhicitta, like "Recognition" of the mind requires a more profound change in us, at least as far as I know. It's not some sort of veneer that we can just gradually accumulate, although something like that is inevitable in the beginning. So much of dharma is like that, our reifying dharma for ourselves, to make it more real than we yet have experienced it, which is a kind of oxymoron – reified dharma. Yet, it happens. Yes, like

everything else, we also reify dharma and that never helps.

This is not to deprecate any kind of Bodhicitta we can manage, but only to point out that the kind of Bodhicitta that is talked of in the pith teachings is total or Absolute Bodhicitta, through and through, and not a surface application. So, why do we fabricate these qualities instead of just going after the real thing, the whole enchilada. And the answer is quite simple.

As we are today, we can't grasp these qualities, but require various purification practices before that is possible. More to the point, we need to recognize the actual nature of our own mind before any of these qualities can be full blown. At least, that is my understanding. And so, the message here is that, everything considered, it all points to our recognizing the true nature of the mind before these things can naturally link in.

Of course, we feel compassion and of course we have a sense of Bodhicitta. Yet, at least in my experience, this is realized as more of a fabrication on our part once we get a glimpse of the actual nature of the mind. Nothing to be ashamed of with these fabricated dharma qualities, but they are something like placeholders, bookmarks until the real thing comes along. They are relative, dualistic.

The moral of all this, the point, is that when all is said and done, we need to recognize the true nature of our own mind. Countless practitioners have done this in the past and there is no reason whatsoever why we cannot do the same today. However, we have to move heaven and earth, so to speak, to achieve this. We can't just sit around and wait for it to come to us. For all I know, it eventually may, but chances are not in any real time-frame that we can imagine.

I have searched around to the best of my ability and I cannot find a back door to this event, this recognition of the nature of the mind. Therefore, we can save time by just getting on with the pointing-out process as it is laid out in many dharma teachings.

The process includes finding an authentic dharma teacher, someone who has themselves recognized the true nature of the mind and see if they are willing to work with you. And with that teacher as a guide, undertake whatever series of purification practices are appropriate for your particular obscurations. The standard Ngöndro is a good place to begin because it exercises many aspects of life: physical, emotional, mental, devotional, and so on.

If you have heavy obscurations, you may require more remediation than others. In my case, I had to do Ngöndro twice to get anywhere (i.e. have any clarity), so don't count on just counting by the numbers or by time spent. IMO, we can only count on the proper effects that result from practice and the signs thereof.

This might appear like a hard rule and I guess it is, in the sense that there is no way around it other than to go through the entire process. Let me know if you find an easier way, but I never could. Get with an authentic teacher and let them keep you on track as you go through the process. The bottom line is that we each have to actually go for it and enlighten ourselves. Imagine that!

WHEN IS ENOUGH STILL NOT ENOUGH?

September 2, 2018

This is a blog you might just skip, because it wanders beyond the bounds I have set for this kind of post. In other words, getting a witness here would be hard, but perhaps not impossible. I believe we all know that we each are on our own. As I like to remark to myself, we are all alone together. LOL.

Of course, we can chat each other up and even hang out some. However, if we are looking for confirmation for one thing or another we worry about, then we obviously have an agenda (which can be a dangerous thing) and we will seek out whomever we believe could confirm this, that or what we would like to have confirmed -- whatever it is that we wonder about.

As for getting a witness, mostly, in my life, as they say, that dog won't hunt. I'm the only one I have to convince and I don't really need other folks to accomplish that. That's the theory; now, if only I knew that. Yet, oddly enough, I reach out to others for something that can only come from myself. LOL. Now, IMO, this has to be funny or it is sad.

Perhaps I am unusually insecure in looking to others for the confirmation that I seek. In my case, since I never graduated from high school, I know that I have a bit of an insecurity problem as to feeling "legitimate," so perhaps I overdo this seeking of approval. As the song say, "I want to be in that number when the saints come marching in." I can't help but seek to belong.

Yet, the dimension in others that I imagine I seek (and that I can only satisfy in myself) is like a vast empty

plain, a desert in which I wander at my own expense. It's like the old phrase "A voice crying in the wilderness." I even know better, but yet I persist in searching within others for confirmation, some reflection of myself. However, an echo is always an echo, is it not? LOL.

When it comes to seeking approval, we each can be lonely in the largest crowd. This seeking for approval is an enormous obscuration, one that can eclipse the sun of the mind for as long as it persists. As for me, I just have to calm down and allow this obscuration to kind of sputter out naturally, especially when it comes to looking to others for the approval that I will not even grant myself.

I ask you: when is enough still not enough?

This braided rope of the Self has many threads, not all of the same color or quality. And these threads did not spring full-blown as Athena did from the head of Zeus, all of one piece, but gradually evolved one moment at a time. Like the old game of Pick-Up-Sticks, it's hard to remove one thread without disturbing all the others. That's the nature of the Self.

As I am getting older, what to do with my time is, as they say, getting down to the seeds and stems. And, as I tell myself, "the way I say it asks a lot," meaning there is a question in all that I say and write, almost like a cry for help; I am gradually becoming aware of this and want to do something about it. How do we answer our own cry for help or is that what is called an echo?

All of this wordy mumbo-jumbo is good, IMO, a sign of waking up, becoming more aware. I seem to have so much to do with so little. LOL. I can't expect to find in others what I don't recognize in myself. And we are all

in the same boat. I know better than to search out where this all came from (like from time immemorial), but still I can't help but wonder. This inner searching on our part dies hard; it is so ingrained and habitual. How could we ever find that which has never been there, never existed? I know what it's like to intellectually realize, as the Buddhists do, that there is no Self that permanently exists, but this here, right now, is the hard-scrabble-end of physically (not intellectually) doing this.

Not only do I not exist in any permanent sense, but no one else does either to any real extent. Wow! That's a tough one. Perhaps I have not always put others before myself, but I believe I have when it comes to existence. I assumed that all of you out there somehow exist more than I do. I never doubted it.

It's like searching for the finite in a hologram; we can't help but come up empty because there is nothing and no one (in that sense) here, there, or anywhere. It's one thing to think and talk about this, but quite another to find yourself out on a limb that's not even there. I am reminded of the quote from the Ven.

Chögyam Trungpa:

“The bad news is you're falling through the air, nothing to hang on to, no parachute. The good news is, there's no ground.”

That's what I am pointing at here. All this time, I thought that the Buddhist idea that there is no Self was a concept that was, for me, quite real enough. I didn't know it was also physically and actually real, i.e. that the Self is not real. The impermanence (not the existence) of the Self is also real down to the last eyelash and dotted “i.” The Self exists, but not permanently.

And I did not know that searching in the mind for no-Self was identically equivalent to searching out in the world for the same thing – no self. Searching here in the mind and searching out there in the world are the same. It's the same hologram in here or out there. That took me a while to realize.

I'm not going to find out there in the world what I can't find in here. When the Buddhists say that appearances are a magical illusion, they are not kidding. Inside is outside and outside is inside.

And, as mentioned, I'm not going to find approval out there in the world of other people for what I can't find here within my own self. This is what is called a thorough search of the mind, inside and out. We come up empty even of emptiness. We neither are or are not. This hologram is what there is.

This world and our Self have no permanent existence. Yes, they exist, but not permanently. As pointed out, this is like a great hologram in which we wander. Is it no wonder that at times we feel empty, empty of self and empty of others.

I have to remind myself that this has never been different; we have always been this way, so there is nothing unusual that is happening here. Whatever difference there is between the true nature of the mind and what we have on hand must be due to reification on our part, endlessly incrementing duality and the veneer that has resulted.

I have to think about this.

A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM

September 3, 2018

Well, the ten-day Mahamudra intensive is over and most folks are heading out across the country to wherever is home. I am busying tearing down equipment, hauling it down to our room, and packing it so that it will fit in our car. Margaret and I are staying an extra day to avoid holiday traffic and for a special all-day puja chanting the Heart Sutra for the reversal of the four maras. I will be taking photos, so maybe I can post some. Then, at dawn tomorrow, we will be heading out on the 800-mile road trip back home. Meanwhile I continue to think-on this ephemerality that we all share; so, if interested, please bear with me.

Something I missed until recently is that in a very real sense when we consider the mind, this includes the world of all appearances, inside our head and outside in the world, as well. In many Buddhist cosmologies, the entire world of appearances is just a dream we all are having. So, for most of my life I have been searching in my mind (The Mind), but not including searching outside my physical body in the world. I have been restricted to what is going on in my head – a simple mistake on my part.

Of course, as a naturalist, I have revered Mother Nature and all the plants and critters there are, so in that sense I did not entirely miss the boat. However, certainly, I have never searched the mind in terms of other people, i.e. everyone outside myself. That was a mistake. Here is my reasoning, for those who have the time for some discussion.

I am referring here to our ephemeral Self, the one that has no permanent independent existence, but is left in a heap when we die; that one. The dharma lords keep telling us (and pointing out) that everything is what they call a “magical illusion.” Like the old song “Row, Row, Row Your Boat” clearly says “Life is but a dream.” And the Buddhists can get behind that view.

And so, much of our makeup is intangible or ephemeral, yet we don’t see it and we don’t treat it that way. In fact, almost every man, woman, and child reify whatever it is we are, trying to make life (and each one of us) more real than we actually are. We want to capitalize everything and add plenty of exclamation marks!

Yet, it is the mind “as it actually is” that all our dharma practice is about and our goal is what is called “Recognition,” realizing the nature of the mind just as it is, not as we wish it to be. And the mind as it actually is, as the teachings point out, is this impermanent, everchanging process that we keep trying to make static; we insist on taking snapshots instead of recognizing the interdependent and ongoing process life is.

In other words, we habitually (and incessantly) reify our own impermanent nature, desperately trying to gild the lily, so to speak, and to make things (especially our Self) more real than it in fact is. I am reminded of the book “The Scarlet Letter,” only here the brand of shame is our own impermanence, our lack of substantiality, this holographic dream we all share.

The whole world of people is like the story of the emperor’s new clothes; we are trying to cover up this nakedness that we feel, this emptiness-of-

permanence, the dreamlike reality of our own existence (or lack thereof).

And, if we search through the eyes and minds of other people (those outside our self), how can we expect to find anything other than what we find in ourselves.

Everyone suffers from the same situation and delusion, other than those rare few who are not in denial of their actual state, those who actually have realized the true nature of their own mind.

Otherwise, all that we can possibly find out there in others are cookie-cutter copies of our own situation in duplicate. In other words, we are all in the same boat. Anyway, it comes to me as a bit of a shock that I have never actually realized that we are all having the same dream, more or less. I had imagined that everyone else out there (you all) are more secure in your impermanence than I am. But, of course that's not true. We are all in this together, equally reflections of an interdependent process rather than a static state. Impermanence.

The upshot here is that I can't expect to find in others anything different from the situation than I find in myself. Sure, we have differences, but basically we are all human beings and share at heart a common karma and it seems (as far as I can tell) that we are all knee-deep into reification – trying to be more than we in fact are.

The point, at least for me, is that for my entire life (so it seems) I have been reifying others as existing in a more real sense than myself, when the reality is that we are all equally impermanent. We wander in what amounts to (as Shakespeare wrote) an endless midsummer night's dream, and a comedy at that. LOL.

And the upshot of this is that I have to stop searching in eyes and faces of others to find the approval and confirmation of my own reality. I have to confirm myself by living in the present -- moment by moment.

QUESTIONS: QUEST-I-ON

September 5, 2018

Very busy day, with a great many still photos and even more videos to process. The best I can do is work away at it. And I can't help but go over the questions I asked Rinpoche this year during Q&A time. In the past, I might ask quite a few questions, but this year I believe I had just two, one of which I blogged a few days ago.

Here is my second question, warts and all. I learned a great deal from Rinpoche's answer to me, mainly that there is no point in comparing something I know to something I don't know. Better to double-down on what I know than to waste time comparing what works with other traditions that I have little to know personal knowledge of. For those interested, here is a transcript of my second question this year.

MICHAEL:

"Rinpoche,

"This is a question about the kind of insight meditation connected with Mahamudra practice. I don't know much about the various other types of insight meditation outside of Mahamudra, but I found out that they can be very, very different. When I first learned to do Insight Meditation... well, I think it is wonderful, for one.

"So I went on and studied it using the Internet and other books that I have and Vipassana seems to be very, very different in different forms of Buddhism. I didn't seem to find anything that I recognized in other traditions that compared to what I was experiencing and enjoyed doing.

“I just wondered whether Rinpoche could explain. In Mahamudra practice, Insight Meditation and Shamata are a combination. And it seems to be a very special combination and I wonder whether Rinpoche could explain what is so special about the Mahamudra-style of Vipassana.

RINPOCHE:

“Well, Rinpoche said, to start with a general answer, the Buddha taught whatever would most effectively... what would most beneficially guide each person who heard him teach. And what I mean is not only that the Buddha might have said different things to different disciples on different occasions, but even during one teaching session, when the Buddha was speaking, each person would have heard it in the particular way that was most suitable for their disposition and faculties at that time.

“So, therefore, it is quite possible that when the Buddha said, now I am going to teach Insight Meditation, that many of the hearers heard very differently. And this ability to spontaneously teach different things to different people as appropriate with each utterance is one of the unique features of the speech of a Buddha. So, that’s the general answer.

“And now the specific answer. As you mentioned in your question, the term Vipassana, Lhaktong (Tibetan), Insight Meditation is used by many different Buddhist traditions to identify what appear to be substantially different practices.

“I don’t know very much about the Insight Meditation of the Common Vehicle, so I can’t comment on it with any exactness, but I would imagine, Rinpoche says, or I would be willing to guess, that the basic difference between the insight you have learned as part of your

Mahamudra training and the insight that is taught in the context of the Common Vehicle is because the Mahamudra-insight is part of the Mahayana and the Common-insight is part of the Common Vehicle; therefore, the Mahayana type might be somehow all embracing, all inclusive, might have a wider scope of understanding, but again, Rinpoche says, I can't say anything more than that because I have never studied the Insight Meditation that is part of the Common Vehicle.

MICHAEL:

"And maybe Rinpoche would comment on... I noticed that in Mahamudra practice that Shamata... is very much a part of Mahamudra practice. Maybe he would comment on how the two of them, particularly, work together in Mahamudra meditation.

RINPOCHE:

"I can't really answer your question and I will tell you why rather directly, and he was rather direct. I know the name of the unity of tranquility and insight. After all, it is a term that we use in our tradition rather frequently, but I have no real experience of it. That's about me.

'And as far as your concerned, I don't know if you have realization of Mahamudra or you have just figured it out because your smart. In any case, it doesn't matter. You seem to have some recognition of Mahamudra and I'm confident that you will never stop practicing it until you die. And that's enough.

'But I would advise you one thing. Instead of looking for the differences between, for example, the unity of tranquility and insight that constitutes the Mahamudra meditation and the Insight Meditation taught in the Common Vehicle, combine all of these instructions,

everything that is helpful to you, into one practice. And this is our approach, overall.

‘That’s why, for example, in terms of conduct, we integrate the Practimoksha vow of the Common Vehicle with the Bodhisattva vow of the Mahayana and the Samaya of the Vajrayana. Sometimes, while it is important to distinguish between different teachings or different levels of understanding, we can overthink it or over-analyze it. I will give you an example.

“The first people the Buddha taught, 49 days after his awakening in the Deer Park at Varanasi, were, as you probably know, just five men, called the Good Group of Five, and they all became arhats. What they heard the Buddha teach was what we would call the Common Vehicle, teaching on the Four Noble Truths

“But, at the same time as he taught them, he also was teaching ten-thousand Devas and those Devas all achieved tolerance for unborn phenomena, which means that they achieved at least the first level, the first Bodhisattva level of Mahayana realization and gained decisive recognition that all dharmas are unborn in their nature.

“Now, it is not the case that the Buddha first spoke to the five humans in an Indian language that they could understand and then addressed the Devas in some kind of Deva language, nor is it the case that he spoke first to one group and then to the other group.

If we think about it carefully, we have to admit that it was the same words that the Buddha spoke that were heard by the five humans as the Common Vehicle and by the 10,000 Devas as the Mahayana. So, in other words, we should not assume that the difference between realizations or between vehicles

or even techniques in that sense can be found by parsing the words.”

I got a lot out of the above, which kind of boils down, IMO, to mind my own business and make what I can from the training I have rather than get caught up in comparisons.

Good advice!

SUPPLICATING BLESSINGS: THE 84 MAHASIDDHAS

September 7, 2018

As I wander through the more advanced dharma-teaching texts and books (from time to time), like those on Mahamudra and Dzogchen practice, there is a recurring thread that (while it may not be dominant) when it appears this point is very emphatically stressed that: aside from everything else, our progress in the realization practices (beyond the purification practices) depends entirely on the blessings of the guru. How is that?

These pith teachings do not say to stop doing our regular normal practices; not at all. Yet, they do say that supplicating (somehow invoking) the blessings of our guru and, for that matter, the blessings of all of the great lineage masters, is essential for realization.

I used to just read past such statements, which often amount to what are exhortations to supplicate the blessings of the lineage; and I did this just because I didn't know how to get those blessings. To me, I was already dancing as fast as I can. And so, I just skipped over those asking-for-blessing thoughts, although I carefully noted that they existed and that they were repeatedly stressed.

But time passes and what was up until then almost a subtext, the need to supplicate the lineage for blessings, gradually accumulated until, as mentioned, it amounted to the main thing that I kind of ignored, perhaps because I was shy and did not know (or was used to) how to just out-and-out ask the cosmos of departed saints for their blessings. Maybe it was too

similar to some of my Catholic upbringing, this praying to departed masters. I don't know.

But, as they say, "What goes around comes around," and sure enough, after walking many a mile with dharma practice, I kept ending up at that same gate, the requesting of blessings. Yet, how do we do that?

I'm no expert, but it seems to come down to that we actually must be proactive and just ask, shy or not. One easy way to do that is "visually," by using images of the lineage masters and also saying their names out loud. That's what I do.

These lineage masters who have passed on are realized beings, meaning (if I understand it right) that they are now emanating and taking rebirth with an enlightened view. If we read through a list of Tibetan saint's names just to get it done, nothing much can be expected. However, if we use some heart, read the name, look at the image, and supplicate their blessing, we just may get to some of them. After all, they are out there in the cosmos somewhere.

It does not matter if we mispronounce their name or are looking at a poor image; our supplication is the act of reaching out to them. We may not know their street address, just where they are, but if we have them in mind, we may at least have the general zip-code where they exist and our message gets through and delivered.

Yesterday, I offered a picture-style sadhana of the Karma Kagyu lineage. Here is a more general picture/name-sadhana of the 84 Mahasiddhas. This can be used directly on a laptop and it is designed (if you are careful) to be printed out back-to-back on two-sided index stock. I've done that and find it very handy indeed.

I don't recite this 84-Mahasiddha sadhana every day, but only when I feel in the mood, I go through all 84 of these, reciting their quality/description and their name out loud, while looking at their picture. And I supplicate (ask) each for their blessings.

For those of you who find elaborate practices too busy, you might enjoy this kind of practice of just noting their image, calling out their name, and supplicating their blessings. Too often, IMO, this is the missing ingredient to successful dharma practice, supplicating the guru.

DOWNLOAD the "84 Mahasiddhas" pecha here.

<http://spiritgrooves.net/.../e-book.../Mahasiddhas%20Practice.pdf>

THE ROOT OF BLESSINGS

September 8, 2018

When we talk of “blessings” in relation to dharma, it’s not just any blessing; it is the guru’s blessing and it is not just any guru, but your own root guru’s (“Tsawai Lama”) blessing that is the most important. “Blessing,” like so many dharma terms in the more advanced (realization) practices is, IMO, ineffable – beyond words.

The 14th Dalai Lama defines blessing:

“The Tibetan word for blessing, Jin Lob, can be broken into two parts—“Jin” means ‘magnificent potential’ and “lob” means ‘to transform’. So Jin-lop means ‘transforming into magnificent potential.’ Therefore, “blessing” refers to the development of virtuous qualities that you did not previously have and the improvement of those good qualities that you have already developed. It also means decreasing the defilements of the mind that obstruct the generation of wholesome qualities. So actual blessing is received when the mind’s virtuous attributes gain strength and its defective characteristics weaken or deteriorate.”

“Blessing” is not a transaction, not passing the baton at the Olympics, and not the dualistic relative-phenomenon that it might appear to be i.e. the guru transmitting something to the student. Instead, IMO, Blessing is non-dual, what the Tibetan Buddhists call “absolute” in nature.

A better translation of the Tibetan word for blessing, which is “Jin Gyi Lob” might be “Grace.” At least, the term grace might help those of us seeking to grasp the nature of “blessing” as the Tibetans use it. As mentioned, “Blessing” is not something that is

transmitted or passed on like you would pass a football. It does not flow or have a subject and an object. In other words, the guru does not do something to the disciple, like touch him or her on the forehead and thus bring about a change.

Although a blessing takes place in time (or at a time), it is not temporal in nature. This ephemerality of the term helps explain why it may be so hard to put into words. A “blessing” does not “cause” transformation, but may well, like a mudra or signal is a sign of it. Again, I keep coming back to the word “grace” as having more communicative-meaning in describing the word “blessing” as used in Vajrayana Buddhism.

We all know the phrase “By the grace of god.” In a similar vein, the grace of the guru or the state of grace of the guru may precipitate the rain of blessings through which the student is transformed.

In other words, spiritual transformation may not best be understood as the result of cause and effect, in the sense that the guru causes the effect in the student. Perhaps it might make more sense to say that by the grace of the guru a student is transformed, just as by the grace of sunlight a flower grows.

In all the dharma literature, there is the sense that there is nothing the disciple can do (other than be a devoted practitioner) to bring about blessings. They are the gratuitous effect of the state of the guru and are not some kind of “quid pro quo.”

Again, with words, we can only think in terms of cause and effect. The sunlight causes the flower to grow. Yet, here my meaning is more like “by the virtue of sunlight, the flower grows.” I know. It sounds like cause and effect, but you would be missing something.

I cannot help but think of the plastic “polyethylene,” a long-chain polymer, where polymeric molecules which are randomly scattered in the plastic material, when the plastic is stretched, cause the molecules to move and rearrange themselves and become more and more aligned in the direction that the plastic is being pulled. They all get into line or come into line.

Blessings are perhaps like that: when when we stretch and work with the mind directly, we align ourselves with the nature of the mind. That idea.

A guru’s blessing, to me, is like that, a realigning of our priorities or direction that spontaneously takes place resulting in a realigned sense of direction on our part.

No, I don’t exactly know how such a blessing takes place, but I know it does take place because I have experienced it a number of times. It just happens, like the fact that we get warm when we step out of the shadows and into the sunlight. Or, what is called the “guru’s blessing” may be (like tectonic plates deep in the earth” that accumulate pressure until they suddenly give way and lurch forward. I am reaching here.

To me, the essence of the many various descriptions on the word “Blessings” turns on the sense of serendipity that surrounds it. It’s not teleological. I repeat; it’s not that there is an obvious cause resulting in this transformative effect, like pressing a button and getting a result.

The so-called “guru’s blessing” just comes along and takes place when it does. Who knows? It may be, as mentioned, a cumulative effect that builds up like a chunk of ice melts and suddenly rolls off the roof. Again: we can’t help but think in terms of cause and effect; only here, the effect may be more like a

realization. As the pith texts point out, “In the midst of experience, realization may arise.”

In my humble opinion, the whole effect is more like a spontaneous transformation (as realization is) that is somehow nurtured and precipitated by working with an authentic dharma teacher.

Often, we find in the pith teachings references to the Bodhisattva or Buddha looking upon us with their compassion (or whatever). Sometimes, it is presented as simply being seen or somehow being the focus (gazed on or noticed) by a Bodhisattva that may precipitate the rain of blessings we are discussing here.

Folks, that’s about the best I can do. I don’t fully understand how it works. I have myself experienced the blessings of the guru a number of times, but have yet to realize exactly how it all comes down, if such a realization is even possible. However, it does take place and it is, well, a blessing!

We all know what it is like to receive the blessing from our mother, father, or hero. It is confirming and empowering. With the blessing of our root guru, who basically is the arbiter of our mind, the effect is even more total, IMO.

Perhaps, some of you reading this can share with us how you view the guru’s blessings.

NONLINEAR DYNAMICS AND DHARMA

September 9, 2018

Or, to put it in the vernacular, with a quote from “The Bard:”

“How does it feel, how does it feel?
To be on your own,
With no direction home,
Like a complete unknown,
Like a rolling stone.”

I may be stepping out of line, yet that is just what this blog is about, so you may have to join me in the plunge into the present moment. Too often, I’m nickel and dimed by my own impatience to move forward in a linear direction. I lose energy waiting.... for what?

I seem to be waiting to accept the present moment just as it is, for things to get right so I can get into it and on with it. I seem to be waiting for life events to take some direction. Why is that? Why not just grasp the present moment and use it as it is? After all, it is immediately here now; and it’s what we have on hand to accept. Why falter or wait? Again, what am I waiting for?

As mentioned, perhaps I wait for some linear direction to appear and take shape, something that makes me feel like I am getting or going somewhere. How silly is that!

Yet, it’s this lack of linearity that worries me and that I talk about, look forward to, and imagine the fact that the only thing at the linear end-of-the line is the end of life. Now, that has to be funny. And, here I am faced with the immediate non-linear (and apparently chaotic) dynamics of life, but rather than accept that, I impatiently wait until life takes enough of a linear

direction for me to get on board. That's just crazy, IMO.

And the bottom line? I guess I don't know how to make use of non-linearity or perhaps I'm afraid to just let it happen and work with the reality of the seemingly more chaotic present. It just appears too chaotic, too out of control, for my linear-history to know what to do with it. I'm afraid to jump into the swimming pool or I worry that I can't swim without a life-line, some sort of linearity and direction once again.

The opportunity here is to just "be," to let go and enter the flow. Apparently, that's how direction-prone I am out of sheer habit. Just as we each learn to swim, I would have to learn to be more in the present moment without turning it into "going somewhere" – this habitual goal of orientation.

Instead, I wait for some sign to appear, but it's always the linear that I look for, always about getting somewhere. If it does not point down a road that I can get behind, my tendency is to wait until it does, plain and simple. I bide my time and wait it out. And what a waste of time.

Meditating in the present moment obviously is not linear; it's like treading water more than swimming somewhere. It could be as easy as the fact that I am uncomfortable doing nothing, with not having a clear linear direction.

And so, this blog is my attempt to write about the non-linearity itself rather than wait for some standard-issue line-of-thought to ride on or to get behind and push forward. Do you see what I am getting at here? It's like I'm endlessly riding on a subway that is going nowhere in particular, one that when it finally does

comes to a stop now and then, I never get off. I just look out the windows. LOL.

How should we handle this? Is this predicament familiar? Is “non-linear” also a kind of linearity all its own, another line of thought or, better yet, a form of experience that will take us in a new direction? Or, is that just an oxymoron?

CUSTOMIZING DHARMA

September 10, 2018

I am repeatedly struck with the fact that dharma practice is such a solitary affair, meaning it's totally a do-it-yourself project. No one else is going to do it (or can) for us. I'd like to say that again, but I don't want to be redundant; however, please don't just gloss over that statement. We are each on our own and this is a fact, not a complaint. It's just the way it is.

And no matter how many dharma teachings and instructions we take or books we read, it still comes down to our doing it ourselves because we want to do it and for no other reason. Of course we want to benefit others. That's what Bodhicitta is all about. Yet, as the old saying goes, "when all is said and done, more is said than done." And we can often listen to the echo of our own words disappearing, yet there we are with whatever we have to do still to be done. And we do it all alone. No one else, not even the Buddha himself, could do it for us.

As mentioned, this is not a complaint, but a looking at the reality of dharma practice. And I don't expect anyone else to do it for me; yet that's not my point. It's more like there is so much we don't know and while our teachers have done so much for us, in the last analysis, we each have to walk the walk ourselves. We each have to do it. And, to repeat, there is so much to learn along the way by ourselves.

Every step of the path to any realization is a learning curve. We each have to realize the dharma for ourselves. The dharma, in my experience, is a process of an endless discovering and tailoring of the dharma to fit our own skin. It's all about customizing.

And, while my words may seem obvious to you, my take on all this is that students of the dharma have little to virtually NO idea how personally the dharma has to be integrated within us to be effective – just no idea.

In fact, this customization of the dharma to fit our personality is (IMO) the hardest part of the learning process because, for some reason, we don't expect that this will be required. Of course, this is the "becoming familiar with our mind" that all of the pith texts point out that we have to do. That's what they are all talking about, making the dharma our own -- personalizing. To repeat myself: we have LITTLE IDEA of the familiarization that is involved because otherwise we would have already done it.

I feel that what I am pointing out here is the obvious and I don't want to insult your intelligence. However, I do want to communicate that this so-called "familiarization" was not familiar to me. And yet, it makes perfect sense. Of course, we have to get behind the wheel of our own car, so to speak, to be able to drive. We have to make the dharma our own. It can't be done just intellectually. It takes our total involvement. That's what the word "absolute" is all about, total extension, not "relative."

In summary, if you ask me what was the most surprising and unexpected aspect of dharma practice, it was the discovery of the fact that it has to be absolutely personal, way beyond our imagination, and unlike ANYTHING the books or teachings prepare us for.

I assumed that by learning dharma that I was learning something NEW to me, something I didn't know now, but that I would have to learn, something entirely new than the "me" that I already knew. I was looking for

something outside of me that I would encounter and then assimilate. IMO, that was not it at all.

The dharma is not outside me, but inside me. "I'm" going to become "realized" rather than become a different person. who then realizes. The dharma tailors itself exactly to us and not vice versa. This fact is VERY hard to communicate until you realize it.

The dharma cannot be something foreign or outside of us because we are it already inside... right now. That's what we have to realize because that's what realization is about. We realize just as we are and not as (or when) we become some different or new person! "We" are realized just as we are, warts and all. In other words, we don't change into a new person who then becomes realized.

Yes, we purify ourselves, but it is ourselves we purify and ourselves we realize. It's all about familiarization with our own mind and we are already quite familiar with who we are as a person. That doesn't change. Our personality and everything about us is realized just as it is now. We don't first change. We just realize what we are now, the good, the bad, and the ugly. Then, we can begin to modify our person into a "better" person.

To put it another way (and then I will give this a rest), at least in my experience, the dharma is not the realization itself, but rather the method to achieve that realization. The one who realizes is us, just as we are at the time of realization – warts and all. Dharma instructions do not somehow give us a new take on our reality. What they do is point out (and put us in touch with) the dharma that is already (and has always been) within us; so that we can realize that we already have everything we need.

The dharma is not something we get, but rather dharma practice simply points out to us what is already within us. We realize ourselves, what we always have been, Buddha Nature and all that. Getting this point was, to me, a pleasant surprise.

THONG-DRÖL: LIBERATION THROUGH SEEING

September 11, 2018

There is such a thing as liberation through sight, by seeing. This is mentioned in a feature film coming out about Tibetan art, which I am looking forward to, but aside from that I don't find very much in the dharma literature. Here is a link to the preview of that film:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch...>

Yet, that is exactly the kind of realization I personally have experienced. I'm not saying I am fully liberated. As if, LOL. However, what liberation or realization I have had has come from "seeing" as opposed to hearing, feeling, or whatever else is out there. And I imagine there are innumerable ways to be realized.

My mother was an artist, a painter of oils, acrylics, and later in her life superb at batik. All of her five sons grew up under the auspices of her fine eye for art; I know I have it.

For my entire life, as far as I can remember, I have been knocked out by visual phenomena. Yes, I know a great deal about music and have based much of my career around it, but perhaps less popular, and for me even more stunning, are the visual arts and, of course, the photographic impact of Mother Nature. You know I like to photograph nature and flowers.

I wish there were a lot of dharma teachings on Thong-Dröl (realization through seeing), but I can't find any, so I'm very much on my own. And I only know my own personal story, how the visual affects me (and has affected me), plus how for me recognition of the nature of the mind was totally mixed with the visual. And that I find (after looking around) is unusual.

It's funny that: no matter how many dharma books I have read, teachings I have taken, and practices I have done, when it came time for me to have just a glimpse of realization, all that dharma-learning (seemingly) went out the window (so to speak) and the visual came forth and claimed the day. There was no question who was boss. I'm not sure what to think about this. That time of awakening was VERY powerful and totally unexpected by me, but then, there it was. It was permitted.

Another aspect that worries me about that bit of realization I did have was the kind of pressure it took to make it happen. I had been serious about the dharma for many years, decades, and I practice. No, I was not the dharma creature I am today, but I was committed. However, that level of commitment (at least for me) was nowhere near enough. It took the hand of fate and a serious blow to my life-direction to setup a situation that I would call the perfect storm for me to get a glimpse.

It was as simple as being laid off from my job as a senior consultant for NBC, something many folks go through, but for me (The Provider), it was crushing to suddenly have no way to support my family.

And what troubles me about all this is that, at least in my case, my life-as-usual did not hold my feet to the fire enough for me to get to the kind of seriousness it took for me to have a bit of a dharma breakthrough. What does that say about people other than me and what it will take for someone else to break out a bit? Or, is it just me that needs the kind of soberness I experienced through that event? What does it take to make us serious? My gut says that I am not the Lone Ranger and that it may take this kind of harsh event for most people to wake up a bit. If so, it is a sad truth.

And it points out that the level of dharma commitment that I had made for years, while somewhat serious, was not strong enough to precipitate the kind of liberation I was looking for and very much needed. That thought troubles me because we can't go around recommending that people jump off a cliff or the equivalent degree of shakeup that was necessary for me to "get religion," so to speak.

So, that fateful event on the one hand, which sent me running into my past for the comfort of the natural world (Mother Nature) that I had grown up in as a child, was what it took to prepare me for some realization. Looking back, I can see that the way I was going (without the harshness of fate intervening), I would never have reached the critical mass necessary, the seriousness, that it took for me to wake up a bit. So, go figure. What are we to think?

In other words, in that untoward harsh event, I walked right out of the dharma that I knew up to that point and plunged directly into something (nature) that I had never thought of as all that dharmic. Of course, it was just what I most needed, but how did I know that? I didn't, nor would I ever have volunteered to go through that.

Mother Nature is, as they say, a harsh mistress indeed and I had been carefully ignoring her for decades because observing nature too closely puts me through so much reality that I could not afford it on a daily basis.

Yet, faced with not having a job (and a way to support my family), the emotional effects and challenges that result from my being out in nature were the least of my problems. I embraced nature as I had not since I was a teenager -- lock, stock, and barrel. Totally.

And in that sea of totality, where there was no doubt (or even a thought) about myself and Mother Nature, I was so at home, so comfortable, that my mind was free to respond in a more natural way. I would never have thought of this as a solution to dharma practice.

Yet, there it was, happening quite on its own. I was immersed in nature and had put everything else out of my mind for the moment. It was like I was in one of those floatation tanks, isolated from any distraction, with my mind riveted on peering through finer and finer camera lenses at tiny dioramas and small creatures. I was not even sitting on the cushion for that time. Imagine that.

And, in that state, I was out at dawn in nature, crawling around with a camera and fine lens through the wet grass, taking photos of tiny critters and dioramas for almost six months. I was watching the sun come up each morning that it was not raining! That alone was VERY different behavior on my part. It had probably been decades since I had seen the sun come up even once, much less each day for months!

Anyway, as I mentioned, I can't help but think that I needed something as upsetting as losing my way of making a living for my family. I would never have suggested or volunteered for such an event and it upset my apple-cart bigtime. However, when all is said and done, it was a major factor in getting my mind down to earth enough that a little actual realization could take place. It set the stage.

As a visiting lama (and close friend) said to me upon hearing my tale: this is textbook dharma, leaving whatever you are doing for a place of solitude, which was exactly what I did for some six months, enough time for my mind to settle. And in that window of time, I saw beyond my rat-race and instead of only focusing

on the objects in front and outside of me with the camera and lens, I found myself seeing into the “Seeing” itself. That’s what is called Insight Meditation.

And that little turnaround tore out some of the roots of my habitual linear-fixation, freeing me up to rest in the natural mind itself. So, I am, as they say, “just saying” here that hardships in life are also opportunities, at least for me, to deepen our dharma. And, in my case that added-gravity was enough to bring me down to earth just enough to realize a little something about my own mind.

CLOSING CLOSURE

September 12, 2018

Just a brief report on what I'm doing. We are still under construction at our dharma center, with four floorings being torn out (many layers), and then built up and leveled, finally with an entire new flooring put in. This includes the kitchen, pantry, a bedroom, and bathroom. This also requires a new vanity in the bathroom, lights, and a new stove in the kitchen. Many decisions.

We also dug up and fixed a burst pipe underground and filled all that in. And the list goes on. On photo stuff, I am in the process of developing (digitally) hundreds of photos, each one that takes careful editing. I can only do so much at a time, maybe an hour, before my eyes begin to not-see-so-well.

And then, there are a good number of videos that require complete color correction and all of that. So, I'm busy and will be.

As for inner changes, a lot is happening, but I cannot yet find words for them. I am watching closely and taking notes, but no conclusions. And that's just the point. There are no final conclusions. Everything is a process extending itself in time.

And me, well, I'm up against the wall at this point, working to curb my tendency to draw conclusions of any kind. Of course, there is the conclusion of my life. LOL. But perhaps more immediate is not trying to bring closure, in general, but rather to leave things open and flowing. Rest in that!

That goes against my habit (for most of my life) of dwelling on the end-game, the result, the so-called purpose, and closure in general. I am good at closure,

but right now my dharma training is going against it, pushing to leave all doors open and even to open them more. LOL. That is a fine kettle of fish, as they used to say.

I do have a sense of humor about all of this, but nevertheless it is very difficult. I'm trying to rest in the moment, but still hang on to this blog, if it is helpful to anyone. Otherwise, I could just go and live my life without attempting to document the journey. That's what I think I would like to do, stay with this blog; however, we will see what my personal dharma requires of me. Another LOL.

WAITING ON DHARMA

September 14, 2018

One question that comes up again and again is “when will I see some results from my dharma practice?” Of course, that depends on what practices you do and how well you do them. The lack of signs of progress in dharma is very, very common. One simple dharma practice that IMO always pays off with results rather quickly is learning to be aware of our reactions. It is part of Lojong practice, a special form of Tong-Len called Reactivity Tong-Len. It is a type of Tong-Len that we do with ourselves.

My years of reactivity dharma training have paid off. I now am able to monitor my reactions and those reactions, over time, have mostly transformed themselves into natural and appropriate responses. I no longer react as I used to, in a knee-jerk fashion, at least not often. In fact, I no longer have to go deep enough into the reaction-causing-event to react and even note the reaction. Those tendencies to just react are fading out. Mostly, I now respond before the reaction ever becomes a reaction and can go on with what I am doing without having to examine each reaction, one by one. Most of them no longer register.

It’s as if these former reactions are now very soft, not-quite-reactions anymore; they may be going on around me, but no longer capture my attention, no longer take my energy. Instead, they don’t command my attention; I don’t even find myself turning toward them anymore. It’s a bit like walking on clouds or cushions, able to mind my own business and not be interrupted every other moment by a cringe or a reaction.

Sure, new or threatening events bring about a reaction, but the run-of-the-mill daily reactions that used to torture me are mostly now at some remote distance, like far-away thunder or heat lightning. They no longer disrupt. I'm not anywhere near the fat-in-the-frying-pan person I used to be. I have toned down my reactions to a marked degree.

How do I know that I'm not just fooling myself? Well, that is an infinitely-regressive syndrome. Suffice it to say that the fact that my ability to concentrate (and general peace of mind) is much more continuous and that I can now turn away and safely ignore what used to cause me to react and all this before even reacting is, at least to me, a good sign.

I'm no longer being nickel and dimed to death during the day by reacting to inconsequential events that used to cause endless momentary cringes and other reactions on my part – fear, anxiety, worry, etc. Instead, it's like walking on cotton or cushions through the same mental neighborhoods that used to command my attention in a moment-by-moment energy-losing way much of the time.

This relief from reacting and the ability to transform what were reactions into more appropriate simple-responses to the conditions of life saves enormous amounts of energy that was previously wasted needlessly. The net result is that my ability to concentrate and be present is very much improved. In other words, the signal now is stronger than the noise.

This is a very simple practice that anyone can do. It takes no effort since these reactions are already happening to us. Those of you who want to read about this technique or refresh your practice can find instructions here:

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

Our habitual tendency to constantly react, especially at the micro-level (a thousand tiny razor cuts) is perhaps the single most energy-draining cause most of us have. This simple practice can address that unfortunate habit relatively quickly. Give it a try.

THE FAIRNESS OF DHARMA

September 15, 2018

“Don’t invite the future.” Exactly; well said. Don’t get into anticipating. This is classic dharma advice directly from the great Mahasiddha Tilopa. He says the same thing about the past: “Don’t prolong the past.”

Obviously, what he is saying is to learn to remain in the present. And even with the present, he adds: “Don’t alter the present,” meaning let it be; don’t mess with it.

How much time can we afford to spend in the future or the past -- worrying, guessing, anticipating, regretting, fearing, and so on? These words of advice are not true because Tilopa says it is true; Tilopa says it because it is true. It’s a few of his six words of advice to folks like us.

Certainly, we can do whatever we want. As my first dharma teacher used to say to me (and often): “Given the opportunity, people will do what they want.” Most of us already doing that as much as we can. Whether we take Tilopa’s advice depends on us. “You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make him drink.”

And one of the greatest things IMO about dharma is that the folks who can listen to the dharma and learn may not be those that we think should listen, but rather the folks who actually do listen. All the advice in the world is not an imperative, not something we HAVE to do, but rather a suggestion, something we might want to consider. In my life, those who I “think” should be the brightest and the best often can’t hear or won’t listen to what is considered as sage advice, i.e. the advice from the great sages. LOL. Apparently, they have other fish to fry and will.

One amazing thing about the dharma is that is not just for the “brightest and the best,” so to speak. It’s for everyone, for anyone who can grasp it – anyone at all. Living in synch with the dharma is available to everyone. And dharma is certainly not the exclusive province of the elite or the pundits; it’s quite the reverse. In fact, the so called “smart ones” are often the last to grasp it. “Smart” is not intelligent; wounds smart. Sharing dharma with those who understand it is the great equalizer, true democracy. It spans all barriers.

With the dharma, it is what you do with what you have, not how much you have. In my experience, my dharma friends are those who are devoted to dharma. Sharing true dharma unites us beyond any discrimination. I know of nothing else that does.

AWARE OF AWARENESS

September 16, 2018

Dharma practice is all about awareness. “Awareness” is simply the awareness that we are aware of something, anything. Even the awareness that we are NOT aware; that too is awareness, the same awareness. It is this awareness of whatever we have to be aware of that is important. That is awareness. We all have awareness, either directly or indirectly as I pointed out.

This common awareness is not difficult to locate. That is what we work with in dharma practice – the awareness itself. It’s the all and everything that we each have. There is nothing beyond that awareness. It’s our awareness and it’s always there if we will just look. It’s what we use to read this.

Once we locate that ever-present awareness and are aware that we are already aware, what’s next? The pith dharma texts say that we should then just rest in that awareness; nothing else. And that means just what it says. Allow yourself to relax and rest in (or on top of) that awareness, much like a mother bird fluffs herself and gently rests on her eggs. It’s that simple.

And continue resting just like that. Of course, there are a host of techniques to deal with thoughts or whatever comes to our attention as we rest, including just accepting whatever arises as natural, rather than perceive it as an interruption. The Tibetans liken this to waves and water; waves (like thoughts to the mind) are still just water. Thoughts are just the mind in motion – natural.

It’s a bit like balancing on one of those giant 3-foot inflated rubber balls that kids use in the playground.

It's not so easy to do. How can we get anything done if all we do is rest in that way? And the answer is that we can't, at least not in the way we are used to.

Instead of trying to "get" something, to "think" something, and "do" something, we relax and allow the mind to present to us what just naturally arises. Trying to keep in the groove takes effort, while being "groovy" (so to speak) allows the groove to keep us. As the great masters point out, not too much or too little, but just the right amount. Being ahead of the curve (forcing) is sadism and being behind the curve (lagging) is masochism. Mind surfing is riding the curve. That's my understanding.

“COMPARED TO WHAT”

September 18, 2018

If by “thinking,” we mean to think, to pick a topic from our mind’s library and just purposefully think on it. Well, that is one kind of thinking, very much like a dog with a bone. However, the effort (which is pretty much habitual) needed to “think” like that; itself drowns out any of the more subtle aspects of the mind’s nature. In other words, the “noise” created by the effort of making ourselves “think” (thinking!) overpowers the signal that is the mind itself. In this way, we create our own obscurations. There must be a better way than to consciously “think.”

A “better” or more natural way is to relax and let thoughts come as they will, allow what naturally comes to mind to arise and then work with that. The idea here is to facilitate and “work with” rather than to drill down on a thought and forcibly “think” it. And we can do that (allow thoughts to arise) while we rest on top of the awareness we have, as mentioned in previous blogs. It reminds me of the Lyle Lovett song “Me, Upon My Pony, On My Boat.” LOL.

Any of these more conscious, deliberate ways to handle thought and thinking don’t work well, as they cancel themselves out by their very deliberateness. The “noise” of deliberate-doing obscures the result we intend. Even the intention itself, if forced, obscures. The mind is that subtle.

And this is why the pith dharma texts say to stop all of that purposeful “thinking” and just relax and allow the mind to settle and rest on our natural awareness much as a hen rests on her eggs. Gently does it. Allow it to happen. Or, it’s like the bobsled run, where

while there is a push to get started, it is followed by the runner jumping into the sled, tucking in their arms and legs, and even pulling in their head.

The more advanced meditation methods like Insight Meditation, Mahamudra Meditation, and Dzogchen Meditation are non-dual practices, meaning we are all in, with nothing hanging out. No one is monitoring or watching us, not even us. This non-dual quality is what separates the preliminary practices from the main realization practices – dualistic as opposed to the realization practices which are non-dualistic.

We are so used to watching everything we do that perhaps we have very few moments where we are not witnessing ourselves by taking a series of ever-present “selfies.” Consciousness of self is dualistic; someone is watching someone or something.

However, in moments of great peril or sudden surprise, we may drop the watcher and just be all present. In the advanced meditation practices like Mahamudra, there is no watcher, no dualism. There is only the one non-dual mind recognizing itself.

Remember that the word “Alone” might better be spelled as “All One,” which is the natural case. We have always been just as we are now, all-one or alone, whichever we prefer.

IMO, lonely (alone) is just something we make up to entertain or frighten ourselves when we are dualistic. When we resolve that dualism, we are all-one and are no longer lonely.

For my two cents, I always remember and quote the classic jazz tune by Gene McDaniels “Compared to What,” recorded in 1969 by Les McCann, with the incendiary sax of Eddie Harris and the words:

“Tryin' to make it real, compared to what? “

That's what reification will get us: caught up in a dualistic comparison, where in reality there is none. The humor in all this, IMO, is that as this song says, there is nothing to compare to. If that is not funny, what is?

It's a long song and I know that most of you don't have time to hear it through, but after almost fifty years, it still raises the hair on my neck. In my little world, this is cosmic.

CLOSING THE GAP

September 19, 2018

What are we to do about other people's bad moods or bad intentions? I doubt that anyone "intentionally" wants to have bad intentions, but it happens or amounts to the same thing. Their agenda is warped or off-center. If they were sailing a boat, they would be sailing into the wind and not getting much of anywhere at that.

Perhaps more important, how are we to deal with other folks bad intentions? We can't just straighten them out or, if we try, it seldom works or only works temporarily. Should we go against them so that they have some resistance and thus a chance to become aware that they are off-track, so to speak?

Opposing someone has to be an act of love, because opposing our wishes is not popular; it does not endear us to someone. Or, more common, do we just let their agenda pass and ignore it. Do we just roll it out the door of our mind and forget about it. There is usually nothing but grief in opposition and who needs that?

I suppose skillful dharma masters, like brain surgeons, can engage us without opposing us and ever so gently lead us out of the cow pasture we have gotten ourselves into. But most of us are not that skillful and may not have the time (or take the time) to address another's persons course-corrections.

Yet, that is exactly what Vajrayana Buddhism is all about, working with an authentic dharma teacher who is not afraid of dealing with us directly, albeit using skillful means.

If you are like me, the world seems filled with folks heading in the wrong direction for their own good

health. It's like trying to pick up the earthworms crossing the tarmac on a road just as the sun comes up to fry them to a crisp. You can only pick up so many and carry them to the wet grass on the other side. Sometimes that seems like such a futile gesture.

Of course, there are those who like to get in our face and purposefully challenge us, heaven knows why. The easiest response on our parts is just to deflect them and allow them to spin on off their course into oblivion. I hate to imagine where they are going with that.

And, if we respond to their aggression, we are instantly connected to them and who knows how deeply. Obviously, they are crying for help, but are we yet able to actually help them and be of use? I question that I am in a position to benefit them in many cases. I have some training, but am not a rinpoche or skilled in handling these extreme cases.

When I was younger, I thought that these hard cases were just the nuts I should crack, but having tried unsuccessfully to be of use to probably hundreds of them, there was very little benefit for me or them. Locking horns is just that, a path of stasis, which is no path at all.

For me, it has been better just to stick with those folks who actually want to learn and who will work with us and to take a pass on those extreme cases. The ones I can't help; hopefully, they can be dealt with by someone with more skill than I have.

Working with someone who is totally willing and asks for help is hard enough. The dharma for even these folks is too often just a dream they are having and real work on their part is far from their minds. We like

to imagine all kinds of things for ourselves, yet few of them do we actually carry to any completion.

Dreaming is what we all seem to do so well.

Whether we can dream reality (have “real” dreams), dream what is real, is something else, i.e. for reality to be as we dreamed it. For that, IMO, it takes dharma practice.

THE GOLDEN GARLAND: A RAIN OF BLESSINGS

September 20, 2018

The essential figures in the Kagyu Lineage, what is traditionally called the Kagyu Golden Garland or Golden Kagyu Rosary, consists of the essential transmitters of this lineage.

Starting with the Mahasiddha Tilopa, who is said to have received this transmission directly from Vajradhara, the enlightened mind of the Buddha, this was then transmitted to Naropa, Marpa, Milarepa, and Gampopa in succession.

Gampopa went on to transmit the lineage to the 1st Karmapa (Dusum Khenpa) and from there it was transferred down through the entire line of Karmapas, where it resides today with the 17th Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje.

In the process, aside from the 17 Karmapas, there are a number of essential other figures who received the transmission from a particular Karmapa and transmitted it to the following Karmapa. This whole series of Karmapas (and their heart-sons) is called the Golden Kagyu Garland.

Each of these essential realized lineage holders is worthy of our respect and supplication and we can ask for their blessings directly. In order to facilitate this for myself (and to be shared with others), I have put together a traditional-style pecha (rectangular sadhana as used by Tibetans), a free download for those interested. This is different than the ones I posted not too long ago.

In this case, I have included two versions, one that is fit for use on a laptop and a second version that can

be printed in the traditional pecha-format, back to back, on two-sided index-paper stock.

There are no biographies or text included, but only the names and titles of the masters and some sort of picture or illustration to focus on. I use this myself daily to remind me of each of the lineage holders and to request their blessing.

Now, I'm not sure how to communicate this next concept without it sounding like an imperative, but here goes. You and I may not know all that much about the dharma and if we are practicing in the Kagyu lineage, we may not even know the names of the 17 Karmapas by heart or the order in which they appeared, much less the various heart-sons that also held the lineage.

However, each of these lineage holders are realized beings and must still be somewhere in the cosmos (or in emanation) generating dharma as vast as the sky. We are free to supplicate these lineage holders and request their blessing, not only collectively, but also individually, one by one.

Sometimes I feel this may be the most effective way to practice there is, one we can do with heart – i.e. supplicate, ask. The ability to bless is held by all of these lineage holders, but we do have to ask for the blessings from these realized beings. I find having a small printed and illustrated sadhana is a very convenient way to do this.

PRONOUNCING THE NAMES

It is also important (or at least helpful) to have some idea how to pronounce the list of lineage holders in the Golden Garland. Yes, the thought counts and the cosmos can probably figure out which one you are

intoning, yet it is a relief not to think we are guessing at pronunciation.

With that in mind, here are the Kagyu Lineage Masters Names as recited by Lama Karma in an audio MP3 file. This covers all of them up to the 17th Karmapa. I have asked Lama Karma for another audio file that exactly matches this version, but for now the enclosed audio file should help with most of the names. It is important to know how they sound.

Each morning, I slowly read through the list, reciting the individual names (I say them out loud) and inwardly ask for their blessing, each and every one. It only takes a few minutes, yet if we sincerely supplicate their blessings, it can only benefit us. Especially, if we do no other dharma practice or are spotty in the practices we do. We all should know how to ask these great Tibetan saints for their blessing. And, as mentioned, to make that a little easier, here is an audio file by Lama Karma pronouncing each lineage name.

<http://traffic.libsyn.com/spirit.../Golden Lineage Masters.mp3>

As for the sadhanas themselves, the laptop version is here:

<http://spiritgrooves.net/.../Golden%20Garland%20%20NON-PRINTI...>

And the 2-sided printing version is here:

<http://spiritgrooves.net/.../.../golden%20Garland%20PRINTING.pdf>

With the printing version, using the numbered pages (and a two-page spread), you can take this file to your local Staples copy center and have them create a two-sided rectangular copy, BUT you will have to

point out to them that each successive 2-page spread has to be reversed (upside down) so that when you turn the first page (vertically) from the bottom up, the second page is oriented correctly.

It's a bit like rubbing your tummy with one hand while you pat your forehead with the other, but if you take your time to think it through and explain it to the copy-center, you will have no trouble having it reproduced. I have to do this myself.

If the paper is then cut so that only the deep red background is shown, you have a very nice (and useful) list of the lineage in pictorial form, the Golden Garland of the Kagyu Lineage.

I have posted other similar printable-pechas here before, but this particular one has only the main lineage figures and no others, so any Kagyu practitioner can use it.

To repeat myself: By reciting their names, we can bring to mind and request the blessings of our lineage forefathers by going slowly through this list. These figures are all realized beings and each is someone out there in the various realms to be supplicated.

[Sadhanas designed by me.]

RESTING IN AWARENESS

September 23, 2018

I have to go back to the early part of August to remember a time when life was more or less normal. Since that time, I either have been traveling or have had workmen and crews here doing one thing or another. Of course, a lot of necessary stuff was getting done, but life as I knew it was interrupted and still is.

A many-day babysitting stint is coming to an end in about an hour. Perhaps by tomorrow things will quiet down, but that's not for sure either. There is still work going on at our center.

My point is that being interrupted as I have been from the relative quiet of being normal has left me with something like only a memory of being normal, but no exact path (or idea) as to reaching that once again. And even if I get back there, which I can't, what is it that I want to do, since so much has changed in the interim?

And this conundrum reminds me of our distracted human state.

There is such a thing as being distracted long enough, if not endlessly (since the beginning of time), until what is normal to us is the distraction itself and the chaos that we have drawn around us. In a very real sense, this is what Tranquility Meditation (Shamata) is all about and intended to do: concentrate and get ourselves together and focused. And it's not that easy to do, especially if we have never done it.

Without first establishing concentration, it seems continuity of some essential sort is not reached, much

less maintained. It's almost as if we have to get ourselves all-together before we can begin to let go. In other words, we have to become aware of our natural awareness before we can rest in it.

It's not what we are aware of that is important; it's being aware of the awareness itself that is important, because resting in that awareness is ultimately what meditation is all about. To make it clearer, here is an example.

If I feel out of sorts, the awareness that I am feeling out-of-sorts is the awareness I am talking about here not the out of sorts experience I am feeling. I am aware that I don't feel well. That awareness that I don't feel well, itself, does not feel unwell. It is pure awareness, pristine. It is the awareness that I don't feel well and that awareness feels perfectly well. That's the idea.

That awareness that we are aware is where we must place and rest our mind, but not in the imperative way as I just worded it. Instead, we must allow our mind to rest in that pristine awareness quite naturally, without any effort on our part, which would just cloud or obscure.

I like the example of the mother hen, who as she settles in on her nest of eggs, fluffs and allows her feathers to expand around the nest and come to rest on the eggs naturally, effortlessly. That's the kind of rest I am referring to. That's the way we learn to rest on top of or in our natural awareness and be one with it.

THE THINGS WE HAVE TO DO EACH DAY

September 24, 2018

There are things that I just have to do each day, yet I don't always feel like doing them. Let's start with the obvious. I have to get up, go to the bathroom, brush my teeth, and so on. And I should take a shower each morning, but sometimes I only do that every other day.

And, of course, a longer-term thing I have to do is cut my own hair. I have not been to a barber in many decades, but use one of those crazy Flow-Be hair cutters that hook to your vacuum; have for years, but I don't like the bother of it all either. In fact, I don't like the "bother" of all the things I listed above. I much prefer just doing nothing at all. LOL.

My guess is that I don't like anything that is regimented or demanded of me. Who knows where that started; I don't.

Other things I do later in a day don't seem to trouble me. Perhaps I just need to get rolling in the morning and I don't drink coffee (or any caffeine), so there is no wakeup-help there. However, more important than all of the above is what I have to do each day with dharma practice. To me, that is much more interesting.

Now, I have been around dharma practice of one kind or another for many decades, so possible practices indeed do accumulate or pile up. I have done the various preliminary practices years ago and some of them more than once, like the Ngöndro. I toy with doing mandala practice yet again (because I like it), but have not acted on that. And so, what determines

what dharma practice I actually do is (to me) interesting.

I want to state the punchline for this piece right off and then explain why that's so. And that point is that I only do dharma practices that I have been especially moved to do. There are literally dozens of practices that I have been empowered to do, but I don't do all of them; actually, I do very few of those type of practices. I am naturally busy, so I don't need more things to do.

I only do those practices for which some "singular" event has signaled me to do and explaining how that works is not so easy, but I will try and I will be candid. Here is an example:

For many decades I always kept a shrine, which means filling each day the water bowls and all of that. However, at one point in my practices (years ago) I went through what I would call a deep-opening process, during and after which I no longer felt like keeping a shrine each day, so I didn't. I felt I was at a shrine all day long in whatever I did or something like that. Sounds arrogant, but it happens.

While I didn't keep a shrine during that time, I still was very aware that I was not keeping a shrine and somehow felt delinquent about that fact. However, I did not FEEL like keeping one and I don't like forcing myself, especially when it comes to dharma. It goes against the grain for me, so I didn't. And here comes an example of what I am trying to share with you.

At some point, my dharma teacher became quite ill; I imagine that all of his main students knew about this very quickly and of course we said prayers and sent positive thoughts his way; I know I did.

Yet, to me, the situation demanded something more from me than that. So, even though I had not been keeping a shrine because I did not “feel” like it, I needed to do something more in my wish for him to be well than just send mental postcards. And so it came to me that, even though I did not feel like going through the elaboration of keeping a shrine (at least at that time), I decided to offer that daily shrine upkeep for the sake of the health of my teacher. And I did.

I know, it probably sounds trivial and stupid, but please put my hesitation at sharing this with you aside and take in the point here, because IMO it is an important one, and that is:

We can offer things that we otherwise might not as a way of being sincere. In this case, it was something I did to make an offering to Rinpoche i.e. maintain a proper shrine. And I did not do it reluctantly, but once moved to do it I did it willingly and I have kept it up ever since then. It is now something that I now WANT to do.

And there are other similar events that have happened that are like this and most of are related to something Rinpoche has said to me personally or to me as part of a group of students at a teaching.

As mentioned, other cases include when Rinpoche is speaking to me personally and says something to me. He seldom if ever says we HAVE to do something, but almost always phrases it as something we might like to do. But I have always taken those hints as direct commands and done them immediately.

In other words, Rinpoche does not make casual conversation, at least not with me. For example, one time at the end of a personal interview, Rinpoche said that I might like to try a mantra device like a wrist

mala (prayer beads or something). That's all he said, but I quickly found that a small wrist mala (which I now always carry with me) was very, very helpful in focusing my attention. That's one example.

Another is something Rinpoche said to me when I asked him a personal question in a group situation about Mahamudra practice. He answered the question about the Mahamudra practice and then tacked on a suggestion that, in addition to doing Mahamudra practice, I might find doing guru-yoga practice also useful and keeping the lineage refuge tree in mind beneficial as well.

I was already doing the guru-yoga practice daily and even throughout the day, but I had not spent much time with our refuge tree, meaning with the list of great masters in our particular lineage. I immediately began doing that, and this is where it gets (at least for me) a little more subtle.

In other words, I didn't just do what Rinpoche says because he said it, although you could take it that way. Rather, what Rinpoche suggested, immediately rang a bell with me and pointed out a valuable practice, to supplicate the lineage of enlightened masters directly. So, for me it was not "Yes, Rinpoche, I will do that," but rather "Oh yes, I see how beneficial it is to directly supplicate the lineage masters and ask for their blessings." There is a difference there.

That is why the term "pointing-out" is so important in Vajrayana dharma practice. The guru points at or out what we might benefit by being aware of and we either are inspired by it or we are not.

And so, my daily dharma practice, aside from practicing Mahamudra, are a collection of short (or

longer) prayers and sadhanas, each of which first arose as an inspiration to do them and were taken on by me voluntarily, sort of “locked into place” by my wanting to do them as a practice.

Is this the only way to go? Of course not; your mileage may be different. The theme of this blog is not to do what your guru tells you, but rather first receiving a cue from a teacher and voluntarily incorporating that cue on you own.

THOUGHTS AS COMFORT

September 25, 2018

It seems that my habitual preference when I rest my mind is to “think on” something; it does not matter much what it is that I’m thinking about. It’s like watching a movie, when you don’t really care which movie, as long as something flicks on the silver screen. In other words, we rest our mind in the distraction of thought because that is what we are used to. It’s our habit.

Even going to sleep, my habit is to pick some topic and think on it while I drift off. Trying to lose that habit is difficult -- very difficult. I go for the comfort of thoughts like a dog to a bone.

Learning to not habitually “think” is not easy; we don’t know what to do with ourselves without thoughts. We are not used to being idle when it comes to thought. We just think and think and think. Sitting there and not thinking (for many) is awkward, uncomfortable, so we catch the nearest train of thought and ride on out of town, so to speak.

Such thought and incessant thinking is an obscuration that busies the mind, blocking and keeping out that empty-of-thought and the nakedness of the mind itself, which perhaps is just fear of the unknown on our part. We may have to let go of thinking or embrace it entirely without being distracted by it, or both.

DHARMA: EMPTY OF WHAT?

September 26, 2018

IMO, the idea of emptiness in Buddhism is not well understood. Many sources treat emptiness like a bowl that is empty or the cupboard is bare. That's not it at all. Like the little poem below that I wrote some years ago, we ARE empty, but empty only of permanent being, like, for example: we are empty of having a permanent soul. Our very being is empty of permanence. We are impermanent.

SEMANTICS

It's not just that being
Is empty;
It's that there is,
An emptiness,
Of being.

It's never been there.

This life is just a dream we are having, one from which we have yet to wake up. Emptiness is more like that, the absence of any more substantial existence. As the Tibetans say, this life is a magical illusion, a hologram, much like the flickering images from an old movie reel.

And this emptiness we sense or feel inside us can never be filled because, as mentioned, it's not empty of "something" tangible, but rather of something existential. We have never existed more than we do now (or less, for that matter). We have yet to wake up to our own insubstantiality, but instead we continually reify ourselves and our life in an attempt to make it more real than it, in fact, is.

And we exaggerate our imagined reality, desperately trying to make it more real than it is, to make ourselves more real than we are. It's not that we once were real and are now just a shadow of who or what we were, but rather that we never were any more real than we are now. As my first dharma teacher used to always say to me. "Michael, this is it!"

As mentioned, we have never been any different and what we imagine is missing in our soul (or being) we attempt to fill by reification and that's a thankless task. It's like sand through an hourglass that's all running downhill. We cannot succeed by reification and this by definition. It's a losing battle.

What we are losing is our struggle to reify ourselves. As we tire, that reification wears off and our lack of permanent-being shows through the gild and veneer that we have laid on life. And we are terrified of lacking substantial existence.

The only thing that I try to keep in mind is that we have never (not ever) been any different than we are right now. It's not like we were more "real" and have become more insubstantial. We have it just backward! What we vainly struggle not to lose is just the reification that we pile on and it was false to begin with. We are somewhat ephemeral and always have been so. As Shakespeare said "We are such stuff as dreams are made on."

In other words, we are fighting a losing battle to reify what was never real to begin with. There is humor in there somewhere. It's a no-win situation and we just have hold of the wrong end of the stick. That's all.

A common definition of dharma practice is simply to become familiar with the mind.

However, in this case it would include grasping how things actually already are (and have always been), plus there is the little problem of rectifying the simple mistake most of us have made as regards reification, which requires a 180-degree reversal on our part. We have to undo our habit of reifying everything. This is what the more advanced realization practices are all about.

As for my two cents, I find that my life is plenty real enough just as it is. The advanced practices include relaxing with things just as they are and no longer struggling to reify everything.

DHARMA: FOR WHOM DO I WRITE?

September 27, 2018

I believe that's a fair question and I often ask it of myself. Aside from some blogs on astrology, music, and other topics, I mostly write on dharma and its practice. And I don't seem to write for those just starting out with the dharma, but more for those who are already started, but may need encouragement or who have reached various impasses.

It seems that I write these comments and essays for those who are at or approaching the gateway to what are called the realization practices (Insight Meditation, Mahamudra, etc.), those who are on this side of the entryway (so to speak), where so many of us have gathered. Yes, some of us may have had a glimpse through the gate of realization, but for the most part our minds are still quite ordinary and so we are waiting for the insights of "Recognition" so that we ourselves can cross over.

Figuratively speaking, if there is not much pushing or shoving among those who are waiting for recognition, it is probably because we don't know which way to push or shove. LOL. The gate to the recognition of the mind is, for all practical purposes, a mystery to us. And it will remain a mystery until the blessings of our dharma teacher and the lineage in their floodtide washes us over the threshold.

And those who wait for recognition are busy indeed, busy with a thousand practices that may look for-all-the-world like they are collectively rubbing their tummies and patting their foreheads. We don't know exactly what it takes to achieve recognition of the

nature of the mind in our case or we would have done that already. LOL.

As mentioned, we don't quite know what is required or else they all would have gone beyond into the realization practices by now. As a group, neither have they schooled together as fish do, all heading in the same direction. There are many ways to Recognition and they can be very individual. And it's not like we know where the portal to realization is located, so many kind of mill around in what might appear as an almost random fashion.

And it's not clear what we collectively think, probably all kinds of stuff. Perhaps we have worked hard, made great efforts, but are now trying to put all that effort behind us. We are looking to enter the realization practices, where the effort is of another kind, more like the effort to relax, which is obviously an oxymoron.

It reminds me of one of those Bic lighters when they are running out of lighter fluid. We just flick and flick and flick, but no flame. We have yet to ignite.

“Recognition” of the true nature of the mind is a portal closed to us without the pure blessings of the lineage, particularly that of our guru. It's the one thing we can't fake because, like I tell myself, “as clever as I am, even I cannot sneak up on a mirror.” As long as we are still reflecting, we will only see ourselves. Isn't that obvious?

DHARMA: LIBERATION THROUGH SIGHT

September 28, 2018

The accent here is on the word “liberation,” in this case through seeing. In other words, there are many ways through which we can or might recognize the true nature of the mind, perhaps infinite in number. In any case, the result of “Recognition” (however it is achieved) is always the same, grasping the actual nature of the mind. That tells us something.

As mentioned, there are only ways to achieve recognition of the true nature of the mind and they are tailored personally to us like a glove to a hand or more like skin to the hand. What that statement means or points to is that “recognition” is an inner realization on our part, not something “new” we discover on the outside. The key to recognition is something that is as close to us right now as our own skin.

If we have not recognized the nature of the mind, it probably means we have been looking too far afield and not looking close enough to where we live and are. The fiducial or means to recognition is always something close at hand and totally familiar to us. It's right before our eyes.

Commonly stated in the pith teachings is the statement that the essence of dharma is simply familiarization with our own mind -- becoming or getting familiar. That statement is important and says a lot, IMO.

And what it says is that we must (or will) become familiar with the mind in our own individual way, not just using what we read in books or hear in teachings, but instead through all the means of experience that

we have had to this date. It has to come home to us somehow and the only means for that is through what we know and are. That's what is meant by "familiar."

RECOGNITION BY WHOM?

It might help to think of familiarization as a translator or interpreter, stepping-down or communicating to us the essential dharma in a language we already understand and can assimilate. "Recognition" is simultaneously also an empowerment and who/what is being empowered is the "ourselves" we are familiar with, not some new or transformed us that we imagine will suddenly appear.

That's the beauty of it. "We" are empowered, just as we are now, warts and all, not as we could be or would be. We are "good to go" now and that is part of what is recognized. We have everything we need at hand and don't have to strive-on to eventually be "better" or get ready. At "Recognition," that's over and is the whole point. We recognize that we know exactly what needs to be done and, perhaps best of all, that we can do it starting right now. That's recognition.

There is so much written about recognizing the true nature of the mind, but almost nothing written about who is doing the recognizing. It's none other than us, just as we are right here and now, not some transformed "us." It is the recognition event that is transforming. Or, another way to put it might be that what is the result of this transformation is the realization and confidence that we are totally able to enlighten ourselves, as mentioned, just as we now are.

What remains after "Recognition" is an unshakable certainty that cannot be walked-back and a sense of compassion for all beings, what is called Absolute

Bodhicitta. It is permanent and only wants expansion and extension.

Why do I provide so many details about this particular process? Won't it influence folks so that they can fake this realization? Won't it spoil for them what is a pristine, life-changing event? And my answer to that is: because "Recognition" IS a singular life-changing event, it cannot be spoiled, previewed, or emulated in any way.

I have a deep faith in this dharma-event called Recognition as to its singularity. It cannot be faked, or tarnished by thought or words. It is immaculate and remains forever pristine. The dualistic or relative-truth dharma practices (purification practices), by definition, can but prepare us to recognize the nature of the mind. That event of recognition has to be triggered by an authentic dharma teacher pointing-out to us the true nature of the mind. Until they do that, we have only the experience of relative truth; however, after recognition, we have realized what has been called "sacred non-dual outlook" for the very first time.

This realization (which is permanent) can then be expanded and extended through our practice and effort. IMO, this is when true meditation begins.

ALL DRESSED UP AND NOWHERE TO GO

September 29, 2018

So much of dharma practice can be mechanical, a process that we repeat over and over and over. Of course, rote repetition without Bodhicitta (heart) is not going to help much. It's easy to reach a point where it seems like we are merely treading water, with no real signs of progress. As I sometimes tell myself: "I'm dancing as fast as I can" or "I don't know what else I can do or where should I go from here?" At those times, no doors seem to be opening.

This is common among practitioners as to be almost usual, at least from time to time. I can't seem to find the secret door (it must be there somewhere) through which I could pass to make dharma progress. LOL.

When we reach what appears to be a blind alley in our dharma practice, what can we do? Where do we go? For me, the key word here is "Patience," which is a must have, yet I remember a line I heard long ago (I know not from where): "When you say wait, you mean a long time." It takes time and as the old saying goes, "What goes around, comes around." It is the same with practice; it eventually comes full circle and we find a way forward. But we can easily have a dry well for a long while.

All of the great pith texts (upadesha) clearly state that we should be very careful not to engage in hope that our practice goes well or get anxious if it goes poorly. Either way, that is a total waste of time and amounts to just another obscuration that delays any realization.

We just have to keep on practicing and wait for signs of progress to appear, not getting lost in hope that our practice goes well or becoming anxious if today's

practice does not go well. Keep practicing with good faith and don't bother to doubt is the key.

Actual results come from concentrating on our practice and learning to put our heart in it, not by looking to the right or looking to the left. And thoughts won't help. There is no court of appeal for practice-gone-aground other than asking our teacher and/or waiting for the results that someday will appear. It can be very difficult to persevere when we are not getting regular feedback or results. Since almost all of the preliminary practices are purification-oriented, in my experience, that can be both painful and tedious. After all, we do them pretty much on spec.

The effort required to persevere through what are (for many of us) years of purification practices is enormous and the immediate or even mid-term results are sparse, often few and far between. IMO, the later purification practices, like the Ngondro and on up to the brink of "Recognition" are when we need the steady hand of an authentic teacher and any other encouragement we can accept.

There is what I would call a "No Man's Land" as we approach the realization practices and when we are tired from years of effort and yet not yet able to grasp the pointing-out instructions and achieve the breakthrough of "Recognition." It is here that the kindness of the guru, our teacher, is most important and needed. IMO, it's a high-wire act.

And it reminds me of what is called the "Ring-Pass-Not" that we find in Western esotericism, a threshold that no one can cross who is steeped in matter and that only those who are not attached can approach. In Vajrayana Buddhism, this Ring-Pass-Not is the event called "Recognition," where we transition from what is called the Relative-Truth of the purification practices

to the Absolute-Truth of the realization practices. It's not unlike focusing a pair of binoculars until the two separate images become one, but not at all that easy.

As we get closer to the realization practices, we sometimes get clues or hints, however brief. We find ourselves drilling down on particular practices, not doing them once a day as we used to, but perhaps doing them all through the day. We follow what is heartfelt and intuitive rather than thinking of things. We just do it.

There is a perfect storm out there for us that will ignite recognition of the nature of the mind, if we can precipitate it. If there is a recipe for recognition, it is very much an individual or personal one, but there are several factors to be aware of.

This includes the ability to concentrate, which is why some training in Tranquility Meditation may be helpful. Of course, we will need an authentic teacher who has given us the pointing-out instructions as to the true nature of the mind. This often has been given to us earlier, even years earlier. These instructions hopefully help to start us thinking differently and can guide us in selecting which practices may actually help.

We may have to do these practices for a long, long time, like years and intensely. It's no longer like going to church on Sunday, an hour a week or once a day, but practices that we can do throughout the day, every day and all day. We are by that point feeling our way along in selecting which practices feel correct.

And then there is the wild card; there is always something almost random, call it luck or serendipity. I like to use the idea of there being a "perfect storm" that brings together all of these conditions in a unique

way. And this all has to be very, very personal, hitting us in the face, so to speak.

And last, but not least, and this is the scary part, we may require something that shocks or severely interrupts our life in perhaps a heavy way. In other words, we may need to sober up, come down from the clouds, and get serious. Often some personal event or shock-to-life is enough to distract us from our normal distractions long enough to glimpse the nature of the mind. At least, that's what the experts say.

DARING TO USE THE DHARMA

September 30, 2018

As Shakespeare said, “You are no longer yourself than you yourself here live.” Since we are already here on Earth, we might as well have the courage to live and explore life. And IMO, the dharma demands this kind of courage on our part for it to work.

We are so passive in this modern life. We read books. We watch movies. We listen to music. Only in the last few decades have we really begun to interact equally with life via video games, the Internet, and various media.

The dharma cannot by definition be simply passive, except perhaps conceptually, as an intellectual pursuit. If we practice dharma, we are automatically interactive. What opportunities do we have in this life-we-are-living to seize the time, so to speak, and make it our own? Or, are we too shy to really live and instead just slide by as best we can?

We could argue all this, of course. However, when it comes to dharma and its practice, to my knowledge, this requires full participation on our part to get results. At least, that has been my experience. The dharma is not very effective as a hobby or casual pursuit. It requires heartfelt commitment on our part and part-time dharma is pretty much an oxymoron. So, what am I driving at here?

Practicing dharma is not a bystander-sport and wallflowers are not rewarded with results. With dharma practice we have to actually roll up our sleeves and dive in. Ultimately, “Realization” as described in the dharma teachings is literally all-encompassing; we go in dualistic-minded and come

out whole – single minded. And it is a one-way process as well. We don't come back to where we were.

It reminds me (sorry folks, but I believe this) of when LSD was first introduced back in the early 1960s. The rumor was that acid could alter your brain forever, chemically, and that was a scary thought. As it turned out, that was not how it was. Yes, it was a mind-altering drug, but what is altered is your view of life, not your brain, and for me that was a good thing. It saved me decades (if not a lifetime) of dualistic confusion. Like LSD, the dharma alters our view, but without drugs. LOL.

It may look like my point here is that dharma practice only involves being proactive, but there is more to it than that. I am not simply saying to be active in your approach to dharma practice, but also to be creative. There are many meanings for the word "creative," so I want to be clear about which I am referring to.

First, by "creative" I mean not to simply accept and reflect the textbook definitions of whatever dharma terms and teachings you are learning about. Instead, we must absorb and incorporate the dharma until it can be expressed in our own words and through our particular life experience. In other words, we have to make the dharma our own, whether we can express it so that others can understand us or not. "We" must understand it at some root level -- total involvement.

And by "creative" I mean that we venture or dare to use dharma actively as it makes sense to us and not be intimidated by abstruse technical terms that we don't yet understand. Dharma is very much a living (and body) language that interpenetrates us from the inside out. Using dharma, we discover what is already WITHIN us rather than take something new from the

outside. The Buddha's teachings exist to "point out" to us what is already within us, what has always been there.

Our incorporation and expression of the dharma depends on how WE understand it and, while I would never intentionally be disrespectful to the teachings, dharma is meant to be used and not just put on some high shelf to be worshipped. That's not my idea of religion. For me, dharma is the essence of the pragmatic, the most practical insights I have ever known. IMO, it's the only way to approach life that makes any sense.

