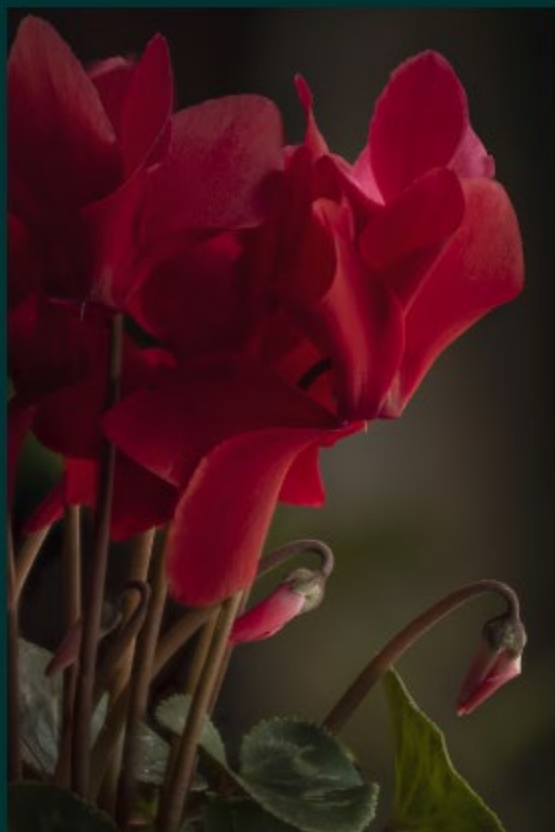


BLOGS 2023 FALL



by Michael Erlewine

2023

Essays

Fall

by Michael Erlewine

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

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

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

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

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WHERE INTEREST GOES TO DIE

October 1, 2023

I've been busy dating hundreds of rock concert posters these last few days, trying to figure out what year they are, given the month, date, and day-of-the-week. That's pretty mindless, if you think about it, which I don't. I just do it. There's little room for space doing that, other than just resting in the doing of it, which itself is spacious. Now, that's a thought.

And I have been doing this kind of thing since I was six years old, cataloging my various nature collections. And it only got worse, so to speak, as I got older.

There is something about rote work that it is so boring that it is interesting, spacious. It's way better than watching paint dry, in that there is motion and repetition, a beat, moving along in time. It's almost like music from a different drummer.

I think I once documented 18,000 jazz albums with all the sidemen, etc. It took five weeks of just doing that. So, what am I getting at here?

Well, not much, really. Just that, that where interest ends, something else begins. Blind repetition is just simple repetition, and the 'blind' is actually 'time out', time out from time itself in its own way, because nothing much is happening, almost nothing at all. And what is it about 'nothing' that is so fascinating to us?

Now, fast forward all that blind repetition and embrace all recorded music and documenting all films and movies, not to mention what I am doing right now,

which is working on 33,000 rock concert posters, just a portion of them, and you get something beyond the ordinary, even if it is 'boring' so to speak, which I won't argue with. Why is it that beyond the ordinary is so fascinating?

Yet, that's just the point. I didn't plan to go where 'boring' lives; I just wanted to do what no one seemed interested in doing, in today's case, sequencing about 1,000 rock posters by a single artist so that all the posters, once dated, lined up, paint a picture of the artist's progression that is hard to see otherwise.

It's one thing to see a pile of posters, and quite another to see them chronologically, which reveals small changes in their work over time... or large changes.

Yet, my purpose here is perhaps a misdirection, as I am skirting the edges of the elephant in the room, which, like drugs, is an inadvertent high precipitated from simple repetition. Do this for 40 or 50 years and you define a space as wide as the world, one that you can rest in.

I went there because 'somebody had to do it', or so I thought, and I told myself I was doing it because it had to be done. The obvious is that after a while, like a few decades, it's not just that somebody has to do it, but that I continue find myself in these strange spaces in time where nobody goes. I also like to arrive early to events and just wait. Now, that's indicative. Perhaps I just like to be alone.

So, it's not like I'm just discovering this, but rather I have made a point of discovering it long ago, if only

under the pretext of doing something that had to be done that no one else would do. Obviously, it's not as simple as that.

In this world ruled by interest, how is it that my keen interest led me to some of the most uninteresting places in time. What was my interest in having no interest? Is it my way of telling myself something? Perhaps it is a bit of peace in a not-so-peaceful world.

One thing, as it turns out, all this boredom and 'nothing' goes perfectly with dharma training, in particular with non-dual meditations, which are called non-meditation.

How about a few of you weighing in on this and explaining it to me. I would like to know, but obviously I already know and just have never verbalized it.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



A DIFFERENT DRUMMER

October 2, 2023

My name was attached to the following blog by well-known astrologers. I enjoyed reading the comments, but have a differing opinion, which since I was invited, felt I should add. Here is the original blog by Larry Ely.

<https://www.facebook.com/.../pfbid032s8Nv9kST6Gf3n78MCp8...>

And here is my comment to the group:

Like the Baleen whales (blue, bowhead, right, humpback, minke and gray whale) who filter plankton from the sea, although I have read most of Rudolph Steiner many years ago (quite a project), and with great interest because it addressed some of the 'feelings' or emotional parts of me. I eventually gradually lost interest because, like the old TV commercial, I found myself asking "Where's the meat?" However, I did not like losing that rosy feeling from reading Steiner.

It was the same for me with Blavatsky and kin, even though I was the vice-president of Michigan Theosophists, and the same with Gurdjieff, and on and on. I found myself losing interest in western esotericism. Reason?

I believe I perhaps stumbled because of Plato's allegory of the cave, and the idea that (like the doctrine of original sin), we once were pure, yet have since fallen away from that, and are now trying to somehow redeem ourselves and regain that purity. I don't like that sin part.

The dharma take on this is very different, the idea that we have not fallen away from purity, but rather have yet to become aware of it, or as my dharma teacher of 36 years, a Tibetan rinpoche said to a group of us. “We are the stragglers, the ones who in all the time up until now, never got it,” meaning got enlightened.

I certainly applaud all of the comments in this blog and at least those of you who write this, and I consider you friends and love to see what I consider more meaningful writing on your parts than I find very often, and to be included.

At the same time, however, it’s been decades since I gave up on the concept of the “Soul” and reincarnation, and my attempt to fit my experience into that mold. Perhaps I have spent too much time with Vajrayana dharma and the concept of rebirth, and not reincarnation. I don’t fit in, quite. Yet I understand your language well, I believe.

I am reminded of a story someone told me of cats on a farm, who in the early evening would sometimes march in a single line, with nose to tail, across the farmyard, silhouettes against the sky. And at the very tail end of the line of cats, sometimes would be one skunk, bringing up the rear.

I’m afraid I’m like that skunk, and as much as I love all of your comments and am very happy to read what you write, I’ve had to move on and cast off from the idea of a ‘Soul’ as an entity as Steiner (and others) seem to suggest and am more than involved in coming to grips with the dharma concept of rebirth instead.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



ANN ARBOR: A SACRED PLACE

October 9, 2023

I have been interested in the dharma since the late 1950s, when we used to stay up late, smoke cigarettes, drink lousy instant coffee with powdered creamer, and talk about Zen Buddhism and Ingmar Bergman films. And later there was sitting Sesshin (all day) with Roshi Phillip Kapleau from the Rochester Zen Center, somewhere out Packard Road. Today, one of my former astrology students is now Roshi there, Roshi Bodin Kjolhede.

As for me, I met Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche here in Ann Arbor in February of 1974, and ended up as his chauffeur and also creating the poster for his talk here. Trungpa took me into a room, sat me down, and taught me Shamata meditation, and from that I was launched.

I have been to Tibet a couple of times on pilgrimage, and have actually practiced Tibetan Buddhism under direct supervision with a high rinpoche for some 36 years. I was very intrigued on my journeys by how the Tibetans treat Mother Nature, natural wonders, and the whole idea of guardian spirits. Here in the West, we don't acknowledge spirits other than ourselves, or that towns and natural places have them. Certainly, in my experience Ann Arbor is such a special place. To me Ann Arbor is sacred and has guardians.

Another way to say this is that Ann Arbor is not a free-for-all, but has something like a definite DNA or direction in which it is headed and not just anything goes. Understanding what is essential to life here and

what will founder is important. That's what I would like to discuss and share my thoughts on, what is the nature of Ann Arbor.

Most of us have a hometown where we came from. Ann Arbor Michigan is my hometown; I grew up there. I am a townie. I would like to speak briefly about the spirit or spirits of Ann Arbor and then perhaps, if I don't go on too long, I will share something about what the Tibetans call "Sa-Dak," the Earth Lords or spirits.

In the early and middle 1960s, Ann Arbor was very different from the overly caffeinated and sophisticated city it is today. For one, back then it did not take me 20 minutes to drive across town, but that's beside the point. I digress.

In the 1960s Ann Arbor appeared much less sure of itself (or was it just me growing up?). As a town, it seemed to be very self-conscious and inward, perhaps even playing second fiddle (weak sister) to other college towns like Cambridge, Madison, and Berkeley. Perhaps we were just young, or Ann Arbor had not yet found its place in the modern world. It certainly has now.

As mentioned, in the 1960s Ann Arbor was still forming as to who and what it was as regards mainstream America, and what it lacked in bravado, it made up for in introspection and a quiet humility. What I did not fully grasp back then is that Ann Arbor is fecund, a most fertile place, indeed a womb. It is pure feminine. And that is rare. Places can be like that.

In the 1960's, Ann Arbor's innate receptivity and 'femininity' might well have been mistaken for passivity and naiveté, not that there was not some of that also present. Ann Arbor in the Sixties was not fully aware of itself, a city yet to awaken and be aware of its own mission, but nonetheless busy taking a direction that time would reveal as significant. It just took a while.

Most city names are feminine, but that is not what I mean by saying that Ann Arbor is feminine. There are two kinds of sculpture, one made by adding clay until we have a form, and the other by cutting away stone until we have a form. Ann Arbor is definitely of the second variety. It reveals rather than posits; in other words, Ann Arbor is passive rather than active, passive enough to give and actually allow birth to emerge and also able to allow things to pass. In that sense it is 'passive'.

Like the Christian Bible says, "... this came to pass... that came to pass." It is a quality of Ann Arbor that it facilitates, accommodates, and generally helps things to pass, all feminine qualities..

At the time, growing up in Ann Arbor (and never really knowing any other city) I was only dimly aware that my hometown was more 'passive', more giving (as in 'giving way' and accepting), and generally just more receptive and understanding than some places.

I might better say that I felt that other college towns I had been to (like Berkeley or Cambridge) were in some way more aggressive or macho, or perhaps just 'on their game'. It was natural to assume that Ann

Arbor was busy bringing up the rear. Obviously, it had not yet quite found itself or was somehow different and that difference was not yet appreciated. That's what I mean by 'different'.

Exactly when Ann Arbor did find itself (in the contemporary sense) I cannot say. I was too busy finding my own self and that happened in 1967. And then in 1980 I moved about 180 miles northwest to Big Rapids Michigan to raise a family, where I live to this day. As near as I can tell, Ann Arbor became an adult somewhere after I left town. Certainly, it is confident and sure of itself today, and I am not just talking about students walking right in front of your car either. They always did that.

My best guess is that Ann Arbor became aware of its feminine qualities the same way I discovered my own gentler side, gradually but certainly, by surrendering to surrender, so to speak, giving in, going inward. Ann Arbor has great inwardness.

In time, the passive qualities of the town have become a power, not a defect or liability. This is my opinion, that this fertility, this receptivity that Ann Arbor has in such high degree is very rare among cities. At least, as to this regard, IMO Ann Arbor is very special indeed.

And I sometimes wonder just how many of us there are who lived in Ann Arbor beyond our college years (not that I went to college) and were somehow unable to be all that we could be while living there, and yet blossomed almost as soon as we left the town. That happened to me. I had to leave Ann Arbor for the

world to appreciate me. Ann Arbor is tough that way, very critical and that can be humbling.

This has always puzzled me and perhaps every town is like that. 'A prophet is never known in his own country' kind of thing, yet it is immediately recognized from the outside. I don't have enough data to even make a guess at this.

Or is the deep receptiveness and anti-macho quality of Ann Arbor Michigan something that makes traditional superficial success more difficult-to-impossible to achieve in this town, yet at the same time builds strong habits for responding to and accommodating life. In other words, Ann Arbor doesn't 'posit,' but instead reveals. This I wonder.

It is interesting that my first real business (incorporated) was formed in Ann Arbor, Matrix Software. In an article on me done for Red Herring Magazine, they found out that my software company, Matrix Software, was the second oldest software on the Internet, the only older company was a little company named Microsoft.

I chose the word "Matrix" not for its mathematical meaning, but because it meant 'womb,' a place where something could be born. In lieu of my remarks here, I find that fact fascinating. Ann Arbor gave birth here to a software company.

Or am I just a little crazy when it comes to the meanings in life. I find it hard to get away from myself and all the crazy associations that often run through my mind. And there is no use apologizing here for my

endless self-referencing either. Isn't it natural? What's the alternative?

Trying to disassociate oneself from referring to oneself has got to be some kind of oxymoron, the ultimate tar baby. The more we protest and struggle, the deeper into the tar we sink. It is OK to reference yourself. Who else do we have in mind?

My point here is that Ann Arbor has always seemed for me to be a sacred womb from which good things come, a deep spiritual well to draw from. Whether this just works for me I cannot say. I can only say it is true for me.

After all, how do towns come to be located where they are? Is it only because this road is connected to that road, is connected to another road? Or does the natural world have springs of spirit just as it has natural springs of pure water flowing? I like to believe in the later take on this, that land has indwelling spirits or 'essences' that also speak to us or for us, much like an oracle.

It is my confirmed belief that Ann Arbor is such an oracular place. At least in my life, it has functioned like an oracle, that rare vortex through which the universe has spoken directly to me, inspired me, albeit perhaps not in words that I have always immediately understood. In essence, Ann Arbor has been a wishing well for all my hopes and dreams.

In ancient Greece they had oracular places, why not here in America? What great female spirit indwells in a city christened after two women named Ann and a

stand of bur oak? The Anns' arbor -- Ann Arbor. Tree Town.

“When you wish upon a star,
Makes no difference who you are,
Anything your heart desires,
Will come to you”

I see that this has kind of run too long. My apology, and I did not get around to sharing information about how the Tibetans view place and its indwelling spirits. If there is any interest in this, here is an article:

“THE TIBETAN EARTH LORDS’

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Tibetan-Earth-Lords.pdf>



THE ROOT HAS TO TOUCH THE GROUND.

October 11, 2023

What I have learned over 16 years of daily blogging, most of which are about dharma, and writing over 5000 articles along the way (and I write long articles), is this:

Our language, the words we use, and this goes for all language, is that language itself is not its own meaning, which means that even at its best, language (words and sentences) are just pointers to something other than themselves. As a system programmer, of course, I know this.

In other words, language (and words) cannot but point beyond itself. All words and language depend on the sense they make. If language does not make sense, we call it nonsense and for good reason. Making sense is so important.

Language can but point to its meaning and the sense it makes. And sense is just what we think it is, sensual, meaning: seeing, hearing smelling, touching, and tasting. And since we are dharma students, we would add mind (mentation). What's the point?

My point is that if what we say or share is too conceptual, intellectual, and abstract, it will make less and less sense to the average student. They just have no choice but to tune it out because we have to reach down for sense, and not up toward more abstraction. Our senses are the pure root.

And so, language has to be 'artful', have some art to it. It has to make sense to those listening, and making sense is by definition an experience that is had. We all know how important it is in dharma practice to engender actual experience. And it takes sense to do that because experience is about sense and the senses. To experience, we have to make at least some sense out of what is said.

That's what the pith dharma teachings are all about. These pith teachings endlessly repeat that talking about topics like the forms of non-dual meditations is impossible, yet Buddhists have extant literature to an order of magnitude greater than any other spiritual discipline or religion. Why would these dharma saints waste their time if speaking about something like Mahamudra is ineffable? There is a reason.

And I believe that reason is that by speaking of what is ineffable, of what can't be spoken, is an attempt to invoke or spark experience in the hearts of those listening, spark experience that is needed in order to begin working with and becoming familiar with the actual nature of the mind. Having personal experience is key.

Personal experience with dharma is so precious as to be invaluable, and that is because without actual experience, we have zero, nothing to work with. The root has to touch the ground.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



ABSOLUTE BODHICITTA IS KEY

October 12, 2023

And of course, we should treat all beings as equals, but that is not done with an 'intent' to treat others as equals; it is done by having no intent of that kind at all, and it can be a little subtle.

This is what makes, in dharma practice, 'Bodhicitta' so unparalleled, so pure or perfect. Bodhicitta is not concerned with conceptual intent, which is why the word Bodhicitta is translated as "Enlightened Heart." It bypasses mentation and thought. They are not essential.

Bodhicitta is not about thought and thinking about anything. Of course, this is hard to put into words, in particular with Absolute Bodhicitta. My dharma teacher of 36 years put it better than I can:

"The Mahayana attitude is unshakable concern for others."

To me, this is a definition of Absolute Bodhicitta, an unshakable concern for others and sharing dharma with them. All we can share is our own enthusiasm and experience with the dharma as we personally know it.

It is that unshakable concern for sharing the pith essence of our own experience that is, IMO, the mark of Absolute Bodhicitta. There is no thought or thinking involved or necessary, no 'conceptual' intent. Absolute Bodhicitta is free of that, free of mentation, and from thinking about it.

What we share is that certainty in the dharma that we have, as Rinpoche put it, that unshakable concern for others. In my own case, it manifests as the wish to share my experience of dharma with any and all those who can receive it.

And I take as my guide and mentor the unfailing example of Khenpo Gangshar Wango who exemplifies for me Absolute Bodhicitta, an unshakable concern for others.

That concern is to share what experience we have, however little, with anyone who can receive it. It is more like a yearning or deep desire to share than it is about thoughts or concepts.

And how do we achieve Absolute Bodhicitta? All I know about this is that it arises or comes along with becoming familiar with the nature of our own mind, what is called ‘Recognition’ of the actual nature of the mind. I don’t know of any other way. Perhaps you do.

Of course, ‘Relative Bodhicitta’ is available to all of us, and it is perhaps good training to have good intent, but conceptual and effortful intent is itself a distraction or obscuration. ‘Absolute Bodhicitta’ leapfrogs all that.

And that ‘Relative Bodhicitta’, that conceptual intent we start out with, in my experience, is cleared or vacated as we become familiar and are introduced to the nature of our own mind by an authentic teacher, although that true nature has been present all this time. We just have to be introduced to it by someone who can.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



FACEBOOK DHARMA

October 13, 2023

I'm reflecting on my 16-year journey here on Facebook blogging for Facebook 'Friends'. Mostly I post a blog a day, which means I write an article a day, and I write long blogs as you all know.

And although I blog on a few basic topics, mostly I blog about dharma from one view or another. And I write these dharma blogs from many decades of working with a well-known monastery of Tibetan Buddhism, and also running a dharma center here in Big Rapids Michigan since the mid-1980s. That's where I'm coming from, so to speak.

Recently our monastery invited me to join a small group of dharma practitioners to work on a dharma curriculum, all members lamas or khenpos who have completed a three-year closed retreat or more.

I'm the only one in the group who is not a lama, which feels a little strange to me, like I better keep my mouth shut because these folks have a lot of dharma practice under their belts. I feel a bit like an outrider.

Of course, as you know, it's hard for me to stay silent, and probably what I can bring to this group, if anything, is my experience here online with you folks, and most of you are not lamas either. In fact, this little story says how I feel.

"Evening is approaching on a farm and in the dimming light a row of cats is marching across the horizon, from the left to the right, west to east, each with their

nose to the tail of the one before them, the line silhouetted against the horizon...and at the very end of the line, bringing up the rear, is one skunk, a volunteer, also marching along with the cats.”

In the group of these lamas and khenpos, I feel like the skunk. LOL.

And trying to write for these lamas about my experience here online with Facebook, as far as dharma goes, was a bit eye-opening. Even though not many of you comment or chime in with dialogue here, nevertheless I feel we have a bond. We are all in the same boat.

Most of you are not experienced dharma practitioners; a few are. At the same time, I'm impressed at how seriously you take your own sense of dharma, call it spirituality or what-have-you. Dharma is just the truth that actually is.

My writing about our time here has made me realize that dharma is not just something that is taught and then we learn. Dharma is a built-in part of the fabric of our lives and we all are working with it all the time, know it or not, perhaps each in our own way.

For sure, as mentioned, we are all in the same boat of Samsara. And it's the same dharma for everyone, from the Buddha on down. After all, the dharma was here for the Buddha to find and realize. Dharma is an intrinsic part of life here in Samsara.

And I don't want to give you a swelled head, but most of you here reading and talking about dharma don't have the arrogance I sometimes find in more 'official'

dharma practitioners. You are interested in, and you are working with the dharma in your lives, actively.

And I feel comfortable with you folks. Many of you are not just my Facebook 'Friends', but my friends as well. Some of you have been together here on this blog for years. And a group of you go all the way back to Ann Arbor where we had the time of our lives, so to speak. It would be great to see all of you in person.

What's the point of this? It's that through working with folks here I realize that, as mentioned, dharma is universal and is everywhere. There is no shortage of dharma. And each of us are busy working with the dharma as best we can, learning what we can, and getting it sorted.

And all of us here on Facebook are working with the same dharma that very experienced dharma practitioners are. And yes, most of us, including me, are not scholars but ordinary people, yet IMO our grip on dharma has as much (and often more) reality and experience as some of the more scholarly practitioners I know.

Much that is overly scholarly is just too intellectual for me to get a sense of. I need hands-on experience.

And I have learned continually and a lot from my Facebook friendships. I've learned that you are as interested in spirituality, call it dharma or something else, as the more dedicated dharma folks, and most are a lot more humble to boot.

And so, I am feeling gratitude for your support and for showing up as you do here, considering how lengthy my articles are.

I have raised a couple of skunks in my lifetime, from a tiny baby skunk on up and one of them was never 'de-skunked'. Little "Stinky" is what we called her. And Stinky would get mad at the rolled-up sock she liked to play with and turn around and spray it.

I identify with the group of us here on Facebook.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



EXPERIENCING EXPERIENCE

October 14, 2023

My worry about that which is too scholarly is that newcomers to the dharma will just give up and go away because they can't make enough sense out of the teachings. If we cannot make sense out of the teachings because they are too abstract, what is sacrificed is the opportunity to create experience, and without actual dharma experience we have nothing to work with.

This is why 'air-heads' are dangerous, because life passes without being grounded in actual experience and the chance of a lifetime evaporates. It is not enough to 'think' dharma; we must experience and use it.

I have run large greenhouses in the past, and one thing we learn is that plants need cultivation and nourishing. The thermometer or measuring device here is the accumulation of dharma experience, which means personal experience on the part of the practitioner, not just conceptually, but actual hands-on experience.

It is easy to see that many classic dharma texts, unless taught by an authentic master, go right over the heads of many dharma students. I'm not saying that these overly intellectual pith texts are not important. Of course, they are. I'm saying that you can't empower a dharma class if there are few to none in it.

Students new to the dharma need cultivation and to be nourished, almost every one, IMO.

Great lamas can magnetize their students and start them turning the wheel of their own dharma, but overly conceptual teachers (lamas or otherwise) cannot. They don't make enough sense and their students can't feel it and precipitate experience.

My view is that you can't hurry dharma and that there is no reason to try. Students not only need to see clearly, they also need to be seen and acknowledged. It's just common sense.

Perhaps there are one or two students who can be channeled along what we might call a fast path to enlightenment. Yet there are multitudes of potential students that can be nourished and cultivated and achieve the same result.

Like the old phrase "No wine before its time," dharma training can be very deliberate, perhaps slow, but sure.

My own experience tells me that no amount of herding or intentional training guarantees results. What works is sharing our enthusiasm rather than just our knowledge, if only because enthusiasm is contagious, while planned conceptual learning is a mixed bag. It can work, but it also can backfire and overload the student with senseless conceptuality.

That is why I find "Absolute Bodhicitta" so useful. It is not based on thought or thinking, but rather on, and as Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche put it:

“The Mahayana attitude is unshakable concern for others.”

That concern is not primarily conceptual, but rather, as Rinpoche put it, is 'unshakable concern." That concern is not intellectual and does not run the risk of overloading the intellect with senseless words, 'senseless" perhaps to beginning students.

I believe that 'Absolute Bodhicitta" is invaluable in that it bypasses the intellect and can magnetize beginning dharma students without boring them or going in one ear and out the other.

And so, precipitating 'Absolute Bodhicitta" in my understanding is the pearl of great price and something that we should engender or precipitate as soon as the student is ready.

Yes, we can save the high intellectual dharma for when the student is ready to absorb it, yet in the meantime it is "Absolute Bodhicitta" that serves as an enthusiasm builder and does not depend primarily on words or conceptuality. Once awakened and nourished, "Absolute Bodhicitta" remains within the mindstream continuously without having to rely on conscious effort.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



FERAL INSTINCTS

October 14, 2023

Outside of the monastery and dharma center atmosphere, such as here on Facebook, those interested in the dharma are pretty much not curated. I admit that at first I found this, well, different, yet in time I found it refreshing.

Folks here seemed more humble and not so much entitled or full of themselves when it comes to dharma. They are from all faiths and spiritual directions not to mention many lineages. And perhaps because I write long and detailed articles, the blog is kind of self-curating. There is not much in my blogs that's entertaining or perhaps even interesting to the average Joe.

I find my Facebook friends at least as interesting as my friends in the dharma community, although quite a bit more independent. And certainly, here on FB they are very liberal and 'Mother Nature' oriented. If I was looking for company in following the "Lama of Appearances," it's with these folks right here on my blog.

As mentioned previously, the dharma teachings say there are four kinds of 'Lamas'.

There is the 'Lama of the Lineage (which we all know of).

The 'Lama of the Scriptures of the Sugatas' (all of the extant teachings).

And there is also the 'Lama of Appearances', this natural world itself is capable of teaching us.

And then, last but not least, there is the 'Lama of Dharmadhatu', inner spiritual guidance.

What that means is that we each can find the particular kind or type of lama or teacher that suits us. And my dharma teacher of 36 years aside, I am of the persuasion that the 'Lama of Appearances,' in particular 'Mother Nature' as it relates to our natural environment is my cup of tea.

And this is because from a very young age I was subjected to being more or less alone and out there in nature. We lived out in the country between two farms with no houses or neighbors in any direction. Knowing little else, I took to nature as a way of learning, and it seems that what I was learning were the laws of dharma although I was too young to realize that. Compared to civil laws, the natural law of dharma has no comparison. It's the way things are. Nature shows us this.

I learned nature's law so early and so thoroughly that I rebelled against any other kind of schooling because it just did not measure up. The result is that I am a little bit feral and undomesticated. And I've protected that, rather than let society round off my edges. This has cost me.

Yet the reward was the joy of teaching myself much of what I know, instead of getting it second hand. The downside is that it makes me a bit difficult to control, and so I have found it best to be my own boss, at least until I got very much older. Actually, later in life I

worked for NBC as a senior consultant and did just fine. Of course, they pretty much let me do what I wanted.

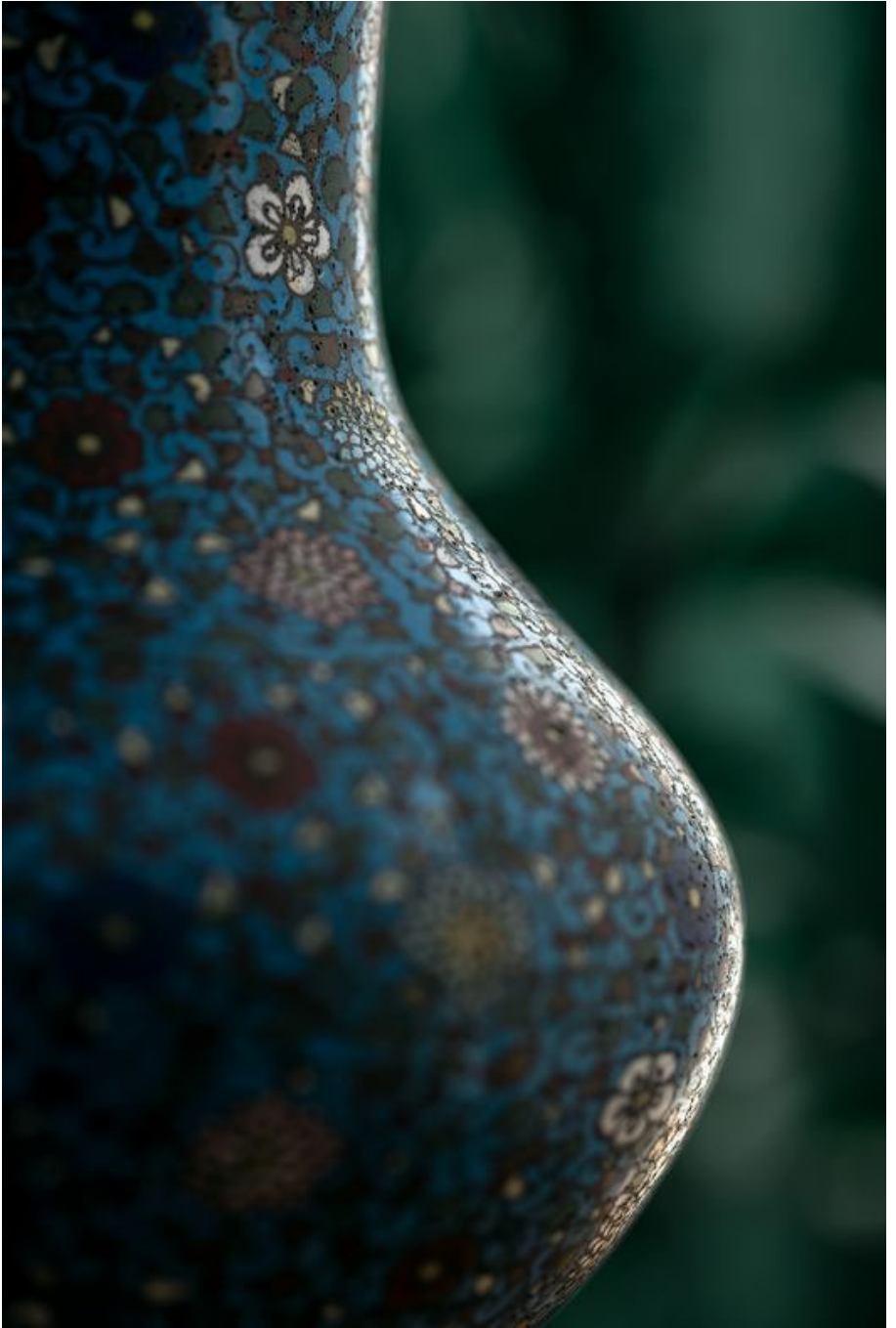
And so, as I look around at younger folks coming up, I have mixed feelings. I can't just tell everyone to go for it, because doing that was very painful as well, not fitting in, not going along, and not being so welcome because of it.

What I can suggest is doing as much yourself as you can be empowered to. And that starts with reducing conceptuality as much and as quickly to common sense as you can, and with that sense comes hands-on experience, and that is life as I know it. Live that life of experience!

And if we do, the above process becomes recursive, the output of one part of the cycle becomes the input into the next, and on around, and it's recursive to the point of incandescence.

And once that fire is lit, we are good to go or already going. At that point I don't worry about anyone. Yet getting to that point is the point.

[Photo by me today.]



GOOD INTENT

October 15, 2023

Having the dharma sink in, from all those years of study and practicing, I wonder what I learned. I recently realized that even though I did not know I was getting it, I was getting it. It is sinking in. How remarkable is that! This is good news for all of us.

Stumbling along as best I can, going through the motions, at heart wanting the right result, yet also seeing how far from the mark I was. And given all that, Rinpoche's blessing of the dharma embraced my poor performance and immersed me in the proper teachings anyway. The dharma is generous.

A blessing it certainly is, because although I did my best at heart, I was so distracted much of the time. In other words, there was something going on besides my sad attempts at making it real.

What this tells me is that by all means try, try, try to do the right thing, even if we are doing it mostly wrong. There is serendipity there, actually just exactly what all the teachings say, a blessing there worth more than we think we perhaps deserve, given our performance.

As it turns out, our intent is so important and worth much more than we know, no matter how far from fulfilling it we are. If our heart is in the right place, the rest will come or, as the Christians say, "By the grace of God," and we Buddhists say that with a pure intent we will be engulfed in the blessings of the lama. And it's true.

Engulphed in the blessings.

Perhaps there is only one way things CAN go, so we don't have to be a marksman, but there is a real need to 'aim' and have an intent. And given our good intent, we will be swept along in the rush of time into the sea of blessings that awaits us, much like the well-known quote by Sir Edwin Arnold from his poem on the Bhagavad Gita "The dewdrop slips into the shining sea." Just so.

Like smoothing out clay when we work it, the gaps are filled in, and like aiming a gun, our intent determines where we end up, even if in our estimation our performance does not add up. It does by virtue of having an intent, an aim. So, please aim and be steady.

And so, we have to be understanding of our own frailties, the jerky ride, and missing links.

As they say, "It's All Good."

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



UNSHAKABLE CONCERN FOR OTHERS

October 16, 2023

Like a statue chipped from stone, after some 16 years of constant blogging to people mostly unaware of dharma as we formerly know it, what remains is Absolute Bodhicitta, the urge to share dharma experience. As my dharma teacher put it:

“The Mahayana attitude is unshakable concern for others.”

What we find out when we share openly with others is not so much about them, but about ourselves, about our motivation and our own intent. Until we get that out of the way, meaning until we clarify it for ourselves, there is not much we have to offer, IMO.

Trying to do others, ‘them’, some good is just another obscuration to let go of. We have to come to grips with doing this sharing of dharma because WE want to do this, and we can’t do otherwise, meaning sharing. IMO, in all the world of dharma that I am aware of, there is nothing more key or important than Bodhicitta.

And ‘Relative Bodhicitta’, with its good intent, is just a trial run at actual Bodhicitta, which is what we call ‘Absolute Bodhicitta’, and Absolute Bodhicitta is not something that we can just gin up. It has to be earned.

In my experience, “Absolute Bodhicitta’ is a pure blessing that only comes with what we call “Recognition” of the actual nature of the mind, meaning that we have been introduced to and are familiar with that nature through what is called our Tsawi Lama, our Root Guru. I can’t imagine any other way it can come about.

And, in my experience, “Absolute Bodhicitta’ is not even one iota conceptual. That’s the beauty of it. It’s pure motivation, pure movement coming from deep inside us, not from the top down, so to speak, but from the bottom up, or as I mentioned earlier, as my teacher put it:

“The Mahayana attitude is unshakable concern for others.”

Unshakable. That’s not something we think about, but rather something we just are, concerned about the welfare of others without thinking about it, not a second thought. That’s what makes us Bodhisattvas or on that path.

If there is one quality that sits at the tip of the top of the pyramid of dharma, it is “Absolute Bodhicitta.” It is thoughtless and constant, blind to reasoning and doubt, and present 24x7. It never pauses or goes away.

Don’t leave home without it.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



“THE ROAD NOT TAKEN”

October 17, 2023

As it turns out, I'm not done with yesterday's topic, so I have to take another run at it.

The high scholarly world of dharma is indeed lovely, or I imagine it is. I can't quite live there but need to constantly ground conceptual thoughts and their wisdom into whatever sense it makes for me and live that experience. I steer life more from the heart or the navel than from the head.

In other words, I have to feel life through experience and that's how I drive the dharma forward. For me, thinking by itself without experience just doesn't do it for me; it's not enough. I need root experience based on what makes sense, and I've been used to that since I was a child, what I feel in my gut and making it real.

Of course, I recognize the high scholarly dharma teachings and don't doubt them. I read them as I can. On occasion I can appreciate them. Yet, for me, my dreams and ideas must make sense, must be made to matter and lived out in fact, on the ground, so to speak.

As mentioned, I connect more with the navel, the gut, and the heart, then I do with the head. That's how I steer my life, from down there rather than high up in

thought and thinking, although in my youth I fancied thought.

I have a lifetime behind me of ignoring intellectual thought in favor of instinct, what feels right. Years and years of school where I ignored words that I could not feel made sense, preferring to not accept words that didn't make sense to me or that were too intellectual. I just tuned it out. I like to learn on my own, by what feels right to me.

And there was a price to be paid for that, for not just going along with what I did not understand and feel. I just ignored and chose to forget it all, the which was too abstract, rather than work with what did not make actual sense to me. And because of that, for all those school years, I never got properly domesticated, and by ignoring it I remain a little feral, a bit wild, untamed by social law. I don't think anyone knew this, including me.

The above is perhaps such a small point, but potentially one that if followed out, which I have done, had big results, at least for me.

I was isolated from just going along to get along, and although lonely enough, this left me with a gap between my nature-inspired sense of law rooted in me from early on compared to conventional social laws. I followed natural law, which in time turned into the laws of dharma for me, the two being one and the same IMO.

Looking back from here, I don't regret it. For me, it's like the poet Robert Frost's poem, "The Road Not

Taken.” That conventional societal road NOT taken by me has made all or most of the difference.



INSIGHT PERCEPTION

October 18, 2023

[This is for those who are poets or writers out there, concerning moments of insight that can flicker on and off like summer heat lightning, especially those subtle thoughts.]

Grasping insight as it comes is just that, 'grasping at', and it's up to us to retain it.

"Jack be nimble,

Jack be quick,

Jack jump over the candlestick."

...without blowing the candle out is the point of Jack jumping.

Be alert and catch any upward draft of insight while it's there and it can carry us aloft, if only fleetingly perhaps, but nevertheless we got it and are there, once again fully immersed. Occupied as we so like to be.

And however brief these brief openings are, they are inscapes; they take us from out here directly inside through the thinnest of cracks in clock-time to where there is no time, but only full immersion. Momentarily, perhaps. Yet we often fail to get in at all, meaning we can't retain the insight. It evaporates.

This is because in a millisecond that opportunity for insight is gone, and I'm left wondering where I'm at,

where it went, and even what it was, that hopeful direction or brief almost-an-insight. It's flickers.

I'm already doing all I can to retain it and have failed. And to seize the time here is really to seize the moment, that half an instant while the gate is open, and I can just seamlessly pass through into certainty, and find I've locked on.

Otherwise, by the time I can react to that flicker of insight, it's gone. Or I react too late, and then can't remember the combination that gets me in or what I was thinking that the inscape even offered. I'm left back in ordinary clock-time holding the bag, rather than lost in the moment, fully immersed in the insight. With insights, the way in is always the way on.

And if I'm not there, and can't hold it, I'm still wondering if I can make this or that work, or will I just sit here harboring a future that I'm already denied. I can't tell if I'm getting more subtle or just more forgetful. How will I know?

And meanwhile a cascade of events I cannot keep up with slide past like a flicker book, leaving me with but a glimpse of I know not quite what. I almost know and want to remember but fail at that and am forced to forget. I can't hold it. What was it? I wish I knew. I need to be patient.

And there's no use in bemoaning what I cannot retain; that's a big waste of time. Savor what we can, while we can, if we can.

And it's always on, this flickering flame of insight, like a pilot light, a candle in the wind. Don't reach for it.

Any movement at all will put it out. Just wait, and I will explain why.

Be patient and be grateful for any insight at all; there's always more where that came from.

I've learned that I must react instantly, seizing the thread of insight when it flickers open and then hanging on to it, go with it. And by sliding through this veil of time, be immersed, and then extend and expand it.

There are infinite paths and variations that open and close in time like a beating heart, faster than we can tread them. They all lead to the same place, full immersion, so we might as well relax.

As William Blake put it, "Nothing of equal value is lost."

Take your time and you will fall into it. I wrote this dharma poem:

REST HOME

My thoughts,
Like birds aboard a ship,
I let go free,

As they fly away with me.
No need to follow on,
And here's the perfect test:

There is no place to go,
All thoughts come home to rest.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



WHEN WE HAVE TO WRITE

October 18, 2023

Perhaps it does not matter whether we have this insight, this train of thought, or the next. They all come from the same place and are going back to the same place, like waves and the ocean. It's all water. So, what makes a difference?

The point here is to get ourselves to a place where if we lose one insight, another will appear in a moment, and either way it will reflect us. The point here is it reflects us just as we are. And I have a story about this kind of reflection.

Early on, when I used to read everything, I not only read most of Kafka, but also his diaries. I always read people's diaries and learn a lot.

Anyway, I was reading Franz Kafka's diaries when I came across a single sentence that I could not easily understand, which went something like:

"...what I write, it already has perfection..."

Hmmm, I thought, just what does that mean? And I carried this conundrum around with me for a number of years until, at last, something dawned on me. What Kafka was saying is that rather than work on his skills at being a better writer, improving his chops, Kafka worked on being a better person or being, and then whatever he did, including writing, would reflect that perfectly. And it did.

So, whatever Kafka wrote, it already had perfection, because he did. Whether that was what Kafka meant, I have no idea, but it made perfect sense to me, and I took it to heart and worked on being a better or more perfect person. I don't mean by that being a 'goody, goody', but rather clarifying my mind.

Yet how to use the mind was NOT how I thought it was. It's not about intellect, but about heart. So, you can sharpen the pencil of the mind until it is but a stub, and still not write well.

Then, or so I thought, whatever I wrote would reflect me and that my state of mind is like a mirror. To me this seems to be true.

And I'm not writing science or fiction or science-fiction. I am a phenomenologist, meaning I monitor my own mindstream and from that derive my philosophy, rather than try to read from outside and internalize everything. All my learning I carry around in my head.

And so, each day I'm just attempting to write where I am at this moment, although, of course, this moment is constantly changing. And if I read what I write today, six months from now, I may well shake my head and walk away, but I can know that at the time I wrote it, this was true for me. You get the idea. Truth tells. And the truth is the future because the truth will last until then, when all else fails. Being true or accurate is the best harbinger as to how we will turn out.

Yet canvassing this present moment for what it offers can get detailed, very granular and fine. And there is

usually not just this moment as a monolith, but rather this moment as a tangle in insights, more like a flickering firelight.

I certainly can't receive, monitor, and then follow out all the competing insights that spring to mind. I can't even begin to have them sorted. Instead, if I grasp at one, I lose sight of ten others, and even that one I think I have is slippery as an eel. It's there, then it's gone, and gone beyond retrieval. Anyway, if you are still with me, that's what I'm talking about here.

And, if we manage to get ourselves (our life) in a good place, whatever insights we have, this one or another one, any insight is a direct reflection of our current state of mind, so if I miss this train of thought, another is just around the corner. And no matter what that insight is, it's coming from the same place and if that place is perfected, at least as best I can make it, it reflects in everything I do... or write.

And by train of thought, I don't mean 'a train of thought like a "story," but more just an insight in which I am immersed in totally, with no thought or doubt whatsoever, and from which I can draw whatever conclusions or sense I can after I emerge from experiencing the insight. Immersion and awareness of immersion are connate. They arise together.

Now, for the nitty-gritty. We are constantly lost in thought, totally immersed, but are not aware of it, of being immersed. Call it being 'busy'. What we CAN learn to do, but it takes work on our part, is to, through true insight, dip into that immersion, that busyness, and experience it. And then, in the next instant, withdraw from the immersion into our normal dualistic

perception and 'think' about that experience we just had by being immersed. We can be aware of what we experienced with insight.

And we can do this moment by moment, repetitively, recursively, until we secure a habit, a permanent stream of the combination of insight and withdrawal, and the subsequent evaluation of that insight. Please consider what I have just explained. Immerse, evaluate, immerse, evaluate, etc. until it is constant and seamless. This is not a new invention. It is part of serious meditation training, which is 'non-meditation,' meditation without effort.

Personally, I do all this for the writing, immerse myself into insight momentarily, experience it, and withdraw, become aware of it, all in a brief moment, but fast enough so that a stream of insight-awareness evolves. And that, my friend, I find is for me the best way to write and keep my writing clean and truthful. That's an understatement.

This is a dharma technique that can be called the Vipassana (Insight Meditation) part of Mahamudra (non-meditation). It all depends upon learning to allow our mind to come to rest, which is very different from the command to 'rest the mind.'

We can't 'rest' the mind because it already is at rest. It's we who are not, and we can only stop 'trying' to do anything and allow ourselves to come to rest in the mind. With that rest, the well of the mind opens to us.

Easier said than done.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



OUR BEING IS BECOMING

October 19, 2023

Is it? What can we know about that?

For example, what is sleep? For me that's a good question, because I don't sleep a lot. I don't even like

the whole process of sleep, like falling asleep. And I really don't like being unable to sleep and won't put up with it. Staring at the ceiling is not for me. Instead, I just get up and work until I feel like sleeping. And what happens in sleep is not all that endearing, as well, yet I love naps, but I digress.

What I do like is being awake and resting in Insight Meditation. That's my preference and my habit.

How many times have I described how and why I write? A lot. Trying to write is an oxymoron, an ignorant thing to do. Just writing is good, but what is it? I can only speak for myself.

Tiptoeing at the edge of consciousness marks the borderline between duality (ordinary conceptuality) and the deep-blue sea (immersion in the mind), the freedom of the future impinging on the present moment, finding the edge between the two, the border between aware and being totally immersed, and then working the two as connate.

Crossing and re-crossing the edge of consciousness is like rolling a tiny piece of grit between our thumb and forefinger. Either side is worthless without the other and the borderline, where they meet, is all we have to tell us we are here. Our compass.

I would say "It has come to this," but it's never been any different as far as I can tell. We live in the balance of being and not-being ("To Be or Not to Be"). It is called 'becoming'. Our being is becoming, because, according to the dharma teachings, we have never been an entity and thus this isn't actually being, but only becoming.

How becoming is that? Not so much, perhaps, but apparently just enough, but not enough to actually 'be'. The pith dharma teachings state that we have never 'been'. Our being is in becoming, so to speak.

I like to joke to myself and say that it is like the older use of the word 'becoming,' "What a becoming dress she wears." What is that particular use of the word 'becoming' about? I believe that's what we have here, so we had best come to terms with it.

This approach, "Our being is becoming," refers to the dharma concept that our being is not static, not a permanent entity, but rather is continually changing and morphing. There is nothing there that is eternal or permanent other than perhaps the process of change itself.

'Becoming' better look good on us, because we have no choice. How we best adjust to that would be a question.

As they say, "How about them apples?"

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



THE GAZE OF A SIDDHA

October 20, 2023

[Meeting Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche.]

A story of the 'Dharma Eye' or it's nice to be seen.

As a high school kid, I worked at all kinds of places around Ann Arbor, especially on campus, mostly as a delivery driver, driving a paneled truck, and bringing groceries to folk's, like to the home of Robert S. McNamara (Secretary of Defense) up near the Arboretum.

And I worked for college bookstores up on State Street and in restaurants as either a 'closer', a salad maker, or as a soda-fountain server. Or earlier, in the late 1950s, at the Michigan Union, as a busboy. This was all high school work. It's just what kids like me did back then for pocket money. And we would use the little bowling alley and pool tables in the Michigan Union and smoke lots of cigarettes.

And of course, as I got older, I worked at the graduate library of the University of Michigan, and in several ways, first and for some time as a postal clerk in shipping and receiving, then later, shelving books from a cart, and finally as someone who scoured the many floors or 'stacks' for materials falling apart and either put them in envelopes or pulled them from the stacks for repair or rebinding.

And later yet, I worked as a stagehand around Ann Arbor, which was indeed a learning experience, like being told to stand there doing nothing (not even

move) until I was told to do something. And I also mixed clay and helped apply glazes for one of Ann Arbor's finest potters in the studio of Peter Grams. Grams is still making pottery, now in the Boston area, the best potter I have ever seen.

<https://www.petergramspottery.com/>

However, most of all (and for the longest time) I worked cleaning toilets and bathrooms for a whole series of shops at 215 S. State. I would clean the common bathrooms, mop the floors, and about once a week take the trash to the local dump in my 1966 Dodge van.

This took me about ½ hour a day if I hurried, and I hurried, and I then had 23-1/2 hours to do whatever I wanted, and God knows I wanted all that free time. Apparently, I need more than the usual amount of time to do nothing but observe my mindstream. And back then I read and read.

I read almost all of the Loeb Classical Library, and all of Thomas Mann, and all of Dostoevsky, some 47 books or whatever. I even took Russian in high school and learn to speak some too. I tried to read everything in the world: philosophy, poetry, European and American literature, plus esoteric and mystical studies.

And all that reading and study fed my own inner life. I've been a phenomenologist as far back as I can remember, watching my own stream of consciousness and learning from that, kind of the tempest in my teapot.

And eventually, despite absorbing literature like a black hole, I gradually turned inward. Somewhere along the line I became dissatisfied with everything I had read, the whole enchilada. It's not that I stopped loving it, but just that it all seemed the same. And I was hungry for more, more spiritual stuff.

And I had chewed through the Existentialists, like Sartre, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Camus, Schopenhauer, and Heidegger in detail. I read almost all of Hegel in translation, and that's an undertaking. And I read the diaries of everyone, trying to get into their blessing.

And my favorite group were the American Transcendentalists like Whitman, Emerson, Thoreau, Longfellow, and especially Amos Bronson Alcott... and Emerson. I even believe today that I am a member of that group. That's where I fit in, and who I am.

And by that time for me there were two trains running, one being the literature and philosophy of the western world which I have touched on, and the other, the lure of eastern spiritual philosophy.

And stuck in between those two were all the western authors who had fed on and absorbed some Asian philosophy, authors like Madam Blavatsky, Annie Besant, Krishnanmurti, George Gurdjieff, P.D. Ouspensky, Rudolph Steiner, and on and on. I read them carefully.

Some of you may remember all the 'Think-and-Do' books for kids. Well, all of this reading and study up until a certain point for me was think, think, think, and

then I turned inward spiritually, and it became do, do, do. I wanted to do something about all that thinking. I had paid my literary and philosophical dues, got the idea, so to speak. And then what?

I had thought enough and still was not satisfied that I had gotten somewhere for all that. I had been trying, on the side, all those years to separate myself from my Catholic upbringing and nothing really took. I had nothing but Christianity to fall back on and the Christians I knew were, well, not very Christ-like, IMO. I did not want to follow or be like what I saw, so I turned elsewhere.

And 'elsewhere' for me meant toward the East and Asian philosophy. I was, early on (late 1950s) fond of Zen's minimalism, the raked sand gardens, bare floors with tatami mats, and paper Shoji screens. As a single young man, that's all I needed, not that I ever had that.

As mentioned, I was drowning in words and literature, talk, talk, talk. And then there was the Zen monk who just sat, not to mention the "Tao" or "Dao" with its spontaneity, simplicity, and naturalness. I did my best to fit in with all that minimalism. I like space.

Yet, as fate would have it, I was not destined for those teak or bamboo floors and Shoji screens, but rather for the ornate profusion of the Tibetan shrines, almost a replica of my Catholic upbringing, mass in Latin, elaborate brocades, and priests in liturgical vestments, cassocks, stoles, albs, and chasubles. And me as an altar boy. And then....

Enter the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, who came out of the blue and spoke to me eyeball-to-eyeball like an equal. When I told Trungpa that he was perhaps the first person in my life I had no criticism of, his response to me was. “Well, you know Michael, we are about the same age, and we are both married men.” And with that, he drove away in a cab to the airport and Boulder, Colorado, leaving me spellbound, probably for life.

Talk about imprints. LSD was a deep, deep imprint for me, but so was meeting Trungpa Rinpoche. Trungpa left an indelible impression in me that has remained so ever since, when he pointed out that the dharma was not just something to talk about (as I had been doing) but rather something to practice and for me to do.

In addition, it was Trungpa that turned the tide for me from outside, looking outside myself for light, to looking inside for light. And that was no mean feat. It changed my life, not to mention that what I needed was already deep within me and not to be found somewhere out there in the world. It was already too close and not at all far.

I was simply inverted, turned upside down, which solved my direction problem, but not what I had to deal with. Everything else was just as it was before, and I had to work through all that, regardless. At least, from then on, I was headed in a direction that I could work with, 180 degrees from the heading I was previously on.

And here I am, decades down the road from back then, and still moving forward. At least it seems I am.

I have settled in and am resting in the mind just as it is, which took me forever because I was antsy, nervous, and driven. To reduce my forward efforts to a big zero took time, like putting on the brakes, learning to let go, and allowing myself to just fall to rest, like a gyroscope, with zero change in direction from its rotational inertia.

Another way to say this is that for years I tried to get into the groove of effortlessness (not trying so hard) and failed. Then, with a twist of fate, I snapped into that orbital groove, and no longer fell out of it. Instead of me keeping the groove going, the groove keeps me.

And so, the point here is what turned me from looking outside to looking within. I did my best to explain this, and that Chögyam Trungpa turned the tide when he, as mentioned, made clear to me that dharma is not something to only talk about, but something to practice and do.

And oddly enough, I had never thought about this, that I too could practice dharma. I liked the idea that others practice dharma, saints like Milarepa and Tilopa, but it had not occurred to me that I also could be a warrior of the dharma, a Bodhisattva. Chögyam Trungpa turned me with his very presence and by recognizing me in his gaze, what's called in the dharma teachings, the 'Dharma Eye'. What was he, a siddha?

And later yet, my dharma teacher for 36 years, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, gave me the bodhisattva vow and also my own bodhisattva name.

Sempa Chönyi Rangdrol

Sempa = Warrior/Bodhisattva

Chönyi = 'Dharmata', True nature of the Mind/Reality

Rangdrol = Self-liberation

Thus,

'Self-liberating Nature of the Mind'

[Photo of the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa and the poster I created for his visit to Ann Arbor in 1974. Photo used with permission.]

CHÖGYAM TRUNGPA



Speaking on: **Meditation and Intellect**

The Venerable Chögyam Trungpa, Rinpoche, former Abbot of the Surmang Monasteries in Tibet, is a Buddhist scholar, Meditation Master, and author of *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism* and *Meditation in Action*. Among other activities, he has founded and directs the Vipassana Buddhist Centers, Maitri, a therapeutic community, and Naropa Institute, a summer program in Boulder, Colorado, offering courses by outstanding scholar-practitioners, in religion, psychology, philosophy, the sciences, meditation, sensory awareness, and the arts. . . .

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Stewart Gordon, Ph.D., U. of W.

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THE STOREHOUSE

CONSCIOUSNESS

October 21, 2023

Now, here's one that will test our credulity, one that has been carefully fashioned over the centuries by dharma experts, so we might at least hear them out. It's a table thumper.

And it's about the Hindu concept of an eternal soul, a permanent identity that stays with us from life to life.

This Hindu view as opposed to the Buddhist view that we have no permanent identity or 'being' that preserves our identity after we die. As you can imagine, this difference is hotly debated by Hindus and Tibetans.

So, if we are dharma students, how do we adjust to the fact that our being is not permanent but forever becoming, which means the concept of having a permanent 'Soul' or ourselves as an entity is out the window, and we may have been counting on that in a pinch or in 'the' pinch. Not going to happen.

It took me a while to even figure out approximately what that meant for me. I liked the idea of living forever, and just switching bodies, which is still apparently true, but with a serious caveat. I counted on 'me, myself, and I' still being there, but just in a newer body. That sounded more than reasonable and very comforting.

For the Buddhists to clearly point out, and then back it up, that, yes, we are reborn, but the main point is that our personality, the 'me' in us, will not be there to welcome us with the change of bodies.

That threw me into a 'buffering' state, like the spinning 'beachball' they call the 'SPOD' (Spinning Pizza of Death) that pops up on our computer when it's thinking. Some days I think I'm still buffering.

Yet gradually I am pulling myself (so to speak "Self") together and moving on, but I'm not sure to where. And so, it has been VERY important for me to understand what the Buddhists are pointing out.

The dharma texts explain it quite well, and in as much detail as I can stand, that our personality (what we call the 'Self') does not survive death, but becomes disincorporate in the gloaming of life, when we pass on.

However, that's not just the end to it, at the end of this life and Self. Something of us does move on and is reborn, but not in any coherent fashion, meaning not like our whole person or Self as we like to think of it, but just those parts of us that remain unfulfilled, be they desires, wishes, karma, etc., that which demands fulfillment, or whatever.

All of these different unfulfilled 'wants' are carefully filed away individually in what is called the Storehouse Consciousness (Alayavijnana), in their appropriate box or bin, not as an assemblage of "Self" and yet still feral.

And then, these 'parts' of us, just those unfulfilled parts, are reassembled into a new person, like a 'Mr.

Potato Head', based on our karma, our selected new parents, and the circumstances and situation into which we are born. And 'someone' does live again, just not quite me, myself, and I. All that is discarded, and "Have Karma, will travel," remains.

So, pretty much, this new person we become has no recall of who we were just a bit ago, in our last lifetime. The bits and pieces of us don't add up to anything they can recognize or remember, although some say they do.

I just have never met anyone who remembers their last life in a way that seems genuine, putting aside the whackos that say they do and that they were Napoleon or some such person. They are just flattering themselves needlessly.

And... this Storehouse Consciousness, this Alayavignana, like a vast barge of all our feral parts and components carefully catalogued, slowly moves forward up the river of time, carrying with it all our vestiges, our unfulfilled wants and karma, a kind of floating parts department, and at the same time continuing to digitally-record our every thought, word, and deed against a future reckoning.

Who thought that up? Or is it just a catchall to explain all the unexplained? I'm sure I don't know, but I really can't continue to look down on the Christian and other religion's imagination. The Buddhists are right in there too, describing away some pretty strong medicine. What have they been smoking?

I have tried to create here a humorous image of our Alayavijnana barge carrying our karma, pushing up

the river delta of time for our next rebirth. I added an oriental flavor to indicate the Buddhist background. It's the least I could do.

So, what do we think of this, if we have an opinion? We are each going to find out, one way or the other, so why not have a discussion. Be gentle, but let's talk about it.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me. Our particular Storehouse Consciousness moving up the river of time.]



LIKE WRITING YOUR NAME IN WATER

October 22, 2023

We know that pure intellect can be dry as a bone, so I'm not talking about that. That would be conceptual duality, subject and object, without the juice of the senses, so to speak. That's too scholarly for me except perhaps on rare occasions.

And I'm not talking about anything that does not make sense, and also not interested in the psychic or twilight-zone stuff either. I'm full up on that account.

I'm talking about a free mind, like a free bird, freeing the mind to be like an empty sky in which that bird can fly. There is something to life other than time.

I guess it's space, and space is empty by definition. And, as the Tibetans say, the track of a bird across the sky leaves no impression, like writing our name in water. That's what I'm talking about here, our immersion in a timeless moment.

Everything together, what we can call 'all one' or full immersion, itself is like water, a welcoming ocean, and life without having to think about it. Life without thought is not life without insight. Insight is like digital sampling, at least the way dharma folks do it, and it's not the whole enchilada.

And a sample is dwarfed by the whole, but still signifies the whole itself. Vipassana, Insight Meditation, is a form of sampling, made useful by

interpreting it with brushes with duality, accessing it with ordinary thought. That's what a sample is, an interpretation of what is significant or signified by the whole of life. An insight.

Insight Meditation of the Mahamudra type is sampling interpreted by ordinary thought and awareness, or colored by it, a snapshot taken from the process of life. Yet, how is Insight Meditation useful?

It is useful because it is timeless and when mixed with ordinary conceptuality (sampling) lends truth and direction to our view, which otherwise can find us wandering off the charts.

Insight Meditation provides us with a taste or sample of the pool of the present moment, which without insight is closed to us by our ordinary thought, dualistic thinking, with its under-sampling or non-sampling.

It's very much like fuel and air in a carburetor, where the 'everything' is fuel and air (conceptuality) is what is mixed with it to make it practical to our relative day-to-day world. In order for there to be 'timeless', there has to be time.

And so, it's not just that full immersion in the sea of sense surrounding us is a solution we can know anything about unless we continually sample it conceptually and make it practical. It's like publishing newsletters about a continuing process, notes from home, so to speak. Again: insights.

And the throttle or frequency of Insight Meditation is widely variable, from just a glance or two on our part,

to an extended vacation in the well of the mind. Perhaps this is what advanced meditators do, take a long vacation off-world in what we can call the well of the mind, complete immersion in non-duality with much less sampling, i.e. coming up for air (conceptually). Perhaps there is no need or interest for advanced meditators in doing so.

All of this sounds very romantic, and it is. However, it's a long road to get there as I'm finding out; just learning the craft, so to speak.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



THREAD SPINNER

October 23, 2023

Spinning thread from cotton. Pulling the thread of life out of the ether, so to speak, from this present moment. The well of the present moment is where the whole story of this world is spun and comes from.

We can't ignore the present moment because every thought, word, and deed has come and still comes from there. And great dharma teachers, like the Mahasiddha Tilopa, have pointed this out to us over and over. Here are Tilopa's words and they are so direct.

SIX WORDS OF ADVICE

Don't Prolong the Past
Don't Invite the Future
Don't Alter the Present
Don't Think
Don't Meditate

Relax, As It Is.

Those words are all about this present moment and how to use it. There is little else we need. Like, nothing else.

And these words of advice are not abstract or overly conceptual. They are all we need. Tilopa does not

mince words. Anyone can understand this, but perhaps few of us can hold to them. We first have to be aware of the need to implement them.

I have worked with these words of advice for many years now, and they are invaluable, every word.

Whether you can respond to this, I can't say because I don't know where you are at. IMO, these few words are worth innumerable books on the dharma. They are what we take to heart and to a desert island.

I know of no greater kindness than to share them with you.

As mentioned, they are easy to understand, just more difficult to actually enact, so take these precious words of advice to heart if you can.

And these words are right there to read and understand. If there is any confusion, let me know and I will explain as best I can.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



THE VANISHING SELF AND PERSONA

October 26, 2023

[I'm not suggesting that the following is easy to understand, so I apologize if it is too much.]

What all the dharma teachings on the Self (our having one) point out is that we can search everywhere and not find what we call our 'Soul', also called our personal 'Self', if what we mean by that is an eternal entity that moves through time from birth to birth with a contiguous consciousness, meaning ourselves reincarnated in the next life and remembering who we are and were.

And the proof of the pudding is that we can't remember who we were in our last lifetime, try as we might. And because we cannot find our past lifetime, we have to continue the search for that last lifetime until we have totally exhausted that search and accept that we don't have a memory.

In other words, not finding a past lifetime does not mean we have not looked long or hard enough, but rather that there is nothing there to be found. We are told that each of us did have a previous lifetime, complete with a 'Self', but that a memory of that 'person' or self that was us is not now available. Gone.

And the dharma teachings point out that what we assumed was our 'person', our Self, was just an assemblage of attractions (likes and dislikes) that we

called our 'Self' and that, according to the dharma, deconstructs at death.

Therefore, what and who we are right now is not a reincarnation of the person we were, but apparently just a newly made Self, put together from current attachments (likes and dislikes) in this present lifetime and not inherited or remembered from a precious Self or persona.

Yet, as mentioned, we are also told (and can read about this in the pith dharma teachings) that our previous life's Self and persona does not continue to cohere at death and was not transferred into this current life. Not only that, but the teachings clearly say that there is no permanent Self for that reason, and thus we are not ourselves personally a permanent entity, not now and not ever.

What we call our Self or Soul deconstructs, falls apart, and is left behind at death and does not reincarnate. It's up to us to verify this for ourselves, and thus the popular search for that. At least we have to think about it.

However, there are elements of our previous life, a certain persistent set of karma that do manifest in our rebirth, our next life, but are not identifiable as 'Michael Erlewine' or his self. They don't represent a contiguous whole but are just recurring persistent elements from our past that help to form our new and current persona and Self. These feral bits of karma are stored in what is called the 'Storehouse Consciousness' and do travel to our next rebirth where they can be seized on and used to populate our rebirth persona, but do not carry any stamp or

signature of “Michael Erlewine” on them. They are just odd pieces of feral karma.

Yet, here each of us are, in the middle of life as we know it and our very ‘being’ is not itself a permanent entity or ‘soul’ that will go on forever, but only part of a process of perpetual change, eternally becoming, transparent much like a hologram, an artifact of the changing appearances.

In fact, what we call outer appearances are not only hollow or empty of permanency, but these very appearances are in fact the emptiness itself appearing. The two, emptiness and appearance, are said to be connate, one and the same, two sides of a single coin. And so, what are we to think of all this?

We might want to talk about it.

What exactly is the hard pill to swallow here?

It has to be that what we call being or ‘suchness’, the sense of substance, of being substantial, and the permanence or gravity in life, and all this is also unreal as in impermanent.

That sense of ‘being’, while very much present, is impermanent and also in the state of eternally becoming and not a ‘being’ in the sense of being a permanent entity or ‘soul’, not real in any permanent way.

We are (and all are) part of pure change and process. Yet apparently, we are used to this, because it has never been different or other than this. That seems to

be where the fear comes, from simple miss-takes on our part.

Further, it seems that life itself is one vast artifact, a construction of the mind that obviously is solid enough to stand up in and live as we now live, but also part of a life that itself is forever changing and in flux. That, so to speak, is the nature of this life.

It's not that all of this is not happening or does not exist; it does and is, but rather that all of this has no permanent existence and is in continual change, and we are not a permanent entity traveling through space and time, like an eternal soul. We are the part and parcel of and the very process itself. That exists, but as the old saying from Heraclitus goes "Change alone is unchanging." We change.

As Shakespeare said, "We are such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little life is rounded with a sleep." Shakespeare also said "My soul is in the sky" and "Are you sure that we are awake? It seems to me that yet we sleep, we dream."

As unsettling as some of these thoughts may be, I have to keep in mind that I'm OK right here, warm in my office, when outside it grows colder each day. Nothing has changed but my thoughts. And it's way too hard to keep in mind that Earth is circling the Sun at 67,000 miles an hour, and the Sun circling its center the Galaxy at 483,000 per hour. And yet my mind remains still, sitting here.

Just where do science and spiritual metaphysics meet? It seems a waste of time to envision two trains running at the same time, when common sense tells

us that there has to be a uniform theory that expresses them both. We just don't have it yet. At least I don't. Dharma and Science are as close as I have come to understand how life works, the outer appearances and the inner mind itself.

In other words, we have science describing the outside or appearances, and the dharma describing the internal or mind, two sides of the same coin. I feel that in our time, the two are merging.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



“WAKE UP, WAKE UP FRIEND OWL”

October 27, 2023

[Bambi: Thumper and friends to Friend Owl.]

It happens almost like clockwork, every few months, I realize that that I have strayed from the straight and narrow enough to need a wake-up call and finally (so it seems) I get it. I wake back up, usually thanks to some small shock or another.

And in the intervening time I have managed to wander off track and find myself in the weeds once again, so to speak.

It must be that my internal GPS is sputtering and intermittent, and there is of course the little ‘devil in my ear’ that encourages me to do what is not in my best interests. I should know better by now.

One clear signal is that my health begins to decrease, usually caused by what I call ‘snacking’ on my part. It seems that no matter how carefully I put up guard rails from eating things I shouldn’t, I am ingenious at finding new ways of rationalizing, new excuses to get around that watchfulness and defeat it. It’s always something.

And the result is the same: my workrooms get messy. I don’t put things away but allow everything to accumulate, and ignore, ignore, ignore, while waiting for the event I’m talking about right here, catching myself, and turning over a new leaf or something to that effect. And I find myself gaining weight.

These are all red flags, warning signals that should slow me down, but for some hard-to-understand reason, I am adept at ignoring them. I let the whole situation accumulate until... until there is a flash of insight like a thunderclap that turns the upset applecart back upright again.

And from that moment of insight, that thunderclap, everything begins to heal itself, to change, and the whole process is reversed. I clean up my mess, put things away, and stop snacking. And my weight moves back to normal.

And it's not that I don't understand the process. I do, but it seems I'm in a kind of waking sleep, a walking zombie that can kind of vaguely see the problem accumulating, but I'm frozen like in one of those dreams when you can't seem to raise even a finger to do something about it.

As mentioned, it takes some kind of shock to wake me up, unfreeze what's frozen, and turn it all around. And it's not a slow pull out of it, but more like an instantaneous waking up, seeing of the problem, and immediately doing something about it. Welcome back, my wife tells me.

I'm once again on track and all the neglected areas are reforming, the snacking ceases, and I feel clean and healthy once again. Not exactly a vacation.

I know that I am not the Lone Ranger in all of this, and that many to most of you know of something similar in your own lives, which is why I write this.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



MICHAEL BLOOMFIELD: GUITAR HERO

October 28, 2023

[Here is an article from my music background, about our band's relationship with Michael Bloomfield, the legendary guitar player for the 'Paul Butterfield Blues Band'.]

Back in the 1960s the musicians I really loved and looked up to were players like Muddy Waters, Junior Wells, Otis Rush, Little Walter, Magic Sam, Buddy Guy, and the list goes on, mostly the great Black blues players. And I had the chance to meet all these artists, interview each of them, and hang out, plus hear them playing live in clubs and other venues. I was a total fan of these folks.

I am sometimes asked why I didn't spend more time listening to my own peers, groups like the Grateful Dead, Janice Joplin, The Band, and so on. My answer is simple. Their music didn't interest me, and this is why.

If that sounds flip, it's not meant to. It was because those players who were my peers were people much like me. No matter how great they were, we all drank from the same cup. We were all derivative, all drawing inspiration from the same musical root-sources, those great rock, blues, and jazz players who came before us. It was not disrespect, but simple camaraderie with my peers. We all looked up to the great players who came before us.

For example, I met and hung out with Janice Joplin at the Grande Ballroom, where we both played. She was cool, no doubt. But I had already heard the original "Take Another Little Piece of my Heart" by Erma Franklin and "Ball 'n Chain" by Big Mama Thornton. I spent a whole late-night talking and drinking with Big Mama Thornton, so I know where Joplin was getting her stuff. Joplin was a popular singer, but she was no Big Mama Thornton. We both revered Big Mama Thornton. Joplin herself would be the first to say so. That's how it was.

It was the same with the Rolling Stones. Of course, I like their tune "Time is On My Side," because that is an Irma Thomas song. What's not to like, but I like the original by Irma Thomas much better. Thomas is one of the greatest woman singers I have ever heard. Period.

I had the chance to have dinner with Irma Thomas and hang out some years ago and it was out of this world. Later that night at the gig, Irma Thomas changed her set list to include many of her early songs that I especially love, just for me. We are exactly the same age. I can't say enough about what a great artist Irma Thomas is.

So, you get the idea. It is not that I was somehow too good for the music of my peers. It was because it wasn't their music and in almost all cases the original was better, and they knew it too. That's why they covered it in the first place.

It's the same with the Grateful Dead. We were all studying the same root music. I remember jamming

with Jerry Garcia and the Grateful Dead in West Park in Ann Arbor one sunny afternoon in the 1960s, August 13, 1967. It was fun, but we were both reading from the same playbook of those great artists that we revered, most of whom were still living. An exception would be Jimi Hendrix. Although he too had roots, he transformed those roots into something really new, IMO. Hendrix was unique in this way.

There is one other exception, only one group I can think of among my peers that I would acknowledge myself a "groupie" of, and that was the Paul Butterfield Blues Band." When the Butterfield band burst on the scene in late 1965, we were right there and we were spellbound.

Although Butterfield and his band made a number of albums, IMO none of those albums captured the experience of hearing that band live. And I should know. As a 'groupie' I heard them many, many times. We even played at the same venue with them.

And we hung out with the Butterfield band and even recorded them. In the spring of 1966, my brother Dan and I recorded an early version of the Butterfield band's landmark tune East-West in "Poor Richard's" club in Chicago, before it came out as an album. "East-West" is considered the first extended rock solo (13 minutes) ever issued on an album, and it served to fuel the future of any number of heavy-metal artists.

Our recording of East-West is the first complete rendering of this tune that is extant. If I remember right, we were sitting behind a black curtain on the stage recording this, but I could be wrong. My brother

Dan Erlewine might remember. Anyway, the recording we made was issued on an album called "East-West Live" by the Butterfield keyboard player Mark Naftalin in 1996. I sent him the tapes. Here is the album for those interested. Our recording is the second cut. But I digress.

http://www.amazon.com/East.../dp/B0000034D7/ref=sr_1_1...

There were many reasons the Butterfield band's imprint on us was so profound. For one, they were just that good, and they were a racially mixed band as we sometimes were. That first Butterfield album stopped us in our tracks and our band was never the same again. That was probably the time we added the phrase "Blues Band" to our name, making it the "Prime Movers Blues Band." That first Butterfield album served as a wakeup call to an entire generation of White would-be blues musicians, a notice that we could go ahead and try to play the blues, "whiteness" and all, and so we did.

Even to this day, Butterfield remains one of the only white harmonica players to develop his own style (another is William Clarke) -- one respected by black players. Butterfield has no real imitators. Like most Chicago-style amplified harmonica players, Butterfield played the instrument like a horn -- a trumpet. He tended to play single notes rather than bursts of chords. His harp playing is always intense, understated, concise, and serious -- IMO only Big Walter Horton has a better sense of note selection. You can tell from the notes Butterfield settled on, that he had really studied the blues.

When I knew Butterfield (during those first three albums), he was always intense, somewhat remote, and even, on occasion, downright unfriendly. Although not much interested in other people, he was a compelling musician and a great harp player. But Butterfield liked to mess with your mind. Here is an example.

I can remember one time Butterfield and I were in Chicago, sitting out in the back alley in our van, probably smoking something or other. He was explaining that he was left-handed and that only left-handed people would ever amount to anything in this world. The rest of us were shit-out-a-luck. That was Butterfield's humor. It is true that he held the harmonica opposite to the standard right-handed player who holds it in his left hand. Butterfield held it in his right hand, upside down, with the low notes to the right.

Michael Bloomfield (lead guitar) and Mark Naftalin (keyboards) in the Butterfield band, also great players, were just the opposite -- always interested in the other guy. They went out of their way to inquire about you, even if you were a nobody like we were. Naftalin continues to this day to support blues projects and festivals.

But it was Butterfield's lead-guitar player, Michael Bloomfield, who most stands out in my mind. Bloomfield actually was our friend. He cared about us. We could feel it. Michael Bloomfield also played lead on Dylan's album "Highway 61 revisited."

Michael Bloomfield is one of the greatest guitarists I have ever heard, and I have heard a bunch. Bob Dylan thinks so too, as this quote from a Rolling Stone article (May 2009) shows:

"The guy that I always miss, and I think he'd still be around if he stayed with me, was Mike Bloomfield. He could just flat-out play. He had so much soul. And he knew all the styles, and he could play them so incredibly well. He was an expert player and a real prodigy too. He could play like Robert Johnson way back then in the 1960s. He could play the pure style of country blues authentically." – Bob Dylan

In my experience, Michael Bloomfield was always filled with light, positive, and interested in helping others into the future. If there are bodhisattvas wandering around in this world, Bloomfield has to be one of them. I am running out of space here, but let me give you just one example of Bloomfield's compassion that I personally experienced.

For those of you who are too young, the "Summer of Love" was San Francisco and the Bay Area in 1967, when more than 100,000 hippies showed up at the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco wanting to hang out. I happened to be there that summer. In fact I made a point of it.

My entire band and I drove all the way across the country (and back) in our 1966 Dodge Van. We had our band name (The Prime Movers) all over that van, but most people thought we were a just another moving company even though across the front of the van we had the slogan "Gonna Ring a Few Bells in

your Ears” a quote by legendary New Orleans performer Jessie Hill from his song “Ooh Poo Pah Doo.” Any of you remember that song? Here it is for those of you with open ears:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UFnKWUjvdk8>

How we crammed all of our band equipment and the entire band (I think there were five of us), not to mention five suitcases into that Dodge van and managed to get it across the U.S. is beyond me. We just did it, took turns driving, and made it a non-stop trip.

I can remember waking up as we crossed the Continental Divide to find us moving at a snail’s pace, surrounded on all sides by a huge flock of sheep. That moment was a long way from what we were going to find in San Francisco and Haight-Ashbury.

And of course we had no money and no place to stay once we got there. We just went there cold because we knew it was happening. And here is my point:

It was our friend Michael Bloomfield who cared enough about us to find us a free place to live for the summer, which turned out to be the Sausalito Heliport, where many music groups practiced, including his new group ‘The Electric Flag’. We crashed on the floor. I remember some famous woman singer gave us \$5 at the heliport for food. It might have been Gale Garnet (“We’ll Sing in the Sunshine”). As mentioned, we had zero money.

In fact we played blues outside on the pavement next to a local Sausalito Black rib-joint for food, just to

have something to eat. We ate a lot of ribs that summer. The Sausalito Heliport was just across the San Francisco Bay Bridge to the north.

However, the band and I spent most of our time in San Francisco and Berkeley, where we auditioned and/or played at all the major Sixties clubs, places like the Avalon Ballroom, The Straight Theater, The Matrix, The Haight A, and even the Fillmore Auditorium. We also played in Berkeley at the New Orleans House and other places

And there is more to my Bloomfield story. It was also thanks to Michael Bloomfield that we played the Fillmore Auditorium. Bloomfield not only found us a place to stay, but asked us to fill in for his band the "Electric Flag" when they could not make a gig, at the Fillmore itself.

It was August 29th of 1967 at the Fillmore Auditorium that we opened for Cream on what I believe was their first concert in the U.S. or at least in San Francisco. For those of you who don't know about Cream, it was the British rock supergroup featuring Eric Clapton on guitar, Jack Bruce on bass, and Ginger Baker on drums. Their songs included many classic blues tunes and, of course, their smash hit "Sunshine of Your Love."

In fact I watched Cream (with needles in their arms) shoot up speed in the green room before the show. And I had a shouting match with Fillmore promoter Bill Graham at that time about how to mic our amplifiers. Graham wanted to run our sound directly through these giant walls of speakers, but I wanted them to

mic our amps through their own speakers, so our particular (old Fender Concerts) amp sound would be preserved. I am sure I was wrong, but at the time it seemed so right. And shouting with Bill Graham was almost required in those days.

Anyway, I wanted to share with you my history as a groupie and my undying respect for the compassion and genius of Michael Bloomfield, certainly someone worthy of my respect. At long last, there is a compilation of Bloomfield's guitar work called "From His Head to His Heart to His Hands." Even that title sounds like a bodhisattva to me. It is here:

http://www.amazon.com/His.../dp/B00I1CRJN0/ref=sr_1_1...

Also, a bio I did on the Butterfield Blues Band here:

<http://michaelerlewine.com/viewtopic.php?f=148&t=53...>

In putting this piece together, I took an opportunity to see what is on YouTube about Bloomfield and Butterfield since I last looked and there is a lot more information these days.

I also watched several worthy videos on Bloomfield and Butterfield, and in particular the parts about the end of their lives, and it broke my heart. Both of these phenomenal musicians died from drug abuse, neglect, and a series of bad choices.

[A photo of me playing harmonica in the West Park band shell in 1967, probably the time I was playing and jamming with Jerry Garcia. Also, a poster of one of our gigs (and Butterfield's band in Detroit.)



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JULY 19 - JULY 24

THE PRIME MOVELA

RETURNING AUG 2 - AUG 7

Are sure to move you. Perhaps straight to the dance area we will set aside.

AUG 9 - AUG 14

THE PAUL BUTTERFIELD BLUES BAND

Electra recording artists. Back by popular demand & once again you just might not be able to stay on your seat.

AUG 25 - SEP 4

Gordon Lightfoot

Folk music at it's smootheast. Composer of songs recorded by Joan Biaz; Peter, Paul & you know who; Marty Robbins etc. Oh! yes and Gordon Lightfoot on United Artist.....

SEP 20 - OCT 3

Fred Thompson

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ONE WEEK ONLY JULY 26 - JULY 31.

*JUDY HENSKE

Electra recording artist. The Rusty warren of Polk. When Judy's here you won't want to dance. She & the group do the swinging.....

AUG 16 - AUG 21

Cedric Smith

Back from England. Actor, humorist, folksinger. Fine voice, fine guitar. May we request you not roll in the aisle.....

SEP 5 - SEP 18

MARC FIELD

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Good Luck Phil!

(SUN, MON, TUES Thru JULY 26th)

Going to New York but returning to Detroit soon. Since 1964 our finest. Hurry back PHIL MARCUS ESSER.

WELTSCHMERZ (WORLD SORROW)

October 29, 2023

World sorrow, what the German's call 'weltschmerz' is something we all have... sometimes.

This last year or few, more so, IMO. Either that or it occurs as we grow older. Well, yes, that too.

I'm surfing it as best I can, yet like the old Satchel Paige comment "Don't look back. Something might be gaining on you." I don't even have to look back, just looking around is enough with all that's happening in the world these years.

It's gaining on me, all the sad things... all around... all the time.

"Enough or Too Much" as William Blake said in his seminal poem "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," and that fits in too. For me, it's been too much, meaning too much to digest or grok or whatever, the sadness that overflows of late.

It's not only the big things, like wars and the like, I'm seeing it in the little things, the tiny things that ought to be just fine because they are small, but no, I see sorrow leaching into there too. It's overflowing from the big sorrows and rolling downhill.

I am a pretty positive guy, as my friends can tell you, and I slough off the darkening of my view as best I can. However, as Dylan said "It's not dark yet, but it's getting there." Is it getting there?

It's not getting brighter as of late. At least that much is true. And the big dark things like the 'Ukraine War' and the upcoming '2024 Election" are kind of bleeding over into the little bright things and casting their shadows.

I don't have to go on in this vein or say much more, do I? Because we all know these are not the most auspicious of times for light and peace.

As for explaining it to myself, this next year to a year and a half, the sunspot cycle will reach its peak, and after that we will not be inundated with so many huge influxes of solar change. Until then, it may be rough because it's already rough now and space scientists say it's not over, and there is more yet to come.

Well, I don't want to spread all this sadness around, yet at the same time I find myself shaking my head to make sure I'm awake to all this. I am, pretty much. And it's not going to get me down, but it does seem to be hovering around and over things, a darkening or dimming of the light.

And the worst: I especially see it in the little ones, grandkids and children in general. It's hard to grow up in and through this. I remember only too well the 1940s and 1950s, first the polio scares (terrifying for a child), and secondly air-raid drills in my classrooms, and crouching under my desk as they simulated a Russian nuclear bombing. We grew up through that and for a kid, that's imprinting. You don't forget the fear of the unknown.

So, anyway, forgive my worry. let's make lemonade as best we can. As for the little ones, I don't know

how to explain to them the foolishness of the adults in this time that we live in, and what we all are somewhat responsible for putting them through and imprinting them with. I'm ashamed. What a world to leave them with!

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



TROUBLED TIMES

October 31, 2023

I don't know how you explain what's happening now all over the world. As an astrologer of some sixty years, I find it useful or at least convenient to note the peaking of the sunspot cycle just now, an eleven-year cycle that scientists tell us is way stronger this cycle than predicted or expected. And it will peak in the next year or a little more.

Whatever is the case, this is a time of extreme solar change, way more that we are used to. The sun and its sunlight, usually very steady and beneficial, can also become insurgent and fierce, spewing massive amounts of plasma at Earth, 'energy change' that we are not used to and cannot easily assimilate as we do with simple sunlight.

Scientists remind us that twenty years ago, in the Solar Cycle 23 (2003) that in what are called the "Great Halloween Solar Storms" of 2003, half of Earth's satellites were lost! That's a fact.

Two enormous X-Class solar storms in a row, an X17-class on October 28, followed by an X10-class solar storm on October 29, 2003 hurled huge fast-moving CMEs (Corona Mass Ejection) directly at Earth.

These CMEs travelled at 1320 mph and 1210 mph and reached Earth in less than a day, causing extreme geomagnetic storms on October 29-31, 2003. As [Spaceweather.com](https://www.spaceweather.com) reports:

“Onboard the International Space Station, astronauts took shelter in the hardened Zvezda service module to protect themselves from high energy particles. Meanwhile, airline pilots were frantically changing course. Almost every flight over Earth’s poles detoured to lower latitudes to avoid radiation, costing as much as \$100,000 per flight. Many Earth-orbiting satellites experienced data outages, reboots, and even unwanted thruster firings. Some operators simply gave up and turned their instruments off.”

“There’s a dawning awareness that something else important happened, too. Many of Earth’s satellites were “lost”—not destroyed, just misplaced. In a 2020 paper entitled “Flying Through Uncertainty,” USAF satellite operators recalled how “the majority of satellites (in low Earth orbit) were temporarily lost, requiring several days of around-the-clock work to reestablish their positions.”

The “Halloween Storms” pumped an extra 3 Terrawatts of power into Earth’s upper atmosphere, which did not occur without notice.

The point here is this ‘extra’ energy beyond normal sunlight is just another word for ‘change’, pushing us this way and that, something each of us has to absorb or negotiate, for better or for worse. Such change not only overwhelms Earth’s communication systems, but also can overwhelm each of our psychological systems as well. Lately, a lot of folks have told me they just have to go and lie down for a while.

Right now, today, sunspot AR3474 is 31,068 miles wide with 2 dark cores bigger than Earth itself, and contains energy for M-Class solar flares.

Of course, this peaking of the sunspot cycle is not being blamed for the wars we are experiencing here on Earth or for all the other disruptive energy, like Covid, the divisions in politics, and the confrontation of the coming 2024 election.

However, one can't help but put two and two together and at least consider what the sun is putting us through now and will be in the next year. It's been building to this sunspot cycle peak and will continue to do so for another year and one half. And we all know these are difficult times.

In troubled times, things don't go as we might expect. Whatever magic we usually have may suddenly stop working and not be there for us and we are left staring out at the void. A lot of people apparently are.

Then being asked, what are we going to do, we may not know. I am hearing from many folks these days, including from my own extended family, that times are hard, upsetting. In particular, the war in Palestine is concerning, the attack on Israel and then the following attack on Palestine, both sides with both right and wrong. People don't agree. There is not just one side.

I've been getting a lot of notes and even messages from my extended family as to the tough times we all seem to be having. It seems we are up against it, so to speak. Hard times affect us all.

As mentioned, we have multiple wars going on at the same time that the 11-year sunspot cycle is reaching its peak in the next year to a year and a half and pummeling us with large solar flares and damaging CMEs (Coronal Mass Ejection). And not to mention the political cycle which is coming around to get us in the next year. And last but not least, Covid is resurging some and continues to harass us. I still wear a mask in public at my doctor's recommendation.

Or perhaps all these world and personal events are linked and working together, whichever makes the most sense. Whatever the case, here these times are, and it seems to be reflected not only nationally but also in our personal lives, however that works.

For example, I find it more difficult to stay on task these days and keep at what I usually keep at. And at the same time, if I don't keep at it, I don't know what to do with the down time of doing nothing just because I don't feel like doing anything. You can't win, and you can't even come out even. And so, what to do?

What I tell myself is to just slow down, relax, and look the problem right in the eye, and then relax more and work it just as it is because there it is, just as it is.

It's no help taking a step backward, either, trying to avoid it. I stand my ground, perhaps keep my head down a bit, not look for trouble, and move forward as best as I am able, one foot in front of the other.

Will it pass? Yes, eventually, but we can't wait for that, because that could be a long time. Weather it out

is what I do, not accumulating grudges if I can, and not resisting the change, even if it is unwelcome. Work with it and work through it.

That's about all I know, and I take my own advice. This is exactly what I'm doing.

Everything is cyclic and comes around again, good times and bad. I am reminded of this wonderful song penned and sung by my daughter May Erlewine., "Rise Up Singing," which has been included in the current edition of folk music book (at their request) of the same name. Here is a link and some of the words.

"You've got to rise up, rise up singing

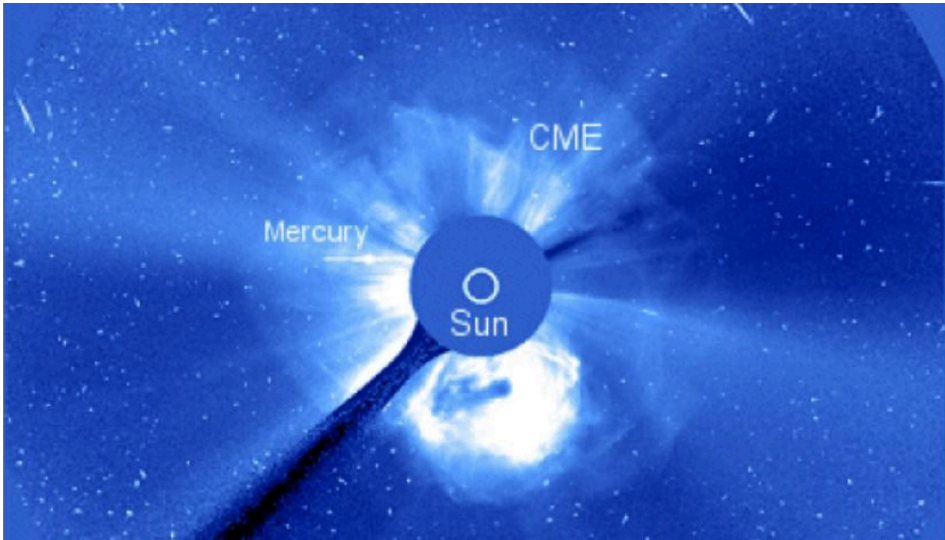
In time this too shall pass

You've got to rise up, rise up singing

You know, trouble ain't built to last"

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

[Image of the 2003 Halloween Solar Influx]



ACTING FROM THE GUT

November 1, 2023

[I'm back on my beat of writing about dharma, so things are better by at least a little bit for me. I colored, created the nimbus, and tweaked this image of Amitabha Buddha, taken from a pen & ink drawing at our dharma center by Sange Wangchuk, who later became the Minister of Culture for Bhutan.]

While all around us war rages on two fronts, we are not aware of the connection between the massive influx of solar influx happening now compared to a quiet sun of just sunlight streaming.

This is a good example of why and how I got into learning the dharma, because it is all about 'Awareness'. Even the word 'Buddha' has its origins in Pali and Sanskrit, and is derived from the word "buddha," meaning enlightened or awakened.

Waking up or becoming aware is the nature of dharma, as opposed to ignoring or being unaware of the nature of this reality that we are living within, which is called Samsara, embedded in almost a complete lack of awareness, or so the teachings say.

The inability to think for ourselves is the result of following thinking to the point of ignorance, of diminishing returns, a tunnel with no light at the end.

And thinking for ourselves demands experience we lack and must have, yet we don't know how to do it. And it does not come from a diet of conceptual pabulum, but rather from learning to exercise our

minds like we exercise our bodies to stay alive. The mind needs to live too.

And I am speaking here not just of thinking, which is part of the problem, but of vigorous exercise, certainly not just reading another article or book that we try to get meaning out of, yet does not move us to action mentally.

I'm going to try to point out how we can usefully exercise the mind, but this is very hard to do, and it took me years of working with a dharma teacher to get to the point I will attempt to share here. And I don't pretend to point out to you the nature of the mind, but just enough to get some action started in that direction, a bit of starter dough.

And again, I am not an expert, yet I can tell you about my own experience in learning this and something about how it was taught to me, meaning how I finally got the correct idea.

Rinpoche was explaining how the monks in Tibet were taught, and here is one example. Rinpoche asked us what the color of the mind is. Is it red, blue, or some other color. No one seemed to know. He went on to say that each of us should go away from this teaching, and for the rest of the day and night, search our mind to determine if the mind is the color 'Red.' Just the color red and not any other color.

And then the next morning when we all came together in the shrine room, he would ask us individually what we found. OK. That was a bit unusual, asking us to actually do something, but I was game to try that.

And so, off I went and actually, it only took me a couple of minutes to figure this out. I didn't need to spend all day and night on this. Of course, the mind is not the color Red, or any other color. The mind is not Red; it is colorless. Obviously.

And so, the next day came and we all assembled, and Rinpoche asked this or that person whether the mind is the color Red, and he got all kind of answers as you might imagine.

And then Rinpoche explained that in Tibet, they do this same question, only the monks there are asked to spend three days and three nights on the color red. And after that, they repeat the same three days and nights, but with the color blue, green, etc. And this goes on for three straight months.

Well, that surprised me, because I know from my trips to Tibet that the monks are no dummies. Why would they spend three days and nights on the color Red, or any color for that matter. I came away that day puzzled.

And I also came away from the entire 10-day intensive puzzled. There was something I was missing here. There had to be. And it finally dawned on me what it might be.

I was not doing what Rinpoche had asked me to. He didn't ask me to think if the mind is the color Red, but rather he asked us to search our mind, day and night, non-stop, and determine if the mind is Red. There is a difference, and the difference is like night and day, or so I found out.

Rinpoche was not asking us to 'think' at all, but rather to vigorously and viscerally search what we call our mind, with all we had. And it was the searching and the exercise of the mind and not the color red, blue, green, etc. that was important.

When we think of using the mind we do just as I am writing, we 'think' and having thought we are done with it, but never or seldom viscerally or vigorously, never from the gut, but always from the mental, conceptual viewpoint. We think it. This is not the mental exercise that Rinpoche had in mind.

Instead, he wanted us to search and massage the mind like we would knead bread or make dough for a pizza. In other words, we need to stretch and pull the mind every which way and for a prolonged time. Exercise. These mental muscles are seldom to never used and they have to be broken in so that we begin to think from our gut, the Hara region, our belly, and not just with our head. Thinking only with our head is killing us.

The point is that we are totally used to grasping things mentally with our mind (thinking conceptually) and not with our gut. We often react with our gut, yet we have never learned to use it correctly, to master it.

Once I understood this, I began to switch hats, so to speak. As a harmonica player for many years, I had learned breath control both breathing in and out from my diaphragm and gut. You have to.

And from that point, when I returned the 800 miles from the teaching, I practiced this exercise of my mind for some three years, very intensely, centering and

using my Hara or lower abdomen all the time, while I worked, and while I did other things. I was learning to 'think' with my gut and not with my head.

And it was after those three years that I had my first real breakthrough into Insight Meditation, a non-dual technique of full immersion, Hara and all.

Whether this is useful for you reading this, I can't say. Probably it will go over your head and in one ear and out the other, as they say.

However, I put it out there and would be happy to discuss it with anyone interested.

[Image of Amitabha Buddha colored and tweaked by me just for this blog, based on a line drawing done at our meditation center by Sange Wangchuk. Amitabha is the particular form of Buddha that our meditation center is dedicated to.]



DON'T SAY NO ONE KNOWS; JUST
SAY I DON'T KNOW

November 2, 2023

It's all dharma or a chance to learn dharma. It's not like dharma is off track or something. Dharma is the track, and the only one that goes somewhere beneficial, so there are no awards for staying on track than dharma itself. Dharma is learning to fly right; it's that simple.

And as the Zen Buddhists point out so successfully, there is a dharma to everything, the correct way for each of us to negotiate whatever pops up for us.

And so, we are not going to run out of dharma and dharmic ways to handle whatever comes our way. And we don't have to become a Buddhist to be dharmic. Dharma was there before the Buddha found it and it's still right there. That's what the Buddha did, realize the dharma. We can do that too.

And so, if that's true why bother studying or practicing dharma, if its already everywhere? Well, the simple answer is we don't have to study or practice dharma. It's just more efficient and easier to do it that way.

It's the same as if I could say to you, here is astrology. It's out there, so go at your pace and figure it out. Or here is a course that will save you a lot of time and get you started learning astrology. It's up to each of us how we want to do it.

Yet, what's not true is that we can avoid the dharma, because ultimately for each of us there is the path for us to or toward enlightenment. And it's not hidden, this path, because it is THE path we will have to take, given our personality, situation, and all of that.

Our dharma path is already out there waiting to be taken, and its obvious because it's our path. If we even try to look, that particular path is what we will find, so take your time or as they say "pay me now or pay me later." There is no real choice here other than to just avoid it altogether, which is what got us to where we are now.

What I'm trying to say here is that there is no way we can avoid dharma, no matter which way we turn or where we go. I certainly tried to go it alone and I taught myself almost everything I know, up to a point.

Yet, after I taught myself everything I know, there were still gaps, huge gaps in my knowledge. I had what is like a patchwork quilt, but with many missing pieces. What was I to do about those?

Well, it took me a while to come to the obvious conclusion, ask someone who knows if you can find such a teacher. And I did.

And it was not embarrassing to be in the position of asking for guidance. Seeking guidance was, actually, enlightening, because my dharma teacher pointed out to me exactly what I wanted to know, which was what I didn't know. Duh.

Why did it take me so long to get around to getting some guidance. Some kind of pride or other.

What a thrill to learn dharma from someone who actually knows, and to fill in the blanks of what we don't know.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



PRECIOUS, PRECIOUS DHARMA

November 3, 2023

It's precious beyond any words, as anyone who has discovered the dharma knows. The dharma is exactly what we don't have and are hungry for.

I don't mean that dharma is just what everyone needs, although that is true too. What's remarkable is that each of us is tailored for a particular unfolding of dharma that they will respond to. There are said to be 84,000 different dharmas to fit our varying requirements.

My point is that there is not just a generic form of dharma, where one size fits all, but rather we each will respond to a particular dharma path naturally. We will find it, or our dharma teacher will point it out to us, whichever comes first.

Either way, just as an infant finds their mother's breast, so each one of us will find a dharma path, a path to dharma that exactly fits our needs and we will thrive there.

To facilitate this, we have to relax and not force ourselves into dharma, even though we know we need it. We have to discover the thread to dharma in the world around us and pick up on that. That's our path, what in dharma training is called our 'Yidam,' the one avenue we are fit to follow, what will work for us.

And so, I write this because you can't pound a square peg into a round hole, and we should not force ourselves to do dharma practices that we don't naturally respond to. That only stains the dharma for us, so we lose the desire to practice dharma at all.

Tread gently is my advice, and you don't know what will work for you until it works for you. And in the process of finding out we can damage our desire to learn by forced practice, just as my being forced to play the piano when I was a kid made me not want to play it. That idea.

Our hunger for dharma, I believe, is a natural hunger, and should be satisfied by finding the kind of dharma, the approach, that is natural for us. There are all kinds, and like Cinderella, the shoe must fit our foot.

There has to be a dharma perfect for us. That's just how dharma works. So go gently into the world of dharmas, feel your way along, and find the thread of the dharma that suits you. And follow that.

And yes, there is a bit of a hurry, but take time to get there.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



OUR REACTIONS

November 4, 2023

Time goes on, and it is in time that every little thing happens and pops up. We are right there. And how we react determines what happens next. In that sense, we are in control of our own destiny, if nothing more.

There is a great difference between a knee-jerk reaction and responding appropriately to whatever happens in the moment, whatever confronts us.

And with that comes the dharma or an opportunity to discover the dharma. It's instantaneous, this moment, with no second takes. And whether we confront the moment with resistance and reaction or can relax and respond to what emerges is all up to us individually. It's going to happen anyway, this moment, and who knows what will emerge and come forth.

We can't control that, but we can learn to roll with the moment, work with it in a positive and responsible way, rather than react negatively and with little to no control.

And there is a very easy form of dharma practice that takes no effort on our part because it depends on our knee-jerk reactions, which are happening anyway. They are beyond our control, obviously. And it's easy to do. Here is how.

All we have to do is to be aware when we react, that we are reacting, and take note of that. And then we just acknowledge or own that this is our reaction

despite what caused it, and then just drop it. That's the whole practice.

We don't think or dwell on what caused the reactions or even about our own reaction. We don't noodle on it or turn the event into a train of thought. We just note it, own it, and drop it.

This is a form of reactivity training, working with our own reactions, a particular form of what in Tibetan Buddhism is called Tong-Len. The only difference is that instead of working with the world or other people, here we are only working with ourselves, and our own reactions.

It is reactivity training or reactivity Ton-Len.

And I'm not talking about just large reactions, like a loud car exhaust or a firecracker going off, or even a phone ringing, or when something interrupts us. I am also referring to the thousands of tiny reactions we have, like reacting to what a big nose you have, or I don't like the tie or the dress you are wearing, a multitude of reactivity that goes on all day long.

And each involuntary reaction, no matter how small, sucks energy from us, and this goes on all day. If we can become aware of our own reactions and tone them back, we save an enormous amount of energy that otherwise is spent and lost. Think about it.

And when we consider how many forms of dharma practice require a special time to be set aside or a special place to do it, here it's automatic, all done for us.

We just begin to monitor our reactions, which are happening anyway, already taking our precious energy and disturbing our mind. We don't have to do anything but note a reaction, however small, own it, and drop it. The rest takes care of itself.

You will find that in a relatively short amount of time, reactions are toned back, and turn into what we could call appropriate responses on our part, and we are soon rolling with events rather than reacting to them.

That's it, the easiest and most productive dharma practice I know of. It will change your life if you do it.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



THE BORDERLINE: CROSSING AND RE-CROSSING

NOVEMBER 5, 2023

Living at the edge. I don't really mean living 'at' the edge, but more living on the edge, meaning being nourished by the edge, the borderline between inside and outside, between being and not-being. That's what's happening anyway, so might as well be aware of it.

It's always those borders and the border line that we cross and recross in order to feel anything at all. I use the analogy of rolling a piece of grit, a grain of sand or a tiny pearl, between our thumb and forefinger, feeling it. That is borderline stuff, IMO. That's what we do with our mind.

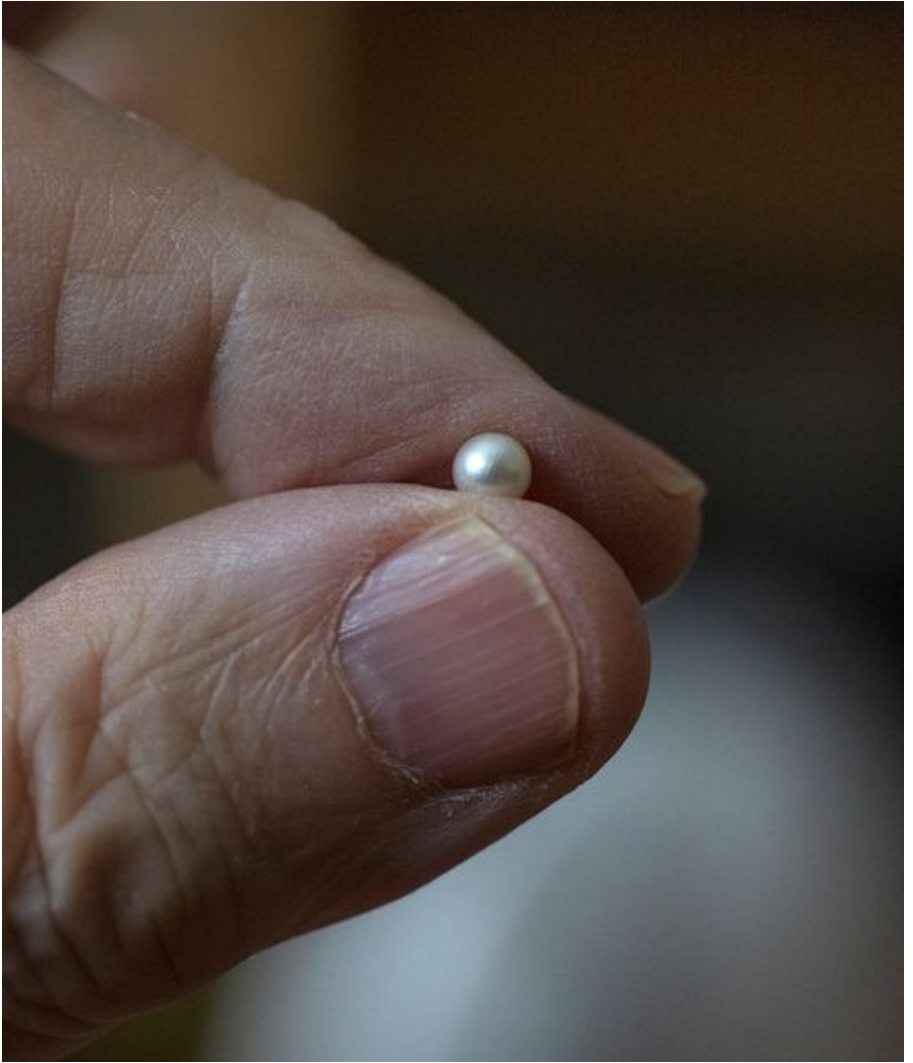
Where do you want to live? If we are fully immersed with no awareness, we are just that. Not aware. If we are aware with no immersion, we have nothing to know,

So that's why the borderlines in life are so important because we fluctuate between them, the in and out. And those of us who are dharma practitioners of the non-meditation 'meditations' like Dzogchen and Mahamudra have no choice.

It's not all in or all out, but both and neither. Again, it's the borderline I am talking about, not in or out, not all in or all out, but living in and on the borderline between the two, crossing and recrossing.

This is what the more advanced meditations, actually 'non-meditations', are all about, using the borderline to remain aware and extend our awareness.

It's not nothing or something. That's the whole point, that there is none, no point or not a point. And we have to deal with that, which is challenging. Every borderline is like a flame or incandescence that, burning, keeps us awake.



BUDDHA NATURE

November 6, 2023

[A little housekeeping here, juggling of dharma terms, and clarification.]

Let's talk about the popular term "Buddha Nature," which became part of the Mahayana Mahaparinirvana Sutra, but is not found acceptable by many Buddhists, including me. While I can understand what is meant by 'Buddha Nature', that because the historical Buddha Realized the true nature of the mind, then we too, any of us, can do the same. That has been called 'Buddha Nature.'

I personally don't favor the term "Buddha Nature," and many Buddhists don't, although it is generally accepted, and I understand. To my mind, the dharma existed long before the Buddha realized it, so I prefer using the term 'the True Nature of the Mind' to the term 'Buddha Nature' because it sounds too much, IMO, like it is a Self or permanent "Soul" and that can be confusing to beginners.

To repeat, just as the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, achieved enlightenment, Buddhists believe each of us has that same potential for enlightenment as the Buddha did for realizing the true nature of the mind. Of course, I agree.

In other words, Buddhists do not believe as do most theists (Christians, etc.) in the doctrine of original sin, meaning that at some time in the past, perhaps at the 'Garden of Eden', mankind 'sinned' and fell from purity and grace, and now each of us needs to

redeem ourselves or have Christ do this for us. In other words, Buddhists do not believe in 'Original Sin', that we have fallen and somehow now have to be saved.

It's fair to ask where is our 'Buddha Nature' or where is the 'True Nature of the Mind', even though we may still have a hard time seeing it in others or even when we look at ourselves in a mirror. Why is that?

What do we expect to see in the mirror? Or is it that in the mirror we see the same stuff that keeps us from being enlightened in the first place. Does Samsara (this cyclic world of confusion) drown out or cloud the visibility of the true nature of the mind. That seems to be what the dharma teachings state.

And that's what Buddhists mean when they say we are not aware of the true nature of our own mind. And it gets a little more complicated, because if we already are perfect and pure within, we don't need to improve what we inherently are, but only to remove what obscures the true nature of the mind. We can't improve the true nature of the mind, only reveal it. Discover.

And perhaps we should give up trying to get 'there' because we are already there; we already have within us the true nature of the mind, and for that matter have always been there and so has everyone else. Again, we each already have within us the true nature of the mind or, if you wish, Buddha Nature.

So, it's beyond backtracking or improvement because there is nowhere to backtrack to or need for it. It's

more about giving up the effort we are making to get to where we already by nature are.

To repeat, we will never get there because we are already there and just don't realize it. We are not aware of what is our own nature. We just have to cease and desist with the effort. "Relax, as it is" as the great Mahasiddha Tilopa put it.

And so, instead of struggling with 'Original Sin' as many Christians do, Buddhists struggle with Samsara and all of the obscurations that prevent us from being aware of the pure nature of our own mind. And so, practically speaking, both theists (Christians, etc.) and non-theists (Buddhists) have their work cut out for them. Christians work to get back to their original purity, and Buddhists work to remove whatever obscures their Buddha Nature -- defilements, ignorance, and negative karma. These are not that dissimilar, with Christians trying to get back to their pure state and Buddhists uncovering what obscures their pure state.

And, as mentioned, "Buddha Nature" should not be confused with the theist concept of a permanent or 'Eternal Soul', which is why I prefer the term "true nature of the mind." However, regardless, "Buddha Nature" is said to have no inherent Self but is also (like everything else) impermanent.

If these two views are similar, what's the difference? One obvious difference is that Christians hold that they have done something wrong, which they call 'sin', and are "trying to atone for these sins," which IMO is a heavy burden, while the Buddhists have never sinned, but instead have yet to remove what

obscures their own view of the true nature of the mind. However, there is no original sin involved.

As my dharma teacher once said to us, “We are the stragglers, the rebirths that in all the time there has been up to now, never got enlightened.” In other words, enlightenment is still in our future, which some see as a problem.

Although, IMO, this is why it can be said that if we see that as a problem, it is a problem we cannot solve, a problem for which there is no solution, and that is because the problem does not exist. I have a problem with the problem, so to speak.

And as to the process of the reveal of the true nature of the mind, I just say, it is straight forward and “Not a Problem.”

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



WHY WE ARE ALONE

November 7, 2023

I'm talking about being alone in the dharma. Here is the problem as I understand it from my own experience.

Advice may be all around us. Everyone is glad to help, but the whole point is that when it comes to dharma and 'Realization', we each have to do it by ourselves. That means we are alone, big time.

Yes, of course, we need an authentic dharma teacher, who can point out to us this or that, perhaps how to do it, point the way, yet the nature of realizing the dharma is that each of us has to do it ourselves. It's not that others would not or will not help, but rather that we each have to do the whole thing, realizing the true nature of the mind, ourselves. We may not be used to doing that, to being just out there, so alone.

Not only no one can do it for us, the only thing anyone can do is point out the way. Even the Buddha could but point the way. And even he would be powerless to do it for us because, as mentioned, we each have to realize the nature of the mind on our own. Again, that's the whole point, so get used to being alone enough so this can happen. That's a good sign.

And so, if we find ourselves in the middle of our life and increasingly alone in this, it's not because no one cares or everyone is too busy to take us in and to cherish us, but rather that we have to be on our own in order to realize the nature of the mind. It's not a group project. It's individual. And all dharma training is going to lead to our being on our own, alone if you will. It will keep happening again and again.

We have to accept this, to understand that's why we are continually being isolated. It's not a punishment. We did not do something wrong, but just the opposite. We did something right and we are being exposed in our aloneness to just the conditions we need to do this ourselves. In my experience, these conditions were like a perfect storm.

It's why, when everything is on the table, again and again, we find ourselves left out, thrust into the charnel ground of existence, not to be sacrificed or ignored, but rather we are being pushed out onto the landing stage ready for us to take off. So, don't fight it.

We are in solitary because although we are not the only one doing this, we each do have to do it by ourselves. Again, it's not a punishment, but rather a requirement for any kind of enlightenment to occur and take place. No one can do this for us. We are going to find ourselves alone in this.

I agree, this is so difficult to understand, because just at the point we could most use support, we have to support ourselves, and are entirely on our own. That's the way it has to be because that's the way it is.

And this is never more true than in dharma and our every step toward enlightenment. Each step is on our own, stepping away from the past, from the group, stepping out on our own, entirely by ourselves and with no help other than guides, what are called the pointing-out instructions.

It can only be pointed out to us. We have to do it ourselves. And I should mention that when we each pass on, it will also be alone in that.

And if we want to burn away the dross or connective tissue that binds us to Samsara, we have to be our own funeral pyre and that fire must instantly burn through us like a trail of gunpowder, through the network of interstices within the fabric of the Self, our personality, that becomes incandescent and burns up.

This poem I wrote celebrates this.

PHOENIX

Personality,
Bright beauty of the night,
That terrible crystal,
Burning in the darkness,
At the very edge of time.

Watching,
In rapt fascination,
Fires,
Impossible to ignore,
Forever frozen,
On the face of age.

It is a dark light,
Indeed,
Funeral pyres,
Signifying nothing,
But impermanence.

This is a fire,
That does not warm.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



IT'S NOT WORTH THE EFFORT

November 8, 2023

One thing about having a web page is that I can write about what interests me, and I apologize if it is not all that interesting to many of you. With that said, here is a bit of an esoteric post, but actually we can apply it to any kind of practice we do.

In this case I am talking about Insight Meditation, an important part of Mahamudra training and how do we know when we have achieved it, and where do we go from there? What happens next?

And I am using here the analogy of focusing a camera lens to make a point.

Learning Insight Meditation (Vipassana) is something like resolving an image with a telephoto lens; as we turn the barrel of the lens, it gradually, but increasingly, comes into focus until it is in perfect focus, but what then? Well, it's in focus. Period, end of story.

We don't want to un-focus it, nor can we focus it any finer. It's in focus, where we want it to be. There is nothing more here, but often we continue to strive for even a finer focus and just mess it up. I'm talking about the striving.

Now, in my experience, this is similar to the clarity of the mind achieved through learning Insight Meditation, as used in Mahamudra training. It takes practice, effort, and in particular time to extend whatever original insight or recognition we may have

achieved when Insight Meditation is finally successfully invoked. And we have to work with it to have that, to even get there.

Ultimately, it can only get so good, so clear, and then we have insight, immersion into a clear view so to speak. When the mind's view resolves into clarity, we stop making effort to resolve and improve it, because it is resolved. However, from my experience I was not always sure of that and kept looking for what's next. This is a problem, IMO.

Of course, as a bit of a lens expert, I know there are finer and finer lenses, but focus is focus and that's it for this discussion.

Once the nature of the mind is resolved or in focus using Insight Meditation, we have the same thing. It's clear, so at that point we stop trying to focus it or should. LOL. Yet, since we have never been there before we may not know when to stop trying to get to where we already and now are. You can see that would be fruitless.

It takes time, some time, to get used to seeing clearly, to using Insight Meditation, just as with cataract surgery, which I have had twice. Clear is clear and you no longer try to see clearly. You see clearly.

It's the effort I am pointing out here that we no longer need, if we ever needed it. Unfortunately, effort is just the scaffolding we require to get here, and not part of the finished view or image.

This is true of Insight Meditation. Clear is clear, and after a while, there is nothing more clear than clear,

so stop trying to focus what is already in focus. And lose the effort. Stop trying.

Of course, I manage to miss the point when I write about half the time, and I feel I have here, so I will take another run at it. I really want to communicate this because at least to me this is key, so important to understand.

If we practice and work toward realizing a particular dharma technique, our relationship until we achieve fruition with that practice is pretty much our entire history of that practice. It's what we know longest and best, including all the effort involved. However...

And there is a 'However' here, and that is: what happens to our effort when we finally perfect and realize Insight Meditation, at least enough to our satisfaction, and I will try to be clear. Where do we go from there? What happens next?

And the simple answer is, we go nowhere. It's a 'no go' situation, as in we don't go on 'efforting'. We're done with effort. We just proceed to use Insight Meditation from there on out.

In other words, we are no longer making an effort to get Insight Meditation where we want it. We have done that. And, when we do, we stop with the effort and even walk back any strain or effort we have gotten in the habit of using. We are done with effort. It would have been best if we never needed it in the first place, but that is a little much to hope for.

Yet we are not done with Insight Meditation, because we will go on using it for the foreseeable future,

extending and expanding our recognition of the true nature of the mind through Insight Meditation. That's unavoidable.

And so, I'm pointing to our habit of effort that we have accumulated from trying to learn Insight Meditation and how it may not just stop and go away but keeps on pushing us, out of habit. How do we remove no longer needed habits?

I only say all this because in my own case, I found myself having resolved the clarity of Insight Meditation well enough, and then kind of continuing to spin my wheels as if there was something else that needed my effort and had to be done, but that churning of effort is just noise and itself an obscuration at this point.

Because done is done. No more effort. Let it be and relax all effort. We don't need our effort on this any longer, so be aware if it wants to churn onward. Awareness of this problem will lead us to a solution.

And keep in mind that Insight Meditation, because it is a non-dual practice, is a realization, so you can't just un-ring that bell.

The only thing that needs to be done here is to relax and walk back the effort (remove the stain of prolonged effort) and continue to use Insight Meditation as part of Mahamudra, which is a form of non-meditation. The key here is to be aware of any stains from the effort and of course cease the effort.

I'm afraid this blog is one of those that kick the topic on down the road and never get it said or defined. I keep trying.

What I am trying to say is that we reach a point where Insight Meditation is operational and working. All that effort, all that trying to achieve it is no longer needed. However, we already have the habit of trying which is by now deeply ingrained and part of our modus operandi. We just try and make effort anyway, yet by now such effort is an ingrained habit, itself an obscuration. We just do this automatically and have to cease doing it AND repair any stain or damage we made by making efforts, and there always are some. That's what I'm trying to say in a nutshell. Sorry it took so long.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



REPORT CARD

November 9, 2023

Without an active dharma teacher, it can be very difficult to determine just where we are in our practice, especially when there are no obvious outward signs of progress. The mind races up and down the gamut from high to low and back again, “How are we doing?”

No one can really tell us, accept perhaps our teacher, and that in my case was 800 miles away and he did not speak English, so I could not just phone him. So, it’s up to us and we are not quite up to it. How do we know?

The textbooks say that one way to know is if you find yourself becoming kinder and more loving to other people. That makes sense, of course, if you can see that in yourself.

This is easy to say once we are certain of progress; we just know. Of course, we do. Then it does not matter. So, my guess is the best view is that if we are not certain ourselves of progress, then there is nothing to report.

If we have a question, then the answer is no, as in ‘not obvious progress.’ And if we are certain of progress, the point is moot.

This situation may not be as we would have it, yet there it is, nevertheless.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



AWARENESS OF WHAT?

November 10, 2023

[Personal note: Well, today was a little different. I spent about 1-1/2 hours in oral surgery having two things done. First, one of my two front upper teeth broke off and the remainder had to be extracted. I'm a pretty sight, LOL. And after the extraction, a titanium post was implanted into my jaw bone, along with a bone-graft. Implant.

And second, another titanium post was implanted in another empty space where a tooth was extracted from my upper jaw.

These will take months to heal and be ready to receive teeth, after which I can smile again. I'm glad I don't have to see myself. LOL

Needless to say, I am all kinds of sore right now. Now on with the blog.]

A question I have is this: Since Buddhism and its dharma is totally about 'awareness', and even the word Buddha is derived from being aware, it is obvious according to the dharma that we are not yet aware enough. I get that.

My question is, aside from awareness, our becoming aware, are we otherwise already enlightened and just don't know it? That's perhaps a bit of an oxymoron for sure, but this points at something to consider. If our inner core and mind is pure and our outer Self and personality is impermanent, that indeed it is an awareness we lack.

If the only thing difference between a Buddha and the rest of us is awareness, and aside from that we are, so to speak, good to go.

Is this true or not true?

It seems to be true. And if that is true then there is nothing for us to do otherwise than to develop awareness. And of course, any Buddhist would give us a thumbs up on that. There is nothing wrong with us other than that lack, that we are not yet aware enough.

If that is true, as mentioned, all that remains is for us to develop some awareness. And that brings me to this: what are the different ways to become aware and how do we find the easiest one for us?

As I have spent some fifty years exploring (and completing) various dharma practices, I have at least some ideas of what they are, how they work, and for me at least, which ones work best.

Some dharma practices look, at least at first glance, like Medieval torture methods. Certainly, it is interesting to look at dharma practice as various ways to make us aware, which is exactly what they are. The problem as always remains with us and our appetite for practice, and what practices best suit us.

Given that all these methods must work for someone, I would hope so, but which of these many methods actually work for us or work on us? That my friend is where our skin in the game comes in.

Certainly, there is a smorgasbord of dharma techniques out there for us to review. I have done that, and I also have done a lot of dharma techniques from beginning to end, so what do I have to say from that experience?

I can say that some of these dharma techniques are arduous, difficult indeed, like doing 100,00 full-length prostrations on the ground, as pictured here. Are they meant to toughen us up or did I just fall into some techniques that were perhaps not right for me?

Well, probably some of both. If I had it to do all over again, what would I do? Well, I would certainly do what I did do, which was find (or perhaps luck onto) a very good and authentic dharma teacher and guide. We can't easily do it all by ourselves. I don't believe we can even do it without a guide, at least as to the advanced practices.

I know, I know. You think you can, and so did I, until I found out I had little to no idea what to do when it came to the more advanced practices. I mean, I didn't even know what the results were supposed to be or look like, other than somewhere, far down the line, I should become enlightened. Everyone knows that.

Sorry folks, that by itself is not enough. We can figure some things out, probably the low-hanging fruit, but beyond that what do we even know to do? You probably don't and neither did I. Although I could teach myself almost anything, I cannot teach myself if I don't even know what it is, if you can make sense of that statement.

Teaching yourself the more advanced dharma is like carrying water in your hands, while working with an authentic teacher (authentic for you) is like drinking from the spigot. Not even close.

And even if we get all that together, each person, every last one, has a particular dharma path they will naturally respond to. It is etched in stone, so to speak. Yet, we do have to find it. And finding it can be painful, especially if we get stuck doing dharma techniques that are 'not for us' and we don't have the presence of mind to admit it. We can do a lot of 'dumb' stuff for a long while. This I know.

And so, I'm probably not really much help here, since I can't point you to what you personally are going to need. The best I can do is point out that we each need to find a natural way to become aware, one that we feel comfortable with. And I suggest you not do dharma practices that you dislike as all that does is stain the idea of dharma practice in our mind. And that stain is hard to get out.

First, get your mind right and then practice. If you can't do that, there is no point in practicing what you dislike. Instead, find a practice that you don't mind doing.

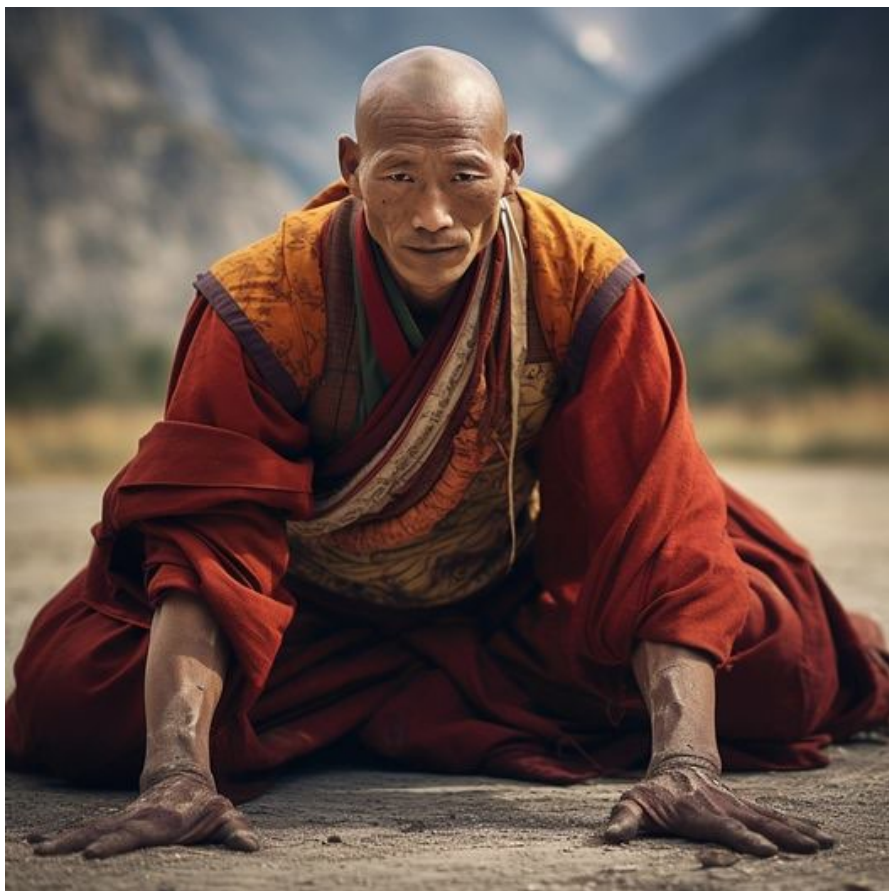
And of course, we can never go wrong contemplating:

"The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind Toward the Dharma"

"The Four Noble Truths"

These never hurt anyone, IMO.

And, as mentioned, take the time to find what is for you an authentic dharma teacher. You will have to make an effort for that, but just do it, make the effort.



THE SECRET OF KARMA

November 11, 2023

[Powerful information and advice about removing karma by a great Tibetan Rinpoche.]

Shakespeare's Macbeth "Out damn spot."

I feel that something I need to pay more attention to is when I get deflated. I guess that means I've blown myself up somehow, if I can so easily be deflated, yet it happens too often to not do something about it.

For starters, things don't always go as planned or I get disappointed. No one else has to do anything. I can get deflated all by myself. And try as I might to avoid it, I go into a tailspin, a corkscrew spiral that brings me down. Where was I that I have to fall? Was I flying too high?

Now the question is, how long does it take me to recover and how do I go about it. That I need to study why and when this happens is clear and that I have plenty of time to do that. And you can't really ever figure these things out.

No one can push my buttons as well as I can push my own. Sound familiar? It should because I am not the Lone Ranger in all this. I've got company.

And of course, I set right about putting Humpty-Dumpty back together again when I come crashing down. It's a process of getting back up on my feet, so to speak. Of course, it's embarrassing, and I should

by now know better, and I do somewhat. At least I am aware of it. I can talk about it.

I no longer cry and moan about poor me. Instead, I just get back up and start looking for excuses to feel better, for some kind of certainty, for some fresh air to pump myself back up enough to at least feel respectable.

By now it's an old story in search of a good ending. I'm not sure when I first became this way, but it was a long time ago, when I was just a kid. It's not just hurt feelings, although that too. It is more like being knocked out of my groove, thrown off track, and finding myself on a southbound train heading for a fall. And the key thought as to awareness is that the damage is already done. It's just a question of how much.

I can feel disappointment as it comes over me. Uh-oh, I'm in trouble now. What can I do to prevent or slow down the crash? Yet, as I learned from Rinpoche, by that time, as mentioned, the damage is done. Karma is created. It's already too late to prevent it. That karma is both created and stored.

Only the solution is not to scrub, scrub, scrub on the washboard of the mind and get that black spot of karma out. That option is gone. The only real option is to prevent it from happening in the first place. And that's the point here and a very important one.

One of the great lessons in dharma that Rinpoche taught me is that the very best way to remove karma is not to create it in the first place.

That concept which may sound trite is worth REAL consideration, IMO. If you understand it, really take it in, it changes everything. And it's the only sane conclusion.

And this is because karma is very, very, very hard to remove once it has taken place. No amount of scrubbing will wash those clothes clean. It has to ripen and take its toll on us as it is paid forward.

If we just don't create it in the first place, we are much, much better off.

[Photo tweaked by me of an old-fashioned washboard.]



THE SEA OF THE MIND

November 11, 2023

“Come with me, oh my love,
To the sea, the sea of love.”

The intellect can be so strong, and the sea of the senses stretches out before us like a forbidden fruit that we dare not enter, much less immerse ourselves in.

However, taking the plunge from intellection into the sea of the senses is not as simple as just jumping in the water. By all means try it and see if you can get wet. It’s possible, but not likely. We are too far removed at this point and have to take inundation and full immersion one step at a time. We are all dried up and too intellectual, so to speak.

And it’s probably all because we retreated into the conceptual mind in an attempt to avoid the hazards of the flesh, which would mean immersing ourselves in the sea of life and acclimatizing ourselves to the sea of the senses, getting used to it.

It’s an easy mistake to make, but difficult to reverse. We somehow have to unpack all that intellection and then train in non-dual immersion and that’s what the non-dual dharma practices are all about. The dharma has a very particular way to introduce us to what are called the non-dual dharma practices, such as Insight Meditation, Mahamudra, and Dzogchen. These non-dual practices are all about immersion beyond thought.

For me, in my case, this took place from a perfect storm of conditions that came together without my realizing it. I certainly did not see it coming. It was the

farthest thing from my mind at the time. I had jettisoned just about everything that I could and withdrawn deep into my past, back to when I was kid or at least a young adult. Familiarization for me was somewhere in my past.

What is familiar? That's an important question to answer, IMO. When you snap back in a difficult time, where do you snap back to in your past? Where is home? What is most familiar? At least for me, that was key.

As it turned out, it was not the many decades of dharma practice that was 'that' kind of familiar for me, although no doubt dharma practice laid the groundwork and set the stage for this. As it turned out, all that dharma practice was still somewhat unfamiliar and in the process of becoming more familiar.

However, when I reached for what I knew best, it was not my dharma practice of over 30-40 years that was home, that was familiar enough. Not even close, and that was a real surprise. I had been doing all dharma all of the time, yet I failed to realize that I was still in the process of familiarization with dharma in my imagination.

It was my study of nature and my being a naturalist that was most familiar, that was home, something earned from early on as a child. Let me tell you, please, I did not know where home was, or with what I was most familiar. I had forgotten.

Yet, I found it like the snap of a rubber band, because in an instant I was back there, where I was most

comfortable, surrounded by nature in my time of trial. Who says we can't go home again. I did just that, although as mentioned, it took a perfect storm of coincidences for that to happen.

What I'm explaining here was enough to make me think and think hard; what is the key to the dharma for each of us?

And I can't get it out of my mind, that Rinpoche used to keep saying, over and over to me, that the key to recognizing the actual true nature of the mind was familiarity, becoming familiar with the nature of the mind, including our own mind. Whoa. Rinpoche was right on the money, but I did not know what he meant. Then I found out.

And I found out in the vortex or middle of that perfect storm I keep mentioning, one I could never have assembled myself, but one fate served up for me all on its own.

That 'particular' familiarity means where I was most at home and comfortable in my past. I had forgotten until I found myself back there, in Mother Nature's arms. And that's where it all added up and came to some fruition, right when I was busy being miserable. What a time for a dharma breakthrough. LOL.

And so, that's my message to you reading this, the only message that comes to mind.

Become familiar with the nature of your mind or, as I did, go back and find where you were most familiar with your own mind. You might be surprised. I was, yet it was so true.

I mean, we have it within us already. We just are not aware of it. And so, we must become familiar with the nature of our own mind, which nature has always been with us, and we know it like the back of our hand but are not aware of it. We are it.

The dharma teachings say that recognizing the true nature of your mind is like recognizing an old friend in a crowd.

If there is interest, I would be happy to explain as best I can how to go about doing this, or at least what worked for me.



A FAMILIAR FACE IN A CROWD

November 12, 2023

Yesterday I mentioned that I could explain more about how we might recognize the actual nature of the mind and this is that.

I have found that although I have read about all of this in the dharma teachings, especially in what are called the pith teachings, that what happened to me apparently (it appears) is particular to me. That perhaps is true for all of us.

Yet, telling you about my actual experience is the only story I have. And I have told it here before. As they say, it goes without saying or you can say it again. I choose to say it again, and hope that something rubs off on readers that is useful for your own story. In this case it is about the 'familiar', which may not be all that familiar.

This story describes what is called in dharma terms our yidam. A yidam is the particular path to recognizing the true nature of the mind that is destined for each of us to find. Some say that a yidam is secret, yet I feel that is a misconception. It is not 'secret', it is unique to us and thus probably not particularly helpful to others if we talk about it, but we are free to talk about it as much as we want, which is what I do because it's my actual experience. And

while it is unique to me because it happened to me just as it did, there may be some generic attributes to my personal story that may make sense and do get through to others.

And it's important to start out by making clear that my experience was above all a 'perfect storm', as they say. It was created from a variety of factors at the time that came together and were beyond my control. I was totally unable to control what happened, call me a victim if you will, yet I don't see it as that.

I am just grateful for this most difficult experience that changed my life and imprinted me at the deepest level. I am going to just tell it as it happened. That's what I have to share. How it fits into classical accounts, I can't worry about. So, here goes.

I was busy sailing along in my life. At the time I was a senior consultant for NBC, working on their website 'Astrology.com', probably the largest astrology site in the world as an advisor, helping to shape content. I am a well-known astrologer.

I never thought I could work for someone else after working for myself for some 36 years, running my own business, but actually I did very well with the situation. I was useful to NBC, happy enough, and making good money. My boss even said once that I did the work of

5-6 people, probably just because I knew astrology so well and for so long.

And it all came to a head when NBC downsized and laid off hundreds of people, and it turned out that I was one of those people. And I did not find out about it at home where I could absorb the shock, but while I was away speaking and lecturing about astrology at a major astrology conference. My boss at NBC was also at the conference which was held in Denver, Colorado. In fact, I had just flown in and was busy setting up my week-long schedule and all that.

And this was when he told me that after this conference, right then, that I along with many others were being laid off with no further notice. Of course, this was not good news for me. In particular, since I consider that I am a good provider for my family and to suddenly at 67 years of age be out of work was crushing to me. What was I to do? That kind of ruined the conference for me. LOL.

At my age, who would hire me and yet I needed to work and make an income. In truth, I had a sterling reputation, so perhaps finding work would not be so hard, but right then my Humpy-Dumpy life was shattered in that moment. I couldn't hide my situation from myself, and I spiraled way down, farther down than I have any memory of, down to the level of the ground.

And at the same time, after trying to process this news, while at the conference, I got an urgent phone call from my wife Margaret that His Holiness, the young 17th Karmapa (like the Dalai Lama, but from a yet older lineage to which I belonged) was suddenly, and for the first time, coming to America to his (and our) monastery in the mountains above Woodstock, NY, and they could use me there as part of the video crew. I was a very active member of our sangha.

I had finished my scheduled astrology lectures and was as mentioned all out of joint, so I just grabbed my stuff and flew out of Denver on a direct flight to Albany, NY, where my wife, who was already at Woodstock for the event, drove up to Albany and picked me up.

And so suddenly I was with His Holiness the 17th Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje, that I had met in 1997 when I took most of my kids to Tibet to meet him when he was 12-years old. Suddenly I was with the Karmapa again, who was now grown up. His presence and being with the Karmapa were more than comforting to me. This too was part of a perfect storm I am getting around to here.

When the Karmapa's visit was over and my wife and I had driven the 800 or so miles back to our home, I still was faced with the fact that I had no job to deal with.

All of this was coming together like a thunderhead, although I didn't see it because I was totally wrapped in my own upset. Things had happened to me that only could be called 'untoward'.

I was no longer comforted by much of anything. I plummeted. And the most shocking thing is that I stopped my daily dharma practice which I had done faithfully for decades without fail. I not only stopped cold and did not practice, I went out into the woods and streams with my camera almost all the time, especially at dawn, when the sun came up. There is where you could find me, crawling around on my belly, soaked to the skin in the wet grass, taking macro photography, photos of small critters and micro worlds through highly corrected lenses. I include some here.

And all this time I was kind of in mourning for a life lived up to the moment when I was laid off, essentially fired. I not only did this pre-dawn photography that one time, but I also did it for six months straight, from late May until the frosts of the coming winter drove me (and my camera) inside. And I watched the sun come up for all those months unless it was raining. I could not even remember the last time I watched the sun rise, and now I was doing it every day. This was more than just unusual. What did it mean?

I don't know what my family was thinking. Suddenly this husband and father was not practicing dharma, was not in the shrine room, and kept deeply to himself like all the time. And the neighbors could not help seeing me along the road, in the bushes, etc., photographing stuff. Why was he not working? I didn't know any more than they did about what I was doing. I was just doing it, and I didn't care what it looked like to myself or to others. I could care less how I seemed.

That's another important thread here, that I didn't care, not one whit. I was totally beyond caring. I was totally inundated, lost in my life event.

Something had happened beyond my control that made me this way and I was plunged deep into my mind, literally thrown out of orbit, off track, into I knew not where. And I was breaking all the rules, my own rules. I just did not care, for me a first.

And to understand this next part, you need to understand my relationship with Mother Nature, which I have explained here in previous blogs, but will state it again for understanding sake.

I was born and raised in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, raised out on a country road between two very large farms where my parents built their own house. There were no other houses around and no kids my own

age for me to play with, only my younger brothers, and it is hard to look up to your younger brothers. I was the eldest of five boys. No sisters.

And so, with no friends my age, being bused to school, I ended up from a very young age studying, totally interested in, and fixated on nature and natural history, dearest Mother Nature. It is all I did until my late teens, and I was quite precocious at it as well. I knew natural history like the back of my own hand, every critter and bug. I had learned natural law rather than civil law, paid little to know attention to school, and was because of this, a little feral.

Flash forward now to my perfect storm, as I try to sort it out in retrospect. During the upheaval within myself at losing my job at such a late age, and being left naked of any job protection, I reflexed back into my life, searching for comfort and a safe space. And to my total surprise, I flashed right past all my decades of dharma practice without a thought. Unbelievable!

I was instantly all the way back to my childhood, to the comfort and familiarity of Mother Nature, with no hesitation, not even a thought. I would have put money on my falling into my dharma practice of so many years, yet what I found out, and this is my best guess, is that while I was totally into the dharma, I was still in the process of becoming familiar with it,

although I would never have guessed or admitted that. There was something more powerful in my past.

Instead, I leapfrogged all that dharma and found myself back with what was the most familiar of all to me, the comfort of nature in my upbringing. And now, I will do my best to explain what I believe to be true, and this is the part for readers to take in with some careful thought and consideration, because this may be true for you too.

In my dharma training, my Tibetan teacher of (at that point) some 25 years had pointed out to me a number of times that what is important in preparing a student for recognizing the actual or true nature of the mind is becoming familiar with the mind itself, whatever that meant. Those were just words at the time.

And about three years prior to my perfect storm, this same dharma teacher had pointed out, in a 10-day intensive on Mahamudra (one of 31 such 10-day intensives on the same subject I attended over the years), what is called the nature of the mind. And although I had the pointing out instructions as to the mind's nature before and never managed to "get" it or recognize the mind's nature, that time I came away from that teaching with an altered understanding as to what I had been doing wrong up to then.

And for the next three years, until my perfect storm, I had doubled down on my dharma practice, doing it more or less all day long. And so, my point is that I came into this perfect storm having done a very intense and protracted practice. And then came the storm, and I am tying it all together here now.

And so, when I went out into nature after both the astrology conference and the visit with the Karmapa, several different streams or threads of direction began to weave themselves together into the event that I was at the center of.

In my years of being an entrepreneur, I had left my nature study in my past and had not been doing much 'nature' stuff while I built several businesses. And perhaps I had ignored Mother Nature because the sense of impermanence nature confronts us with was just more than I wanted to keep in mind, our impermanence, although it is one of the "Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind to the Dharma." And to a degree, we could say I had in my deep upset stopped ignoring impermanence. I was looking right at it again. I remember, one morning when I was out watching the sun rise I saw a lovely Luna Moth trying to land on a branch when a bird swooped down and snatched it away. That's impermanence.

In other words, suddenly I was right there in nature again where I grew up, and familiar with what I had

been most familiar with, nature. I ate it up like oxygen and acknowledged my own impermanence and the impermanence of every other natural critter on Earth, like I used to do as a kid. In a way I was struck dumb. Thoughtless, pushed beyond thinking.

And somehow, that ‘familiarity’ punched a button and broke a brittle vase in the mind letting all the contents flow together again or for the first time, and there I was immersed in Insight Meditation, the particular kind of Vipassana that is part of Mahamudra training. This just all happened.

Anyway, I let go and was inundated, as mentioned, immersed in the nature of the mind, but for the first time with intense and vivid awareness. As I gazed through these highly corrected macro lenses at little critters and tiny worlds I stopped seeing just the critter at the end of my lens, and instead started seeing the seeing the ‘Seeing’ itself seeing, if one could find words. As the old poetry line goes, right then “The dewdrop slipped into the shining sea”. The brittleness of duality cracked and broke, and there I was ‘thoughtless’ and fully immersed. There was just all one, not two.

Why else would I go out every morning when it was not raining and watch the sun come up, when I had not even done it once in many years? Yet, it did not come back with me when I went back home each day,

the Insight Meditation, but only happened when I was out in nature like that. So, I went out there, like all the time.

I did not have a word for it yet. All I knew was that I had never experienced anything like that before and that I could only do that while out in nature, so out in nature I was.

That's as far as I feel I have to go with the story to give you the gist of what happened. I have elsewhere detailed how I worked with Insight Meditation and brought it home, so to speak, where it is today and right now. Yet, that can be another story.

I want you to please understand that in order for all this to happen, I had to be shoved out of my comfort zone and into a very difficult time. Had I not lost my job, this never would have happened, at least then. It took me down from my high horse, so to speak.

The takeaway here is, that as Rinpoche kept saying to me, again and again, we must become familiar with the nature of our own mind. Yet the word 'familiar' is not just some technical term or description, but he meant we must find what is already (and always has been) familiar in our own mind.

Not some book-learning term somewhere on the outside to 'get' or understand, but the very heart of our comfort and familiarity within ourselves, what we are already most familiar with from experience. At any rate, that's what happened to me. That's my story, if it can be of any use to others.

And later, that next spring after that summer a close friend of mind, a Tibetan lama who had done two 3-year closed retreats came to visit, and as we walked an early morning road I explained to him as best I could what happened to me, and he knew. He named it, which I had been unable to do. What he said was this:

Just as there is the 'Lama of the Lineage', like my Tibetan teacher, there is also 'The Lama of the Scriptures', all the extant written teachings. And there is also the 'Lama of the Dharmadhatu', a deep inner teacher, yet in addition, there is in my case, a fourth lama called 'The Lama of Appearances', which also is totally capable of instructing us in the dharma, and it is this lama, which appeared through Mother Nature, that I had been learning from all my life. And it was with this that I was most familiar. Period.

I write this down not to just tell of my own experiences but that it may communicate just how important it is to look within our own mind for what is most familiar, and they call it 'familiar' because it is just that, what is

most familiar to us already. Not something strange, different, or unknown, but as the pith teachings state ‘... it’s like seeing a familiar face in a crowd.’ That kind of familiar is what is needed. We already know it, yet just are not aware of it. It’s there in each of us. I suggest that finding it is required to recognize the actual nature of the mind.

[Photo by me.]



“TRYING TO MAKE IT REAL, COMPARED TO WHAT?”

November 13, 2023

I would like to talk at least once over lightly about what is called Samsara, this cyclic world of ups and downs in which we bob and weave. And Samsara, as Shakespeare understood, is a play within a play.

Unfortunately, Samsara to me appears all business as usual, packing our every moment with activity that drowns out the light of dharma with its space and emptiness. As I keep mentioning, I don't believe folks realize the following fact.

All the dharma studying I have done makes it clear that those of us not enlightened, and that would be about all of us, have never, not ever, known anything but Samsara as our home. And why does this need to sink in?

It's because we have always been part of Samsara, and we have nothing whatsoever to compare our life in Samsara to. Nada. And to emphasize this, I am reminded of the title of this blog, the quintessential jazz tune by performers Les McCann & Eddie Harris in the tune 'Compared to What'.

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

That's the idea I'm trying to communicate here, in particular the lyrics of Gene McDaniels, who wrote this song, "Trying to make it real, compared to what?"

That's the bit of philosophy I am pointing out here, our trying to reify everything compared to what? They say we have 'Buddha Nature' as our root, but at best we have only 'understood' this intellectually, but never realized it. Otherwise, we would be realized.

And this is only the tip of the iceberg, IMO, when it comes to understanding Samsara and the fact that Samsara is purely a construction created by whatever is not true about life, and yet we call it home. I can appreciate that this discussion is quite abstract and thus difficult to make any sense of. However, there is no reason we can't begin to sort it. It's very elusive, and has taken me years to get a handle on it.

And if I am correct in what I surmise, we have nothing but runaway corruption on hand when it comes to any general consensus concerning Samsara. In other words, we are so far up that creek that we can't see any daylight.

As pointed out, Samsara is (and has been) our home as well as our own construction. We are born into it but are also co-creators of it, if you can make any sense from that.

So, the real question I have is this. If all that we have ever known is Samsara and we have zero experience with Nirvana (enlightenment), then what are we basing our knowledge and expectations on when it comes to the dharma and its practice? Where is the actual experience? Apparently, there is none.

We seem to act as if we have been to Nirvana and came back and now know the way. Yet, I find no mention in all the years of my practice and study

about having known Nirvana and every mention of being stuck here in Samsara, and I will add, of our own choice. That's the problem if we have one. Intentionality.

And if Samsara is the sum-total of everything mistaken, all of our fixations and attachments, everything not true, and that's our home and shelter, where we live and breathe, where is our pole star, the guiding light that we call the dharma? How does that work?

Everyone seems so laid back about life, like we are going to live forever, yet in undercurrent we all know the of second of the four thoughts that turn the mind, 'impermanence'. It's always right there looking back at us.

We must have something confused or we would already be enlightened, so what is it? My guess it is our ignorance, our habitual but intentional ignorance as to the true nature of the mind. In other words, we have it just backward and most shocking of all, have no intention of turning it around. We are addicted to Samsara.

We are so comfortable in Samsara, have made it our home, that in spite of its shortcomings, and have up to now only known the darkness of ignoring the light of the dharma, which for us is far too bright for us to dare turn toward it. Samsara itself can be defined as turning away from the light.

In other words, there IS a play within a play. The play that is within a play is Samsara, and the play itself is

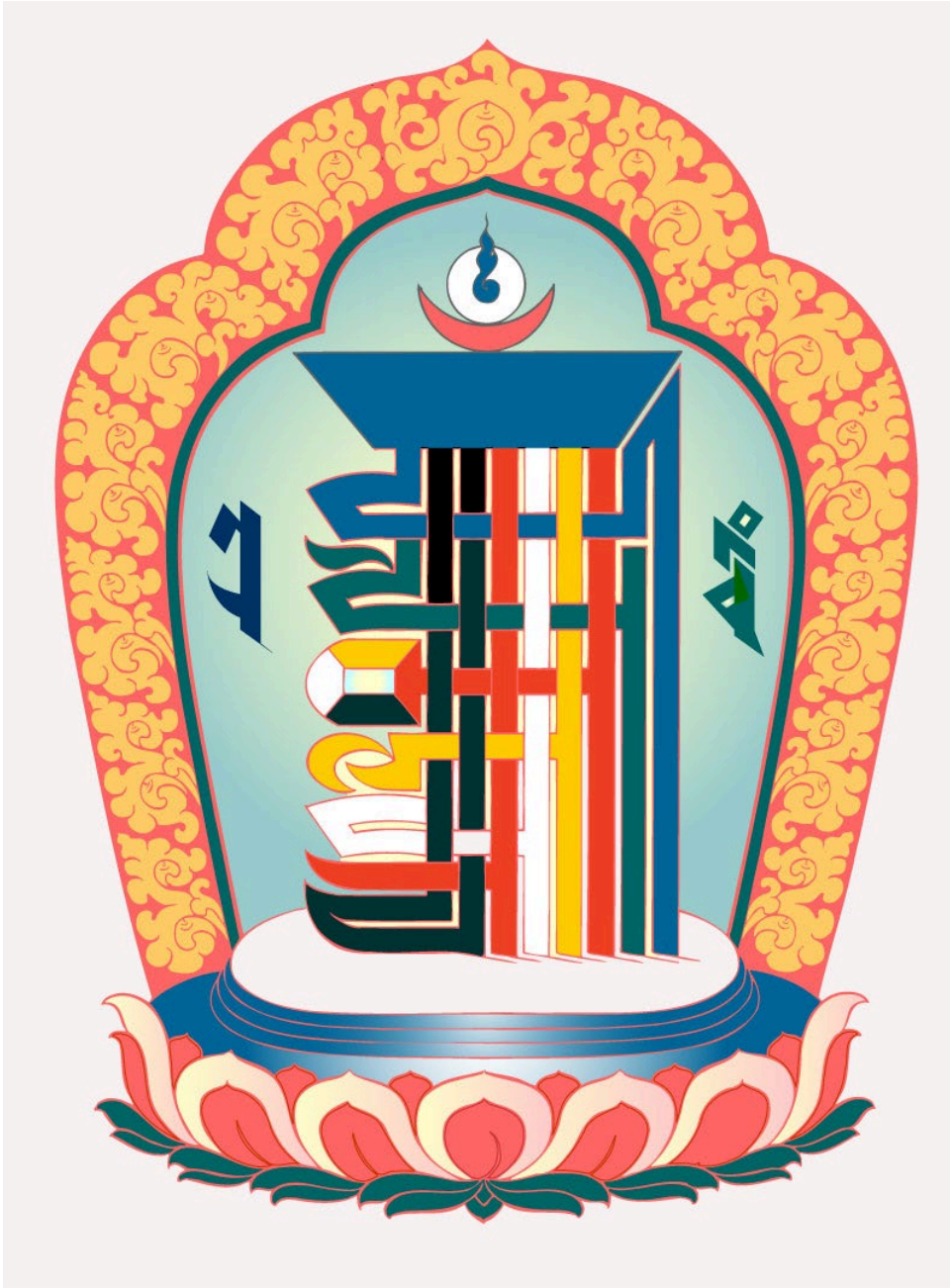
the construction of Samsara, the fact that in itself it is a construction.

And on that construction, our life exists to the degree it does. What bothers me, as mentioned, is that no one seems to worry or be interested in the fact that we are habituated to ignoring the bright light of the bardos, which bright light as far as I know is the dharma itself. And it shines as brightly right now as it does in the bardo, but we are not sensitized to it at this point.

And it's not what we study and practice that we call 'dharma', but rather the actual true nature of the mind itself. The actual nature of the mind is of a brilliance we apparently cannot at this point stand, endure, or even look toward, but rather one that we habitually ignore, and this habit of ignorance is as old as history itself.

Does anyone reading this have an interest in talking about this?

[The image shown here is that of the 'Kalachakra', the "Wheel of Time," the empowerment of astrology, which takes from a few days to a week to offer. Margaret and I took this empowerment in Toronto in 1990, from August 9th to the 13th from His Eminence Jamgon Kongtrul Rinpoche. I have colored this image myself according to the tradition.]



“ALL THE WORLD’S A STAGE”

November 13, 2023

Shakespeare: “All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players. They have their exits and their entrances...”

This is a follow-up on yesterday’s post on Samsara, what it is, and its possible deconstruction. That would be the deconstruction of Samsara, apparently our home, rebirth after rebirth since time immemorial. That’s if we are to believe the dharma teachings.

I would like to point out that even our excursions from Samsara, like much of the dharma we know, practice, and work with, are brought to us courtesy of Samsara, which lets us out a bit, just to reign us in. Samsara is our filter for everything, including dharma. That comment takes some thought.

Samsara, as I understand it from the dharma teachings, is nothing more than a construct comprised of our reifications, attachments, the sum total of our mis-takes on reality, everything other than the actual true nature of the mind. It’s everything ‘but’, and that makes it a construct that can and could be eventually deconstructed and removed. Yet, we are so indissolubly attached to Samsara that we have no idea of any of this.

If we could take away all of the Samsara that obscures, what would that leave us? If I understand it right, that will leave us with nothing but the actual true nature of the mind minus our obscurations, and the

true nature has always been in there anyway. There is, however, at least one problem.

And that problem is that because of the 'shadowy' nature of taking Samsara as our refuge, the true light of the mind itself, by comparison, is too bright, actually blinding and way more than we can stand to experience. In fact, we habitually turn the other way and ignore it. Apparently, we have done this for millennia. And that's a confirmed habit.

And on top of that, our continual incrementing of Samsara compounds itself recursively, thickening rather than thinning the crust of Samsara. We have not only painted ourselves in a corner, but we are also now painting the walls and redecorating Samsara as well. We show no intention to leave, lip-service aside.

Perhaps it would help if we examined what Samsara consists of. Above all, it consists of our ignoring the actual truth, as in turning away from the truth. And we do this with our endless busyness, incessant interests, and that is crack-less, there being no cracks of light coming through. Samsara is a closed system, a black box.

Yet, we are perhaps somehow nourished by the light deep inside us, the light of the true nature of the mind that we can't bear to look at and endure. In other words, the truth remains, despite Samsara. We are just not aware of it and never have been.

And Samsara consists of our programming and reprogramming ourselves with constant entertainment, filling every moment with whatever interests us until our interests and attachments

themselves become the glue that holds Samsara together.

That's why the Tibetan word for Samsara is 'Khor Ba', cycling, referring to the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth going on forever, and that we each are bound to Khor-Ba due to our desires, ignorance, and karma. And we are said to want to break free from this cycle of Samsara, the question is: do we really want to enough to do so?

And by now, Samsara as we know it has gotten so out of hand that the very light of the truth is abhorrent to us. We speak intellectually of the light of truth and how we love it, but in fact we are like talking shadows, silhouettes against a backdrop of attachments. That kind of thing. We lack even the intention of leaving Samsara, despite all our verbal protests.

Take away all our busyness, entertainments, interests, and what remains is the specter of boredom, lack of interest, whatever makes us nervous or dulls the mind, pure ennui, yet these are and will eventually be the key to our liberation from Samsara.

Boredom is one of the clearest signs that we are in trouble, perhaps the last signal that Samsara has not yet managed to obscure. Look boredom in the eye. Get used to it. It is a portal, not blockage.

The truth as I understand it is that Samsara is basically our ancestral home, the place we have always and forever lived. As Rinpoche pointed out to our sangha, in all the time there is and has been, we are the stragglers, the ones who have yet to realize our true nature. It is still in our future.

And so, we don't stray far from our home here in Samsara, as shadowy a place as that apparently is. We keep ourselves in the dark. Unfortunately, by definition, Samsara is a refuge not from darkness but from light. Samsara is the darkness and shining a light on it destroys it, which is what dharma is all about. Dharma is the single match that can light up eons of darkness.

Because of that, we creatures of Samsara are not afraid of the dark but rather of the light. We are used to being entertained and busy 24x7, and anything otherwise than to be aware, and any crack of light seeping in has to be covered up.

Note: I have been using darkness and light here as an analogy, something we can understand. In truth, in real life, the darkness is the closed busyness, entertainments, and attachments, while light is the absence of those, absence of the darkness, etc. That reveals the light of the dharma.

Take away our busyness, for example, and that exposes us to the light, which here means uncovering and revealing us with no cover to hide in. It's like a baby's pacifier, take it away, the baby cries. For us to be without our cover, Samara, and we react almost violently to the increase in light.

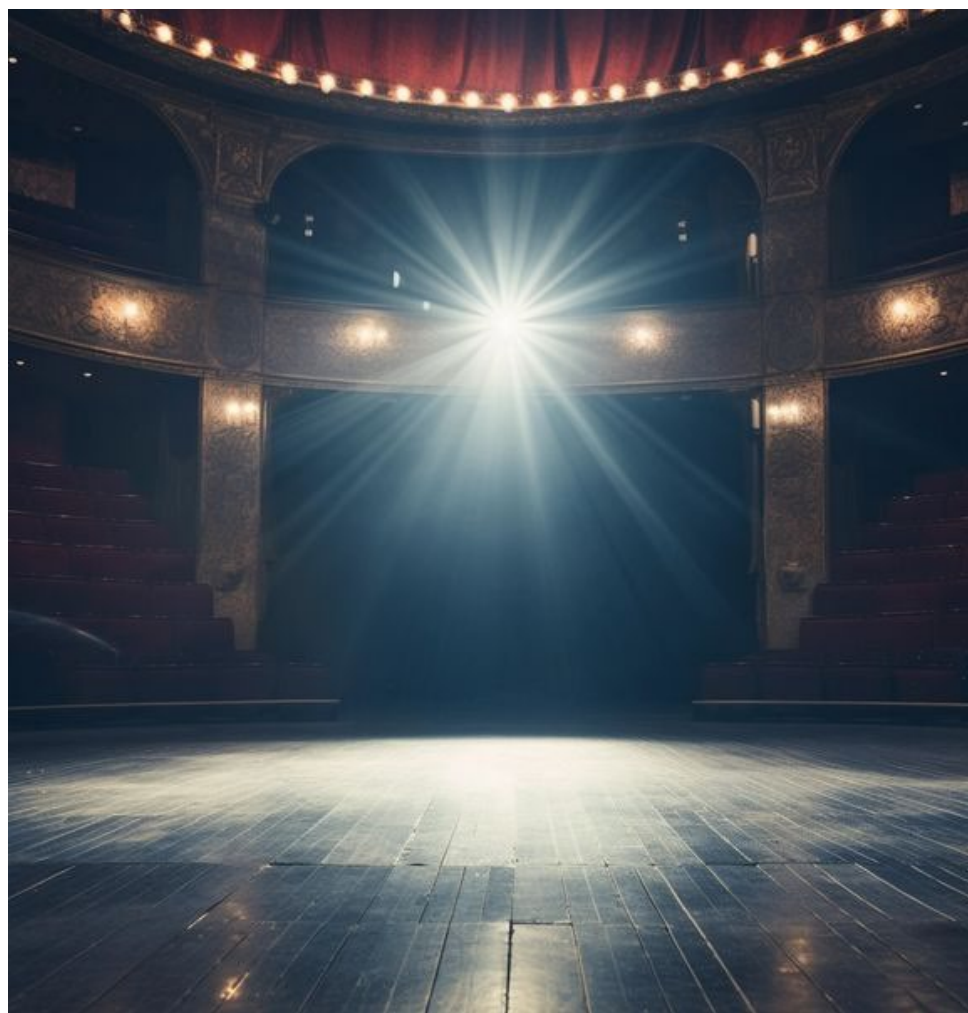
With that in mind, that we are blinded by the light and retreat from it, we might want to begin acclimatizing ourselves to light in small doses to begin with. To do that, seek out boredom, ennui, whatever we can't stand to endure and be subject to. That's a beginning.

Unfortunately, as luck would be, we have it just backward. In Samsara, light is dark and dark is light. We run from the light and hide in the dark. We do this by keeping busy and entertained as much as we can.

We are used to it and can't stand boredom, emptiness, or space. As mentioned, we like to keep it packed full of entertainment and busyness. And when that fails and boredom starts to intrude, we run for the shadows of entertainment and ever more busyness and are led around by our interests. We like things light-tight.

How do you tell someone that the stage called life is actually empty other than for a light high above us that is too bright for us to look directly at. And that eventually the clock of our little busyness will run down to nothing left. And yet, all around us everything is going on. Samsara is full but empty, full of an emptiness that we fear, and unfortunately at the tip of that emptiness is the light of dharma.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



'I YAM WHAT I YAM; I'M POPEYE THE SAILOR MAN'

November 14, 2023

[Facebook just invited me to open up my FB page because I have more than 10,000 followers.]

You youngsters probably don't remember Popeye the Sailor Man' who first appeared in a comic strip in 1929, long before I was born, but was in full stride when I was a boy. He usually appeared with a can of spinach in his hand, and he would say “.

“ I yam what I yam, and that's all that I am. I'm Popeye the sailor man. I'm strong to the finich cause I eats me spinich.”

That's how we learned about spinach, not that we ate it, but I digress.

Recently I've realized that I have graduated a bit somehow or at least reached what for me is like a plateau where I can look around. And I am doing that.

It's like resolving a camera lens, focusing until the image in the lens is in focus, and when it is, it's focused. I'm focused. I am not saying that I could not get clearer. Of course, I could.

Yet, as mentioned, focus or being 'resolved' is just that, pretty much in focus. And now that I'm focused, what should I do? For one, part of me has to catch up

with the rest of me, the part that apologizes for being what I am, whatever that is. What am I? LOL.

I came through to old age more or less intact, a bit beat up I would agree, but nevertheless, here I am, as they say, warts and all. And it's been a long haul, and 'haul' is a good word.

I can kind of stop helping myself get it together and concentrate on seeing if I can be more useful to others.

I admit that I am probably only good for what we call the 'low hanging fruit' when it comes to sharing the dharma, and not in the running for the high echelon levels of dharma, but I seem to have learned the basics, and it is the most difficult thing I have ever done, and I have done a bunch of things.

The dharma is the only alternative I see to expand and extend outward, with and toward the true nature of the mind. It is elegant, efficient, and seems to fit my slipstream, so to speak.

At my age, I am about as complete as I am going to get, and while I may have limited utility, I do have some. I'm good at something after all. My gyroscope is set and while I may waver, I no longer easily go off track. I know, I don't glow in the dark or point north yet either, but I'm oriented.

And so, being in the midst of stopping my push for more resolution, as mentioned above, I'm resolved well enough. That push, and all the effort that was behind it, has now become more of an obscuration. The sheer effort of the push itself drowns out the finer

vibes and has to be discontinued now that it's not needed. I am taking that scaffolding (effort) down a bit at a time, leaving me, well, more free floating.

I have to stop apologizing for who and what I am. Enough already. As Popeye the sailor man said, "I yam what I yam." And so, I am.

We are free to be who we are. We are free to be free.



FULL IMMERSION

November 15, 2023

No matter how we twist and turn, change, or shift, that's just our outer form. Nothing deep inside changes that I am aware of. We, any one of us, still have to come to terms with what's inside, with the mind and its nature. The true nature of the mind is right there, waiting to be recognized, discovered, and our access to it trained.

We can change our face, our outer situation, but our mind, not so easily. What we can do is begin to get to know and become familiar with our mind. And to do that we have to, so to speak, come down from our high mental horse, and stop minding everything. I wrote this fun poem.

THE REST OF THE MIND

You cannot rest the mind,

but you can let the mind rest.

Just let go,

And don't mind the rest.

In other words, we can't 'think' life. We can only live life and we can't do that from way up there in the mental clouds, taking cover under concepts and the intellect. Why? Because it's not satisfying, and intellect by itself has no feelings or sense. It is senseless.

If we want to feel life, we can't just stick our toe in the water; we have to jump in and immerse ourselves, and we can't do that with one hand on our mental steering wheel. It takes all of us, a 'Look Ma, No Hands' approach. We have to inundate ourselves by complete immersion in life, if only for a moment.

And right now, most of us are more lost in thought and not feeling it, than we are immersed in experience. I would bet on that.

As mentioned above, no matter how hard we search for a back door to our living life, to just coasting in the mind, there is no back door, and sooner or later we will come to this fact, that if we want to feel and have meaning, we have to jump in, take the plunge, enter the water, and that means full immersion and getting involved, our getting wet.

We could say "Come on in, the water's fine," yet most people take refuge in the mind and intellect, not in their feelings. Our feelings and actual sense

experience can get scary, not that the crazy mind cannot. LOL.

This frigid approach, of not even venturing a toe in the water, leaves us high and dry. It would be no problem, accept it is a problem. The German philosopher Hegel said this very well in his description of what he termed the 'Beautiful Soul':

"This soul lacks force to externalize itself... the power to make itself a thing and to endure existence. And, to preserve the purity of its heart, it flees from actuality and steadfastly perseveres in a state of self-willed impotence to renounce a self which is pared away to the last point of abstraction... and to give itself substantial existence or in other words: to transform its thought into being and commit itself to absolute distinction, that between thought and being."

And Shakespeare, of course, said "To Be or Not to Be."

"Not to Be" is what we are pointing at here, taking refuge in the mind at the expense of life and living it, not daring to live and fully immerse ourselves in life. Intellectuals tend to do this, with too much conceptual abstraction and not enough sensual experience. They lack good sense.

These folks literally lack common sense, the sensual, and they need to wash their mind in the waters and sense of life and inundate their dry words and concepts. Full immersion is what is required here and not just mere words.

That's it. There you have the idea. And of course, it's up to each of us to decide how much we are abstracted from life and how much we are involved and immersed. We vary.

However, hint, hint... if we are dissatisfied, we are dissatisfied, and no amount of intellection can fix that. Satisfaction has to make sense, and sense is sensual, and not abstract. Sense is always a physical experience waiting for us to have, if we will allow ourselves to feel it.

How to immerse ourselves in the sea of life is not quite as simple as 'Just jump in, the water is fine.' Our habit of intellectual abstraction is by now totally established. We don't just break it as we would break a vase.

That part of us, too much mentation, has to be deconstructed, taken apart, piece by piece and bit by bit, and right now we are not of that persuasion. We are not used to letting go or just jumping in. It's everything we don't do.

We need to do it!

However, this is easier said than done. We have painted ourselves into a corner of words and intellection and can't get out, can't let go. We first have to discover that the mind is not just conceptual, but is a hybrid, a cross between the abstract and full immersion. That's the magic and the mystery.

And to experience this we first have to exercise the mind viscerally and not just metnally, like we would exercise a muscle. The mind is effectively like a muscle. It has to be limbered up and massaged or kneaded like we might knead dough for making a pizza.

And this is done through various dharma exercises, which we should discuss.

[Photo by me.]



THE ANATOMY OF A STROKE and THE NATURE OF SAMSARA

November 16, 2023

I was forced to see the construction behind Samsara, this cyclic world that we inhabit, quite against my will. I witnessed it, nonetheless. This was when I experienced my major stroke. It was choiceless.

From the onset, I found myself trapped in a sort of Limbo, so to speak, not for a few seconds but for days and weeks, until my regular Self (whatever we call it), which had been shattered in the stroke, was able to reanimate itself and close up all its gaps or windows. Until then my eyes were propped open with toothpicks whether I liked it or not. I had no choice but to look.

And what I witnessed, and I saw was terrifying; I perhaps was not so terrified by just what I saw as much as by the fact that I had never seen before what I did in that instant, and I believe few have, that it's not that we cannot free ourselves from Samsara, but rather that we don't want to and have no intention of doing so. To me, that was news and shocking.

It was as if we are like double agents and don't know it, on the surface working toward liberation through dharma, freeing ourselves from Samsara, but internally actually working against it.

It's as if during the day we weave the future, while at night we unravel what was made in the day. We step forward by day, but step back by night. I wish to high

heaven that I could share the experience I am describing here.

In a nutshell, it is that we are going exactly nowhere and have no intention of doing otherwise. It's the lack of intention that dumbfounded me, the insincerity, and the ignorance, and probably willful ignorance at that. And the so-called resistance movement to Samsara was, including much of our interest in dharma, in reality just another part of Samsara. We never get beyond the periphery, the city limits, so to speak.

Why? The answer is dirt simple, because we are habituated to the here and the now of Samsara. It's an age-old habit, Samsara, the only thing we have ever known, and we have zero intention of doing otherwise, despite all our protests to the contrary. Don't believe it.

And here, when I say 'We', I not only mean you, but the 'We' includes me too. I want the same thing that we all seem to want, the comfort, entertainment, and false security of Samsara, and the freedom to continue on with that. And even in my revelations from the stroke, all I could think about was getting back inside my comfort zone and back to ignoring the harsh light and truth of reality, and that Samsara is an elaborate construct.

There has to be a reason that in all the time there is and has been, we have never liberated ourselves from Samsara, and I in an instant saw why, that Samsara is addictive like no drug we know. It's one huge habit.

I can't say strongly enough that we have never known anything else but Samsara. It's not like we once know the true nature of our mind, sometimes called our "Buddha Nature," and are trying to get back to that awareness. Not true. We have yet to get there, to be enlightened.

The dharma teachings are crystal clear about this, and I have asked over and over. We have never managed to recognize the true nature of the mind and have always only been an inhabitant of Samsara. It's no wonder that we love it so; we are so used to it.

The power of this major stroke wiped out completely my near memory (and far memory too) of who I was and, more important, how to find my way back to the habits and history that up to that point I had lived in. I could not remember or bring it to mind, my Self, try as I might. And you can be sure I tried with all my might to get back to what I knew, the cloth of my history in which I could hide and feel comfortable. It was not happening.

Instead, what I did see and what I was continually exposed to was this brilliant white light in the mind above me that was shining like a searchlight directly down on me and could not be ignored. Nor could I look right at it. It was too blinding.

I saw this light right in the hospital while I was being carted around here and there. Surrounded by doctors and nurses, carrying on as normal, I was for all practical purposes there right beside everyone else, yet at the same time the stage of my personal theater was wiped clean, empty of everything, other than the

blinding light in the sky above me. It was like a waking dream. I was wide awake!

And before we get too fixed on the idea of this white light, that is just an image that I use so you can understand. And this next note may be a little difficult to understand. The white light was not a light at all, but in reality, it simply was the nakedness I felt because I was denied the cover, closure, and the refuge of my normal haunts, my sense of Self, entertainments, and the darkness that had always shielded me from being exposed as I suddenly was. I was mentally naked as a J-bird.

Like a hermit crab without its shell, I was forced to endure full exposure to vulnerabilities that had never been exposed to the stark reality of what I was experiencing. And there is one very important fact to declare.

You might think that when the stroke took place, the mind was confused. Well, yes, there was all the confusion I just described above as to the hospital, etc. However, the mind and its native awareness was crystal clear and just totally there as usual, actually clearer than I have ever experienced.

Of course, I had none of the attachments, likes and dislikes, or history of the Self I had always carried with me. I was stark naked of all of that and just out there, exposed, and desperately trying to find a way back to the familiar Samsara I had always and only known. That my friends was the situation I found myself in.

And this was not like an instant, a few minutes, or even an hour, but went on for days and weeks while

my totally shattered sense of Self tried to reanimate itself and yet could not. That's what a major stroke can do, wipe that all out like someday, when we die, our very death will do.

One has to clearly separate the physical effects of the stroke, and all the tests and busyness taking place around me, from the utter clarity of the mind, which is unlike anything I had ever known. The natural awareness within us is infinite and clear as a bell. We see everything because without our Self and our Samsaric obscurations we have no closure, no cover, and no history for a spell, and quite a long while at that.

It's like what we call our Self was completely gone, totally deconstructed, and wiped clean, which is EXACTLY what the bardo teachings state will happen to us after death, leaving us aware and more sensitive than we have ever known. That's what happened to me with the stroke, my history and Self was just wiped clean, and there I was, one with the awareness that is. It was excruciatingly painful, but completely eye-opening as well.

And when I was able to relate this to my Tibetan dharma teacher of 36 years training, a high rinpoche, Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, he just chuckled and said this experience will stand me in good stead when I die and enter the bardo. Of course!

There are so many ramifications to this experience, so many reflections that it's like a kaleidoscope, so I won't trouble you with them just now. This blog was just to get the blunt truth of reality expressed and allow folks to react to it as they will.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



THOUGHTS AT THE EDGE OF THE FUTURE

A COSMIC JUKEBOX

November 17, 2023

On the one hand I am getting old and am not as nimble as I once was. And definitely, I have been working with my mindstream, tinkering with the mind itself, in particular when it comes to picking very subtle threads out of the ethereal slipstream, where thoughts arise. I'm not saying that the thread contents themselves are subtle, although they are, but that grasping them is and can be, these thoughts at the edge of the future.

Many very fine or delicate thoughts are only there for a millisecond, and are gone so fast that, if I don't write them down or at least start to, they are gone. Of course, some of them do reoccur, but just as many don't. These are momentary phantoms that are barely there at all and are not graspable unless I secure them at once. Even the slightest waver of attention on my part and they vanish.

This requires one-pointed concentration. As mentioned, any distraction on my part, however slight, and they are already gone. When I look up from being distracted there is nothing there. Gone, and I can't remember what the thought was, try as I might. And some of them are profound, now lost to me.,

This is the environment in which I work a lot, the merest flash of insight, too subtle to reflect it in words, and there are many of these insights sputtering out at once, like a string of tiny firecrackers.

If I am to use them, I have to tie them down at once with a note, a word or a few words that can remind me, because these proto-thoughts are gone, one replaced by another, perhaps just as good, in an instant. It takes actual discipline to retrieve and remember them using whatever way best works.

However, up in these ethereal regions, the means of retention are few and the moments brief. It's like catching fireflies; as you reach for them, they turn off, only to reappear a little distance away. It's like that. Grasping at straws does not hold a candle to what I'm describing. I'm speaking of something that is barely there, something at the very edge of not being at all, at the borderline where the future and the present meet, broadcasting themselves like a cosmic radio.

Yet, these threads are fresh, as mentioned, almost proto-thoughts, and can be very rich in in the sense they make, and most of them are worth gathering up and considering. They often are threads that can be elaborated into entire topics of interest, thoughts never thought before, and my tying them all together through a stream of insight, weaving these into the normal thread of time that makes up the fabric of our existence as best I can. That's about the best description I can give. We have to move toward poetry to capture the spark of it, which I will try here.

AN INTERNAL FLAME

At the extreme limits of our mindstream crystals of time sparkle like falling snow along the edge of the mind, fireflies winking and blinking in the night of time. An effervescence of insights.

Where the future meets the present, it's so hard to acknowledge or confirm what we are not yet certain of ourselves, that which is in the process of becoming a fact for us but is not yet a fact, inner thoughts surviving a process that stretches across the bridge of time like an overstrung guitar string that gets plucked.

This is a future that is not yet certain, yet already casts its shadow on the present and waits for time to acknowledge it. Ranging out there on the borderline is an iffy thing at best and perhaps is more of a probable expectation than a fact. After all, it still is part of the future, and not yet quite present. Being there, we are the first to experience them, a kind of welcoming committee.

Why go there at all? Because of the freshness, the life that could be, a life that perhaps can be shaped by our will. We assist in the creation of the world, like a midwife of time itself.

Where else are we going to find the future other than at the very edge of the present moment, where the anticipation of the future is mixed with the pure oxygen of insight.

Mixing the fuel of this present moment injected with the oxygen of the future works like a carburetor, a pilot light that burns at the very edge of time, an inner flame waiting for their time and incandescence.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



THE STRAIGHTER THE LINE, THE FINER THE CURVE

November 18, 2023

Everything circles or cycles and goes around. Anything that does not cycle does not register. It does not last long enough for us to remember.

And this idea, that the closer we come to resolving the true nature of the mind, the closer we come to resolving infinity. In other words, in this case, less is more. And the closer we come to total resolution, the longer it takes and the more we are extended and infinitely stretched out in the present moment.

This is easy to prove. Just try to photograph a sphere and look at the edges of the sphere in the photograph. It's all there.

Photographers know that photographically resolving any spherical object to its extreme edge involves an infinite decreasing, and that "Infinite decreasing" usually refers to a sequence of numbers that continues indefinitely in a way that each term is smaller than the previous one. For instance, a sequence like 10, 7, 4, 1, -2, -5. Here we show an infinite decrease by subtracting 3 from each term to get the next one. These sequences often approach negative infinity but never actually reach it, as they continue indefinitely.

All these factors contribute to the challenge of resolving the extreme edge of a spherical object photographically. It's a bit like trying to zoom in further

and further on a digital image—eventually, you reach a point where the details blur and become indistinct.

In a similar way, this concept appears similar when it comes to resolving the true nature of the mind. The straighter the line, the finer the curve. It gives the idea of 'packing it in' new meaning or the thought of 'saving the best for last.' That sense of 'last' lasts. It's infinitely extended.

And I'm not speaking here of the dharma term 'Recognition', which refers to our initially recognizing for ourselves the true nature of the mind, but rather once we have that recognition, the process of extending and expanding that recognition becomes like the problem of photographing a sphere, and the devil is in the details of resolving the edges of the sphere. The edges require an infinite resolution as with Zeno's Paradox, where halving the distance to a goal becomes theoretically impossible and some kind of calculus has to step in.

However, again I am talking not about a mathematical problem here but rather resolving our use of any non-dual practice like Insight Meditation. The closer we get to full resolution (resolving), the longer it takes, until some kind of spiritual calculus must step in and take over and (here it comes), we let go.

It's the letting go part that I am talking about here. What does it take, how long, and what is the meaning?

And there is no avoiding it, no leapfrogging. It's the stretching and attenuation of a certain subtle something that can only lead to release and

revelation, i.e., letting go. And that my dharma friends is a BIG letting go.

And this descriptions amounts to a definition right here of the non-dual meditations which are non-meditations. Or as Paul Simon put it:

“You know the nearer your destination,

The more you’re slip slidin’ away”

This is a good definition of the immersion that non-dual forms of meditation require of us. We merge with the oneness, full immersion, where no thought, doubt, or care is possible. Pure awareness.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



THE HABIT OF PRACTICE

November 19, 2023

Our habits cut both ways, IMO, especially when it comes to practicing Buddhism, dharma practice. Either way, habits lay down or create tracks or grooves, and grooves can either smooth our way or become a rut, so some awareness is needed. And I wrote a little poem about just this issue.

PRACTICE A HABIT

Meditation,
While not practice,
Is a habit,
That can be practiced.

Practice builds habits,
But should not itself,
Become a habit.
In other words:
Practice,
To form a habit,
But don't make,
A habit of it.

That poem expresses my view. We can practice to learn meditation, but the goal is to meditate and not to form a habit of 'practicing'. We don't want to practice; we want to meditate. There is a difference.

We can pad a habit with skillful means, and meditation can become a habit, but 'practicing meditation' without just meditating should not be a habit. The two main forms of meditation are

Tranquility Meditation (Shamata) and Insight Meditation (Vipassana).

The whole kit and kaboodle of learning these two forms of meditation is difficult. IMO, it takes real dedication to accomplish them, especially Insight Meditation.

TRANQUILITY AND INSIGHT MEDITATIONS

We can't have 'Insight Meditation' (Vipassana) without having mastered 'Tranquility Meditation' (Shamata) at least to some degree. Tranquility Meditation provides the floor or stable ground on which we can launch or invoke 'Insight Meditation'.

In other words, we have to just calm down enough to support Insight Meditation. As I like to put it, it's like trying to thread a very fine needle with shaky hands. Tranquility Meditation will remove the shakiness from the hands, so that Insight Meditation can thread the needle.

Tranquility Meditation, a stable ground, by itself, is not enough. We need Insight Meditation for liberation to take place.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



INSIGHT MEDITATION IS IMMERSION

November 19, 2023

The word 'meditation' is pretty much meaningless now. Almost everything under the sun is called meditation these days. What happened to the form of

meditation proposed by the Buddha and many of the Indian saints, in particular Shamata (Tranquility Meditation) and Vipassana (Insight Meditation), usually practiced in that order, first Tranquility Meditation and then Insight Meditation?

And these two forms of meditation are practiced in this order because learning meditation is like trying to thread a very thin needle with shaky hands. First, we learn Tranquility Meditation to steady the shaky hands, and once stabilized, then Insight Meditation is possible, which threads the needle.

Insight Meditation is the second stage, but not JUST a “next step” or next dharma practice. It is way more than that because it is a transition from what up to now have all been for us dualistic or ‘relative’ dharma practices into non-dualistic meditation like Insight Meditation (and Mahamudra and Dzogchen), which are “Absolute” meditations, actually ‘non-meditations.’ So, there is that to consider.

Dualistic dharma practices are inferential by definition, meaning they infer truth, such as, given this or that fact we can then infer something is true. This is how we start out. Tranquility Meditation (Shamata) is dualistic, therefore inferential.

As mentioned, non-dual forms of meditation, the second type of meditational dharma practices, depend on our first mastering inferential meditation such as Tranquility Meditation. These non-dualistic forms of meditation include “Insight Meditation (Vipassana), Mahamudra and Dzogchen.

Given that, our invoking of Insight Meditation is not just a slam/dunk sort of thing; the door to Insight Meditation is not an obvious procedure but can be very fickle indeed. It's like, as an older person, when I take one of those ultra-thin produce bags at the grocery store and try to open it with my increasingly insensitive fingers, I can spend two minutes trying to separate that thin plastic and open the bag. Something like that. It's not obvious and not often easy.

One of the problems here is that we don't know what Insight Meditation is until we do. We have had no experience with it and thus no experience with that idea, what it is or even what to look for. You can read all the books there are about it, and that's what you get, something 'about it', but not 'it'. Words cannot describe "Insight Meditation" because it is ineffable, beyond language, as all the dharma teaching state. That's why we have the pointing-out instructions, and they require an authentic dharma teacher to point things like this out to us.

And Insight Meditation is not an idea or concept for us to just 'get'. It's not something to think on or about, but rather something to experience, and something to immerse ourselves in, and we can't just happen to 'find the way', at least easily, on our own. I'd say it is impossible to do it alone, but there may be some rare exceptions I don't know of.

And I'm not trying to be evasive here, but just straight forward and to the point. With 'Insight Meditation', a case of "You can't get there from here" sort of thing, not without some sort of guide.

In addition, at least in my personal introduction to Insight Meditation, I had the pointing-out instructions by an authentic master, followed by several years of very explicit and constant dharma practice, and even then, it required like a perfect-storm of conditions for Insight Meditation to ‘naturally’ happen. And the conditions were tough, not easy. The outward conditions were such that I was pulled down from my ‘high horse’, down level to the ground, humbled. It took that to get my attention and for Insight Meditation to just happen.

Is it worth working for? Of course, it is, beyond the imagination worthwhile. Is it easy to achieve? Not that I know of.

For me it was very difficult. You have to want it without even knowing exactly what it is. And then, harder yet, one has to practice, practice, practice, and then let go of all that effort and allow it to naturally happen. And also, the cosmic conditions apparently have to be just so.

That’s why it is such a big deal. In the dharma I practice, our lineage calls this event “Recognition,” meaning the recognition and familiarity with the actual nature of the mind, and it also exists in Rinzai Zen Buddhism and is called “Kensho,” where it is just as respected.

In a word or nutshell, my suggestion is that invoking Insight Meditation is not just a part-time job, something we can do on the side or over a weekend course. At least in my experience, I had to change my life for this to happen. And even then, when Insight Meditation suddenly appeared, it took a year or more

for me to expand and extend it to the point of being able to use it in day-to-day living.

And if you are shy to actually get up, go out, and find an authentic dharma teacher, then that's a problem you must solve. There are no armchair dharma practitioners when it comes to Insight Meditation. We have to go to meet our maker, so to speak. Do it ourselves. Otherwise, we might as well just cast our bread upon the waters and let karma decide.

Given all that, Insight Meditation, IMO, is the pearl of great price.

[Image worked up by me.]



LEARNING TO MEDITATE PROPERLY

November 20, 2023

First, A Story

A few of you are interested in learning Tranquility Meditation (Shamata), and are willing to start at the beginning, where we should start. I will explain that here, but first I want to tell a brief story of how I started seriously meditating.

Decades ago, some 40 years now, the second time I met with Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, the abbot of KTD (Karma Triyana Dharmachakra monastery), I was so impressed with Rinpoche a few weeks before in Ann Arbor Michigan, that in those Limbo-like days between Christmas of 1983 and the New Year, Margaret and I decided to drive 800 miles to his monastery in the mountains above Woodstock, NY, with our entire family. We never had a babysitter for our kids in all those years, not ever, until our oldest could act as a babysitter. We took our kids everywhere we went. Why would we leave them?

As it turned out, these were the coldest days of the year, just bitter cold. And crazy as it sounds, I didn't even call ahead to see if Rinpoche was at the monastery and could see us. We just piled into the car and drove all that way. Our youngest child, May Erlewine, was only one-and-one-half years old and we were driving a tiny 4WD Toyota Tercel, dark blue.

When we got to Woodstock and began driving the curvy three miles up the mountain to the old summer

retreat house where Rinpoche lived, it was so cold that I had to use a cardboard matchbook cover to scrape the ice crystals from the inside of the front windshield in order to see. There were five of us (and all our luggage) in that tiny Tercel.

This was before KTD monastery was even built, and there was just an excavation for the eventual monastery, with some cement poured. It was freezing up there and the strong winds whipped the plastic covering the cement forms making an eerie sound as we stood at the retreat-house door in the dark and knocked. There were no lights on. We really had just winged it.

After a long time of knocking a light came on and the door opened. A woman named Norvie welcomed us into the building and I explained why we had come, which was to see Khenpo Rinpoche.

As luck would have it, Rinpoche was there, and although totally unexpected, she told us that she would ask Rinpoche if he would see us. We were led to a small anteroom and took off our jackets and hats. In later years we got to know every room and bathroom in the place by heart, until they eventually tore it down to build a new complex.

And that night Rinpoche eventually came down along with his translator Ngodup Burkhar, who was to become a lifelong friend. Rinpoche spoke no English. And, as mentioned, we had met Rinpoche on Halloween, some weeks before.

In the interview I explained that we had come all the way from Big Rapids, Michigan to see him and asked

what should be our next step in working with him. We had decided that Rinpoche was the teacher that we had been looking for, and that is an understatement. Rinpoche was the perfect guru or guide for us. And I am getting around to the point of this story, although I admit, kind of slowly.

I explained to Rinpoche that I had been an astrologer and studied spiritual ideas for many years and did some meditation. And that I hoped that I could kind of place out of Meditation-101 and start at some of the more advanced practices like the Ngondro or something like that. Rinpoche took this all in and then began to speak.

He very gently told me that he could see that I had never harmed anyone with my astrology, yet he felt that as far as meditation goes and we would be working with him, and that the place to start was at the very beginning.

Of course, ignorant as I am, I was a little taken aback by having to go to the end of the line of practices, which is the beginning of learning meditation. However, I felt so wonderful in his presence that I just dropped all that and accepted his suggestion of starting at the very beginning. I could do that.

This was more than fortunate because, as it turned out, I didn't know squat about meditation, although I assumed I did. Rinpoche then gave us a book called "The Torch of Certainty" by Jamgon Kongtrul Lodro Thaye, and instructed us to read the part of that book on the practice of Tong-Len, exchanging yourself for others. And with that he wished us a goodnight and was gone.

Well, we got into our care and went back down the mountain in the frigid conditions and found a little motel in Woodstock, just a room with a tiny infrared-type heater in the wall. And put the little kids to bed and opened that book and read about Tong-Len.

What we read was quite unnerving, because in the practice of Tong-Len, you breathe in all the darkness and problems in the world, and exhale all of the light and goodness within yourself, and again and again.

Well, that was just the opposite from what the psychics and mind-readers had told me, that we should always wash all the darkness out of our body, our hands, etc. after doing a reading for someone, and keep all the purity and light in ourselves. And here, this Rinpoche was telling us just the opposite. This was my introduction to Vajrayana Buddhism.

What were we going to do? We loved meeting Rinpoche and yet did not want to get into some kind of witchcraft or whatever this Tong-Len stuff was.

And here we were, 800 miles from home, with all our babies, in a tiny cabin, outside of which was nothing but the howling wind and frigid cold. That was an interesting night, to say the least.

As it turned out, we decided that our respect for and the warmth coming from Khenpo Rinpoche overpowered our fear of the dark and strange practice of Tong-Len, as it appeared to us. And I was at peace with Rinpoche's wanting me to start at the very beginning of learning meditation. All I can say, how lucky I was to overcome my arrogance and just start

at step one with meditation practice and learn it correctly.

With that said, I will offer here a short course or several blogs on Tranquility Meditation (Shamata), perhaps not every day, but often. This should provide what you need to learn Tranquility Meditation, which we can learn without an authentic teacher, although I have certainly been given permission from my dharma teacher to offer this.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me. Not a photo of our family, but one created by me for this article.]



DON'T EVEN THINK ABOUT IT

November 23, 2023

I'm talking here about letting thoughts just naturally arise rather than thinking them up as we often do. Both methods work to some extent, but letting thought

naturally come up removes the stain of the effort used to think them up, and also the forced directionality. That 'thinking them up' narrows the mind, as opposed to seeing what comes up without thinking. Thinking and thoughts are two different things.

And a byproduct of that effortful thinking is the shadow of our effort playing on whatever we are thinking about. Effort obscures. Sitting around thinking is something many of us do. I can well remember how I would think myself to sleep at night, concentrating on whatever I was interested in and by that process falling asleep.

We might ask, if we don't consciously think of something to dwell on, will there be no thoughts coming? And the answer that the dharma texts say is that there always will be thoughts coming and passing away, forever. In meditation we don't remove thoughts but learn to live with them, and even are propelled on their energy.

In other words, it's not that our goal is to have no thoughts and somehow keep them out as much as it is to not be bothered by them, not recognize them as just the play of the mind. If we allow thoughts to arise and go as they will and when they will, this relieves us. In other words, pay thoughts no particular attention.

And I have found that if I am not always thinking, ginning things up and then riding them as on a train of thought, that my thought process greatly improves. And by this, I mean just take note and be aware of what thoughts do arise and come to mind, and let them go or, if we wish, consider the thought.

The more we can keep our own personal two-cents out of the process, the more organic or natural the process of thoughts become. There are thoughts that, naturally arising, actually can be helpful and are meant for us to consider as opposed to our just thinking thoughts. We don't have to think, at least not so much.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



TAKE IT TO THE PATH

November 24, 2023

Bobbing again at the surface, treading water so to speak, there is no directionality. Are we no longer going anywhere, or have we finally arrived at where we always have been headed or going? I doubt that.

There is always the opportunity to take whatever happens in the present moment to the path and make a feature of it. Everything then seems to be a learning experience for us.

In the case of no directionality that is obvious, taking that to the path is just that, making ourselves at home and becoming familiar with it. We can say that, given lemons, we are making lemonade, but that's not what I'm suggesting here.

Rather it's not seeing what we don't like or find useless as lemons. Making ourselves at home and becoming familiar with wherever we are and with whatever we have been given. That's the ticket.

If we have already labeled the present moments as 'lemons,' then we are already on a downward spiral and need to

renegotiate. The sage advice, IMO, is to become familiar, make ourselves at home in the present moment, just as it is, warts and all.

The dharma speaks of taking everything to the path because if it is the present moment, it already is the path, or at least is in our path, meaning that whatever it is it already has been permitted to happen to us. It's not like we have a choice.

And how are we to know that the present is not a doorway to the future because that is exactly what it is. And here it is right now, the learning ground that is being offered to us, like it or not.

And how are we to get around the present moment, certainly not in the past and probably not in the future, either. The present moment is directly in our way and, as mentioned, there is no way around it. Therefore, work with it without prejudice against it.

It's not there for no reason. In the dharma that I am coming to understand, pliancy and flexibility are high on the list of traits that are useful if not mandatory, being able to work with what is. And don't forget 'patience', perhaps the most important trait of them all.

And determining what 'Is' is not a judgment, but a process of familiarization that we have to go through. We 'have' it to go through, so best get on with it.

And so, take it to the path and the path is right here in front of us, in what have you? So, we all have the same opportunity.

And so, it's not "Take It to the Path" so much as "It" already is the path or right in our way.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



GROUNDHOG DEJA VUE

November 25, 2025

Perhaps drifting too far from the shore, it's time I tightened up a bit and pulled myself together again. I feel like an old jalopy rattling down the road and losing parts as I go along. There is nothing to compare what I feel now to, except where I came from, which is when I was younger, and as to what's ahead I can only imagine, and I can imagine pretty well. Not a lot of fun, but is there a saving grace?

I should know better because the pith dharma teachings spare no effort in talking about the failure of the human body and our trip to the end of the line. It's more than clear and it's hard to find an upside, yet of course I'm looking for one. And the whole thing, our eventual death itself, may well be an upside for all we know. There is so much we just don't know.

I can't help but peek behind the curtain of age and wonder whether when we get just too old, it will be better to drop this aging body and just be free of it. And let's not forget Shakespeare, with Hamlet's soliloquy, and this worry:

“... But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscover'd country, from whose bourn
No traveler returns, puzzles the will,
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of?”

“Thus, conscience doth make cowards of us all,

And thus, the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pith and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry
And lose the name of action.”

Is there such a thing as our going to meet our maker with open arms, where we are anxious to see what's there after death and, of course, it's not like we have a choice? When there is no choice, what's our best attitude and approach?

One becomes at least inquisitive as to what it will be like to be free of age, free of the physical, and to find ourselves floating beyond time and space, but still with some kind of consciousness paying our way forward once again, driven by our karma.

And beyond this life, left with no way to turn back to it, and no cause to remember where we came from, which apparently is soon forgotten, our slate being wiped clean even of ourselves. Venturing onward, while parts of our karma, like iron fragments reacting to the magnet of rebirth, assemble a new Self piecemeal and offer an opportunity for someone new (no longer us) to discover who they are all over again. We would be the last to know because our Self is what is abandoned and left behind at death..

Scarier than hell, yes. Impossible, apparently not. And, again, all the dharma texts state we have done so (taken rebirth) innumerable times before. Yet it doesn't mean that we don't have our heart in our mouth each time. Imagine!

I have no memory of such an event in the past, and yet apparently, I have no choice but to experience this over and over, much like the movie “Groundhog Day,” a dharma film if I ever saw one.

With all the accumulation of experience from an entire lifetime, what parts of us at death are persistent enough to persevere through the veil of death and reanimate in yet another personality, one that requires a new start where, as a new person, we figure life out all over again. What a thought! And not so far away, either.

Is this a ‘Coming Attraction’ and not just a loss of this life?

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



INVOKING INSIGHT MEDITATION

November 26, 2023

[This is another long draw, here an explanation as to how I first encountered ‘Insight Meditation’ as part of Mahamudra non-meditation, as well what it took to allow this to happen, and how I have cultivated that original realization. So, for the few and probably not the many.]

I want to explain as best I can a spiritual event that took place. The main event or realization was experienced while lying in the wet morning grass, peering through a high-quality camera lens at small worlds, in other words macro photography.

One moment I was looking through the lens at a small critter or plant, and the next I was no longer seeing the object at the end of my lens, but instead I was seeing the 'Seeing' itself, the whole enchilada, and at that point there was no see-er and no object to be seen, but just immersion in the seeing itself. This was a new experience, a non-dual experience, and it did not go away. Stunning! It in that moment all one thing, and no longer two. I was not there, but only the 'Seeing' itself.

And what was obvious was the crystal-clear clarity and luminosity of the entire immersive moment and its emptiness of any and all elaboration, like no thoughts or worries, no anything.

I had never experienced this before in my life and I found that I could repeat the immersion, the 'seeing the Seeing' by looking in a certain way, again and again. Of course, I did that, over and over and over. I was mesmerized by the clarity.

And this special kind of 'insight' stayed with me when I went back home that day, the clear imprinted memory of it, yet I was not able to 'see' in that way at home and around the house, but only out in the fields and woods at the crack of dawn. And so, because it was for me such a profound experience, I found myself going out morning after morning to watch the

sun come up and to look in that same way and have that same experience. I did not want to stop doing it. I was already down the rabbit hole.

And I did this from late May until late November when the cold weather drove me (and my camera) inside, about six months straight of going out like that. By that time, I had quite a lot of practice with this new technique, although it was a kind of a nail-biter for me to go into and get through the oncoming winter and see if the experience was still there the following spring. All winter I was trying to invoke this insight in my little photography studio, inside at home, but I did not have quite the same experience, although something like it was almost possible.

The whole experience was initially an event but the repetition of it also became a learning experience, a learning path I was on and very interested in, perhaps already even addicted to. There is no going back from that.

Now, the above is about the event and the experience itself. It does not tell us what led up to it and the conditions that it required, which were crucial.

Nor does to say much about what happened after that summer and what became of the experience. However, both the before and after are VERY important to at least know something about, so here goes.

BEFORE

Before the event, what led up to it was not just business as usual. What led up to the event was

critical and key to the event itself and the event could not have (I believe) happened (or be understood) without an understanding of the conditions that caused or at least colored the event. I share this so those of you reading this don't assume this just happened to me out of the blue. It didn't. It was a long time coming, but precipitated by a harsh event.

What did happen was that what I call a 'Perfect Storm' of conditions, so untoward and jarring that I was forced out of the groove I had been in for I don't know how long, many, many years and I suddenly found myself with a job, laid off and without any means to take care of my family. As a good provider, this was a profound shock to my system. My apple cart was turned upside down in a day and I had to react and deal with it. It changed my life and direction.

And the shock and my upset are what propelled my out of my routine and into taking refuge not in my family and not even on my meditation cushion (as I would have expected) but leapfrogging all of that back to my childhood love of Mother Nature. I had been a confirmed naturalist even as a child and in the shock of that upset I found myself seeking the familiarity of my childhood intense study of nature. Familiarity with our own mind is key, with our own history. Like: Family.

Of course, there are a ton of details I could share that would perhaps better set the stage for this perfect storm, yet I believe you have enough to get the idea. I suddenly found myself under siege from the world and these events, so I reached out for something familiar and known, and ended up not on my dharma cushion or consoled by my family, but reaching back

to my early childhood and what went on into my teenage years, my familiarity with the natural world around me.

And so, the point here is that I was brought down from whatever 'high horse' I was on, down to the level of the ground and kept there by my reaction. It was in this special cauldron that a spiritual experience and realization was possible. And now, something about the future after that experience.

AFTER

For me, it is more difficult to describe what happened after I experienced what I came to call 'Insight Meditation' or if I am being generous to myself, a form of Mahamudra non-meditation. And here is what I am doing or attempting to do with this post.

I am here building a vehicle, a time-release capsule or 'ark' of words that will last as long as I can make them last in time and by lasting long, imprint the mind of anyone who can carefully read this with long-lasting words that wake (come apart), if ever, last or at least much later.

These words are meant to endure or persist to the degree that they are carefully crafted and can withstand not-being-understood and by that imprint the mind of the reader deep enough that they make sense and last long enough in the mind to be understood. And with that said:

I started with that first moment when I was plunged, immersed, in what is called non-duality, a oneness that had no perceiver and no perceived. And that

moment was not only a passing experience, but at the same time, as mentioned, was an experience that I was aware of having AND through which I realized the nature of what I was experiencing. It was indelible and stayed that way. That's the nature of a realization.

And not only did that experience imprint my mind, but that realization, because it was a realization, was permanent, and repeatable. I did it again and again. And I not only did it again, but I did it for something like six months straight as much as I could manage. Yet the question arose, what am I to do with this repeatable form of insight?

I ran out of summer and even fall, and was forced inside, and by that time my insight experience was habitual, albeit that it only seemed to happen out in the morning air while watching the sun rise. Yet at least it was there and had become a practice. Where do I go from there?

It was a shaky time, getting through winter, and onto the next spring when I could get back out in nature and see if it was still viable and happening. As mentioned, trying to jump start it inside over winter was touch and go, not too definitive.

Spring brought warmer temperatures and I believe I was out as early as late February on sunny days trying to confirm the state of things, of my practice. I still did not have a real name for what I was experiencing or realizing. I could care less because the fact that it was working was enough, but of course I wanted to find a name for it.

And that came in spring where a dear friend of our family, Lama Karma Drodul, a Tibetan monk who had completed two three-year closed retreats came to visit us. As we walked the nature trail on a bright spring day, I explained to Lama Karma just what I was going through.

And to my surprise, he knew exactly what I was experiencing, and even had a name for it. I was experiencing what is called the “Lama of Appearances,” meaning that the natural world itself is also a perfect teaching of the dharma, and I was experiencing that.

Lama Karma explained that there are four types of lamas. Of course there is the “Lama of the lineage,” which I had of course with my Tibetan teacher, Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche. And then there was the “Lama of the Scriptures,” all the extant dharma scriptures and writings. And third, there was the “Lama of the Dharmadhatu,” where the very essential nature of the mind is an instructor, and finally, what Lama Karma said I was experiencing, the “Lama of Appearance,” where the nature world surrounding us, ‘Mother Nature’ is also a perfect reflection of that dharma and can serve as a lama or guide to us in pointing out the dharma path. I had invoked that lama.

Whatever the name was that Lama Karma pointed out, it was by then clear to me that I was experiencing some kind of Insight Meditation (Vipassana) because it was non-dual and permanent. It did not come and go, yet neither was it very adaptable. More or less, it only worked when I was out in nature photographing. I wanted to do something about that, but how?

To put it in a nutshell, doing something about it was very, very difficult, one of the most difficult things I have ever done in my life. However, the beauty of what I realized through Insight Meditation was so profound that I never gave up on making it more useful. I was quite naturally driven to expand and extend this dharma technique.

And it took me about a year and a half of non-stop effort, trial and error, to move the Insight Meditation I knew from photographing nature out in the wild, inside and home where I could use it everyday for other things, in particular for writing like I am here. I wanted to do that more than anything else I could think of.

However, it didn't just move. Period. When I tried to use my will to make it happen, nothing happened. I was powerless to even move it a fraction of an inch, so to speak. It was not a matter of will power, apparently.

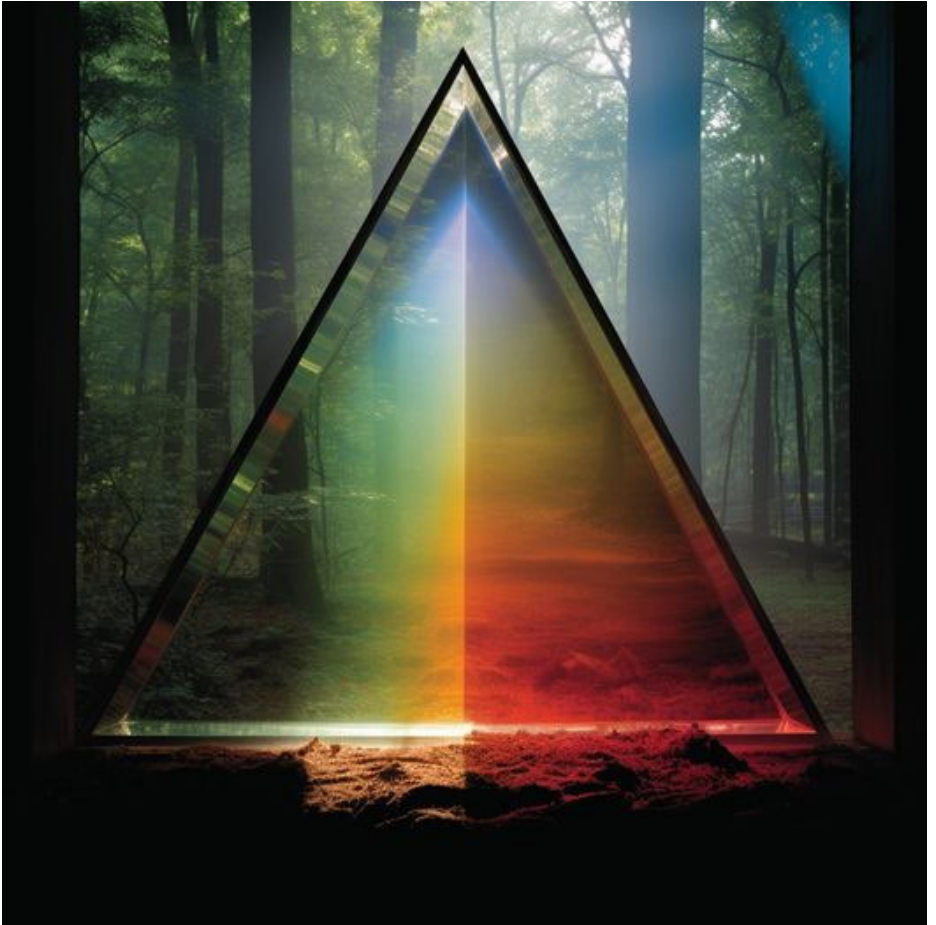
Then, after many, many months (I never gave up) I noticed a teeny, tiny bit of movement. At last! And that smallest of threads I grasped by the end and began to work. I write all this so that those of you who can identify with this know that it is not impossible, yet can be very difficult, so don't give up.

And during this time, I was realizing that the expanding and extension of Insight Meditation, the so-called "Recognition" as to the actual nature of the mind is natural and had to be done. From the smallest portal through which we kind of gaze, that thread or opening must be worked with and expanded and extended until it embraces the entire world. It's like turning the inside out and the outside in.

And what kept (and keeps me going) is the incredibly clear and luminous nature of Insight Meditation and the Mahamudra non-meditation it is packaged in or part of.

I have tried to present here what my experience was, the realization of that experience, and the perfect storm that allowed it to happen, and what I have done (and had to do) afterward to bring the realization to full use. I hope this is useful for someone and not just a bunch of words.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



THE CONTINUITY OF CONSCIOUSNESS

November 27, 2023

The Rollercoaster of the Mind

Well, how about that, the dharma teachings all seem to agree on the continuity of our consciousness virtually forever, just not a continuity of the person now known as John Michael Erlewine. At least we get something out of this, for less is more than any, and any is better than none. As old age rolls in, I am more willing to settle for less. LOL.

If we use up one lifetime and then rebirth to another, the Self left at the end of each previous life is pretty-much worn out. If you are 82 like I am, all you have to do is look in a mirror to observe a declining asset. The writing is on the mirror.

And so, our Self does NOT reincarnate as the same “Me, Myself, and I” at rebirth but our self only exists temporarily for each lifetime and is then discarded; however, apparently, although I as me don’t continue on, an edition of my complete karma does move forward through time like a great barge in what is called the ‘Storehouse Consciousness’, and from that barge a collection of our most virile or ripe karma apparently is selected to create a new persona for our coming rebirth, but the use of the word ‘our’ here is a misnomer.

However, at least it will be my karma continued, just with a different name on the driver’s license or on hers.

And so, what can be considered as the downside of all this is that with each rebirth, we start out again as a baby, and after birth we also begin to assemble a new Self and persona based on our parents DNA and our past karma. And so, we are still there and at the same time not there anymore.

So, the scary part is what we might call the blackout, when we tune out from our last lifetime and begin to tune into another station, our rebirth, but as a new persona – someone else. This has to be stranger than fiction.

Talking about having a sense of humor, I guess that it pays to have one.

And so, a careful reading of the dharma texts states that our consciousness is continuous and will remain in effect virtually forever, however the caveat is with each rebirth comes a new Self or persona being constructed anew. It gives a whole new meaning to “Where’s Waldo.”

I don’t like rollercoasters much anymore, but it sounds like a new rebirth comes pretty close to a wild ride.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



IT'S COME TO THIS...

November 27, 2023

Each day, as I look for where to focus or rest my mind I come up with the same exact location. I don't want to do this, that, or some other thing. I just want to rest

in the nature of the mind enough to be immersed (and yet also remain aware). It's like skipping a flat stone on a still pond, where the skipped stone samples the water as it goes. I include photos.

In meditation, these alternations are EACH just momentary.

Touch, sample, touch, sample, touch, sample, and so on.

Or... Sample, Look, Sample, look, Sample, Look, etc.

Or better yet:

Immerse, Look, Immerse, Look, Immerse, Look, etc.

Only, by now, after all these years, the process for me is contiguous, seamless, so instead of an alternation as illustrated above, there is only a single stream of consciousness, so to speak. Like a laser beam I turn it where in the mind I like, on one thought or idea or another or none at all.

And, by design, the only product of this process (Mahamudra Insight Meditation) is the writing that is appearing here that you are reading. It's like a utility or tool, yet it is also complete in itself. And by complete, I mean the process itself produces an output, these words on a page, however, at the same time it is self-sustaining; I am resting in like pure oxygen, perfect clarity. Non-dual means no thoughts or any distraction.

There is nowhere else I want to be, and I am complete right in this here and now. This is a form of

meditation, in the form of 'non-meditation', just resting in the nature of the mind itself, yet sampling.

There may well be something else that I could do and that could be done, yet at this point I don't know what that is. More impactful, I don't seem to care or worry about it just because this present moment of Insight Meditation, while it may seem or may appear solipsistic because it does not need to go further than right here, is nevertheless self-complete. Perfect.

Perhaps, I have come thus far and no farther. As to how to get beyond this point, I have no idea, because I have no desire to be anywhere else than right here. This is either a good thing or a problem. You tell me.

In any case, this is a distinct form of meditation. It is non-dual, meaning immersive, yet clarified by seeing, not just looking, but also seeing -- insight. And it is, as mentioned, seamless, continuous, clarifying, and free from thought and doubt.

If that is OK with you, then that is what I would like to continue to do, this particular form of non-meditation. I have no one to ask because I have not seen it described as I am describing it. And you know that I have looked.

However, it's not just immersive with no awareness. It is immersive followed by insight and this awareness is dualistic enough to result in words like these, in this form of non-meditation, which is non-dualistic/dualistic, a kind of 'practical' form of meditation that I can do for hours each day. And I do.

Is this portable and can it be used as in the Zen tradition for things like “The Art of Motorcycle Maintenance,” etc.? It would seem so, however am I missing the whole point somehow, and do I care? That is a question for others to decide.

There is no doubt that through this form of productive non-meditation I (at the same time) continue to extend and expand my recognition as to the true nature of the mind, which is what my beloved dharma teacher asked me to do. It was the last thing Rinpoche said to me.

I am doing that, yet I am, so to speak, also ‘living to tell about it’, if you follow me. And that’s a little bit of humor.

I want also to play with my dharma friends, yet try as I might, I am busy doing this form of non-meditation and never quite seem to fit into the textbook descriptions of what I should be doing, or anyway, that’s how I see it. I have described it above, nothing more and nothing less.

Does that mean I am in or am I out of what is acceptable. I really don’t know, and it seems (I have checked) I don’t really care. Color me acceptable or not acceptable, I seem not to do otherwise than what I do, and it feels organic and natural.

Could I straighten up and fly right? I’m already doing the best I know how. For me this is flying right. I just may be non-typical and not fit into any kind of mold that I can locate. I’m sure I fit in somewhere, yet I just don’t know where, and worse, worrying about this is itself an obscuration so I may have to stop doing that.

I might have to just be me and not quite fit in
anywhere. LOL.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



REALIZING REALIZATION

November 28, 2023

[Yesterday at 2:50 PM EST an X-Class solar flare (the highest class) erupted and there are perhaps 3 CMEs (Coronal Mass Ejections) heading inbound toward Earth that should impact Earth around November 30-December 1.]

The dharma teachings talk a lot about the three stages, Understanding, Experience, and Realization. 'Understanding' is just that, grasping intellectually what is being said. "Experience" is simply yourself experiencing what is understood, and 'Realization' is the most difficult of the three, which is why I want to discuss it here.

With any realization, in particular large realizations, there is the collapse or deconstruction of the dualistic view that obscured the realization as it was realized that that view is not accurate or true. Realizations are automatic and it goes with the territory that there is some kind of breakdown or re-Viewing of what went before. That deconstruction can be devastating for us yet enlightening.

And of course, there are little and greater realizations. They happen to us all day long but are much more dramatic the larger the house of cards that comes cascading down, or in the Tibetan analogy, the so called, 'snake in the dim light that is realized to be a rope'. There is no remedy needed, just the realization itself. That kind of thing is a realization of an

experience and not an theoretical understanding, and often is somewhat dramatic in effect!

We have the realization, and depending on its size, what remains when it comes over us is the stripped-down truth, the remains of the misapprehension, what was seen to be false, what we got wrong. The mistake falls away and is replaced by the reality, the truth, the correct View. We see clearly. We realize. That's what 'Realization' is.

This is more than just similar to when some tragic or powerful event happens to us and shatters the Self, like a death in the family, our sense of ourselves, leaving us temporarily without a Self or any familiar ground to stand on, an imagined 'reality' which has crashed or withdrawn beyond our ability to reach it and make use of it. The Self is often temporarily eclipsed by the realization, leaving us with an emptiness of or unreachability of the Self.

And so, whether the cause of the realization is tragic or enlightening, the effect on the Self seems to be similar, a shattered Self or a Self temporarily not available, unreachable for all practical purposes. And what remains is a kind of starkness or field of emptiness that leaves us with no alternative but to witness that emptiness and a dharma opportunity to have a good look around until the Self closes back in.

Of course, we immediately try to put our Humpty-Dumpty Self back together again after a realization, as the old poem goes:

"Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall.

Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.

All the king's horses and all the king's men

Couldn't put Humpty together again.”

In other words, it takes time to recover from a realization, any major realization, a time when there is essentially nothing obscuring us or our view, or at least less obscuration than normally.

And it appears that a realization is neither good nor bad, but just a realization and how we react to it or take it is up to us. Yet, either way, a positive or negative reaction, it takes time for our sense of a Self to gather itself together or reanimate and once again exert some kind of control over us, or even to be available to us.

We have no choice but to wait that out. And that wait or ‘empty stage’ of our life is an excellent time to learn what we can about our situation, a kind of dharma field day.

In my own case, as the pith dharma teachings tell us, I find that realizations can be enabled by our looking directly at whatever problem or situation that directly confronts us. If we double-down and look directly at the nature of the confrontation, it can resolve itself, which means that we can realize or resolve that situation through realizing the actual or true nature of it, which may or may not rearrange or change our View.

And by ‘True Nature’ it should be understood that by looking directly and perhaps repeatedly, the ‘miss

take' on our part falls away, revealing the truth, the reality in terms that we can plainly see and understand as reality.

And I am not speaking through my hat. I have the experience to prove it. Recently I was struggling with a very deep and emotional problem, what the dharma calls a "Klesha," an unimaginably difficult situation, was even in the midst of writing a very sad account of it, when it occurred to me that the dharma teachings, not to mention my own guru very clearly stating that when you have this kind of profound problem, to just look directly at it, and it can resolve itself. Anyway, that came to mind, and I tried it. What did I have to lose?

So, with my problem firmly in mind, I looked directly at the nature of it. I even doubled down on it. And to my total surprise, lo and behold, the problem began to churn and dissolve. And in the dissolution, I saw my own original take on it as wrong, a miss-take of the whole problem, and behind it and shining through it was the reality, the true cause and nature of the problem.

I watched my entire house of cards, so to speak, vanish before my eyes leaving me with the correct view for the first time, which I saw as correct and that I had it all wrong up to then. It was exhausting and painful but also clarifying and exhilarating.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



DON'T PRACTICE A HABIT

November 29, 2023

Yes, I believe practice makes perfect, yet I do have one caveat. Dharma practice time as measured by how much we do each day is not what I believe works. It is a question of choosing your dharma practice times, doing it when you feel like doing it and

not just because the clock strikes 8 AM and it's time to practice.

Of course, doing it by the clock works somewhat, it's just a clunky way to practice, IMO.

Another approach is to say that practice is just time we put in and because everything cycles, we wait for a creative time to spontaneously arise somewhere within our allotted or scheduled practice time.

I know. I know. Always practice at the same time every time and it pays dividends. The dividends do come from practicing each day; however I question the scheduling.

In my experience, it is much better if I wait until I feel like practicing (or doing anything, for that matter, like work, etc.) until I feel like it. Of course, if one never feels like work or practice, then set your clock and just do it. I'm talking here to the more pliable folks out there who can take advantage of the moments when they feel like getting something done.

I have learned to look at what I have to do on a given day, take note and keep checking with myself do I feel like doing this or that right now. It's not that I may be thrilled to practice at any time, for that matter, but what happens is more like, when I check my availability for practice, I come back with "Why not, I'm not doing anything else right now." And so, I do it.

Staining our dharma practice by forcing ourselves to practice is bad habit, because, as mentioned, the forcing ourselves stains our desire for dharma

practice. I have done dharma practice for many decades, so I have some experience in this.

In fact, at one point, it got so bad, so stained, that I had to stop practicing and begin again only doing it when I more than less was up for it. Be careful, is all I'm saying here. Habits are hard to break, especially bad habits.

The whole idea of practicing anything is questionable IMO, and in my experience. Practicing meditation is to help us learn meditation, not for us to learn to practice meditation. Get the horse before the cart on this one.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



WHERE IS THE COMPASSION?

December 1, 2023

I have gotten at least one question as to where compassion is in my dharma practice. Of course, it is right there, front and center, in the nature of

Bodhicitta, which I mention at the end of each blog very clearly.

My guess is that folks don't know what Bodhicitta is, since it is a foreign term. Bodhicitta essentially is another word for "Compassion," and a very special kind of compassion.

There are two basic types of Bodhicitta, Relative or 'Aspiration" Bodhicitta and Absolute or 'Engaged" Bodhicitta.

Aspiration Bodhicitta is just that, the intent or aspiration to attain enlightenment for all sentient beings. Aspiration Bodhicitta is largely conceptual as the word 'aspiration' suggests. It is the empathetic understanding of the suffering of others and the desire to alleviate that suffering.

Absolute or 'Engaged Bodhicitta' is a bit harder to define. As I understand and have experienced it, Engaged Bodhicitta is a byproduct of 'Recognition', the recognition of the true nature of the mind. When recognition is attained, Engaged Bodhicitta arises with it.

I would describe Engaged Bodhicitta as a constant heartfelt compassion for all sentient beings that is like a realization in that once aroused, Engaged Bodhicitta does not slacken, or go away but remains constant and on point through thick or thin.

So, Aspiration Bodhicitta is the good intent to benefit all sentient beings by realizing enlightenment and Engaged Bodhicitta is an inner yearning and devotion

to doing everything one can to bring all beings to enlightenment.

I am a subscriber to Engaged Bodhicitta. That's about the best I can do in differentiating these two kinds of Bodhicitta, and both are types or kinds of a special compassion.

Of course, I have been a lover of natural wildlife since I was six years old, and have raised or rescued about every animal you could imagine, as well as served as a board member of a wildlife rescue operation, skunks, possums, racoons, deer, rabbits, squirrels, lizards, snakes, salamanders, frogs & toads, birds of all kinds, and on and on . Our backyard was filled with numerous stainless-steel cages with injured or abandoned birds and animals that were nursed back to health and released.

These years I am more concerned with sharing dharma with anyone and everyone interested in it on an equal basis.

Bodhicitta is engaged Compassion.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



“I’M ALMOST A SCHOLAR...” LOL

December 2, 2023

Yet I’m not by any means a scholar. I can, at times, dip into the more scholarly tradition of dharma teachings and absorb what I can until I cannot absorb more and am forced to withdraw to keep from desiccating, not able to make further sense of what I am reading. In other words, I make forays or excursions into the more intellectual realms, gather

some understanding, and then get out while I can, back to a language I can make more sense of. I depend on actual experience for most of my knowledge, and not my imagination or theoretical intellection.

I wish I could endure the intellectual longer, and over time I have been able to increasingly grasp the scholar's view, but at any given scholarly reading I can only take in so much and then it's 'out of there' for me, back to something I can feel and that makes sense. In other words, I am not a scholar although I wish I were and would be if it only made more sense to me. Intellectuality, for its own sake, is not for me. The knowledge I get is not worth the beating I take trying to understand it, if I understand anything from it at all.

So, I am a victim of the low-hanging fruit when it comes to scholarship. And I can even feel the love of scholarship when someone skilled in scholarly dharma speaks of it, and wish I could feel that way too, but as mentioned, highly detailed scholarship apparently is a cut above my pay grade.

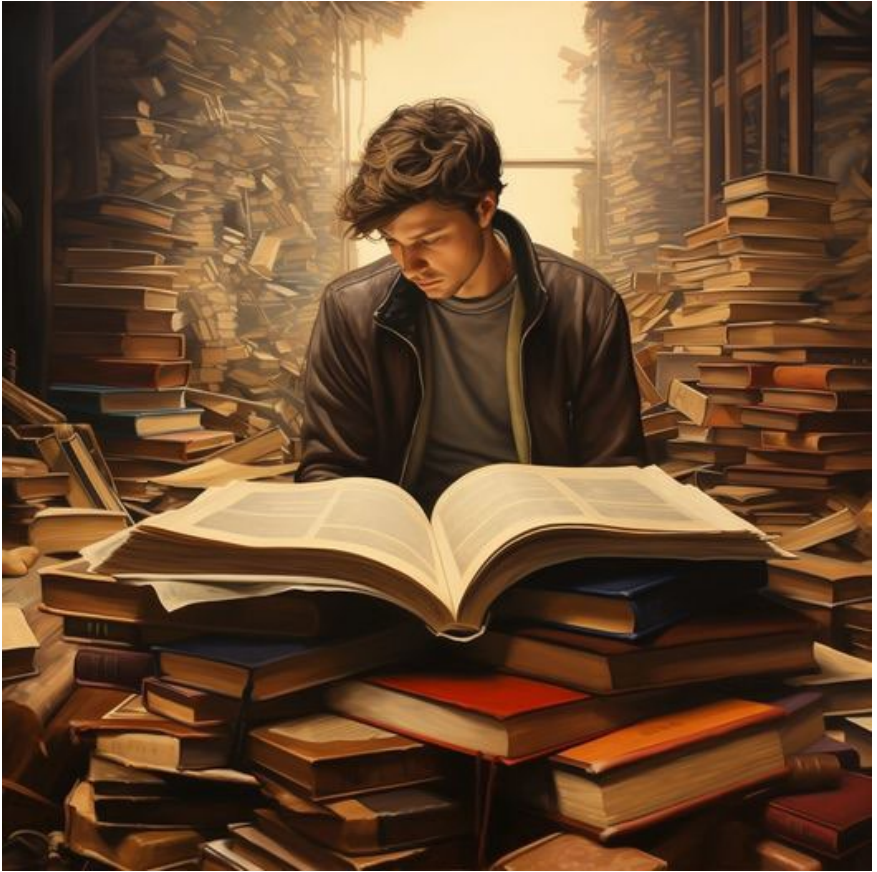
Yet, it's not like all I can do is pick from the scraps that fall down from the table. I do have a practice of my own, however it is very much my own and fashioned from what I do understand, personal experience, and whatever realize I can manage. My only real problem is dharma as I know it is peculiar to me, to my history, and my aptitude. It does not usually match the textbook descriptions of this or that dharma realization enough to be confirming. Frustrating, so take note that we have to confirm our own practice by

reaping the fruits of our own effort. Dharma is very much a do-it-yourself project. No one can do it for us.

And so, I am left forging my own way while at the same time looking to see if what I know and am does match what I'm led to believe or expect. So far, there is not a very good match, however I am very comfortable with my own dharma practice, which is perhaps how it is supposed to be, almost totally individual. We must each confirm ourselves, and be our own witness.

If I were unhappy with my practice, I would try to do something about it to better understand just where I fit in, yet as mentioned, I'm good with what I have and need to stop trying to compare it to anything else. That comparison itself is an obscuration, a disturbance. Your thoughts are welcome.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



CONSTANT DISTRACTION

December 3, 2023

Looking for entertainment in all the wrong places, more of a habitual habit or reaction than any inherent need. We habitually look to hide in and be absorbed in busyness, and our endless personal interests and attachments, or whatever it takes to soak up the sense of ennui and boredom that can face us at every

turn. We are always doing something. We resist the sense of empty 'voidness' which confronts us like a mirror. Why is that or, better yet, what is all that hiding on our part about? What are we hiding from and in?

Samsara distracts and fixates us in a plethora of ways, helping to shut out any open space or sense of peace and keeping us distracted, fascinated, and riveted to entertainment of one kind or another. This distraction keeps us busy all the time so that we cannot experience cracks, gaps, and space to unwind or be exposed to openness of any kind, distracted from the open sky of the mind.

Samsara is a closed system and likes it like that. We are habitually signed, sealed, and delivered to Samsara. And Samsara is an almost perfect karma making machine. We are accumulating karma faster than we can remove or ripen it, keeping us tethered to Samsara for eons and this will go on for a long, long time.

Moreover, if I am to believe the numerous accounts in the dharma teachings, we have never, not in all the lives and rebirths we apparently have lived, we have never known anything other than Samsara as our home and refuge. And the teachings say that ignorance was there from the beginning and is unborn. To say we are habituated to Samsara is an understatement. We were born in it! It is our home. And we have known nothing else and have nothing to compare it to.

When the dharma offers us refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, it is refuge from Samsara which is all we have ever known and where we have

always been. That's not an easy thing, to just reverse and turn around our habitual life of being forever in Samsara.

We are fixated on Samsara, sealed tight like a drum, busy fighting away boredom and open space, all the cracks of light shut out. And yet that room and some space, like the open sky, are just what we need.

If you wonder about this, just check your quotient for boredom and ennui. If you work hard to avoid being bored, by keeping busy and entertained by whatever means, and yet are always distracted and don't even realize it, then you are tithing with Samsara. If you are not always busy and not easily bored, that's a good sign, IMO.

In Vajrayana dharma, the keys to our liberation from Samsara are always the things that we turn away from, rather than toward. We are perpetually distracted and don't even know it.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



REALIZATION: WHAT IS IT?

December 4, 2023

Since I have had a recent brush with ‘Realization” more of the mundane kind, I’d like to go over a few things in this article.

First, let's be clear what a realization is and what it is not. A realization is above all a one-way trip. Once you have it or turn it on, there is no turning it off. You can't 'unsee' a realization. It does not come and go. It comes and stays.

A simple example of a realization is being instructed on how to turn on a light switch. Once you 'realize' how to turn on a light, you know how to turn on most any light. And you can't unlearn it. It stays with you forever unless you manage to forget about it, which is not normal.

Psychological realizations or spiritual realizations are no different. Once you have them, they are yours forever. It's like turning on a light.

One thing about all realizations is that before you realize, you did not realize. When we get to the more spiritual realizations, more often than not, previous to the realization, we had some other expectation or anticipation in mind, something that we perhaps dreamed up or imagined from reading books or gathering information. By definition, we got it wrong. Otherwise, we would have the realization.

And so, the first thing that happens with a realization is that our previous ideas are vacated. The Tibetans like to use the example of seeing a poisonous snake coiled up in a dimly lit room and eventually realizing that the snake actually is just a piece of rope. And with that realization, the whole image and idea of the snake evaporates and is gone.

That's why they say that with realizations we don't need a remedy because the realization already is the

remedy. And once we have the realization, whatever it replaces is gone, which may or may not be painful for us. Many realizations dash whatever we dreamed up on our own, so how each of us reacts to a realization varies and can be enlightening or heartbreaking, but regardless, it is the actual truth of the situation.

I recently had a relatively big mundane realization, and it completely shattered the idea and concept I had maintained for a great many years and replaced that with a view I had not ever properly considered. In my case, the realization occurred in like slow motion. It came over me and my previous history fought against it, but in vain. It came over me anyway and, in the process, my previous house-of-cards came tumbling down, with me trying to hang on to it.

Yet, the realization overpowered me and gradually replaced my previous view, just like the sun comes up. Although I twisted and turned in the wind of this change, as the smoke cleared, so to speak, the actual truth won out as I realized the actual nature of the problem I was considering. However, it was painful, excruciating for a while, but ended by exorcising from my mind my previous view, which was very much damaging me until it lifted.

And so, realizations are both mundane and sacred, with no preference. They just happen if the time and situation is right. And while most of them are minor, the occasional 'big' realization is to whatever degree lifechanging. I just went through one of those realizations that was capable of changing, reorienting my life with a more accurate view.

I also have, in the past, some sacred or spiritual realizations that without a doubt were life-changing in a big way.

The blessings of realization include clarity and quite often relative emptiness; our slate has been to some degree wiped clean. And in realization, there are no echoes, no embellishments, and no thoughts. It is a clear view and immersive.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



THE PROBLEM WITH LEARNING

DHARMA

December 5, 2023

[This article pertains to learning the more advanced forms of meditation which are called 'Non-Meditation.~']

Dharma practice is not like practicing a musical instrument, such as a guitar. With practicing playing a guitar, we of course have to learn the frets, tuning, notes, and so forth. However, we also can put on any guitar player's music we admire on the audio system and actually listen to what we are trying to learn.

With dharma practice and learning it, we have nothing similar to playing a CD or DVD that will acquaint us with what enlightenment or any kind of realization sounds or looks like. We have no experience and barely an idea until we actually have the realization or enlightenment for ourselves.

And so, as mentioned, although we find ourselves practicing dharma, we have yet no actual experience or idea what it is that we are trying to achieve with our dharma practice. I find this problem handicapping and particularly difficult to solve.

Having myself increasingly become more practiced and skilled in the dharma, starting back in the late 1950s, I came to respect what I detailed above about having no idea what our goal looks like or what actual

experience, much less realization, would be like. How do we solve this?

The traditional answer to this seems to be unpopular with Americans because, so it seems, we like to believe we can do anything we want to all by ourselves. Umm, yeah. Wishful thinking, IMO. I tried that.

I know from my own struggles to match my dharma expectations and anticipations to reality, that actual practice brought with it very mixed results. Certainty and confirmation of dharma progress can be very hard to get.

I was often so wrong as to my expectations, that it's almost like I had to figure this out all by myself because the teachings seldom matched up to my experiences, and as for 'realization', good luck. And it's true that with the dharma, we each have to turn the wheel of the dharma by ourselves, because no one can turn it for us, not even the Buddha. That's the whole point. Dharma is do it yourself only.

However, there is a traditional solution to all this, although as mentioned above, this is not a solution most Americans cater to, and that is: find an authentic dharma teacher or guide to help us find our way. They do exist, but we would have to look.

This is not just an alternative option, but rather this is 'THE' required option passed down through the ages: secure an authentic guide or dharma teacher and work closely with them. The pith teachings go so far as to say this is the ONLY possibility and that without

it, we are going, well, practically nowhere with our dharma. Read that again, please.

And I speak from bitter experience. Early on, I was convinced that this dharma stuff, whatever it is (I had little idea) has to be able to be figured out and that I could do it. And of course, I tried. And I tried and I tried and I tried.

And I even got some of it figured out. I did, but by and large I did not and could not do so without guidance. And that's what I discovered after years of effort.

Perhaps we are too proud to ask an authentic dharma teacher for help, or are we too shy to ask, or just too lazy to go through the steps of finding an authentic guide. Ask yourself?

Or perhaps we are content with just casting our bread upon the waters of life and letting what comes. Or our attitude is that fate will be a case of "Que Sera Sera" (whatever will be will be). Perhaps we just don't care to put that kind of effort into the dharma.

Again: you can ask yourself.

In my own case, I eventually figured out that in fact I needed help, and set about finding a dharma teacher that I felt was authentic. And I went through a string of dharma teachers, including meeting the 14th Dalai Lama face to face, the 16th Karmapa (Rangjung Rigpe Dorje), Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, the 17th Karmapa (Ogyen Trinley Dorje), and a great many others, all very authentic dharma teachers. I met them all.

Of course, I learned from each of the above mentioned dharma teachers, all different and all authentic. For example, just because the Dalai Lama is the Dalai Lama does not mean our vibes synchronize. I loved meeting him, but did something click? No.

Instead, I first meshed perfectly with the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, the abbot of KTD (Karma Triyana Dharmachakra) monastery. Who can explain it. I just instinctively knew I could learn from this dharma teacher, and I did, for 36 years. I was a devoted student.

And so, you get my point. We have to actually reach out, search for, and find a dharma teacher we 'vibe' with and who will accept us as a student. If we can't do that, well, then we can't and must continue on just as we are. It is up to us.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



OUR NATURAL NATURE

December 6, 2023

It's right there, right now, the natural nature of the mind itself. There is nothing else but that. It's not that it is hidden or secret, but rather it is just because we are not looking that we don't see it. What to do about that? Well, the obvious answer is to look or learn to look.

It's hard to separate the dualism of subject and object. In fact, it can't be done, and this is because more separation or distance just exaggerates the problem and this we don't need. We have separation.

Separation is not the answer, but rather inclusion, combining, immersion, and solution, the two becoming one, much as the poet Sir Edwin Arnold wrote "The dewdrop slips into the shining sea" or the ocean wave collapses and becomes one with the water. That.

If I think back into my own past, back to May 6, 1964, that night in Berkeley California when I first took LSD, it was all laid out for me and crystal clear. So, it was not the lack of clarity that hung me up, but rather the decades it took for me to make practical sense out of what I saw, what I realized on that one life-changing night. It changed my life and is responsible for my enduring interest in the Dharma.

And what I saw then was nothing less than the nature of the mind and how it works. I not only understood it, but I experienced it in the flesh and consciously. However, I was not prepared by any means to 'realize' that the outside world that I lived in and saw, was actually inside me, mostly my own projection and not something outside that was real and other than me.

In other words, what I realized was that the outside was me again, my own projection that I watched projected on the screen of life, the outside world, and took to be real. In the slowness of expanded time there was no mistaking it, the outside world that had me by the short hairs all my life was my own projection, a projection that had me transfixed in its 'otherness', which was not otherness at all. It was 'same', just my own projection.

It was just me again, me projected beyond my own skin upon the screen of the outside world for me to watch, thus I was transfixed by my own inner fears. Before that night, before that moment of realization, I had unknowingly cowered from life, intimidated by what turned out to be my own inner projections writ large on the screen of life. It could not have been more clear. It was certain.

It stunned me with its truth, that realization. And yet, in that very same moment I was simultaneously liberated from that life-long duality. Realizations are one-way only and you cannot un-realize what has been realized.

However, that realization required that, practically speaking, I had to reorient my entire life, not based on

duality as I always had been, me against the world, my Self and the 'other'-world outside me, but in that moment the dewdrop slipped into the shining sea and was seen to be one and the same, the duality of subject and object was resolved, seen and experienced as one.

The problem, as mentioned, was that if what was realized was certain, and I was certain it was, this meant, that had stopped seeing double, stopped considering me in here and the terrifying world out there.

Instead, from that moment and night onward I could start doing something about the overshadowing world I saw out there. I no longer was a "stranger in a strange land," me against the outside world.

From then on, I had to, and I did begin to reorient, rearrange my life, because I had seen that I could, that I had skin in this game, and that I was persecuting myself with my own projections. I could stop doing that. I was an equal part of all this.

First, it took time, and a lot of it, to 'Grok' and add up the implications of my realization. Everything changed in an instant just as the Tibetans say, that a single match can light up the darkness of eons. However, the repercussions of that realization were not only extensive, but they were also total, a total realignment and rearrangement. In other words, that realization revealed instantly what had to be done from that point forward, but I had to actually do all that, change my life around.

The byproduct of any realization is our reaction to it and what that realization requires us to do by realizing that.

Responsibility.

However, like that single match that lights the darkness, from that moment onward, every day and every night, I never forgot and totally remembered what was realized and began a total inversion of my View, letting the outside in, and the inside out.

And this took me days, weeks, months, and many years to fully respond and accomplish, yet as mentioned, never for even one instant did that light of the mind go out. That illumination was eternal, always the same. I had seen it. And it was me that had to rearrange my 'everything' to align myself with reality, the realization that what before was dualistic, me against the world, was in an instant realized as non-dual, me against myself and nothing more than that. And most important, that I could do something about that and did.

I was essentially liberated there and then, on May 6, 1964, in Berkeley, California. It was done. Only it took me many decades to adjust to that realization. That was the rub.

And back then, that night in Berkeley, California, my understanding of dharma was still rudimentary, just forming. And in time, as the decades passed, and I ran out of the low-hanging fruit of my realization, things I knew how to do, I found in the dharma the tools and means to complete that realization, not theoretically, but in fact, actually.

Was it worth it? I had no choice because that is what a realization is all about, realizing. One can't invert a realization, can't go back but only forward. Yes, we can let a realization go fallow and not continue extending it and expanding it, but there it sits until we finally work with it. It does not go away.

And so, ultimately all my dharma training has been an extension of the one night in 1964 as I wandered the campus in Berkeley, when I realized that it was not me against the world, but that outside world was also me, just my own projection. And most important, in that realization, was the fact that since it was already me that I could change it myself, and I did.

And that has been a long journey, one that is still being extended and expanded day by day. And even though, since then, I have been introduced to other dharma realizations, realizations all resemble one another. They are a direct introduction to the nature of the mind, our natural nature.

We align with it and not vice-versa.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



FROM THE HEART

November 7, 2023

We have to learn to turn away from what currently distracts us, however exciting that may seem or

whatever that is, and learn to look directly at the nature of our own mind. It's that simple, yet apparently, it's almost impossible to do.

And by distraction I don't just mean a mosquito buzzing around our head. Distraction here means always being busy and occupied with either our interests, whatever we entertain ourselves with, and even our fear of boredom or the empty spaces in our lives.

And I mean that we are almost always locked into what we have going on and seem to subscribe to slogans such as "Idle fingers are the devil's workshop" and the like. If we find ourselves fighting boredom and avoiding it, that's exactly what I am pointing at here. Our dance card is full.

And by that fullness is sealed any cracks that might let in the light of realization, our inability to look directly at the nature of the mind. We don't do it and effectively can't do it. We don't know how, so we never look.

This is all part and parcel of having been in Samsara, like forever, lifetime after lifetime, say the pith dharma teachings. We are signed, sealed, and delivered to Samsara, born in and through it. And we might ask: what's wrong with that? This world isn't so bad.

Of course, I get that. I'm here too.

However, I'm talking about removing what is unnecessary, which with Samara means almost everything, so there's a cause for pause. If we start peeling that onion, we are going to end up with

nothing, which is just the point. We seem to be terrified of that 'nothing'.

If I am to believe the great Mahasiddhas, whose view is so respected, they would have us believe that by removing our obscurations, which Samsara is nothing but, we end up with clarity, with seeing clearly. What is that worth?

This I can vouch for and from actual experience. The result of Insight Meditation is not only clarity, seeing clearly, but with it comes full immersion, meaning no subject and object, and actual rest from the storm of life. In fact, IMO, there is nothing I have ever experienced more useful, meaningful, and addictive than the Insight Meditation that is part of Mahamudra. That's saying a lot.

Why can't we just order up some of this Insight Meditation or get it wherever you get it. Of course, you can, but where you get it is not a place, but rather a way to achieve it, and that requires real effort on our part, plus a special form of guidance.

I would say that all my writing, the reason I write this blog, is to tell folks about Insight Meditation and its parent Mahamudra, which is not a form of meditation, but rather non-meditation.

That alone is inexplicable, so how to even approach it?

It seems that learning this special form of non-meditation is too much trouble and requires such extraordinary effort that very few people will bother learning it. And yet there are innumerable dharma

books that speak of little else other than Mahamudra or Dzogchen non-meditation.

I talk about it because I have little else of equal value to speak of, and on the off chance that one or two of you out there can catch the scent and make the trip. There is a host of dharma teachers out there waiting to assist you, yet the only way you can signal them is by showing aptitude, intent, and progress.

And so, we have something like a Catch-22, a seeming paradox or Ouroboros. That one koan that has to be solved in order to proceed, IMO. It's almost sad, requiring each of us to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps in order to stand up and be noticed.

The dharma teachers can but water and fertilize us and help us to grow, but we have to do the growing on our own. And with dharma this is very difficult, at least in my experience.

What's missing IMO is very simple. We are so used to looking out at the world, that we have seldom-to-never bothered to look inside at our own mind. And because of this, we know very little, meaning we have almost no experience and have not become familiar with what is most familiar of all, our own mind.

Unfortunately, we can't just stop and look at the mind. It seems we have to un-look at a whole lot of other stuff first and learn to direct our gaze inward rather than outward. It's not as simple as just turning our head and looking.

Our head is used to thinking, intellectualizing, and that is not the kind of looking we need. We have to learn

to immerse ourselves in our own mind, to ground ourselves, and not just intellectually, in order to take a peek.

I had to learn this myself and it was not easy because I was used to just thinking with thoughts, and only enough to understand intellectually, yet not enough to ground those thoughts in the sense world and make sense of them, which is an experience. It comes from the heart.

We have not experienced our own mind, much less realized its nature. We have to start with that understanding and experience for ourselves what we understand. We need that experience to accumulate before we can even begin to realize the nature of that experience.

This takes increasing familiarity with our mind not intellectually, but viscerally, from the gut, emotionally, before we can generate enough experience, much less accumulate that experience.

Of course, that is what Insight Meditation and the non-dual meditations or 'non-meditations' are all about, immersion.

We are so used to thinking that our mind is the intellect and that everything can be thought out intellectually, that we have never exercised our mind from the Hara or lower-abdomen, much less massage or knead our mind like we would bread or clay.

It's a whole discipline to move our mind from the intellect down to the lower abdomen. It takes time and effort to become familiar with our mind as anything

other than a thinking machine. That all has to be done before Insight Meditation can be invoked and take hold. We have to be centered in the gut, the lower-abdomen or Hara region, speaking from the diaphragm and not the upper chest.

I learned this from years of playing the harmonica which has to control the diaphragm both in and out, so I had a leg up on this. Even with that, I had to be directed in this by an authentic dharma teacher before it came spontaneously.

And so, there is work in dharma training that has to be undertaken and that cannot, to my knowledge, be avoided. Even when I finally got the message as to what to do, it took me several years to do it plus what I call a 'perfect storm' of a situation that pulled me down from my high horse long enough to complete the training. Only then did things fall into place.

No one said it would be easy.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



DOING NOTHING

November 8, 2023

There is nothing to say, and so it either goes without saying or you can say it again. I'm in the 'you can say

it again' camp and have always been there. I want to share dharma experience.

And I am most comfortable just there, resting in the nature of the mind. It's like no other activity I know, quiet, with no thought, at peace, and with no sense of time.

Non-meditation is a process of deconstructing Samsara by first of all not contributing to it, being able to not make it worse, which is done by being distracted from our usual distraction, actually ignoring Samsara and embracing not the shadows but the light of the dharma. No karma is made in non-dual meditation because it is not meditation at all. It is non-meditation.

Yes, it's bold to dare it at all, but once done, irrevocable, in like Flynn. And once tasted, no choice. There's no food to be eaten and nothing to be done. This poem I wrote is clear enough.

MEDITATION IS NOTHING

The books say:
Seek a place of solitude,
And meditate,
But it's just the other way round.

When meditation,
Naturally occurs,
There is no place in the world,
That you feel comfortable,
Try as you might.

Not here or there,

Not doing this or doing that.
Only nothing feels right.

You just want to hold real still,
Let the mind rest,
And then park yourself,
Somewhere out of the way,

Like on a cushion,
Or
In a place of solitude,

Because:
Nothing is going on.

Note: What can I say? True meditation is not difficult because it's not meditation. It's non-meditation, nothing at all.

I can't find any food I want to eat, or anything I want to do. The only place where I feel comfortable is right here, sitting in non-meditation. It's not a room or a place around the house, but rather invoking Insight Meditation and immersing myself within it.

The hunger was never for food, not for something to do, but for the luminous clarity of immersive non-meditation.

These are all words. And words cannot reveal, but only point at or toward. Words are not enough.

Whether here at home or out in nature, the sacred space is not a place we can find, but an inside in which we can rest.

It is freedom from constraint, like a tube we can slide into, away from distraction, like a soundproof room without a sound.

We are free to see nothing at all and not be seen.

No one nowhere.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



WHO NEEDS SCIENCE FICTION?

December 10, 2023

In general, folks don't like talking about the inevitable, our passing on, at least not so much.

Those of us who are learning to follow the path toward dharma can't avoid what is called 'impermanence', preparing for our own impermanence, at least an acknowledgement that it is still out there and exists.

And if we really acknowledge impermanence, we are not just preparing for the end of this life but looking beyond the end of dying in this life, and also considering beyond that on into the next rebirth. According to the dharma teachings, we are guaranteed a future life, but are not privy to what our identity will be in that life, UNLESS we can help determine that in the bardos.

In other words, there comes a time when we stop polishing off this life and turn our attention to rebirth and a next life. We look beyond the veil of death, that over-shadowing, to life anew, an anonymous rebirth that, although we won't be there, is also ours. How's that for a puzzler?

To repeat, we can't help but focus a little on our coming death and dying, yet at some point we can leave off with that and begin to focus beyond death and toward rebirth, which actually is probably more interesting for us even though 'personally' we won't

be present. That realization is a tough one, IMO, yet please tell me where is the choice?

Yet how do we fit into rebirth when we are not going to be there in person? Well, apparently, according to the bardo teachings, we are going to be there as our karma, the good, bad, and the ugly. And so, it's still all about us except we can't take it personally, because it isn't our persona. We will have to discover our Self all over again. Remember what that is like?

We won't remember who we have been or even what we have done to get us to this point, any more than we can in this life remember who we might have been in a previous life. Yet, apparently, we will wake up as a new person just as we have done in this life. Certainly, it's like the movie "Groundhog Day."

And this view is not as convenient as certain other 'religions', who believe that our person or 'soul' is permanent and that in our next life, 'Michael Erlewine' will continue his journey through time and space. The Buddhists point to the fact that right now most of us have no memory of a previous life. I know I don't.

At best I have had a couple of like waking dreams in which I momentarily slipped into another role or lifetime, but only for a few seconds. Otherwise, I have always been right here in this life and have no other kind of memories.

You would think that If I was going to be who I had been in my last life, some kind of a permanent 'soul', I would have at least some inklings of who I was before now. I don't. And so, although I would like to believe I will live on as me, my person, I have no sign of that

and every sign that I don't move on as a previous person. The past is closed to me.

And though, as an astrology counselor, I have heard from my clients all kinds of tales of what and whom they thought they were in their last lives; none ever were convincing, IMO.

Which leaves me with what the dharma points out, that somehow it is that our karma moves on, but the "Me, Myself, and I" does not, yet my karma takes on a different personality based on the parents, DNA, and circumstances of our rebirth.

As mentioned, it would be most convenient if I could have a contiguous persona from life to life, but as mentioned, having checked as carefully as I can for many decades, I have zero memory from my last life. I guess, if that's the case, as it seems to be, anonymous rebirth keeps things fresh and a bit exhilarating. It certainly has my attention. It's a little scary as well.

Who needs science fiction? It's amazing to me that more folks don't raise an eyebrow to look into death and what comes after, and yet for all of us it's just around the corner.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



APOLOGIA

December 16, 2023

I'm like a ship upon a stormy sea.

And nope, this astrology is not working for me. I'm not happy with it. Too many other things that I need to finish up and make available. However, please see the end of this blog. One of you might like to do this, I have created a perfect template.

For one, I do my best to share the kind of astrology I use for myself, and it's just not clear enough to be of use for others, without some learning and work on their part. You know, it's the same with dharma. It seems nothing in life is easy without some effort and learning on our part, and astrology is the same. It's like a luge or bobsled run. We have to push at the start and then climb in, tuck our head down, and ride.

What I have posted here of late is exactly what I do for myself when I feel astrology will help me to get a more correct View.

I tried to put most of it on a single graphic page, and then added notes and comments on another page. People ask what is astrology good for?

And I asked my dharma teacher of 36 years about astrology years ago, because all of the monks and lamas I have met over the decades each are aware of astrology and most have a monthly calendar they carry with them, often a little booklet of the various astrological techniques that Tibetans keep track of.

Rinpoche said to me: "Astrology is one of the limbs of the yoga, but not the root."

And by this Rinpoche said that astrology is a relative truth, which means a truth of value here in Samsara, where relative truths are the coin of the realm.

Relative truths are meant to help us improve our situation here in Samsara. However, they alone will not help us get out of Samsara or liberate us from Samsara.

In other words, astrology is like that old saying that we are busy rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. And this means, by using astrology we can improve life here in Samsara and make it better, but each of our ships is going to sink when life ends, nice chair arrangement and all.

Against that thought it helps for us to be aware and take steps to also learn of the non-relative truths, what are called the 'Absolute" truths, truths that pertain beyond Samsara and can lead to Samsara's gradual deconstruction and our liberation from it. Yet, how do we switch over? IMO, it is very difficult.

I don't consider myself a master of dharma, yet I have mastered astrology to the very best of my ability. And on these daily forecasts I offer what I consider to be the most useful information that I know about improving our life here in Samsara through astrology. Yet, it will still take some work on your part to make it useful. I used to teach astrology students using this analogy.

Imagine a sphere covered entirely by water, with waves blown around by winds. On the surface of the sphere is one sailboat, struggling to sail out of the rough waters. That boat is astrology, which if we set our sails right, can steer us out of the rough waters of Samsara into calmer waters. That is what astrology can do and that is very useful. However, it is limited to this world of Samsara in which we find ourselves. No

amount of sailing, of astrology, will ever take us to the center of the sphere, such that the whole of Samsara will deconstruct and become clarified. That's the limit of astrology or any relative truth.

As mentioned, I don't consider astrology as a substitute for dharma or whatever passes for religion. Yet, I do find astrology very helpful indeed to make life more livable and comfortable. Astrology is a very elegant way to arrange our deck chairs.

And so, what I am just now realizing is that I can't make astrology simple enough that just anyone can use it. Newspaper astrology is done everywhere, yet it is essentially worthless. Even after a few days of posting, my gut tells me that I am not happy doing this, and I have made a great effort to make it work. I'm just not that guy.

At the same time, I don't want to just grind out dharma writings any longer, which I have done with all my heart, year in and year out. It too is very difficult to realize. So, where does that leave me, and where's the paddle?

It leaves me writing whatever I am moved to write, dharma, astrology, or otherwise, since to me it's all dharma. The Zen in me is standing forth. And I find myself turning toward nature or plant photography with a renewed devotion. I can say with photography what I cannot put into words, and I like that.

I always try to tell it like it is for me right here and now, and I let the future take care of itself. I feel refreshed after this excursion into astrology forecasts, even if it only is that I walked around my cell or surveyed the

corner that I have painted myself into, and can better see why I am where I am.

I apologize for jerking everyone around, including myself. And will go back to considering my belly button.

I kind of came up with this astrology forecast to kind of tread water while I figure out what I want to do. Now that I see that I am treading water, it does not feel right. Perhaps you would like to do this.

However, in putting this all together I have assembled all the text, images, graphics, etc. so that anyone could create the graphic page (going forward in time) in about twenty minutes, provided they have a PC, Adobe Illustrator, and the Blue*Star program. Just about everything came from Blue*Star. So, if anyone would like to do this daily, to carry this on, just message me and I will teach you how. I believe it would help folks. I just have other areas I need to bring to a close first.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



“SPARE CHANGE”

December 16, 2023

“Turning and turning in the widening gyre

The falcon cannot hear the falconer;

Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;

Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.”

From W.B. Yeats, “The Second Coming.” These last few days have seen a bevy of four very strong solar flares, including an X-Class flare that is the largest since 2017. And these include a combined (layered) CME (Coronal Mass Ejection) from the three large solar flares that are Earth directed. The X-Class flare silenced some of Earth’s radio signals and did other damage, but that is not my focus.

These powerful flares and their combined wave of a coronal Mass ejection also affect us internally, and since science is just getting around to that kind of investigation, it is up to us to look for ourselves at what’s happening inside us.

And the Sun is such a powerful source of life that it does not only affect us with its sunshine, but also seats effects we can only realize are deep inside, where we don’t go... much.

One thing they do, although we may not have gotten around to naming it, is throw our inner winds and channels into chaos, powerful inner change that finds us without knowing it being forced out of our usual groove and wandering around for other possibilities in the turmoil. We don’t even realize we are doing this. And this just happened to me.

As best I can understand, increased solar energy that comes rather than in streaming sunlight, but in huge surges and packets way beyond our ability to easily

accommodate it, somehow affects what in Tibetan Buddhism are called the winds and the channels. The winds and channels are delicate pathways and systems deep within us that are easily disturbed.

And once disturbed these winds and channels perhaps are affected by the solar power surges, just as in electrical storms can blow out transformers. A strong solar flare surge may affect our internal winds and channels, causing an energy surge that results in something that resemble the effects of hallucinogens or staggering, in that we find ourselves wandering beyond our normal groove in a kind of temporary out-of-the-body state, without realizing that we have left our normal reservations. The sheer energy impulses of large solar flares may cause this, IMO.

Certainly, I have been doing this recently, reoriented enough that I launched my astrology forecast service because it felt like the thing to do, only to go back a few days later to the merry-go-round of change and come out canceling that and, at least for now, taking another tack entirely. I'm still recovering from this game of 'winds-and-channels' musical chairs and it may not be over.

These deep solar charges affect us internally, changes that stir us deeply, pushing us beyond our limits, out into a kind of trance and we are swept up in this pure modicum of change without being aware of it and are led by the nose hither and yon.

I'm working now with the aftermath of these recent powerful flares, and it's not even aftermath yet, because the hits just keep on coming. And we may

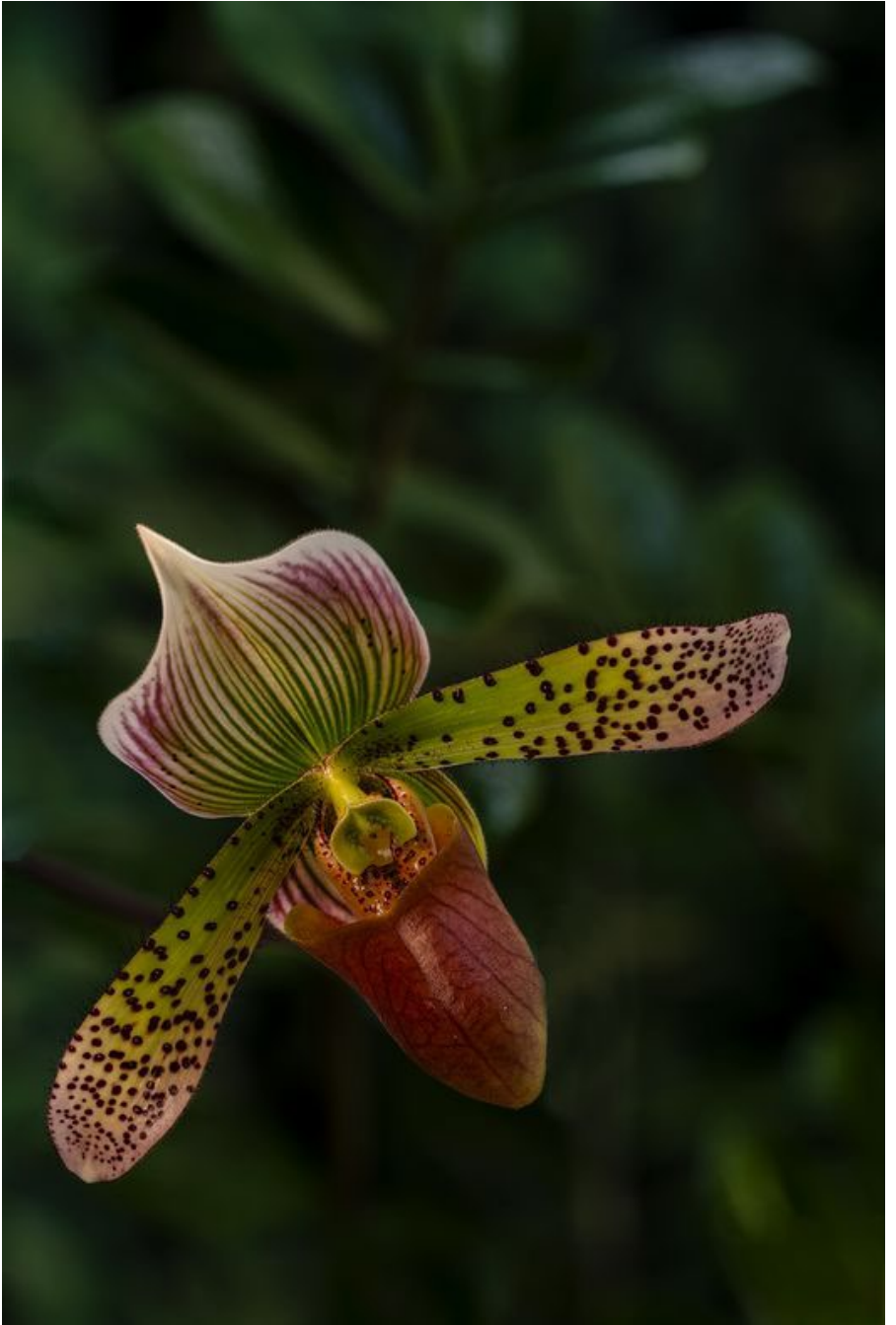
not be done. And the solar sunspot cycle has another year at least to heighten.

Where does change come from? Ask yourself that. Yet, we all know it comes, invited or uninvited.

I'm doing my best here to keep folks informed, while at the same time churning in the same gyre as the rest of us. Obviously, I did not see the large X-Class flare coming and it coincided with a big change in my own life, within a couple of hours. So, don't tell me there is nothing deep in there that's moving around. It's moving all right, and it's up to us to get in line with it and use it or be used by it.

It's just a lot more change than we are used to. These are just my opinions on all this.

[Photo of an orchid by me.]



THROWN OFF TRACK

December 17, 2023

As the result of a mental ‘Blow Out.’ Given the Vajrayana dharma path I am on, our mantra is “Take it to the path,” so I try to learn something from everything I do, and now is not the exception. What have I learned from my recent bout of forecasting astrology and then doing an about-face or complete reversal? There is something and here it is.

Power surges often blow out transformers on our city streets when an electrical storm comes through. I believe that intense solar flares and CMEs do the same for our inner guidance system, what the Tibetans call our winds and channels. Internally, we don’t seem to have much of a surge protector from the very powerful solar surges that come with intense solar flares.

And what I find a bit scary is that what little surge protection we have does not go bang-pop and explode as the street transformers tend to do. It’s all silent. We have no idea it is happening, at least this has been my experience.

Instead, it seems we just quietly wander off track into the suburbs of our mind and wake up far away from where we were and often feeling misguided at that. Solar surges can power us right out of our daily groove, what we call normal, and send us ‘believing’

that we can do what we cannot actually do or at least we cannot maintain that new-found direction.

And when the solar surge subsides, there we are on the shore of life just as the outgoing tide strands a piece of driftwood on the beach.

I don't know much about how this works, but science seems uninterested for the most part in the effects of extreme solar influx on the human psyche and our emotional systems. There are those of us that have some awareness of all this, like the old Dylan quote..."Something is happening here, but you don't know what it is, do you Mr. Jones?"

I can't say that I do know, at least all that well, yet at the same time I am aware of something going on, so I can't fail ignorance by a meter or a foot. Just as our cars, computers, and what-not have intricate electrical systems, the human condition is said to have a vast system of 72,000 channels and winds that itself is very delicate.

Perhaps it does not take much to blow out the stops and send us careening into the future but off our contacts. That just happened to me during these latest very powerful solar flares and influxes. It blew my mind a bit, at least enough that I found myself, or woke back up in the midst of launching an extensive astrological forecast system. It seemed like a good idea at the time. LOL.

Nothing wrong with such a forecasting system, and I'm the guy to do it, but as I came back into my senses, it was obvious to me that, even though I built the entire system and have it running, this is not the

gig for me, at least not right now, because I have plenty of other irons already in the fire that need attending.

And so, when the bubble popped, I found myself just out there, launched and operating a full-blown astrological forecast. It was like waking up after a night of drinking beer and wondering... 'Wha' happened?"

And so, this leads me to venture to say or at least ask this question about solar influx: Do these solar flare power-surges blow our mind enough that we are easily thrown off track and end up blithely wandering off our normal reservation on a wild goose chase, only to wake up as the extra energy throttles back, leaving us, well, holding the bag of whatever we came up with from our wandering vacation.

I'm just asking and looking for discussion.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



SELF PROJECTION

December 18, 2023

Some of you are not going to like me running this tired idea past you one more time, yet I can't help but do it. Why? Because it is so very, very important.

As a point of understanding, I agree with you; it's just another concept. However, as for actually experiencing this, much less realizing it, that is another thing entirely. I am going for realization here yet starting with understanding the idea.

There is no end to this attempt to communicate that there is no such thing as we, the subject, in here looking out, while out there is the object we are perceiving, independent from us. Never was and never will be. We are all together one.

According to the dharma teachings that was a misunderstanding from time immemorial. We are born with it. And it's true today.

I learned this on May 6, 1964, in Berkeley, California, when I first dropped acid, some Sandoz LSD, fresh from Switzerland. That night was to change my life forever in an instant, although I looked at that instant all that night and did so for the next 30 years or so, until dharma training helped show me how to use it properly. It was a perceived difference that was none, the first I ever knew.

As mentioned, decades later, the same thing came up with dharma practice and dharma realization, although it took me a little while to appreciate that I had done all this before, back in 1964, yet did not know then all of what to do with it, how to work it. It had all the profundity of a realization.

In that instant in 1964 I realized that everything out there in the world, everything I saw out there for my entire life was for the most part my own projection. Yes, LSD enabled me to do that, to see (and in slow

motion at that) that I was busy projecting my own innermost fears onto the outside world and then watching them in rapt fascination and being freaked out by what I saw. I had done this all my life to varying degrees. It's called duality, mistaking two for what is one, and that is what Samsara is all about -- duality.

And in my life up to that point, never, not even once, had I known or even suspected that the outside world was to a great extent my own projection that I was seeing. This never crossed my mind. I assumed that the outside world was the outside world and totally separate from me and I was already 22 years old.

And then, that night, as the poets might say, the dewdrop slipped into the shining sea. And just like that I realized (and realizations are forever) that what I saw out in the world was nothing other than my own projection. I saw this repeatedly that night, in 3D and real time. There was no longer a me in here looking at the world out there, such that I had to protect myself from it. I was in fact creating the world I saw outside of me and I realized this!

The realization was that 'Me, myself, and I', along with the outside world, were all together already united and one. There no longer were two, me and them, but only the one bunch of us together, and already totally familiar. Suddenly, I was in on the joke, so to speak.

And a correlate of that realization was that since this was all my own projection, I could do something about it. I could change my perception, which would change my projection, and begin to make friends with the outside world, person by person, and moment by moment. I started that night.

This all may seem obvious, but is it? Here you are 'understanding' intellectually what I am saying, yet that is paper thin. In 1964 I was not only experiencing it in real time, but most importantly, I realized it. And as I mentioned earlier, realizations are forever. That's what the dharma is all about, realization.

It wasn't for me obvious until that night I realized that the world was my own projection. What a surprise. And so, that's the power of LSD and I imagine other hallucinogens, the power of perceiving the two, subject and object, as in fact one, united. It plunged me into oneness. There was no choice.

And I was struck dumb by that realization. And like the Tibetans put it, even the light of a single match can end the darkness of innumerable eons. And that's what happened to me that night, a single realization that ended a lifetime of

darkness, fear, and suffering, at the same time offering me a differential, a way to gradually change what I saw. Of course, this took time, lots of it.

As Shakespeare said in his tenth sonnet, "O, change thy thought, that I may change my mind." In an instant, I changed what I thought, I realized, and that flipped me, changed my mind in an instant that night.

This is what studying and practicing the dharma is all about, deconstructing the duality that Samsara is based on. When our dualistic house of cards collapses, unity appears.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



THE PROCESS OF REFINEMENT

December 20, 2023

I know, the following is something like how many angels can dance on the head of a pin, but there is a point here. It's more like the old saying, "The mills of the Gods grind slowly, but they grind exceedingly fine."

"Insight Meditation," at least in my experience, starts with insight, a breakthrough view, like a porthole, or if you like, like a tear in the fabric of Samsara, which is called recognizing the nature of the mind and how it actually works. The view, once penetrated, then widens from there, becoming increasingly more inclusive, gradually incorporating more and more of our samsaric world within it. That's the path, opening up, and Samsara deconstructing.

As my dharma teacher would say to me, and these were his last words to me before he passed, "keep expanding and extending your recognition..."

That porthole of recognition is more like a mobius strip, increasingly incorporating more and more of samsara, until we have turned ourselves inside out and thus, I mostly agree with the Advaita teacher Wayne Liquorman's statement:

"As you walk the spiritual path, it widens, not narrows, until one day it broadens to a point where there is no path left at all."

Exactly, and what then? Well, we are where we are supposed to be. It can't be all path and no fruition.

Perhaps we can say it's like breathing air. We have to keep on breathing to live, so some process continues. And I do agree that we keep on refining our view, expanding and extending it, until we are fully enlightened. And that's what the sacred texts I have read say.

I'm not saying that we arrive anywhere else other than here and now. What I am saying is that we get some of the rough changes out of the way and gradually refine our view so that we no longer have to roil the water as much as we once did.

And so, I can't agree with Liquorman that there is no path left at all. That is an overstatement, IMO. The path gets increasingly finer and more refined, yet we are still doing something all the way until we are enlightened. Whether, after that, it's like breathing, meaning the process of enlightenment is continual, rather than our ever reaching a static state, I can't say because I don't know, probably the former.

What I can say is that sooner or later we arrive through this process such that this samsaric world that we live in is pretty much incorporated into our view. Or as my dad used to say, "things get down to a gentle roar."

What is germane IMO is that this need to be on a path, to always be forging forward itself evaporates, and is seen at this point as itself an obscuration, that effort, if there is any.

Of course, these are things we don't need to be worrying about yet. LOL. Worry, no, awareness of, yes.



LIGHT IS LIGHT

December 30, 2023

For reasons not always clear to me I feel it is not appropriate at this time to write about the more advanced forms of meditation, as I have been doing for years. These times are perhaps too distracting, and I believe we all need something more immediately useful and practical.

Even at my best, writing about the ineffable Dharma that traditionally cannot be put into words, seemed perhaps a step removed from practical, yet I feel something like this needs to be available, and I addressed what I felt was that need.

Yet, today I feel our lives are under siege by all of the ongoing world and political events, each demanding some part of our attention, with the result that, by perhaps an order of magnitude, we are distanced from the more subtle concepts. We are busy enough just keeping up with events that tax our focus and concentration.

Yes, after saying that, it's still the middle of the night and I wake, as usual, and do something for a number of hours before heading back asleep. Yet, as mentioned, these days I don't seem to be guided by an urge to talk about the more advanced and nondual forms of meditation, like non-meditation. And so, here I sit.

And I have been working and concentrating on, as of late, photography, a visual medium. Of course, I have always, and for good reason, claimed that 'Liberation Through Hearing' as we see in the Bardo Teachings is not the only View available to us. I have long been an advocate of 'Liberation Through Seeing', liberation

through the eyes and the visual arts, like graphics and photography.

And for many years I have been a 'nature' photographer, working with natural light and natural subjects, like flowers, plants, and Mother Nature's critters. I saw no need to use special lighting in my work, as I felt that such lighting was perhaps non 'organic' enough. I've got organic on the brain.

Well, kiss those thoughts goodbye. Suddenly, I realized that light is light, and natural daylight at some 5600 Kelvin is no different than 5600 Kelvin light produced in my studio. That statement is easy to say and rolls off the tongue, but I found it mind boggling when I tried creating natural light in the studio and saw the results. I could see no difference. None. Shows what a prejudice can do.

And so, this realization precipitated me into learning to use natural daylight temperatures in the studio and not only from the light coming in from my windows with a southern exposure. I can mix the two and there is no difference that I can see. And seeing is what we are talking about here. Visual.

Therefore, in the last month or so (especially since it is winter out) I find myself exploring lighting my photographic subjects indoors and, in the studio, and realize that I have ignored these lighting considerations all along, so to speak. And they are considerable and consequential.

Anyway, I'm on a learning curve, one that is affecting my photographic work and I have been leaning back into that medium recently and for the time being. It is

not that I can't work with words. I can and continue to do so, writing things like these articles.

However, I continue to find (and always have) a certain liberation in the visual realm through photography. Certainly, as the old saying goes, "a picture is worth a thousand words." I realize this in fact and through experience.

And so, although I have known by label and equipment about photographic lighting techniques, I can't say that I have actually mastered all of that, as mentioned, perhaps because I considered it artificial and not natural enough. I ignored it.

Against that view, I have recently reconsidered, and I realized that light is light and that since photography is all about light, I have only mastered one half of the equation, so to speak. I am rectifying that and exploring how to use light itself to paint images more than I have to date. And as I look at Mother Nature and 'natural' light, it is clear to me that all of the techniques of lighting exist in nature and that I have just ignored them up until now.

And so, as Robert Blake in "Baretta" used to say, "That's the name of that tune." And with that, I am writing. I will have to follow this thread for a while. At least I'm talking to myself again. So much to learn. LOL.

[Photo by me.]



STORY: VISITING TIBET'S GOLDEN CHILD

December 31, 2023

In 1997, at the request of my dharma teacher, and one month's notice, I dropped everything and took my family on a pilgrimage to Tibet to see the 17th Karmapa, Orgyen Trinley Dorje, the young Tibetan lama that the Eddie Murphy movie "The Golden Child" is said to be patterned after.

Like the Dalai Lama, the Karmapa is the head of one of the four main lineages of Tibetan Buddhism. At that time, the Karmapa was 12-years old, but his incarnation goes back seventeen generations. In fact, the Karmapa Lineage was the first of Tibet's reincarnated lamas. The current Karmapa is the 17th, while the current Dalai Lama is the 14th.

“Our Pilgrimage to Tibet”

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

I had no real idea how this trip would affect me. Above is the free e-book for our entire trip, yet here I will pick up the story from the point where we actually arrived at the Karmapa's ancestral home, Tsurphu Monastery in the Tolung Valley, deep in the mountains of Tibet at some 15,000 feet in altitude.

There I sat, with my wife, two of my daughters, and my son in a little room waiting to see the Karmapa. We were about to spend three days there as the

Karmapa's guest. We came with all kinds of letters of introduction from our lineage.

Apparently, every day at 1 PM the Karmapa has a public reception, where a procession of visitors file up, offer a white scarf, and get his blessing. We wanted to do that too, but were told to wait and that he would see us privately.

As mentioned, we had come with letters of introduction from a number of high lamas. It seemed that from the moment we arrived, all the monks there knew we were Khenpo Karthar's students. We could see them whispering. We belonged to Khenpo Rinpoche and they seemed to know exactly who that was, all the way to Tibet.

The time ticked away on the slow track as we waited with anticipation to see the Karmapa. I had last seen His Holiness in 1974, but in his previous incarnation as the 16th Gyalwa Karmapa, Rigpe Dorje, and I felt like I had been in endless touch with him through the lineage all this time. Like the Dalai Lama, the Karmapa is the spiritual leader of an entire lineage of Tibetan monks, a lineage most famous for its yogis and meditators.

Until one month before, we had little hope of ever seeing the Karmapa, since it was very uncertain when or if the Chinese would ever let him leave Tibet. He was essentially a prisoner in his own monastery. And now, here we were at his ancestral home, about to meet him in person.

[Note: The young Karmapa secretly escaped to India from Tibet in December of 1999]

At last, the summons came. The Karmapa would see us now. So off we went in single file toward his interview room, some two stories up from where we were. And I was right in the middle of the worst of my altitude sickness, still sick and getting sicker. I don't do well at high altitudes, slipping into bronchitis, having to go on antibiotics, and all of that. I was not well.

As I climbed the steep stairs toward His Holiness I had to stop and do heavy breathing, just to keep enough oxygen in my lungs. Every few steps, I would find myself gasping for breath as I climbed upward toward the interview room. And please understand that the average Tibetan stairway is more like a ladder (like on a boat) than the kind of stairs we are used to, and steep. You literally hang on and climb.

We eventually came to a small courtyard in the open sun outside His Holiness' room, where we took off our shoes. I actually had to sit down and pant. How embarrassing. And then up another short ladder to the interview room itself, where I arrived, still trying to catch my breath.

I plopped down on my butt at the back of the room, while everyone else was up front prostrating to the Karmapa. I was so bushed that I did not (at first) remember to do the three traditional prostrations that practitioners do before any great lama. All I could see was this young man kind of inset into this wall of golden brocade at the far end of the room. I got up and slowly moved forward.

Through the 1960s and onward, in my quest for spiritual teachers, I had seen many gurus in person, and so was preparing myself to actually be in the presence of the Karmapa.

In the past, when I met great spiritual presences, most were imposing, some almost regal. I was very much getting ready for a similar experience here, you know, me seeing them. However, the Karmapa was different. In the end, in his presence, it was me that I saw, not him. Here is how that happened.

As I reached the front of the room, there was the Karmapa, looking better than I could even imagine, and I had imagined he would be great. All of 12 years old (by our calendar) and five feet tall, but seeming seven feet tall and ageless, he filled the room with his presence. All I remember is how happy I was to see him, like a child sees his mother. I remember kind of getting through my prostrations and fumbling to offer him a white scarf, while kneeling down before him.

He looked at me like I had never been looked at before. His eyes look straight into my eyes and then he ups the ante by focusing intently within me. I was being seen. His dark eyes, almost like the ever-adjusting lens of an auto-focus camera, were actually moving in and out, trying to get the right focus. His pupils moved.

I have never seen eyes do that, be able to lock gaze with you and then, with the gazed locked, still move in and out, getting a fix. Yet that was just how it was. The Karmapa examined me for a few seconds and, in the grip of his eyes, it seemed as though time

stopped, and then all relaxed and time moved on again. He placed the white scarf over my head, gave me a welcoming kind look, and I sat down in front of him with the rest of my family.

There was chanting going on. Gradually I realized we were in the middle of the Mahakala puja, perhaps the most important daily practice for the Karma Kagyu Lineage. Later we found out that we were experiencing a special form of Mahakala, one for insiders, complete with Tsok, the ritual feast offering. Karmapa was sharing this with us privately.

It was very intense, with His Holiness leading the chanting with an intent and often fierce look. Mahakala is a wrathful practice, as some of you may already know, one invoking the protector deities. And this one was complete with drums, cymbals, and the various Tibetan horns. I had experienced the Mahakala puja many times before, but never one quite like this, certainly not one with the Karmapa himself leading it! And I don't really know how to describe what happened next.

I begin to identify with this puja as not much different from my own practice in many ways, and I found myself examining just where I was with my daily practice, and what it was all about for me. I had done it, without fail, every morning and afternoon/evening for many years. I was to do it until my death or until I completed it by realizing the essential nature of my own mind, whichever came first.

Now, here in the midst of Karmapa's mandala, I began to explore the true meaning and nature of that

practice. What was that practice and what was the essence of it? I thought how in my own idea of myself, to my mind I was somewhat of a tough character, and I carried that strength or toughness into my practice.

In fact, I loved the fierce wrathful deities, somehow identifying with them. And now, there in that room with Karmapa, that same strength, toughness, or we might even say fierceness came up in the mind and began to be examined inwardly, but in a new light. And this was no idea that I was playing with.

Instead, I was examining myself or, to be more exact, I was realizing part of my self, in this case, that part that had been practicing all these years, the one who did the practice.

And as this realization took place, I saw how my fierceness or toughness was but a shell or shield covering up this extremely sensitive inside. I was tough, because I was so...so sensitive and, at heart, even kind.

In that moment I was flooded with a state of compassion or rather the realization that I was (and always had been), in my deepest part, compassionate, concerned, and caring, and that this was my natural state.

It was not something to strive for, but already in fact always the case – the state of my very being, something that only had to be uncovered, opened up. I did not have to strive to be compassionate, for that was already my natural state. All I had to do was to let go of what obscured this insight, relax, and let it shine through.

Again, I should point out and be clear that this was not a concept or idea, but a realization that totally involved me. I realized that the essence of my practice, of my fierce presence, was none other than compassion.

It was as if, like taking off a glove, I had turned myself inside out. Tears just flowed as I was overcome with this, now so obvious, realization that I was, in essence, very simple – just a soft-hearted, easy mark for this world.

I was at ease and all of my toughness, my fierceness, was nothing more than an attempt to cover over and shield myself from responding too much to all the suffering I saw around me. In that moment, I understood myself and my practice, right in midst of that Mahakala puja with Karmapa. I was at peace and at home.

And later, when we left the Karmapa and very slowly drove back down 40-miles on a road that was not really a road at all, we saw rainbow after rainbow after rainbow.

So that is what Karmapa was about to me at first meeting, not some powerful being sitting on a throne. Rather, there was enough space and time within his mental mandala and presence for me to realize myself. It was not the Karmapa I saw when I was with him, but myself. I realized my own nature, not his. That is my definition of a spiritual being, one who helps me realize myself, not who they are.

After the puja, we spent some time together with the Karmapa during which he gave the answers to the

questions that we had brought to him. He did not skirt the tough questions, but was clear and unequivocal in his answers. I was deeply relieved, both from the experience I just described and to hear the various particular answers. And later, he came out in the courtyard and just kind of hung out with us. After all, my son Michael Andrew was about the same age. I doubt that very many western families with kids had ever made it to Tsurphu Monastery.

I had heard many stories about His Holiness, both this incarnation and the previous incarnations, stories of amazing actions, all pointing to this extraordinary being.

Somehow these stories help to inspire faith and confidence in the Karmapa, that he is who he is -- that sort of thing. Yet these stories were nothing compared to the sheer brilliance of his presence. And this kind of thing defies words.

How do you explain that when you are in the presence of His Holiness, you have a different idea of yourself, of who you are, why you are here, etc.? I learned things about myself when I was in his presence that I never knew before, important things. The word is "realization." I realized things about myself that I had never realized before.

And I understood why my teacher, Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, wanted us to go to Tibet and meet the Karmapa in person. It occurred to me that if I could start my life over, I would drop whatever I was doing, go and see the Karmapa in person, preferably in an interview like we did. And only after that would I pick

up my life again. I didn't understand who I was or how best to make use of my life until I met His Holiness. We spent three days with the Karmapa, as was even invited to stay overnight with him.

In the beginning, phrases like "His Holiness" and "guru" were literally foreign to me and smacked of exotic cults and all of that stuff, a hangover perhaps from the New-Age fads of the 1970s. But meeting the Karmapa, eyeball-to-eyeball, was not foreign at all. It was only too familiar, like knowing myself finally for who I am, confirming who it is I always hoped I was.

[Photos by either me or my wife Margaret.]

