

2021 Essays Summer



by Michael Erlewine

2021
Dharma Essays
SUMMER

by Michael Erlewine

© Copyright Michael Erlewine 2021

These are not all, but they are the most useful essays from 2021, 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 'any' 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.

Contents

THE AUTHENTIC RINGS TRUE	8
THE VIDEO AND SLIDES	10
MISSING THE POINT	11
WHEN WHAT CHANGES IS OURSELVES.....	14
WALKING THE DHARMA TALK.....	16
"I LIKE TO WATCH TV"	18
WHAT'S IN A HABIT?	20
THE ADVENT OF AMERICAN DHARMA.....	23
SHORT TIMER	27
MORE THAN YOU WANT TO KNOW	30
WHAT I DO WITH TIME	33
WHERE PROCESS IS THE GOAL.....	35
NEWS FLASH: THE SUN NEVER QUILTS.....	37
MY 80TH BIRTHDAY	39
"MEANING:" BEHIND THE BEYOND	40
AMERICAN TRANSCENDENTALISTS.....	43
DHARMA MNEMONICS: DO YOU USE THEM?	46
THE WHEAT FROM THE CHAFF	49
EAT THE WHOLE THING	51
FEELING FOR THE EDGE OF THE FUTURE.....	53
BREAKTHROUGH AND LEAPOVER.....	55
GETTING DOWN TO OUR FIGHTING WEIGHT	58
I READ MY OWN WRITE	61
NO PIE-IN-THE-SKY	63

FROM GOD TO THE DHARMA	64
SHAMATA: THE TIP OF THE SPEAR.....	67
DHARMA: THE PERFECT STORM	74
INSIGHT MEDITATION: THREADING THE EYE OF THE NEEDLE.....	77
INSCAPE: THE WAY IN	81
THE POINTING OUT INSTRUCTIONS.....	84
THE DHARMA’S NEW CLOTHES.....	88
“AWARENESS WITHOUT A WATCHER”	91
A DHARMA STORY -- THE DRAWING.....	94
REALIZING THE REALIZATION.....	97
FABRICATED EXPERIENCE.....	108
THE EASIEST DHARMA PRACTICE.....	111
LIFE BEYOND THE BUBBLE.....	118
ALL THE NEWS THAT’S FIT TO PRINT.....	121
1969: “THE SUMMER OF SOUL” AND THE HARLEM MUSIC FESTIVAL.....	123
THE TRAILING SUMMER.....	127
ERLEWINE PLANTS: CRAZY AS YOU WANNA’ BE.....	128
THE MOST EXPENSIVE RESTAURANT IN THE WORLD.....	136
FAMILY DHARMA WEEKEND	140
MAY ERLEWINE AT THE WEALTHY THEATER	143
THE SACRED TORUS	148
THE SENSES FIVE	149
THE POINT OF LEAST RESISTANCE	150
A FUTILE CONUNDRUM	152
IF AT FIRST YOU DON’T SUCEED, TRY, TRY AGAIN	157
WHY “EMPTINESS” IS A MYSTERY.....	158

MIND READER	161
WHAT PERSISTS AFTER DEATH?	167
FASCINATING: THE BUDDHIST CONCEPT OF “SCENTING”	172
FASCINATING: THE BUDDHIST CONCEPT OF “SCENTING”	176
SUMMARY: WHO MANAGES TO BE REBORN?.....	180
KARMA AND THE ALAYA CONSCIOUSNESS	184
DRUGS AND THE DHARMA: LIGHTNING IN A BOTTLE	187
THE INVISIBLE MIDNIGHT SUN.....	195
BEYOND BOREDOM	197
SKY BURIAL	199
INTO THE BOREDOM.....	201
TIME’S FLOW	204
MUMS THE WORD	206
LETTING IN SOME AIR AND LIGHT.....	210
EMPTY OF WHAT?	213
NOW: INTENSE SOLAR ACTIVITY	215
SOLAR ENERGY: BEHIND THE BEYOND	218
ENNUI.....	222
THE HARD STUFF	223
HARDENING OFF	225
GRIN AND BARE IT.....	228
PHOTOGRAPHY: LIBERATION THROUGH SEEING.....	231
STORY: THE CRANES AND THE TOOTHACHE.....	242
LOVE AND COMPASSION	250
AS TO DEVOTION	254
“COMPARED TO WHAT?”	256

A CHAIN OF FRIENDS.....	262
THE RULE OF CHANGE.....	265
DUMBING DOWN THE DHARMA	268
ROUNDING UP OR ROUNDING DOWN	270
THAT NO LESS THAN THE SAME IS CERTAIN	272
“THE PALE CAST OF THOUGHT”	273
ENFOLDING AND UNFOLDING DHARMA SPACE	276
IMPLICATE AND EXPLICATE ORDER.....	280
STREAMING SERIES: “THE EDDY”	282
“TO BE, OR NOT, TO BE”	283
A ‘NEW AGE’ PROBLEM.....	288
NOTIONS OF LANGUAGE.....	292
THE LATENT ECHO	296
THE LATENT ECHO REDUX.....	301
WE ARE EACH ALONE, YET WE ARE ALL ALONE TOGETHER	305
VAST EMPTY SPACE.....	306
DIRECT SOLAR EFFECT.....	306
OVERWHELMED BY SOLAR CHANGE.....	307
MOVING INTO THE LEELANAU PENINSULA	309

THE AUTHENTIC RINGS TRUE

To me, the authentic is lived-in reality, actually living in the body and speaking from the experience there, and not just from the theoretical and the purely conceptual. It is too often true that we seek refuge in the mind when things get hairy as opposed to getting into and taking control of our body and living it out, seeing things through. Of course, we can't get out of the body until we die, so retreating to the mind seldom solves very much. It's like the ostrich that sticks its head in the sand.

We all know that we can't steer a car worth beans unless we are in the driver's seat, which here means being in our body as opposed to a cringing retreat to the mind. It's a problem and a common one at that. I can't say that I know how it all works.

It would seem that whole nations or at least whole movements have died out because, apparently, no one was living the life, whatever that might be. My best guess is that somehow, we get all up in our mind and by doing that manage to neglect the nuts and the bolts of living, meaning getting into our body and using it.

If too many folks are doing that and not enough are minding the body, perhaps we just talk our way out of existence or something like that. Something has to explain why movements, periods, and perhaps whole epochs came and went. How does that happen? Someone is not minding the store.

What is “authenticity,” being authentic? It must be when we know what we are talking about from experience and not conjecture. Yet perhaps we are not willing to submit to experience in many cases and are satisfied with just hearing about it. If everyone is listening and no one is speaking, what then? There seems to be a surcharge for authenticity and never quite enough of it, which would suggest that it is generally not available. Is it no wonder that we like the authentic?

It seems that we know what is authentic when we see or find it, which suggests it is relative to a person. Experience seems to create a personality and we can sense authenticity when we find it.

And so, authenticity seems to accumulate through actual real-life experience, living and doing life, as opposed to just thinking about it conceptually. Let’s say authenticity is the residue or sign of life-initiation.

It rings true.

OUR 50TH WEDDING ANNIVERSARY

50 years ago today, July 3rd, 1971, Margaret and I were married under an old oak tree at a Theosophical campground. We had no money to rent a church or cared to. Being outside in such a place was fine with us. And we had a total of \$200 for food, etc. and that was it.

A couple hundred friends came. As for what we ate, it was potato salad, baked beans, French bread, some beer, and the odd joint. Our dear friend Tecla Loup

helped us cook all the food and she made Margaret's wedding dress and also a huge heart-shaped cake. Despite having no money, it was a wonderful wedding and a great time.

Now, 50 years later, some 15 people gathered at our home for a two-day celebration of our anniversary and my turning 80 years of age, my four kids Lotis, Anne, May, and Michael, along with a handful of grandkids and two dogs, Wilber and Sybil. I include a photo taken last night of some of the fun. There was another group on the other side of the room.

I express gratitude for making it this far and for my wonderful kids and beloved grandchildren.

Jul 3, 2021, 4:25 AM

THE VIDEO AND SLIDES

SEE THE VIDEO:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cv-SzfQkOGg>

Sometimes the cosmos is with us and Margaret and my 50th wedding anniversary just fit the bill. Yesterday, in the early hours of July 3, 2021 a new sunspot emerged and promptly exploded, producing the first X-class solar flare since 2017, complete with an extreme ultraviolet flash. The pulse of x-rays

promptly ionized the top of Earth's atmosphere, causing a shortwave radio blackout over the Atlantic Ocean. This X-ray burst called a rare "magnetic crochet," which altered the Earth's polar magnetic field, not like days after the flare, but while the flare was in process.

Here is a video, some slides, and a sense of what our party was like. It features a couple of many songs by Seth Bernard and May Erlewine, not to mention the grandkids, a couple of dogs, and a huge feast.

Jul 6, 2021, 9:07 AM

MISSING THE POINT

The integrity of the dharma is my refuge, one that I never tire of. It is pure recursivity, always purifying itself. Where else can we turn for refuge? Tell me.

And anything that looks, smells, tastes, or sounds like dharma is revered. Since the whole world can be seen as sacred, this makes for a lot of reverence. At what point can that approach become meaningless if our "reverence" itself is not authentic and fresh?

I understand from many decades of study and practice with the dharma that any contact with the dharma whatsoever may be to some degree be meritorious, yet IMO, at a certain point we may just be gilding the lily, placing faith in the dharma when it may be better placed in ourselves realizing the dharma. Putting faith

outside of or beyond ourselves, instead of in ourselves, IMO, is a bridge too far or simply a mistake.

It's not as if I don't have years of experience in all of this, enough time to try it out and see what works or does not work. I had one of the shocks of my lifetime when I had a major stroke and ended up in the hospital, which stroke wiped out my sense of Self and my person in one fell swoop and this lasted for days, weeks, and months to some degree. There I was, left standing naked and without any cover whatsoever.

And the shock of Shocks came when, after some recovery time, I sat down on my cushion and tried to do my daily dharma practice. Whatever cachet I remember having was completely gone, like all the ambiance I earned from reciting texts and mantras by rote all those years and not with feeling. Surprise, surprise. That was now all void.

All that was left was any tiny bit of realization I might have garnered from all those years. Realization is forever but gilding the lily or whatever was gained from reifying rote practices was gone for good. I was horrified! It was like "Do not pass 'Go' and do not collect two-hundred dollars" as in the Monopoly game. All of the patina I had accumulated from all those years of reification was stripped bare. Gone!

If I wanted to feel something, I had to generate it on the spot from heartfelt feeling, as if for the first time. It felt like I was demoted and sent to the back of the line to start all over in dharma merit accumulation. What had I been doing all that time?

I am not saying this to frighten anyone, but just stating out loud what had frightened me, “big time,” as they say. Rubbing shoulders with the dharma, surrounding ourselves with dharma items and Tibetan culture is no guarantee of accumulating much merit. Of course, there is probably some merit in reifying the dharma, making it more important than it actually is to us. I will grant that, but small pittance in the long run.

However, if I had imagined that all of the meaningless rote recitation I had done, recitation with no real mindfulness on my part, would accumulate anything more than lip service, that was not the case. In fact, as I found out after my stroke, it amounted to nothing, zilch, other than a memory of how much time I more or less had wasted, while waiting for my daily dharma practice time to be over so I could get back to what I really wanted to do that day. That should be a hint to some of you.

Dharma is not something we can just throw a few good wishes at. The dharma is like a wheel that we must ourselves turn. If we don't authentically turn it, nothing much will happen. We actually have to do it with full intent. “Full intent” means as if our life or future rebirth depended on it. Dharma is not a casual undertaking.

If you can hear my message, pay it some attention, and perhaps adjust your dharma practice so you are actually more deeply involved. Time passes, nevertheless.

Jul 8, 2021, 2:06 AM

WHEN WHAT CHANGES IS OURSELVES

[Before this blog, a couple of housekeeping issues.

(1) Cataract Removal: My wife sent this note to our kids on our family chat:

“Dad is wandering around like a little kid, marveling at his hands, the tiny rain drops on plants, leaf details, etc.”

(2) CME (Corona Mass Ejection): “Decaying sunspot AR2837 (N17W36) erupted on July 7th, hurling a coronal mass ejection (CME) into space: movie. Most of the CME is heading away from Earth, but it still might affect us. NOAA analysts are looking into the possibility of a glancing blow by the CME's flank a few days from now.”]

BLOG

When it comes to change from solar influx, it's often a case of feast or famine. Getting irritated because nothing has changed in our situation is always a problem. It's the same old “same old,” so what's new?

It's either that or be inundated by so much change that its disorienting, change that's busy wiping the slate clean, and plunging us into putting ourselves back together again, a perfect example of arranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. We don't even realize it is happening, so bewildered are we. We are too busy trying to fit all the pieces back to where we think they belong.

Change happens or we could say change comes, and it comes in any number of forms that may seem quite natural. It can sometimes appear “foreign,” but most change caused by intense solar activity simply stirs or shakes up what we already are working with.

Samsara, this cyclic world we live in, is subject to waves of change that roll in and roll out, leaving us to make sense of it all as we can. Well, yes, our chattering mind may be picking away like hens pecking gravel, yet beneath that is a slow swell, a more viscous layer of what I call bewilderment at being disturbed that does the rolling in and rolling back out, while we vainly attempt to maintain some kind of stability through it all. It’s like rolling with the groundswell of the sea, waves that lift us up and bring us back down, while we bob and dunk in the surf.

Those of you who do not want to link this inner sense of change to solar activity don’t have to. The rolling change is there no matter how we spell it. As they say, “Change is the only constant.” Endlessly trying to rebuild our house of cards or sandcastles goes on, nevertheless. Only the amount of bewilderment changes. Many of us know the old film “On a Clear Day You Can See Forever.” It’s like that. Every day is not clear.

Another thing, although it sometimes happens, is the tendency to look outside for change to come and, well, change us. Mostly, it’s not like that. Change is not something that “happens” to us; Instead, what happens is that WE change. In other words, instead of something from the outside changing us, we ourselves change, “We,” the one who is looking for change to come upon us. While we are busy looking out for change, the one who is us changes, and we (the monitor of change) never know it. Before we know we have changed, we change.

Against that kind of change, it is difficult to prepare for, because the one who is watching out for change is exactly what changes. Just as the eye cannot see itself, so our built-in monitor for change itself changes. It is difficult to monitor the monitor. That kind of change short-circuits the mind.

Look around you. Look anywhere you can, and you still can't see it. We can't see change if we are what is changing. However, we can feel change. About all we can do is take a deep breath and ride the rollercoaster of this everchanging life and try to piece it together AFTER the change takes place. Now would not be the time for me to quote that "The only constant is change."

WALKING THE DHARMA TALK

How do we end up walking our talk and putting our money where our mouth is? I don't think it is as simple as that we can just will it be done; my will is not that strong. And so, how is that done?

If we are used to being free, why would we choose to go into a cage? How important is that kind of natural freedom? As mentioned, I don't see it as a show of sheer will power. That won't do it.

Michelangelo also wrote poetry, and I remember this line from his poems:

"What if a little bird should escape death for many long years, only to suffer a crueler death."

To escape the death of prostituting ourselves through working at something for which we have no interest is no easy matter. It involves going the long way round, a long, long way indeed.

“The straighter the line, the finer the curve” comes to mind.”

And it's a hard way to go, yet like the bird that flies from the ship far out at sea, if we can't find any place to land, what choice do we have? As mentioned, if we were raised free, how do we give that up? Freedom is more valuable than money. And here is the rub.

If we don't know we are free and that we are not free, it makes one think. Exactly what would you trade your freedom for? However most folks don't even seem to have that problem.

If we never were free up to now, we have nothing to lose. That's the real problem of Samsara in a nutshell. We can't lose what we never had. I think about that.

We can't realize what we have never realized. There is no way to fake realization. We wouldn't know how, because we don't know what realization is. That's the whole point.

It is a problem with realizing the dharma that we have no idea (at least not a good one) what realization is like without actually realizing. So, there is no sounds-like or maybe-it-is-like-this because, aside from some conceptual understanding, we have no idea what dharma realization is until we do, until we

realize it. Therefore, we can't imitate realization. That's what's called a ring-pass-not. We can't see past it. In our lineage, it has to be pointed out to us by an authentic teacher.

Jul 10, 2021, 1:19 AM

"I LIKE TO WATCH TV"

The above quote from the movie "Being There" starring Peter Sellers. To this, I add the following:

"He sat motionless, still, his eyes looking straight ahead, fixed on a single point. And he could do this for hours at a time." What kind of yogi is this?

This is not a yogi. He was watching a movie, binge-watching a series. Yet, the similarities are striking between this and Tranquility Meditation. And most Americans can and do, do this. Are these two techniques related?

I say they are related. And as horrifying as this may sound, watching the tube or screen may be one of the standard dharma-preliminaries for Americans. Before you laugh (which I at first did too), take another and more careful look at all this. I had to.

It's also humorous how such a left-field thought can creep up on us, but it happens, and IMO, this is a case of that. And yes, there are facets missing between mind training on the TV and on the dharma cushion, but not as much as you might think. For one, almost everybody in America is doing it, which is a far cry from imagining that everybody is sitting on a cushion trying to learn to meditate. We couldn't coerce everyone to sit on the cushion, but watching TV in this manner, is literally being done by everyone, and voluntarily.

I'm a great admirer of taking what is already accomplished and making use of it. Considering the extensive training most of us have had through watching movies and television, all of which proves our ability to remain still and focused, how can we turn that into dharma practice, or is it already close to that and we have not realized it?

This fact just proves the point, that our "interest," what interests us, is the key to most everything, including dharma training. "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink." The same goes for us. We don't have to force ourselves to be interested in what we already interested in. We just need to find that interest and follow it.

There must be a facet of the dharma that each of us are interested in, or most of us at least. And interest can be recursive. The more we follow our interest, the more pure it gets and our interest increases its focus.

My point is that, if you watch video (movies and TV) intensively and for many years, you (by default) have to have by now an ample amount of training in the basics of Tranquility Meditation already there. Those skills have to be there. Only what drives them and how they are used differs.

The more traditional way of learning Tranquility Meditation, where we measure by our lapses of focus and then refocus (rinse and repeat), contrasts with the method I am pointing out here, where instead of tracking our failures to focus, we concentrate with our genuine and positive interest in a subject, just as we all have enough interest to get to the end of a two-hour movie with no help and few failures.

If this approach is worth a try, it remains for each of us to find an area of dharma that interests us enough to have that interest. Then we learn to focus on that and begin to hone our interest. Make sense to anyone? Tell me what you think or how crazy I am, if you must.

Jul 10, 2021, 9:48 PM

WHAT'S IN A HABIT?

Well, quite a lot of misunderstanding, IMO, of the blog "I Like to Watch TV." Some folks just want to look at the content of a habit rather than the technique involved in creating a habit. So, I will try again.

Let's start with learning the technique for practicing Shamata meditation (Tranquility Meditation), which, for example, can involve focusing on a pebble or a stick, and is not exactly interesting to many, as compared to the habit formed by watching movies and TV. To me, it seems to be the difference between mechanically practicing mindfulness (Shamata) and being interested in the

content of the movie enough to watch it to the end, regardless of what that content is.

However, please don't mistake. A habit of concentration is being formed by watching a movie just as it is in practicing Shamata meditation. And if you have watched movies for years or decades, it is a strong and ingrained habit at that. If the two approaches could marry, that could be a happy marriage. The two approaches would be (1) being interested as we are when watching a good movie and (2) building a habit of mindfulness practicing Shamata Meditation. Both can work, but they are quite different.

To me, the problem with the classic Shamata training, as I know it, is that the technique involved is not naturally or organically interesting, but like so many different kinds of "technique" training, it is very mechanical, requiring rote practice until a habit is eventually formed. Not all of us are good at that.

Yet, watching movies is somehow interesting to us or else we wouldn't watch them. In other words, through watching TV and movies, a technique is also being learned (a habit) based on our natural interest, while (on the other hand) learning Tranquility Meditation (Shamata) is driven by a wish/will to learn to meditate more than that the actual process or technique (at least initially) is inherently interesting to us. We have to practice it, while we don't practice in order to watch movies. That difference tells us something right there.

What are called "The Preliminaries," the preliminary dharma practices, are mostly a series of techniques to be practiced until we perfect them. Often the various practices themselves, physically speaking, are not all that intuitively interesting, like doing 100,000 prostrations, 100,000 100-syllable mantras, concentrating on a pebble or a stick, and so forth. Yes, they may be fueled by our interest in dharma, but these are techniques to be learned, not something we would

otherwise naturally do. We may lack the interest in practicing these repetitive, recursive, techniques.

My question: is there no more organic way to learn Shamata (Tranquility) Meditation other than this? Is there not a more natural thread of interest that would lead us into the dharma other than by rote practice? Why can we not adapt our (ingrained by now) habit of watching movies so that very solid habit can be directed to learning mindfulness?

I don't necessarily mean those of us who have managed to learn Shamata, but all those millions of folks out there who have built some kind of habit by watching movies carefully, and who would perhaps benefit from Tranquility Meditation.

Of course, if we had an authentic dharma teacher and was with them enough that they could monitor our interest and repeatedly point out the ways into dharma to us, that would help. Yet, here in the West, we not only don't have that, but authentic dharma teachers are actually very rare.

And, as an archivist by trade, with all the Virgo qualities that I have, I can't help but want to convert our movie-TV habit, something built up most of our life, into the mindfulness that characterizes Tranquility Meditation. I am not saying that I know how to do this, but rather asking anyone reading this if they have ideas how this could be done.

[Photo by me.]

Jul 12, 2021, 4:46 AM

THE ADVENT OF AMERICAN DHARMA

Is it coming or is it already here? Consider how integrated or enmeshed Tibetan culture is with the Dharma in Tibet. Well, the dharma was there before any Buddha realized it, and so if we trace the dharma back in Tibetan history, we get to the pre-Buddhist Bön religion (with its left-facing swastika), which had a dharma of its own, although I have not studied it. My point here is that the dharma as it came from India soon melded almost seamlessly into Tibetan culture.

And so, my question becomes: what will happen here in America as the dharma impresses itself on us? Will it too make its home in the roots of this country as it did in the culture of Tibet? What will our Bön be?

It is only rather recently that I began to have a second-take on the future of the Tibetan culture in this country. Previously, I assumed that we American dharma practitioners would follow the Tibetan line (and lineage) out until it becomes a vanishing point on our horizon. I did this without thinking. Yet now I am thinking.

As to where that thought came from, my guess it comes from observing my own tiny bit of realization as it arose. As I have belabored here in my blogs probably too much, any realization that I have managed did not follow what I could read in the dharma pith texts or heard live from my Tibetan dharma teacher, meaning it

did not come just from the verbal understanding I received from my Tibetan sources.

On the contrary, much to my surprise, any realization came from within myself, kind of oozing up from within, and carrying not a Tibetan (or textbook) flavor, but the flavor of myself and my American upbringing. In fact, it was to me at first almost unrecognizable, so different and personalized it was, so familiar as to be ignored.

And so, is this personal experience a harbinger, not only of my particular realization, but of the dharma in America. Perhaps it will NOT strictly follow the Tibet (via India) lead, but instead arise somewhat independently through an American filter all its own.

I am not saying here that Shamata, Vipassana, Dzogchen, and Mahamudra will not be what they are. Only that the particular methods and paths to these realizations may distinctly have an American flavor and taste all its own.

And I know, even mentioning this is almost heresy and sounds deviant, which perhaps it is. It is more that, over time, I have become less confident, much less enamored, of any linear or straight-line future. Instead, long before we reach out along the line of our expectations and grasp something we imagine must come, dharma in America will morph or blow up into something much more familiar and closer to home. I feel it is happening already.

The dharma in this country will have an American accent and not a Tibetan one it does now. I love the quote of the poet Gertrude Stein, "Before friendship faded, friendship faded." I'm talking about something like that, only with dharma. "Before Tibetan dharma faded, Tibetnized dharma faded." Is that possible?

And, as mentioned, I base this upon my own personal realization, such as it is. To repeat, what small taste of realization I have had does NOT follow the Tibetan textbook's description, but instead came through the personal filter of me and my particular upbringing. That's what realization is, IMO, something already in us, including the trimmings .

At first, I had to make excuses for myself, apologies to the Tibetan tradition that my experience (and thus my small realization) seemed markedly different from what the Tibetan pith texts describe. And it has only been in time, and a fair amount of it, that I have stopped apologizing and begun to realize that what realization I have is distinctly familiar and comfortable, even though it does not dot the i's and cross the t's of the Tibetan descriptions. What am I to think?

Well, I told you what I'm thinking, that my personal experience (and I am sure I am not alone) is perhaps some kind of template for how dharma will eventually appear in America, not clothed in Tibetan culture, but smacking of our home-grown American culture, only too familiar to us.

I don't know why I find myself always walking point, at the edge of the absurd (but not quite), feeling my way forward where I cannot yet see clearly.

And, as mentioned, I have stopped asking forgiveness for being different, and realized that my realization of realization is peculiarly comfortable and, although it does not fit what I read in the texts, I would not (probably could not) change it. It's so familiar.

What I am looking for, of course, is for others to tell me I'm crazy and off base, or perhaps that they experience something similar and that the dharma is already being Americanized (or Westernized).

Any confirmation or thoughts on this?

Jul 12, 2021, 4:01 PM

SHORT TIMER I am older now. I have less time, But more of it. I finally have enough, Of whatever I was saving for, To make it to the end. For as the end draws near, What I need to get there, Grows less with every year. So, I can take a break, A chance to look around, To see how you are doing, To know where you are bound. We could even walk together, But here is what is tough, I am only going to the end, And that is close enough. [A poem I wrote, gets more real by the day.] A declining asset? Well, at my age, that would be time, of course. If I remember when I was a kid, it seemed that time took forever. At least back then it seemed forever before I could be grown up enough to not want to be any older than I was. And it is not the expanded time back when I was a youth that impresses me, that I remember, so much as it is my inability now to absorb and be satisfied by the parade of events that are passing by. We detach with age. Not only do we get old, but we are also not able to appreciate and savor as well as we could when we had forever to do it. I can see and witness this in so many ways. For example, just the passing seasons. To me, it seems like spring used to bring with it a wide array of flowers for me to photograph, and I would, one by one. At eighty years of age, it seems that spring (and now summer) are pushing me, rushing past, flower after flower, and I lack the energy or perhaps even the interest to document them all. These spring flowers now seem to burst out all around me and I can't find the time to photograph each of them as I used to. That's just an example, and an easy one. I watch them bloom and fade, with me not finding the time to photograph them. On a more subtle level, it seems that

time is closing ranks until the seconds of time, instead of being drawn out, are now flying by in a flurry, like one of those old flip or flicker books I had as a kid, only now they are way too fast for me to slowly take in. It's like the senses close down as we age, as time compresses, and satisfaction of any kind is not as it once was, full and ample. Instead, it's now short shrift, a taste, but hardly even an echo of the fullness that it once was. It's like we gradually turn into the hungry ghost that dharma speaks of. We are fading, but have not faded entirely, yet we definitely are leaving the body, degree by degree. Our senses are shutting down on us. Slow it down? Not so easy, because time is like a freight train hurtling down the line. Even food that I carefully make does not register or taste as it once did. I know that we can't slow time down, but does it have to speed up as we age? As Einstein pointed out, time certainly is relative. It's like the Rolling Stone song "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nrlPxIFzDi0> [Graphic designed by me, implemented by my brother Tom Erlewine]

SHORT TIMER

I am older now.

I have less time,

But more of it.

I finally have enough,
Of whatever I was saving for,
To make it to the end.

For as the end draws near,
What I need to get there,
Grows less with every year.

So, I can take a break,
A chance to look around,
To see how you are doing,
To know where you are bound.

We could even walk together,
But here is what is tough,
I am only going to the end,
And that is close enough.

[A poem I wrote, gets more real by the day.]

A declining asset? Well, at my age, that would be time, of course. If I remember when I was a kid, it seemed that time took forever. At least back then it seemed forever before I could be grown up enough to not want to be any older than I was.

And it is not the expanded time back when I was a youth that impresses me, that I remember, so much as it is my inability now to absorb and be satisfied by the parade of events that are passing by. We detach with age.

Not only do we get old, but we are also not able to appreciate and savor as well as we could when we had forever to do it. I can see and witness this in so many ways. For example, just the passing seasons. To me, it seems like spring used to bring with it a wide array of flowers for me to photograph, and I would, one by one.

At eighty years of age, it seems that spring (and now summer) are pushing me, rushing past, flower after flower, and I lack the energy or perhaps even the interest to document them all. These spring flowers now seem to burst out all around me and I can't find the time to photograph each of them as I used to. That's just an example, and an easy one. I watch them bloom and fade, with me not finding the time to photograph them.

On a more subtle level, it seems that time is closing ranks until the seconds of time, instead of being drawn out, are now flying by in a flurry, like one of those old flip or flicker books I had as a kid, only now they are way too fast for me to slowly take in.

It's like the senses close down as we age, as time compresses, and satisfaction of any kind is not as it once was, full and ample. Instead, it's now short shrift, a taste, but hardly even an echo of the fullness that it once was.

It's like we gradually turn into the hungry ghost that dharma speaks of. We are fading, but have not faded entirely, yet we definitely are leaving the body, degree by degree. Our senses are shutting down on us.

Slow it down? Not so easy, because time is like a freight train hurtling down the line. Even food that I carefully make does not register or taste as it once did. I know that we can't slow time down, but does it have to speed up as we age? As Einstein pointed out, time certainly is relative.

It's like the Rolling Stone song "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction."

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nrlPxIFzDi0>

Jul 13, 2021, 10:22 AM

MORE THAN YOU WANT TO KNOW

[Solar update: We are 3-days overdue for a high-speed stream of solar wind. Scientists now say that the waxing sunspot cycle is again protecting us from cosmic rays coming from deep space.]

What makes me tick? I am not going to get into politics, but from the following you can imagine my view. And this goes for dharma too.

The politics of dharma, like the politics of anything is just that, politics, plain and simple. I am not denying it happens; I'm just grossed out by how clumsy and obvious it is, whether it is the politics of dharma or the politics of anything else. I feel the same about most salespersons and their pitches. Spare me!

It is almost a cliché to speak of the frailties of organized religion. Perhaps religion can't be successfully organized or is best left as natural and organic. As soon as a hierarchy sets in, a thousand differentials are born, each leveraging as best it can.

I can't help but do my best to keep a distance from situations of vested interest. I am naturally liberal in my approach and not so much a conservative, other than conserving what has merit and value. After all, I am an archivist of popular culture by trade, protecting and preserving the beautiful and meritorious.

I see hierarchy, as it is most often implemented, like ticks in the flesh of reality, embedded entitlement and privilege that should be rooted out; it goes against the grain of nature. And so, I am generally in favor of not attempting to organize the spiritual and what passes for religion. Instead, leave it as it emerges, free to expand or contract naturally. A loose organization, yes, but meritless oligarchy, no.

And so, it seems this tendency finds me not so much a group person as an individualist, a "loner," not by choice, but by necessity, the necessity to prefer independence, especially when it comes to group or teamwork. The tighter the team, the more independent each member must be, IMO.

Bureaucracy of any kind mucks up the beauty of individualism and freedom of expression almost every time. It may not intend to do so, but as far as I can tell, nevertheless, that's the result.

And so, I am cautious about being trapped in hierarchy, compromised by position and attempts to hang onto it. I have served on any number of boards or related situations, but have not found that experience satisfactory for me as for actually getting things done. Endless meetings have little value.

I am used to doing things myself or working in a loose team where each member, as mentioned, is independent or perhaps a better word is "interdependent." I can work with and within that.

I believe in compromise, but not in being compromised or stalemated, so that is a problem by definition. I will work hard for a project, provided that I am free to do so. The moment entitlement and privilege rear their heads, I am out of there.

I have flourished by being my own boss, not by being bossed. I have worked for and with others, but only if given a liberal amount of freedom to act. Take that freedom away or compromise it and I lose interest and soon retire from action. I avoid those situations and people.

And so, I have no one to blame but myself if I am an isolate. I got a laugh out of reading the journals of M.C. Escher, where he drones on about how lonely he is, only later in the same journals to say that he is lonely, yes, "... but it is so refreshing."

Jul 14, 2021, 3:36 AM

WHAT I DO WITH TIME

My main dharma practice is Mahamudra Meditation, with an accent on the two techniques that comprise it, Insight Meditation (Vipassana) and for Insight meditation to be possible, Shamata (Tranquility Meditation), which has to be present and stable. And, in my case, the two main forms of Mahamudra practice I engage make use of either photography (the process of taking close-up photographs in great detail) or through Insight Meditation, writing essays and articles such as this.

However, my wish to do Vipassana meditation, to fully engage in this form of meditation for long periods of time each day, itself is more important than any ideas I have or interests I want to look into. I wait for those “trigger” ideas to surface and I then write about them through the process of Insight meditation. And if no ideas surface, I then find an old piece of text and rewrite that until the writing in it is clear to my satisfaction.

In other words, I don't care so much what topics I write about because I will do the same with any topic, further refine and articulate it until it is readable in a more direct fashion. It is the actual process of meditating that absorbs me. And no, what I write is not a palindrome, but it might as well be, as it makes sense from front to back, and from top to bottom. It is (at least to me) lucid and integral. I would say that I write until it (and I) am clear, if you can understand that by “clear” I mean that it is transparent; I can see right through it. The process of Insight Meditation is more important than the ideas involved, since all dharma ideas converge on realizing and becoming familiar with the actual nature of our own mind.

Anyway, this is what I do and also what I want to do and I have never tired of it after well more than a decade. Give me any ragged piece of text and I will look into it until it rearranges itself into something realizable and readable. And the process of doing that is why I do it, and the finished piece reflects that process. And that IS like a palindrome; it reads the same in essence forward and backward.

If truth will out, then the truth for me is doing this form of Insight Meditation (Vipassana), or is it Mahamudra, and this is what I want to do with my life, because I find myself unable to resist doing it.

And no, it is not “formless” meditation, although the way I do it is formless, in that I am not aware of being a subject or of it being an object. It is a little like a trance in that I extend myself in it until I am fully extended and let things just reveal themselves to me. The process is so very clear and lucid that I make many typos and don’t even know it until much later, when I re-read and edit the material. The chief attributes of this kind of meditation are certainty and lucidity.

And so, the point here is that the act of meditating in this way is itself both the process and the goal. What exactly I am doing we could discuss or even argue about. I am not claiming this process as anything special, only that it is special to me.

This meditation process may just be a steppingstone to something farther down the meditation road, but I don’t know or care. It is enough for me just as it is and totally absorbing. If it grinds out readable essays as a byproduct, more power to it. I don’t know any better way to spend my time nor can I imagine anything beyond this. If it sounds like a dualism, I say it’s not, even though it may be a window through which I gaze. Yet, I am not aware of myself looking or what is looked at, nor of the window itself. I just do it.

Instead of seeing an object. I am seeing the Seeing itself seeing, and not what is seen or who is seeing it.

As William Blake wrote:

“To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.”

Jul 15, 2021, 3:19 AM

WHERE PROCESS IS THE GOAL

Well, now that I have finally stopped fooling myself as to what I like to do in the way of dharma practice, where do I stand? After some 47 years of actual dharma practice, not counting the 15 or so years I was just toying with meditation, I have to admit I have found something in the way of dharma practice that I love and that I do as much as I can each day.

And the last words of my precious dharma teacher to me, before he passed on, was to “keep extending and expanding” my realization. I heard that and it echoes in my mind each day.

When I say “admit,” I mean I was confusing the process of meditating with the expected goal of meditation, imagining that I was getting somewhere, getting to some place, and going to reach a goal, when it seems that, in fact, the process of meditating (at least at this point) “IS” itself the goal of meditation. Let me clarify that.

Practically speaking, what this means to me is that the actual goal of my meditation is the very process of meditation itself, and nothing more. That alone seems to be enough, at least for me. If the idea of a process is a loop, it is a very hard loop for me to get beyond, because I am so delighted to remain in it.

How does this situation I mention relate to enlightenment, to eventually becoming enlightened? Of course, I have no misconception that I am enlightened or anything close to that. If I am so happy doing the simple meditation that I do, how will I ever get beyond where I am at this point, especially when I don’t feel the need for anything other than what I’m now doing? This is recursion personified.

I don’t know the answer to that, if only because I could care less. I admit that I am happy where I am at, at least content. Where these thoughts lead, I do not know, yet I am not worried about it, which probably should trouble me, but it doesn’t.

And, as mentioned, it is comforting for me to acknowledge that it does not matter to me what I write about through Insight Meditation, because with the dharma, all roads lead to Rome, so to speak, meaning the one point or result of all this meditation is the realization and familiarization with the true nature of this mind we all share. “Familiarization” with the true nature of the mind is the ongoing process I mention here.

In my experience, there is nothing beyond that, no “place” we are going to or that we will ever get to, something other than becoming familiar with this mind that has always been right here within and in front of us. That familiarity is recursive.

Yes, we can deepen and extend our realization more fully. And the road or path to that is nothing other than the process of ever deeper familiarization. Yet, a Christmas tree has many decorations, and we each are one of those. We may not be the star that crowns the top of the tree, which would be a nirmanakaya Buddha, but we each shine, nevertheless.

Jul 15, 2021, 8:38 PM

Jul 16, 2021, 8:28 PM

NEWS FLASH: THE SUN NEVER QUILTS

... Yet it EXPLODES.

[Interruption of normal blogging for a solar-activity news report.]

Live and learn, is what I say. Up to now, I have not associated solar bursts on the far side of the sun from Earth as very much affecting us, and in some ways perhaps they don't. However, it seems I have been reflecting what scientists tell us they do externally, i.e. they are weaker than direct hits. And by going along with science, I have conveniently ignored that these massive solar-influx events affect us as to internal change with way.

In other words, as far as I can tell, these explosions from the far side do affect us, but internally more than externally. For the last three days or so (July 13 to July 16th) a CME (Coronal Mass Emission) occurred on the opposite side of the sun from us almost every day. And these explosions were so strong that scientists tell us that, while the body of the sun blocked the explosion from Earth, energetic particles "Still peppered Earth..." That's the outer effect.

And so, what strikes me, or what struck me, internally, was a huge disruption within the psyche, actually quite numbing, almost reducing me to speechlessness at times, and you know that says something. I am seldom speechless.

And further, there are signs of continued activity from these same sunspot regions and they will be turning directly to face Earth within a week. What are we to think about that?

Well, there is no question that facing or not facing Earth, violent explosions on the sun affect those of us here on earth, if not so much externally, then very much internally. In summary, if nothing else, this confirms my suspicions that solar activity, whether directed directly at Earth or not, affect us via our internal sense of change, and they do this with relative ease. And that's a change in my position, at least in my assumption.

The bottom line for me at present is that any changes in the sun's dynamics, whether directly or indirectly, affect us internally as to how we take and absorb change in our lives.

I imagine there is a difference internally between outward-directed solar influx and inner-directed (toward Earth) solar influx, yet not so much as to how disruptive these forces are as that they affect how we take and absorb internal change. Any solar influx of strong measure (no matter where it is directed) is going to affect us "internally" is what I'm going with now.

Jul 17, 2021, 9:39 AM

MY 80TH BIRTHDAY

Another birthday, this time the big Eight-O. I seldom do much on birthdays, other than the usual. I like that regular stuff and don't really need "special."

However, a couple things ARE happening today, or just happened to time out on this day. One is a talk for NCGR (National Council for Geocosmic Research) members only. It will be on Burn Rate: The Retrograde phenomenon. I'm sorry I can't invite anyone, but I may post the talk after I give it, since I have been promised a copy.

The other event, as I mentioned yesterday, will be Margaret and I welcoming our granddaughter Iris, the child of May Erlewine and Seth Bernard, for a couple days of visiting while her parents have gigs. May Erlewine is in Nashville and

Seth Bernard is teaching and working with kids in Muskegon and Grand Rapids. Meanwhile, we will be engaged here with Iris and her dog Wilber, and we are looking forward to a special time.

As for the birthday, Margaret and I will make a little apple cake, mostly for Iris to enjoy and otherwise we will just hang out here at home. I am getting ready for my 2nd cataract surgery on Wednesday, so I have to do this, that, and the other thing to get ready, mostly take many different eye-drops in succession, refrain from this or that, and so on.

I send my BEST WISHES to all my Facebook friends for checking in on my blog once in a while. Meanwhile, I forge on into my future as long as my future will have me.

Jul 18, 2021, 4:53 AM

“MEANING:” BEHIND THE BEYOND

[Birthday is over and I’m itching to do what I like to do, of which this is an example.]

The graphic shown here is by 1960’s poster artist Bob Fried; he called it “Beyond the Beyond.” This blog is more about “Behind the Beyond.” The original graphic by Fried was a billboard 20-some feet long. I almost bought it for \$5k years ago, but it would not fit in our studio, so I purchased a signed print of it instead, which I still have.

And so, what do we mean by “Meaning?”

“Meaning” is not simply a static quality nor is it rubberstamped. It does not exist independently from how it is articulated. In other words, “meaning” is a product of how it is made or put together, often how much it is loved.

The point here being that we would do well to articulate very carefully and thoroughly, as best we can. And “articulate” does not just mean language. We can articulate (exercise) any and all areas of our life.

And the reason for such care is because much of the meaning in life is in the articulation; “meaning” does not exist separately from its actually being articulated. We either articulate or we have little to no purchase on time. In other words, we create a bridge to hold back what we have from vanishing away.

We could say the same thing about our existence, that it is no more real than our moment-to-moment articulation of it. We are no more real than we are able to now here live. That idea.

Like an onion, there may be nothing at the center when we peel all the layers of meaning back. Yet, the way the layers are formed, the care taken, may make all the difference in the world. That is where the meaning is, in the process of our articulation of living and how the layers are fashioned and loved.

Of course, even those carefully articulated layers or moments may not mean enough, yet if you are looking for persistence, that which is carefully made does persist longer than poorly articulated moments, much like the fixed stars shine in the heavens. They are brighter than anything else.

Does anything mean anything? In one sense, perhaps not, but meaning is relative. In this world at times of diminishing returns, when things fall apart and like the poet Yeats said "... the centre cannot hold;" when we find ourselves facing the void, those things that most persist because we gave them meaning, that don't quickly fade away, are what last.

This is why I often say that the "truth" is the future. Why? Because the truth will last until then, until the future, while so much that is made poorly will fade away and be gone. Therefore, the truth is the future, by definition.

The dharma demonstrates to me, to again use Yeats word "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold," that there is no permanent existence. And there is no wizard behind the curtain. As the philosopher Hegel so aptly put it:

"We go behind the curtain of the Self to see what's there, but mainly for there to be something to be seen."

However, just because there is no center to it all does not mean that the layers that we peel away have no meaning. And this because "meaning" is just what all the many overlapping layers of moments do have and that meaning is none other than what in this world is made by us with our most love and care. You may say "This all goes without saying," yet I say to that, "Yes, or you can say it again." I prefer to say it again and again!

And while all the many layers, signifying or holding "meaning," veil the unborn mind, this does not make the Zen-like articulation of either our language or our

life any less valuable or "meaningful." After all, that's where meaning comes from. We give meaning.

This is why the search for the meaning of life can only lead to the here and the now, to this present moment. We give life meaning through living, by articulating ever more carefully each moment. Yet even "meaning" itself is relative; it too is just a cloud passing before the sun, behind which is the lucid clarity of the mind. Rest in that clarity.

[Artist Bob Fried billboard/poster, "Beyond the Beyond," for which I substitute "Behind the Beyond."

Jul 20, 2021, 12:26 AM

AMERICAN TRANSCENDENTALISTS

[Transcendentalist? Yes, I am a lesser light, but I shine nevertheless. LOL. Meanwhile, I am off at 6 AM Wednesday to the hospital to have cataract surgery on my 2nd eye. I only have two eyes. I am still working on that third eye.]

When I think about it, when I look back over my influences as to what and who I am, it is clear to me that at heart I am an American Transcendentalist and part of that direct lineage. Perhaps it is as easy as the fact that early-on I read Emerson, Thoreau, and especially Amos Bronson. Alcott and I are soul brothers.

Or was it the simple love of nature that I have had all my life. Even in my decades-long practice of Dharma, when it came time for me to realize a little something, I was not sitting on a cushion, but out at dawn crawling around in the wet grass with a camera photographing nature. It came to me there and not in the shrine room.

Or perhaps it is my avoidance of bureaucracy and any organized religion that is a sign, or my preference for following my native interests at all costs. Or is it my stepping back and independence to better embrace this world. It's hard to say.

In other words, I have known for many years that I belong to the wave of American Transcendentalists, even if I am a straggler 150-years later. When I read over the lists of the main traits of Transcendentalism, it's like reading a Who's Who of myself. I am that. Here are some examples of traits.

ESSAYS: One list of Transcendentalist traits starts out with: "Transcendentalists are Essayists." I have been writing essays all my life, but especially on Facebook, almost daily, since 2007, so I can check that box.

NATURE: A love and devotion to Nature, "Me again," as Bill Murray said in the movie "Groundhog Day." I have been a naturalist since I was six-years old.

SELF-RELIANCE: Individualism and Self-Reliance. I am an entrepreneur and have been, on my own and self-reliant. And I married someone who feels that way too.

INTUITION: Use of the intuition. Yep, like all the time; following my threads of interest is what powers this blog.

NON-CONFORMIST: For sure. I never finished high school and ignored school religiously for the previous eleven years. I did not want to be distracted from going my own way.

INNER-LIGHT” Transcendentalists believe in each being having an inner-light. In the dharma this is called Buddha Nature and along with it goes Bodhicitta, an unrelenting urge to assist others. I feel that.

ANTI-BUREAUCRATIC: A distaste for bureaucracy and politics. That box was checked long ago.

And so, there you have it, what I feel I am and where I belong when it comes to a creative lineage. As for a dharma lineage, I am in the Karma Kagyu Tibetan Buddhist lineage. Yet when it comes to creativity, I am pretty much an American Transcendentalist in function.

Jul 20, 2021, 2:58 PM

DHARMA MNEMONICS: DO YOU USE THEM?

[I am back from my cataract operation on my second eye. It all went well, yet it takes time for the fogginess to clear and focus, and that has not happened yet, so I am still looking for the clarity. It is early yet.]

Mnemonics can mean many things. Here I am using it to mean those devices (like mantras, prayer wheels, worry beads, and the like) that distract our attention (cancel out our worry and angst) so that we can see clearly beyond our nitpicking dualisms and into non-dualistically, if that makes sense.

Just as those old flipbooks we had as kids, when we flickered them, they presented a stream of video to our eyes, so can the various dharmic mnemonic devices (mantras, etc.) trigger us into a non-dual zone, a zone we could call awareness without a watcher, where we see non-dualistically.

It seems that I don't know what to do without something like worry-beads to trigger me like that. For me, Insight Meditation, at least the way I do it (using photography or writing as a trigger) is like saying mantra or using a prayer wheel. Those triggers are part of my psychometry, my touchstone. They allow me to leap over my doubts and worries and into a non-dualistic zone.

As useful as these are, I don't know how to get along without something to manipulate by handlings, to reflect off of. And most important, I use Insight Meditation, not just because of the "insights" (which are profound), but almost like a drug, as a way to enter and remain in the nondual zone. Where would a zone be without a means to reach it? Not sure I know.

And so, it's write, write, write, not so much because I have something to say (although I do) as because it has become the key to nonduality, through Insight and Mahamudra meditation. If I want to perform Insight Meditation, it seems I have to have to go to that window, the technique I use for Insight Meditation, and gaze out of that window. It's miraculous that it works; And I don't know how to get to that place without it. Someone out there: please teach me how.

My need to write is more important than what I write about. That seems to be putting the cart before the horse, to some degree. Yet, that's the way it went down for me in the beginning and that's the way it still is. This is not a complaint, because I am eternally grateful to have found this technique. I just would like to universalize it if I can.

However, if I want to do Insight Meditation without a mnemonic, without my "worry beads," I'm not sure how to do that. And, how important is it to break free of our mnemonics? It gets me into the nonduality zone; it just has the baggage of requiring I have to write or do photographs in the bargain. I like photos and writing, but I don't like to "have" to do them. Or perhaps I just wonder if that is OK. Do I need permission?

And so, although I have been afraid of having to use a prayer wheel (carting a huge thing around), yet I fell into writing (a mnemonic) as a vehicle for Insight Meditation all the same, without realizing it. While on the lookout for mnemonic devices, I picked up a mnemonic device. There is humor in that, somewhere.

And you can't just fake it, meaning to just write, but not mean it, or write, but not arrange words until they confirm and mean something. Indeed, Insight Meditation

is like a window I sit at all day and gaze through. However, it's not just about the window, but rather the gazing through. That's the ticket.

I am noticing that I am more aware and perhaps antsy than I used to be that writing or photography is required in order to accomplish Insight Meditation. I would rather just do Insight Meditation all the time, in anything and everything I do. Not sure how that might be done. And I guess it is not too much of a chore to have to write to accomplish this. Nevertheless, knowing myself a bit, for me, the dharma is ever expanding and extending. Given a little time, the big picture gets a little bigger, more encapsulated or accommodated. Embracing more.

Yet, it is clear that I probably could write about anything and, in a short time, transform that "anything" writing into the best form of itself, at least as far as I am capable.

In my experience, everything emerges from the general fog of life through Insight Meditation. It's like Atlantis rising from the sea of confusion; the entire 3-dimensional form of Samsara gradually becomes realized as I expand and extend realization.

What about these mnemonics that many of us use?

[Here is a wrist mala (worry beads) which I made and carry around with me.

Jul 21, 2021, 1:44 PM

THE WHEAT FROM THE CHAFF

Some time ago, I was startled to realize (and admit) that much of my dharma practice was mindlessly reciting texts that I could not remain interested in; it was not fresh, because I thought I should recite them and not because I was following the text or being heartfelt. Please be clear. I am not confusing such mindless text repetition with useful mantra repetition or using repetition to trigger a trance-like state. There is a big difference. I am simply eliminating meaningless recitation from my daily practice. If I can't manage to mean it and stay up on it, I don't recite it.

Of course, I ask myself if I am drifting away from the dharma by not doing some of my rote recitation practice. Hard to say, but I hope not. The truth is that I like the freedom of NOT doing the rote reciting (or any part of my practice) that is not done with feeling. Of course, the lack of feeling is on me, yet if I can't maintain it, what good is it? To me, mindless recitation does me more harm than good. This is especially true if other parts of my practice are amazing to me.

At the same time, stepping off the cushion to a degree and suddenly opening my dharma practice to include (as I am able) everything I do through almost 24-hour post-meditation is a significant leap, as well. There is a little fear and trembling to take any initiative, at least for me.

My focus on dharma has become over the last many years a focus on Vipassana (Insight Meditation) and a wish to do Insight Meditation as much of the day as I can manage it. That remains the same, meaning I am happiest and most fully engaged when I am doing Insight Meditation as part of Mahamudra Meditation.

I also don't need to invoke the Tibetan cultural elements in my practice just because they are Tibetan. Not having the cloak or cover of some of the Tibetan cultural elements feels different, but overall better. I am not Tibetan, just like I always wished that I had some Native American DNA in me, which I don't. I am mostly Irish and some Dutch. LOL.

Without so much of the Tibetan culture flavoring my practice, this does not mean that the dharma is suddenly "secular" for me. Without so much dependence on Tibetan culture in my practice, there is an added sense of responsibility, as if it is all up to me. I'm not being carried along by the imagined cachet of rote mindless repetition or by the Tibetan culture.

It is not quite the case that I'm a "Stranger in a Strange Land" now, although it smacks of that a bit. It is more like I am in the universe of Now, yet still tethered by a cord to the space-capsule called "Dharma." However, I get the sense that all of life is dharma. I don't want to be a maverick just to be a maverick, yet I also don't want to be tied to rote practices that have little meaning for me at this point. It seems to me that it is all dharma all of the time.

What I do know is that my respect for Rinpoche and the pith dharma teachings that he shared with me has not wavered. At the same time, like the lost-wax process of casting statues, it feels like the old saying, the die is pretty-much now cast and I am in the process of breaking-off and polishing the rough edges of what I am becoming.

I am filled with what Rinpoche placed in my care or introduced me to, such that I don't feel inadequate or that I need anything else to be taken in. I just have to be responsible. I do continue to have a wish to share with others on the same journey, yet I better understand why that can be difficult, due to the almost unique yidam or path each of us are on.

Overall, it's like growing up or trusting myself, with no real safety net that I can find. Everything seems like a birth process, being born, learning to react or respond and develop responsibility -- the ability to respond. Responding. I am responding to my own situation. I alone am responsible for my karma.

Separating from the mass where I was, and gradually cohering, like a drop of water that pulls away from the stream and immediately takes the spherical shape of a single drop. A different shape from the amorphous mass I was, yet it is still just water.

This reminds me of the Zen Ox-herding images, where eventually everything becomes meditation. There are traditionally ten ox-herding images, but for myself, I condense those images into a single image, shown here. I get the idea.

Jul 22, 2021, 7:12 AM

ATE THE WHOLE THING

There is a difference between my just sitting around and thinking rather than my experience as part of Insight Meditation and in the process of that meditation writing down what I think. It's not that I do Insight Meditation and then write it down afterward. No, the process of Insight Meditation I have worked hard to develop is Insight Meditation in which words are rearranged and written on the

fly, in real time, as part of the meditation itself. For me, it is a complete practice, in that it expands and extends my realization and, as a byproduct, I write essays that may or not be meaningful for others. Yet, they are written in the process of Insight Meditation.

It has something to do with the touching and manipulating of the words that I write. It is almost a form of psychometry, where actually handling the words in real time puts me in touch with their essential meaning -- something like that. It is inexpressible.

Insight Meditation has been described as "Awareness without a watcher." I like that. My own way of describing Insight Meditation is that it is lucid certainty, with no criticism, doubts or second-thoughts. The swarm of mental mosquitoes we normally have around us is absent.

While using or invoking Insight Meditation, all outer criticism and comments are naturally silenced, blocked, or just fall away or become unimportant. This is because Insight Meditation is non-dual. And in that silence, there is extension. I'm neither aware of myself as a subject or what the words are about as an object. It is beyond duality. Words come together on their own, fitting like parts of a puzzle, certain, and always to my edification and realization. It is trance-like in that it is non-dual. It is peaceful and brings rest.

Samsara has been our refuge for who knows how long. It is as big as all outdoors, so when using Insight Meditation, it does not matter what part of Samsara I seize upon with the dharma to trigger realization.

All of Samsara has the same essence to be realized, and that realization is a process that has no end, from now until Samsara is totally realized.

However, at least in my experience, Insight Meditation is incremental, meaning each successive time I invoke it, my realization is broader and more encompassing. I am accommodating or able to grasp more fully the nature of the mind. I am not just chewing on the same cud, but always realizing the whole enchilada more and more fully. I get it! Pardon the analogy, but it is like a snake gradually swallowing an egg in its entirety.

Jul 22, 2021, 9:03 PM

FEELING FOR THE EDGE OF THE FUTURE

[I feel guilty if I don't advise you of intense solar activity, although any of you could check the charts each day as I do. Later today (July 23, 2021) a CME (Corona Mass Emission) may sideswipe Earth's magnetic field and spark G1-Class geomagnetic storms. I am not so interested in the external effect, but rather the internal ones, which we seem to be sensitive to.]

As to dharma, what do we write about if we are not writing about how to reach Recognition as to the true nature of the mind? That is the vortex of dharma practice into which every dharma practitioner eventually enters.

In my case, I like to do my writing out at the edge of my understanding, a little beyond what I already know, reaching out toward a future where I can't quite yet make sense. I am not talking about all the way out to where everything is

nonsense itself, but just a little shy of that, to a place where the strictures of time don't yet bind and there is still some freedom to imagine and to hunt. I like to sense and feel the future coming before I can see it.

I am (literally) impressed by days when the sun is intensely active, and the possibility of change is in the air or upon us. Things can shift and they do. There is no reason why in writing the rearrangement of words cannot be fulfilling, a time where the juxtaposition of words in a sentence precipitates "meaning" down to a form that then is more perfect for it. I am talking about putting words together like pieces of a puzzle, words that fit together to indicate or have more meaning than they otherwise would if no care were taken as to their arrangement. We can make meaning profound.

It's a bit like shaking words through a sieve until they shift, slide together, and eventually fall through, into place, and then lock. Words in sentences made this way last or withstand the test of time much better than those just haphazardly arranged. Like great violins, craftsmanship shows and lasts.

In fact, much of our "meaning" depends upon this conscious arrangement on our part and does not exist to this degree otherwise. Anything made with great care and artistry will better withstand the sands of time and endure -- persist.

There is nothing quite like elision, the eliding of the opposite ends of duality into one, non-duality. Not only is the nonlinear universal, but it is also silent of all the chatter and confusion that the relative duality of Samsara is prone to. And non-duality (like Insight Meditation) is as crystal clear and lucid as we are capable of. Why does everyone not learn it?

The answer to that is because it is difficult, unless we are shown how by an authentic dharma teacher. Even then it is very challenging. Perhaps there are but a few techniques that are worth learning in life despite their difficulty. Insight Meditation is one of these. It not only changed my life; in a way it is life itself.

Jul 23, 2021, 3:15 PM

BREAKTHROUGH AND LEAPOVER

This is the kind of blog whose cone of interest is so narrow that almost no one will find it useful. Nevertheless, here it is. It is about achieving the dharma breakthrough called “Recognition” as to the nature of the mind, its familiarization, and how that is maintained once achieved.

The process of the refinement of our realization. What does that mean? In order to refine our realization, we have to have some realization to refine, some starter dough, which in baking they often call the “mother.” The means to do this require a meditation practice like Mahamudra, Dzogchen, Maha Ati, or whatever. We have to have that and to achieve that takes, at least in my lineage, an authentic dharma teacher who can empower us.

And beyond our initial recognition of the mind’s nature, it is a question of refining the process of realization. However, getting to that point of realization is not a walk in the park for most of us. It often takes years of dedicated effort and

practice to achieve what is called “Recognition,” realizing the true nature of the mind, and becoming familiar with it.

How we achieve “breakthrough” varies. It is individual, tailored to our personal history and needs. It can be shallow or deep, a peek hole or a plunge. Either way, once we are in, we have to pull the rest of us in after it. And when we are mostly, more or less, in, then it’s a matter of stabilization, and most of all familiarization, becoming familiar with the nature of our own mind. We have never previously recognized its nature.

Regardless, once familiarization is established and stable, it’s definitely some kind of plateau, which means something else may eventually be in the offing, if only that it may involve the continuation of the status quo, the foregoing process continued.

The fact that the need for continued articulation is required, reminds me of an iron-lung, a breathing device... or like the fact that to breathe, sharks have to keep moving and cannot rest, the idea here being that there is some effort involved to extend and expand this realization.

Any way we look at it, there is a process, something is being processed, articulated, and enduring, in order for awareness to be maintained and continue. The process, like being on a ventilator, is the thing itself, the purpose, and as to WHAT is processed to maintain the system may vary and is not the point. The byproduct of the process is always the same although the content of that byproduct is always different and ever changing.

As to how we step beyond the process, I have no idea how that might be done. Yet, it must exist. The process must rise into critical focus and then recede into

the background over time, perhaps becoming invisible and automatic is my guess.

Just like the heart beats, the breath heaves, and so on, these automatic processes must accomplish something, if only their own persistence. Perhaps it is like the oxygen in the water that the fish breathe in order to generate a phrase like “A fish out of water.” Or is it like a bilge pump on a leaky boat, pumping all the time to keep the boat afloat. I can’t rightly say. The takeaway is that there is some effort involved here, something like duality.

This process or system is how I have ended up with so far. It works yet is not effortless. The effort to articulate Insight Meditation produces clarity and lucidity, but it is a continuing process. Nor is it entirely non-dual, although almost so.

The effort to look at the nature of the mind, itself is dualistic, but what is seen through that look is non-dual. It reminds me of pushing the bobsled at the top of the run, jumping in, tucking our head down, and riding from there.

Jumpstarting this process, as mentioned, is called Recognition of the true nature of the mind, which once started and authentic, must be extended and expanded from that point until full Enlightenment, probably many lifetimes away.

These are many words about a subject that can’t be put into words. For this, I apologize for attempting. Yet, what these words can only point at is crucial to understand and to prepare for, IMO.

Jul 24, 2021, 6:45 AM

GETTING DOWN TO OUR FIGHTING WEIGHT

[Solar Flare Alert: Around 8 PM EDT Friday, there was an hour-long pulse of X-rays and UV radiation. The explosion also hurled a CME (Corona Mass Emission) into space, but it does not appear to be heading for Earth.]

If you jump into the pool of dharma, sooner or later, you will seek out your own level and get to work. It may take a while, and nothing is stopping you from reaching toward the top. Getting there is another story.

It is frustrating to find that what is standing in our way is our own insensitivity, our inability to measure or gauge our own responsibility. Like the old saying, “We can’t perceive the phenomenon if we lack the faculty.” That, in a nutshell, is the typical problem. And it’s really humbling.

We can persist as long as we want in denying where we find ourselves as compared to where we think we belong, but eventually we get around to admitting where we find ourselves and start doing something about it.

If we are too crude to care, then there is no way to feel ourselves forward when it comes to dharma. We are stuck where we are with no one to blame but ourselves. That, my friends, is when we start to look into what are called the

Preliminaries, otherwise known as the purification practices and guess who gets purified? It's not our neighbor.

I like to tell myself this is like a prize fighter trying to get down to their fighting weight enough to qualify. In this case, we practice the purification practices until we can get our attachments transparent enough that we can see through it, so that they are no longer an obscuration.

For me, it was a conscious decision. In the beginning I had no intention of doing all these purification practices to bring my obscurations down enough so I could see through them. I was going directly for the tip of the top, for enlightenment itself. Why not?

Well, that and a token would get me a ride on the bus.

The simple truth was I could not discriminate or measure the fine differences that the teachings pointed out. The teachings pointed those differences out, but I could not see or feel them. That was embarrassing but a direct truth that I could not deny, even as clever as I was.

And so, I had to lose some karmic weight, so to speak, and set about doing that. And doing so was no walk in the park. It's like losing weight with our eye on the scale, painful.

Of course, to begin with, I just did little stuff, fiddling around a bit, and I avoided what is considered dharma boot camp, the Extraordinary Preliminaries, better known as The Ngondro. That was too Medieval, or so I thought. I'm not doing that. Period, end of story.

Well, that dog didn't hunt and sooner or later, I got around to asking to do Ngondro, only to be told I had to have permission to do it, and things like that. Well, that was like a slap in the face, adding insult to injury.

Eventually, I got permission and received the Lung (reading transmission) and then the actual instructions on how to do Ngondro. And it seemed at first, overwhelming to me. 100,000 of this and 100,000 of that, and then more 100,000s. Yet I did them, and it took a few years. I worked at it morning and evening, two sessions a day of about 100 rounds each session.

I have told this next part many times, but it is important, so here it is again. When I finally completed the Ngondro and had a chance to meet with my Rinpoche to tell him so and ask what I should do next. I had my eyes on any number of what are called Deity Practices that I expected to do next. Rinpoche had this to say to me.

"Well Michael, do you want to know what I would do if I were you?" Sure, I wanted to know. How could I say anything otherwise, and Rinpoche then said: "I would do another Ngondro." Well, I said silently to myself, I just did that. But, sure enough, I did another Ngondro because Rinpoche asked me to. And it helped.

And I tell you this because it is important to understand that we trust our dharma teacher to care more about ourselves than we know how to care for ourselves. At least, I didn't know what was good for me. I wanted it as easy as I could get it.

Yet apparently that was not what I needed and Rinpoche was not afraid to lay it on me. And I trusted him that much, to do the whole Ngondro all over again. And so, that's my story and I will leave it to you to get the point.

Jul 24, 2021, 11:51 PM

I READ MY OWN WRITE

I read some authors inside and out, every last word, but mostly not. In other words, I read many great authors enough until I get the idea of what they are about, note that, and get on with living my own life. I take direction, but just a touch of it and I am on my way. I wish I had the time or would take the time to read them to the bone, but I don't. I get a glint or a hint of their view, take it in, and move on with my own trajectory. I celebrate them by living my own life.

I markup books, so I can find the pith sentences later and quickly remind myself of that author's view. By doing that, I am sure I miss graduating to other things they have written and content myself with re-reading what first struck me, that which I placed a mark next to.

I was deeply touched by Shakespeare, probably the greatest English writer IMO. And I read almost all of the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, not just his poems, but his diaries, journals, letters, and sermons.

From writers that affect me, I take in some key phrases or ideas and they may percolate inside me for years, until I understand to my satisfaction what I think they are saying. And I read diaries and journals. Let me give one clear example, the diaries of the novelist Franz Kafka. Of course, I read his books, but in the end, I got more from his diaries.

In one of the diaries, I found this single sentence, it read something like “Each sentence that I write, it already has perfection.” I did not grasp what Kafka meant by this and I spend many years, perhaps decades puzzling over it because that sentence stuck in my mind.

Then, many years later I understood. Kafka was explaining that he did not spend his time learning to be a better author, but instead, like any dharma practitioner, he spent his time perfecting his mind so that any sentence he wrote already had perfection, because he had perfection. That’s the kind of thing I puzzle out.

Not to wax too poetical, but these key thoughts and phrases, these pith teachings light up the halls of my mind as I feel my way forward through time. They are the road signs or signposts that guide me.

With no disrespect, I don’t tend to depend on external quotes or thoughts, except perhaps dharma quotes. I’m into my own mind most of all, which I see as a cornucopia, literally a wellspring of insight. Developing those emerging thoughts is what I do day and night.

Jul 25, 2021, 1:42 PM

NO PIE-IN-THE-SKY

The idea here is that what we fall into the habit of thinking as the goal of dharma, let's call it "Enlightenment," is rather a process than a state, and one that is non-linear at that. So, the traditional idea of "Pie in the Sky" that filters down from Christian or some monotheistic beliefs does not fly in the dharma teachings, in which there is no "Heaven" out there at the end of the line, but rather whatever IS there is within us and present right here and now as much as it will ever be, if we could just realize it. The problem is we can't seem to realize it.

It's a ring-pass-not if we think in linear terms, that there is something out there that is not already in here that we have to grasp or somehow get and take it within. Yet, all the time, it is already right here within us.

Samsara, our so-called "real world" that we have taken refuge in for this (or many) lifetimes, which we have been reifying like mad all this time... when we finally realize that is but a gossamer illusion that will never resolve into anything more solid or permanent, but instead Samsara will vanish with the realization of Nirvana like the morning dew.

How do we replace our traditional linear habit of expecting a reward at the end of this line of life, with a process that we have with us right here, a process that up to now we have not paid much or any attention to? What are the odds of that happening? The odds are not so good, is my thought.

It seems to me that we would have to start now, long before death, long before the "end of the line," so to speak, with our realizing that Enlightenment (our "Heaven," if you must) is a process and not a static goal or state to be had

somewhere down at the end of the line. And then we would work forward from there. We would have to look within ourselves for this, rather than outside down the line of time until life's certain end. There is nothing there but the bardo.

And "Finally," as regards the end that IS workable, we arrive at a process here and now (in the present) and not at the lineal end of life, and that process is totally available to us right now, if we will just realize it and learn to work it. We may need help to realize this process.

Learning to work that process is what dharma practices are all about.

Jul 26, 2021, 7:18 AM

FROM GOD TO THE DHARMA

Having been raised Roman Catholic, including going to catechism, Catholic school, and also being an altar boy, what was I to do when I became disenchanted (not that I ever was enchanted) with the Catholic Church? Of course, I tried other denominations of Christianity here and there, and they were the same or actually worse, IMO. I even sought out what were supposed to be the "smartest" Catholic priests, the Jesuits, hoping that they had something I could relate to.

I'm sorry to say that they did not have answers to my questions. One question was this: God was God and Jesus was God, but also a man. Did Jesus and I

share our humanity? Was the very best part of me the same as the worst part of Christ? Did we have anything at all in common? In other words, was there ANY part of me that related to Jesus? Did we overlap anywhere, no matter how imperfectly?

What the Jesuits told me is “No, there is no part of humankind that is at all like Christ. I asked that question in as many ways as I could think to ask it, but the answer always was no. I could accept that this was their answer, but if that WAS their answer, if they believed that, I could no longer accept the Jesuits or the Catholic Church. That was the last time I attempted to make a connection. I cast off for other shores, in particular the dharma.

I liked the idea of Buddhism and especially of the Dharma, but how was I supposed to get to Heaven using Buddhism? That’s kind of where I was at around the late 1950s. If I didn’t have the Catholic faith, how on Earth was I to get to Heaven?

Well, I’m sure you want me to make this next long-story short, and I will. It took me a long, long time to swap out the Christian “mystery” tradition for what the dharma offers. Certainly, the Catholic church was a mystery to me. It made no sense that I could find. I had no problem with Jesus Christ, and wished that I could meet someone like that. It was Christians and how they behaved that were troubling to me as a young adult. I did not want to end up like that!

Lucky for me, it was not long before I latched on to the fundamental dharma principles called “The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind Toward the Dharma,” often just called “The Four Thoughts” or “The Four Reminders.” Now, these four thoughts pretty much read my mind because all on my own I had come up with at least three of them. Let me list the Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind.”

(1) The Preciousness of the Human Life. For sure, I knew early on that my life was precious and I did not want to waste it. And I did not want to be wasted.

(2) Impermanence. I knew from my close study of nature that life is fragile and all that lives also dies. Impermanence was crystal clear to me. Nature does not blink.

(3) Karma. Again, from studying nature I could see that for every action there was a reaction, that what goes up comes down, and that we don't break Nature's laws, like the Law of Gravity. They break us

(4) The Defects of Samsara. This Fourth Thought I only got "somewhat" early-on, although I eventually got it good, so to speak. And my way of saying this is "You will never get all your ducks in a row," no matter how hard you try.

Anyway, those four thoughts or at least three of them I had already figured out long before I met the dharma. For me, Mother Nature WAS the dharma.

My point is that the Four Thoughts were about as much religion as I understood on my own, and I didn't even think of these thoughts as religion, so when I discovered that Buddhists call these four thoughts "The Common Preliminaries," the rock bottom principles of the dharma, something inside me clicked. I felt that these thoughts were my kind of truth, call it the dharma, Mother Nature, or what have you?

Compared to how I was brought up, where I could not even be a part of the Trinity, and God was remote and never encountered, suddenly with the dharma I was an integral part of everything, and there was no God up there pulling the strings or laying down laws. I not only played a part, but it was up to me how well it was played. What the Dharma taught was pretty much just how I had figured out life was on my own, only better and more complete than I had come up with.

How wonderful it was for me to find my own solution to religion, although I don't consider dharma as a religion, more just like the truth, the way things actually are. I guess the way things are is religion enough for me.

Jul 27, 2021, 2:37 AM

SHAMATA: THE TIP OF THE SPEAR

[The following is a little convoluted, I admit. Those of you who make it all the way through this and understand it, let me know please. Talk with me about it.]

These next two blogs will be about the two main kinds of meditation that are part of Mahamudra in the Karma Kagyu Lineage, Shamata (Tranquility Meditation) and Vipassana (Insight Meditation). A quick idea as to these two meditation types is as follows:

If we have shaky hands and are trying to thread a very fine needle, Tranquility Meditation removes the shakiness of the hands which allows Insight Meditation to thread the needle.

I call Shamata the “Tip of the Spear,” knowing it is the foundation and knowing that the foundation is the tip of the spear, if that makes sense.

One thing I was taught, and that all the dharma texts say is to ask questions. The dharma is not weak; it can stand whatever you or I come up with in terms of wanting to know. One key factor that is very, very important is simply learning to meditate, and this generally means learning Shamata (Tranquility Meditation). And, of course, I have a couple of questions about this.

One question that I have is that I have been told that in Tibet, Shamata (Tranquility Meditation) was not taught until later, after the purification practices are complete, practices like “The Ngondro,” Lojong, and the like. However, here in America, perhaps because of the influence of the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, Shamata Meditation was taught straight away, before anything else.

One reason I have been told, but don’t know if it is true, is that this was because Americans were loathe to do and rejected purification practices like Ngondro. My own two-cents, which is probably worth about that much, is that there is no pressing reason to learn Tranquility Meditation (Shamata) before the purification practices are complete because Shamata is not really needed until we are ready to undertake Vipassana (Insight Meditation). Just a thought.

Regardless, learning mindfulness via Shamata (Tranquility Meditation) is something all on its own that has to be learned before any of the more advanced “realization” practices like Vipassana, Mahamudra, Dzogchen, etc. can be

practiced. Before the realization practices, we have to have a stable and coherent base or foundation. I have other questions, as well.

One of these involves how we learn Tranquility Meditation. I know of two basic ways this can be done, only one of which is ever discussed, so let us discuss. And, of course, the one less discussed happens to be the path I took. Go figure.

I will back up a bit. Awareness is something we all have, awareness of where we are as we look around us. This awareness that illuminates our life is intrinsic and we shine that awareness wherever we look, lighting up our world, much like a flashlight. This gift of awareness is something we all use, but it is usually outer directed, much as we use it now to read this page. We see by this light of the mind.

If instead, we turn awareness away from the outside, and in on itself, then we are entering some kind of spiritual or psychological realm, by using this same awareness to look within. What we see in there mostly hasn't been seen by us or is seldom seen clearly, and certainly not familiar. It takes some getting used to, some familiarization. Progress in the dharma is all about the familiarization with the nature of our own mind.

In general, learning basic meditation depends on allowing the mind to quiet and rest in place. Relax. How do we do that? Do we just stop what we are doing and sit down and rest? I have heard it said, repeatedly, that WE don't rest the mind, but instead we allow the mind to come to rest. We let go. What's the difference?

The idea is that resting the mind is not a matter of will power on our part, not something we CAN do, but more like just the reverse, our letting go to the point where things naturally just settle out and come to rest.

There are dozens, perhaps hundreds, of meditation techniques out there, yet most of them focus on quieting the mind (allowing it to quiet) in one way or the other. And I can't recommend one method over the other because, in my case, none of these rote techniques to be practiced seemed to work for me. And I tried them not only for years, but several for decades, and to no avail. There was a reason for my failure, which I will get to.

Looking back, it seems I was destined to go another way entirely, although I didn't know that at the time. Apparently, I don't take to rote techniques and their practice. Never did. Throughout my life, I have been driven by my natural interests rather than by requirements of one kind or another. In fact, I don't like to be instructed but rather I like to learn by myself. For some reason, it takes a special teacher to get my attention. And I have paid a pretty price for this, it seems, but it never stopped me from pursuing what interests me. And so, what's the difference between these two approaches, traditional rote practice and following our interests as relates to Shamata Meditation?

I am sure both methods work, if you have the aptitude for each, or both. As mentioned, I never enjoyed learning focused-concentration by practicing from rote techniques that I was inherently not interested in, other than, of course, my general interest in the dharma and aspiration for learning mindfulness, which I will explain.

What I did learn and know like the back of my hand, was how to follow my natural interests and inclinations, and this can accomplish the same thing (Shamata Meditation) via an alternate route. That different route is what I am explaining here in case some of you would be more comfortable and successful taking the route I followed. I want to at least lay it out for you.

The goal of Shamata (Tranquility Meditation) is to be able to be mindful and concentrate focus until we can rest the mind stably focused. This is commonly taught as a technique that we can learn by following the traditional directions for this technique, focusing on a stone, stick, etc.

However, we can also focus and stabilize the mind through our natural interests, where the interest is sustained and becomes stable quite naturally. This is what I was used to following since a young child, mostly through an intense love and study of natural history – Mother Nature.

And so, when it came time for me to learn dharma meditation and I was presented with the traditional rote technique for mindfulness and told to practice it, this was a new experience for me, because I was totally used to following my own interests, which for me were more intensely stable than any rote instructions ever were. These rote methods (like sitting and focusing on a pebble or a twig) seemed completely unnatural to me and even clumsy or beside the point. I never was able to learn Shamata Meditation that traditional way although I tried for some 32 years. Think about that.

There is also some history and discussion about Shamata (Tranquility Meditation), although I am not sure if you may have come across it. One idea is that Tranquility Meditation is, in itself, somehow incomplete, not a complete practice. And this is both right and wrong, IMO.

We do need to stabilize our mind, not only to stabilize our mind and be at peace, but we need a calm and stable mind in order to do Vipassana (Insight Meditation). In other words, we need to rest in stability before we can achieve Insight Meditation (Vipassana). This is a standard dharma teaching.

And so, that is why it is sometimes said that Tranquility Meditation is incomplete without Insight Meditation, and that just getting stable with no insight makes little sense, because there is no point to it, i.e. the Insight Meditation. And Shamata is useful because, as pointed out, Insight Meditation can't take place without a strong and stable Shamata (Tranquility Meditation). This is true, although I have had personal experience in this regard to the contrary, which I will get to in a moment.

Tranquility Meditation (Shamata) is dualistic, a relative truth, and not non-dual as is Vipassana (Insight Meditation.) Therefore, while Insight Meditation is one of the "realization" practices because it is non-dual, Tranquility Meditation (Shamata) is not a realization practice, due to its duality. By "duality," I mean when practicing Tranquility Meditation, we the subject are practicing meditation, the object. In the realization practices, there is no subject or object, just being present.

And now for my caveat: when it came time for me to achieve Insight Meditation (Vipassana), meaning that it arose naturally, I had not to my knowledge developed Shamata Meditation to my satisfaction, although I had practiced it by traditional rote methods for many years and failed to really feel it was successful. For me, it was an exercise in futility, just not interesting to me.

Yet, the moment that Insight Meditation became possible for me, when it arose, at that same instant, Shamata arose instantaneously to hold and support it vividly. What was that all about, I wondered?

I was amazed, but eventually realized that all along, all those years, I had a very strong Shamata practice, but just could not raise it through the (to me) clumsy rote method of practicing it mechanically as a technique. I was used to interest.

Yet, I have done many decades of very detailed work with the mind, first as a naturalist, then as a system programmer, a video editor, graphics designer, and most of all as an archivist of literally millions of pieces of information, through detailing all recorded music from 10-inches onward, and all recorded films and movies, and other disciplines. I am by trade an archivist of popular culture.

It never occurred to me that all of that very detailed work, which was done fueled by my natural interest, had given me more than what I could need for Insight Meditation to be stable. And so, as mentioned, when Insight Meditation arose spontaneously in the midst of my life and quite to my surprise, Tranquility Meditation just naturally was perfectly right there to support it. It had been there all along, through my natural interest, and I never thought of it in the same light as I did with trying to learn Shamata (Tranquility Meditation) by rote practice. There is a point there somewhere if you can find it.

It was just that trying to learn the Shamata Meditation technique by rote instruction instead of by natural interest was foreign to how my mind worked, chiefly in its clumsiness and not-interesting-to-me rote practice. I guess one of my points here is that when Vipassana (Insight Meditation) arises, it will automatically invoke and draw upon any Shamata we have. Otherwise, as mentioned, Insight Meditation would have a hard time arising, yet it works both ways.

So, of course, knowing me, I want to lay all this out for anyone who, like me, has trouble with rote practice. And I would not have it any other way. I only wish I understood early-on that I was ahead of the curve in developing Shamata (Tranquility Meditation) and not behind the curve as I feared.

Anyway, I can't help but contrast these two approaches, laying them out so that you might have a choice as to how you, my dharma friends, want to approach learning Shamata (Tranquility Meditation.)

Jul 28, 2021, 9:23 AM

DHARMA: THE PERFECT STORM

It seems I always lean into the wind given adversity, and at the same time opt for good times and do my best to avoid hard times. It is a rare time when events conspire to suppress or hold me down so that I cry uncle, but it happens.

And I definitely prefer the cream at the top of life as opposed to getting dunked against my will. However, if I keep a kind of running total as to the times I learn the most in life, it's seldom in the good times, but almost always the bad times that bring out the best in me, although I am not always aware of this at the time.

This says something about me, I'm afraid, and I am aware of it, but I certainly have not made a habit of welcoming the bad times when they roll in like the tides, and they do. Yet, I am increasingly aware that spiritually I flourish in the hard times more than the good times.

In other words, it takes some hard times to squeeze the best out of me, like them or not. I believe most of us feel this way and I'm not aware of anyone I know welcoming the hard times into their lives. Well, maybe some yogis. At the same

time, I want to grow spiritually, yet apparently not enough to walk on burning coals, so to speak.

When I consider my own history, one of the few times I experienced a real dharma breakthrough, there was an almost perfect storm of depressing events whirling around me like a tornado. It was enough to hurl me out of my normal path into a completely new trajectory and territory, as well as bring me down to my knees.

Like taking my temperature, it does not require any genius on my part to put two and two together and conclude that I am biased toward the good times and do my best to avoid the hard times, even if the hard times bring me spiritual growth and sustenance. I apparently don't value dharma growth THAT much that I want to sleep on a bed of nails.

Some release-catches require that we first press them down in order to trigger the release. Life does this to me every once in a while, without my permission. And that is what happened to me in one major event. Going through it was difficult and certainly I was catapulted out of my orbit, only to fall back on my history with Mother Nature that I had kept at bay for decades because she, Mother Nature, is so honest as to be harsh. Yet, Mother Nature, is in my bones and DNA.

In the whirlwind of my upset at the time, the perfect storm I speak of, I threw caution aside and didn't give a damn. I plunged back through my pain into Mother Nature in an attempt to absorb her honesty and blot out through her what had gone wrong with my life. And how did I meet nature once again?

To make this clear, every morning the summer of that year (for six months straight, unless it was pouring rain) found me out before dawn crawling around on my belly or hands-and-knees peering through exquisite camera lenses at micro-worlds and tiny critters, taking photos. I can't remember before that when I watched the sun rise even once, and suddenly I was doing it every day from the month of May until the frosts of pending winter drove me (and my camera) inside.

That's how far out of my usual orbit that perfect storm had hurled me. Yet, somehow, in this time-out from the normal, the dharma inside me was free to express itself and be loosed. It was in that very special time, that genuine Vipassana (Insight Meditation) arose within me for the first time and flipped my life around. I came out of that time able to do Insight Meditation, my first actual realization of that kind, and one (like any realization) I have never lost.

As my precious dharma teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, said to me, "You have been introduced to the nature of the mind," what is called in our lineage, "Recognition." I began to become familiar with the mind's nature, my own nature. And it is from that point and forward that I feel that actual Insight Meditation began and was possible.

And all that was thanks to the perfect storm of sorrow and upset that blew me off course, only to wake up in another world and a new morning.

And so, as they say, "every goodbye ain't bad."

Jul 28, 2021, 11:51 AM

INSIGHT MEDITATION: THREADING THE EYE OF THE NEEDLE

This is the second of two blogs about the two main kinds of meditation that are part of Mahamudra Meditation in the Karma Kagyu Lineage, Shamata (Tranquility Meditation) and Vipassana (Insight Meditation). I will offer here again a quick idea of these two meditation types:

If you have shaky hands and are trying to thread a very fine needle, Tranquility Meditation (Shamata) removes the shakiness of the hands which allows Insight Meditation (Vipassana) to thread the needle.

While Shamata (Tranquility Meditation) can be practiced at any time because it is a relative practice, meaning it is dualistic, when it comes to Vipassana (Insight Meditation), at least of the Karma Kagyu (Mahamudra) variety, this is not so. Insight Meditation is a product of or enabled by what is called “Recognition” of the true nature of the mind. And until that Recognition takes place, we may be analytically parsing concepts and calling it Insight Meditation, but we are not straight-away meditating with Insight Meditation in its non-dual form. Not yet.

Because it is nondual, Insight Meditation, by definition is beyond words. It cannot be spoken of or described accurately. We can only attempt to define it and hope that we grasp a corner or two. So, why bother?

Well, we bother because historically everyone does, and some sense of Insight Meditation is perhaps better than none. And before anyone gets their undies in a bundle, there are many forms of Insight Meditation. I speak here ONLY of Insight

Meditation as practiced as part of Mahamudra Meditation in the Karma Kagyu Lineage. I cannot speak for any other variety because I don't know them.

As mentioned above, we can't just go out and buy a book on Insight Meditation and expect to be able to do it on our own. Aside from having to first master Shamata (Tranquility Meditation), doing Insight Meditation requires that we successfully receive what are called the pointing-out instructions as to the true nature of the mind from an authentic guru. Only then are we able to practice Karma Kagyu style Vipassana (Insight Meditation).

And so, as you can see, there is not a simple slam-dunk approach to Insight Meditation, which leaves me with the task of saying something of use that is not discouraging to beginners. Don't be discouraged! It is a matter of one step in front of the other and straight on till morning, as they say.

At the same time, we can't just go and do Insight Meditation because we will it, and this because it requires all the preconditions (mastering Shamata, etc.) I mentioned, and that is enough to stall-out many would be practitioners. All I can say of value is that there is really no choice in the matter. Sooner or later, we will each have to learn Insight Meditation because it is invaluable. It's like learning to read and write. IMO, the benefits of Insight Meditation as described here are beyond calculating. And so, I encourage readers to do what is necessary to acquire this training. There is nothing like it in my experience. Having said that, I also know how very difficult Insight Meditation, the actual meditation, is to learn and get right. And to top it off, we can't really describe or talk about it.

As a first step in that direction, I suggest that you find an authentic dharma teacher, one who shows by their manner that they have mastered or at least have been trained in this kind of instruction. Directly ask them to work with you

and by working with you, help you to determine what in your case would best work for your particular dharma training.

What is needed may be quite individual, so some examination as to your needs is required. From that evaluation, a clear plan can be laid out as to how best to achieve the results that best suit your situation. You have to talk about it with an authentic teacher. You can't do-it-yourself. All the classic pith dharma texts say that.

Now, I am not saying this will not be difficult. No one ever said it would be easy and it's not. Yet, it is possible and with the proper support and guidance, steps in the right direction can begin immediately. The dharma in this country is still quite new and IMO there are not yet enough qualified and authentic teachers. You will have to find one.

That is your responsibility and don't accept any wooden nickels as we used to say. Locate an instructor whose words ring true to you and get their instructions and advice. That being said, here are some general concepts that may be useful.

Unless we are very, very unusual, we have to get into shape to do this type of dharma practice. I don't mean we have to only physically get in shape (although that helps), but we have to become aware of our obscurations, what impedes us, and begin the process of gradually removing and thinning them out. That takes time and effort, plus this is all part of what are called the purification practices, getting our sense of selves and our obscurations down to a "fighting weight," so to speak.

Often, to begin with, reading and absorbing some of the classic pieces of dharma texts is very helpful.

THE COMMON PRELIMINARIES: THE FOUR THOUGHTS THAT TURN THE MIND

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/The%20Four%20Thoughts%20Book-2.pdf>

If you want a simple dharma practice that can't go wrong, I suggest this special form of Tong-Len I find the easiest to learn and practice, a form of working with our reactions.

TONG-LEN: THE ALCHEMY OF REACTION

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Tong-len%20-%20Second%20Edition.pdf>

Fortunately, there are good teachers available for what are called the Preliminaries, the purification practices which is where we each have to start. Here are some centers where I know how this will be taught and they could be a place to start. I can't promise that you will get on with the various teachers, but it does not hurt to contact them, meet or phone them, and get a feel for their teaching style.

<https://kagyu.org/ktd-affiliates/>

You would be asking for instructions in the Lojong Teachings or the Extraordinary Preliminaries (The Ngondro). That would get you started.

And here are a couple more series of articles:

DHARMA: THE INTANGIBLES

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/DHARMA%20-%20The%20Intangibles.pdf>

TRANQUILITY AND INSIGHT MEDITATION

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Tranquility%20and%20Insight.pdf>

The road to jump-starting the Kagyu-style Vipassana (Insight Meditation) takes preparation, considerable purification, and guidance by an authentic guru, someone trained in this practice. I will consider writing a more detailed approach to Insight Meditation as it is usually taught, but the above reading should get you started and headed in the right direction.

Jul 29, 2021, 3:31 AM

INSCAPE: THE WAY IN

[I get requests to explain Vipassana (Insight Meditation) and the rather complex training that is required to enable it. I will do that in another blog, but as a

stopgap measure, here is a form of Insight Meditation that anyone can use right now. Call it Mini Insight Meditation.]

The poet Gerard Manley Hopkins introduced the concept of "inscape" to the English language, a word he coined to indicate our access to the beautiful and the profound, the way into allowing the mind to rest naturally. Scholars tell me Hopkins keyed on this concept from the work of Duns Scotus, another of my favorite poets. I can't say I agree with most scholars as to their interpretation of what Hopkins meant by "inscape." I have read Hopkins extensively and have my own understanding of this concept and will use that.

Inscape to me is a natural sign (a signal) in our busy life of distractions that flags down our attention and carries us within to rest in the nature of the mind, however briefly. These moments of rest are crucial.

Another way to phrase this is that an "inscape" is the signature of the beautiful, a sign that catches the eye. For example, on a nature walk, when I finally get outside my busy day and try to relax, it takes time. I have to walk a bit before I can shake off my day-to-day distractions. An inscape is that sign or bit of beauty that first catches my eye in the midst of my business and instantly carries me out of distraction and into the spatial-ness of the moment.

Once I catch an inscape, I immediately slow down, calm down, and find rest in that beauty, if only momentarily. I am suddenly more at peace and beyond the rush of time once again. I am free. I too call these avenues (or ways within) "inscapes," as I believe Hopkins did.

I used the example of a nature walk to illustrate inscape at work, but we search out inscapes all the time, wherever we are and in whatever we do. Without these

instantaneous moments of rest, without some beauty along the way each day, we could not go on. These nanosecond events are essentially timeless connections to the true nature of the mind, which is beyond time – a brief glimpse of eternity.

I attempt to create inscapes in language as I write. As mentioned, inscapes are our way inside the business of this instant, through the particular here and now we are given, and thus a step beyond time to a moment of pure rest. Let's call it the vertical or spiritual dimension. The horizontal is our linear life story, that freight train to tomorrow, while the vertical or inscape is our the inner dimension. For example:

Every sentence tells a story from left to right, from the first to the last word, but along the way, the combination of words, pitched one against another in the sentence, creates peaks and valleys of attention (awareness). These too can be inscapes, ways into the timeless aspect of a moment, an injection of space in time.

Inscapes are designed (like pit stops at a raceway) to attract or flag us down along the horizontal or linear line of our life and guide us safely within to allow the mind to rest, however briefly. The mind is not limited as to rest only in naps or in sleep at night, but much more so in these briefest of moments through inscapes of beauty that un-distract us and deconstruct our conceptual mind into the experience of pure rest. We escape linearity through inscape and heaven knows we need the rest.

These inscape moments are nothing new to any of us. We find and use them all the time to get essential rest or we would go nuts. However, it is helpful to become aware of what we are already naturally doing by necessity.

Inscapes are an integral part of what is called Vipassana (insight) meditation, where this concept of directly looking at the nature of the mind is learned and practiced. Of course I, like you, have made use of inscape moments all my life, but perhaps have not been fully aware of it.

However, it was only when I began to consciously practice them through close-up and macro photography that I learned to look through these moments (like windows) instead of just "at" them like photos. Their effect was compounded by iteration and focused concentration until I began to see through the object I was photographing and look instead (or rather come to rest) in the true nature of the mind. That is where all the rest there is "IS."

These fleeting moments catch our eye or catch our ear and, in a nanosecond, deconstruct our distraction and supplement life with space and expanded time in which we then can dwell. That's the point: to render the mind openly at rest.

No, this is not exactly formal Insight Meditation, but it is close, and it is something each of us can do.

Jul 29, 2021, 3:09 PM

THE POINTING OUT INSTRUCTIONS

My take is that all of the dharma purification practices, and there are many, help remove obscurations, whittling our overage down to essence until our attachments are manageable. Is that, then, enough?

What's beyond the purification practices and how do we know when we are there, i.e. when we have done enough purification? Again, I guess we know we are there when we find ourselves clearly traveling the path and have worn out any of the returns and benefit from purifying ourselves. We are as lean as we get or at least lean enough to begin to see beyond our attachments. Our teacher may also tell us so.

It's at that point, when we have thinned out our obscurations, that we are ripe for awareness, like when we suddenly find ourselves actually growing more aware. And when it comes to awareness, all is not always gradual. There are sudden leaps or at least jumps in awareness too. It is not uncommon; in fact, it is usual, especially when suddenly finding our way into Insight Meditation. That is a special event.

In some ways, finding our dharma path is a lonely occupation. Of course, we are surrounded by our fellow dharma practitioners, and we are all together in our loneliness, all interdependent. Yet alone it is. We each have to enlighten ourselves by ourselves. Everyone can help but turning the wheel of the dharma is something we alone must do. No one can do it for us.

Anyway, when we have purified ourselves enough to begin to see through our own obscurations, we enter a time of refining and waiting. Of course, we are waiting for the other shoe to fall, so to speak, and to make the leap forward called Recognition, meaning that we recognize for ourselves the true nature of the mind. Imagine!

And that is not something we can schedule or find on the clock. It just happens when it happens, but we can prime the pump, so to speak. And just as we seek out a medical expert when we have a health problem, at that point in dharma training, we need to seek out a dharma expert, an authentic master who can tweak us correctly until we can recognize the nature of our own mind. It is a subtle realization.

This is not an easy thing to do, and it can take many years to effect, or it can happen in a moment. Mostly it takes many years. LOL. In the Karma Kagyu tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, it is called “Recognition;” in Rinzai Zen it is called “Kensho.” Either way, it takes a authentic dharma teacher and a student who is ready to make the breakthrough to recognizing the actual nature of the mind. The presiding master gives what are called the “pointing-out instructions,” meaning pointing out to the student the true nature of the mind. It’s up to the student to be able to grasp it.

And it’s more like brain surgery than its not. It’s like, IMO, breaking the umbilical sack, only in this case, the dharma master has to gently misdirect the student from where he or she habitually is pointing their attention, to where it should be pointing. It’s a lot like one of those old figure-ground paintings that used to be popular.

You would have a painting and within that painting would be a separate image that was almost impossible to see, until it was pointed out to you. You couldn’t find it, but once pointed out, you could afterward see it every time. Pointing out the nature of the mind is something like that. Now you see it, but before, in your entire life (and lives) you had never seen it. Then, you do.

I include a very simple and obvious example-illustration of this here, yet imagine one that is impossible to see without first having it pointed out; that would be a rough example of our needing the true nature of the mind to be pointed out to us by an authentic teacher.

I have received the pointing-out instructions a number of times when I never successfully had the true nature of the mind pointed out to me. I was willing, but not able. Nothing got pointed out. Bummer. Don't be discouraged. As my teacher always said to me, "Keep going."

Then one year, during a multi-year Mahamudra teaching on "The Union of Mahamudra and Dzogchen" (a text by the esteemed Karma Chagme), as taught by my root guru Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, a teaching that included the pointing-out instructions, to my surprise, I finally understood what I was doing wrong. From that moment of understanding, it took me about three years of very concentrated work to get myself in shape enough that I could actually recognize the nature of the mind. And finally, it worked, and I did. Hallelujah!

The whole process of Recognition is very subtle, and it does not take just a little of us. It takes everything we have to give and then some. Yet, most of all it takes an authentic master of that process to nudge us at just the right time and in just the right way, and by that to alter our view and distract us from what we think we should see, so that we can see what we have never before seen, the actual nature of the mind.

And in that "Recognition," we simultaneously take responsibility for our own enlightenment from there forward, and for the first time find ourselves in the driver's seat of our dharma path. And with that, our dharma teacher has completed their main task, which is to introduce us to our own mind so that we can begin to become familiar with it.

It's like when an infant is born and everyone waits for that first breath and its cry. Sometimes the midwife has to spank the baby's butt just enough for them to start breathing. After that, the delivery is complete. It is the same with the pointing-out instructions. Once we are introduced to the nature of the mind, we no longer need any pointing out. It but remains for us to become familiar with our own mind. It is our responsibility at that point to enlighten ourselves. We don't need anyone to point out the mind's nature because that has been done.

[A simple and crude example of what happens via the pointing-out instructions, only in the actual process it is impossible without the help of an authentic guru.]

Jul 30, 2021, 11:25 AM

THE DHARMA'S NEW CLOTHES

I was first interested in Buddhism and the dharma in the late 1950s, when we stayed up late, smoking cigarettes and drinking cheap instant coffee with powdered creamer, and talked about Zen Buddhism, along with Existentialism, the latest Ingmar Bergman film, and so on. Back then, we just talked a lot; it had not yet occurred to us that Buddhism was something to practice.

The idea of devotion to the guru was not there in the late 1950s when I discovered Buddhism, because the experience of having a guru was not present. Sure, stories about samaya (bond) and devotion were floating around, but an

actual addiction to Tibetan culture was not. We hadn't had that experience yet; we had just read about it.

Once I had met someone like Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, H.H. the 16th Karmapa, and my root guru Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, the Tibetan culture came right along with it. I couldn't get enough of it. And the whole concept of devotion to the guru was unavoidable. It was part of the package. I'm not saying the cultural part of it was like drinking the Kool-Aid, yet it was similar to my wishing I had Native American blood as a kid. It was like a package deal.

And I'm not saying anything is wrong with clinging to the Tibetan culture, other than the clinging or attachment itself, like any other attachment. I am perhaps saying that separating the dharma from the culture it came in, in this case the Tibetan culture, may be helpful and I will explain why. However, I had no inkling of doing any such thing. I steeped myself in all things Tibetan.

And I am no different today, other than, with great respect to Tibet and its people, I can no longer dress up like a Tibetan, so to speak, and the reason is that the dharma that I'm now realizing is American. Why? Because if you will take the time to check or examine any dharma realization you have had, you will find that it comes from inside, within us, regardless of how we first took it in, from Tibetan books, teachings, teachers, or what-have-you?

I am in no way demeaning Tibet's contribution to American dharma, but rather noting the fact that realization, such as I have had (not a great deal) is American and not Tibetan, Sanskrit, Chinese, Japanese, or anything else.

I still stand here, surrounded by Tibetan culture, and dharma culture at that. Yet it reminds me of coming to a costume party dressed in a costume, when I then

realize it's not a costume party. There is a separation or difference between my mental anteroom where stuff comes in, so to speak, and my dharma realization, small as it is. There is nothing Tibetan about my realization. It seems to come up from inside me, but not with a Tibetan flavor, but rather all-American, so to speak.

It's like laundering money; what goes in is different from what comes out, and realization comes out in much smaller quantities than what came in. I realize that perhaps I am drifting a little too far from the shore of where I started in this blog, yet it's worth a consideration, nevertheless.

I am torn, not by intent, but by the reality of the fact that Tibetan Buddhism, much like the old song "The Music Goes Round and Round," by Ella Fitzgerald, in which she sings:

"The music does down and around and round,

Whoa-ho-ho-ho-ho-ho,

And it comes out here."

And "It comes out here," means the dharma "realization" comes out as American and not with much of any other flavor. And there is no prejudice here on my part against Tibetan or Tibetan dharma. I love it dearly. I am just being honest to note that the dharma does not belong to any country or flavor. It adapts itself to whatever country it enters and its realization, by definition, appears "in their speak" and in the manner of that country.

The above is not true because I say it; I say it (I was somewhat shocked) because I find it to be true and marvel at it. American Dharma.

Jul 31, 2021, 5:49 AM

“AWARENESS WITHOUT A WATCHER”

Insight Meditation has been described as “Awareness without a watcher,” being aware, but not self-conscious, either as a subject (a watcher) or an object (something watched). That means no “you” watching “it” or “it” being watched.

If you are older, as I am, and you have no idea how to go about finding an authentic dharma teacher to work with this late in the game, what can you do? Well, first off, I suggest that you not worry about it. That worry itself, if prolonged, is just another obscuration to add to the pile. So, worrying won't help.

Also, I don't have any available Rinpoches that I can send you to, and I would be hard-pressed to know exactly where to go myself if I needed to. I don't. So, let's say, unless you are very determined and willing to go to extreme lengths to receive the pointing-out instructions as to the nature of the mind, chances are, and also considering the pandemic, it may be beyond your ability to locate an authentic lama who has time to work with you. I could be wrong. Yet, there are things you CAN do and that you would have to do if you did have an authentic teacher. This last point is important to note. There is plenty to do without a high-level dharma teacher.

Meanwhile, what you can do is get busy working through the purification practices, since the first thing an authentic dharma teacher will have you do is start in on those. If you can't manage those now or don't want to, you are not ready to undertake the necessary purification practices that have to be done. These practices are not an overnight affair, but most often a long process of preparation, sometime (often) taking years.

In other words, even if you had an authentic lama on hand to work with you today, you would still have to get busy bringing your attachments and over-inflated "whatever" under control. That involves thinning out your obscurations, which is required before the pointing-out instructions would do any good. These purification practices are not something you can do by rote, because unless we actually remove or thin down our obscurations consciously, there is no progress. So, consider that.

Anyway, by the time you have completed whatever purification you may need, you may (or perhaps probably would) be able to find an authentic dharma teacher willing to take you the rest of the way to recognizing the true nature of the mind. There is lots to do right now that you would have to do anyway if you had an authentic teacher. And there are many dharma practitioners who can instruct in the purification dharma practices. They are available.

Remember that the "nature of the mind," whatever you imagine that is (since you don't know), is right here and now present for you to realize. If we have not realized it, this means we are not yet subtle enough or our attachments are not transparent enough for us to see through them to the actual nature of the mind at this point, anyway. So, since this is a long process, start out by relaxing and taking it slow, day by day. It's like "hurry up and wait."

If Insight Meditation is “Awareness without a watcher,” take some serious time to examine your life as to what you already like to do with your life right now, and see if there are areas where you now have clear and lucid awareness WITHOUT the sense of a watcher present, without a lot of doubt and worry. What are you doing now that resembles actual Insight Meditation? How do you relax and what are your areas of rest without worry or unnecessary thoughts? Inventory your life.

Or it could just be the things you already like to do, that when you do them, the worry and the doubt fade to the background, and are not really very disruptive, if at all. Treasure those moments, those activities, and help them to grow and spread. This anyone can do right now.

Of course, that’s not all of what Insight Meditation is. Insight Meditation also brings with it a clear and lucid certainty, one that is ever-more inclusive and accommodating of what is -- accepting. And time spent in Insight Meditation is time not spent in standard dualistic conceptualization and thought, which thinking can’t help but accumulate karma. Hard to put in words, but Insight Meditation is said in the dharma texts to be time-out from accumulating karma, and time out from time itself. It is also incredibly healing, and we all need the rest.

Above all, Insight Meditation itself is an ongoing process and not a state or some place to get to.

It’s as if where we are going or trying to get to is how we travel to get there.

And that process is recursive and iterative. In my experience, Insight Meditation is time-out from the samsaric rat-race we spend our time in. And as mentioned, Insight Meditation is a hedge against karma and a chance to rest and heal ourselves mentally, without being constantly buffeted about by the winds of time.

In summary, there is no time like the present to make a start with the purification practices. A simple but very effective dharma practice that anyone can do and that does not take up any of your time during the day is what is called Reaction Toning, a special form of Tong-Len practice. You can do this while you live your day and it really, really works. Here are some articles on Reaction Toning to start you out.

<http://michaelerlewine.com/viewforum.php?f=373&sid=8447ac64d0865f81c57f5b0aba971403>

Ask questions if you have them and I will try to offer answers, if I can.

Jul 31, 2021, 10:40 PM

A DHARMA STORY -- THE DRAWING

Since many of you like these stories, here is what I consider a marvelous story.

Many years ago, in the 1980s, I had a dream. It was very vivid. And in that dream I presented my dharma teacher Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche a drawn image or portrait of himself. It was one of those dreams that is magical, somehow more real than waking life. For that reason, I felt it was important that this dream be

made real and acted out in actual life. Sometime after the dream and its imprint in my mind, I began actively to consider how this could happen. I tried on many ideas.

I finally settled on a sketched portrait but finding an artist good enough was not easy. I only knew of a single such artist, one of the finest draftsman in Michigan, a man named John Felsing who was renowned for his life-like portraits of wildlife, especially birds. I have several of his watercolors on my wall today.

I contacted Felsing and asked to visit him. Then Margaret and I traveled to Lansing where he lived and sat down with him. I explained my dream and what I was hoping he might do. After some discussion, he agreed to do a drawing and I gave him a really nice photo of Khenpo Rinpoche.

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

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

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

Felsing did not hesitate for a moment, but said he was coming to Big Rapids to see Rinpoche. He jumped into his car, drove through

rainstorm into the oncoming night to our center and, when he arrived, he formally asked Rinpoche to give him “refuge.” Refuge is a short ceremony that takes place when someone discovers that they have great respect for the dharma, respect not only for the historical Buddha, but also for his teachings (the dharma), and the sangha (those monks and nuns who embody the living teaching). It is a request you make of a teacher. Felsing’s request was honored and Rinpoche gave the refuge ceremony, which includes giving those who ask for it a dharma name.

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

Aug 2, 2021, 12:14 PM

REALIZING THE REALIZATION

“Keep your eyes on the prize.” I would convert that to keep your eyes on the “realization” and where it comes from. That’s the dharma equivalent to “Follow the money.” The realization does not come from on high, or even from your dharma texts and best dharma teachers. Not at all, and we need to know this. I can’t get any feedback from my dharma friends on this issue, so let me try once again please:

Realization, as in dharma-realization (or any kind of realization) comes from ourselves, from within ourselves, and from deep within ourselves at that. It’s OUR realization and not realization pictured in the classic dharma texts. More important, realization does not come to us in Hindu, Tibetan, Sanskrit or any format other than our own speak, American English (or what have you). I would pay close attention to that fact.

Any realization that arises in us will be filtered and flavored by our own deepest history, our background, family, locale, and even our DNA. That’s what I mean by our “own speak,” our dialect, brogue, or what-have-you? I am saying this, but am not sure many of you are hearing me, so I should repeat.

Our realization, by definition, will be American realization, and not any other. Yes, I know. All roads lead to Rome and Enlightenment is Enlightenment the world over. That’s true. What I am saying is that there are flavors to realization, flavors colored by who we are, where we are, and when we realize. Indian Buddhism, Japanese Buddhism, Chinese Buddhism, and Tibetan Buddhism are just some of these flavors. American Buddhism is a work in progress.

Any realization I have will come to me through and filtered by my life, background, language, and on and on. Also, flavored by my habits, obstacles, training, and all of my history. And so, my dharma may come into me (as taught) as Tibetan, Indian, Chinese, and via Sanskrit, Tibetan, English, etc., but it will only come out of me as dharma "realization" is concerned as American, just as we are Americans. That's certain.

For years, even decades, I assumed that the dharma that I received (teachings, books, etc.) would be reflected in time, come out of me, as it came in, like a mirror. I could not have been more wrong, and it took years for me to put it together that what goes in via formal dharma teaching does not come out of me in the same formal realization, so to speak. No way.

Realization comes out of us as filtered through, well obviously, us! It appears in our own personal language, as formed by family, history, location and whatever makes us up. It's like talking to ourselves or to someone like us. And we may not like ourselves or trust ourselves to speak dharma to ourselves. LOL. Yet, it is true. Realization is OUR realization, how we interpret or realize the dharma, and not how others, even the classic texts, present it. This may not be as obvious as it appears.

So, be prepared to hear your own voice speaking to you in a language perhaps too familiar to you, perhaps one that only you can understand. Don't look around to see who is speaking because it's only you talking to yourself. This is easy to write out here, but I believe hard to accept for many. It's just proof of how far we have drifted from trusting ourselves.

We want to hear such things as dharma realization from an authority, just as we heard it from teachings or read it in a book, and we may not be prepared to hear it from our own selves and with such familiarity. This is why if you tell me that your

dharma experience was a mirror-reflection of what the pith texts say, I want to take your word for it, but it goes against everything I personally have experienced about realization, and sounds to me more like conceptual experience talking, and not realization. And don't be offended, because that is not my intention. We can differ on this, but we each should tell it as clearly as we can and let the chips fall where they may. It's a big world and it takes all kinds.

And I did this myself. For the longest time I assumed that what I read or heard in the dharma texts as to realization would be my experience, but in reality I was expecting "their" realization experience, the teachers, books, etc. And this because I never had any dharma realization of my own. And when I did finally have a little, it came from the last place (and person) I would have ever expected it, from deep within my own experience and flavored or colored by no one else but me.

And it was filtered through my own "through a glass darkly" state of mind, meaning as best as I was able to realize it and put it all together. It was like seeing double, but not a mirrored double, but the classic description of realization on one hand and my own realization on the other, and this for the longest time. It seemed like two different worlds.

And then, at long last and very gradually, I began to realize that what I was experiencing as a personal realization was (at least vaguely) similar to what the textbooks pointed out.

Yet, it was enough different so that I had to look at one and then the other, back and forth, until to my great surprise I realized that these two realizations (textbook and my own) were talking about the same thing. Oh my god!

It was only at that time could I admit my own realization was legitimate and real, and that it was only my way of, well, realizing the dharma. It was not wrong or incorrect, but probably one of the proverbial 84,000 ways to realize the dharma. We have to find confidence in our own manner of dharma realization!

And so, I am asking those of you that are concerned with such differences to examine your own dharma realization to see if indeed it is your own or just a conceptual reflection of what you were taught.

Let me know your thoughts.

Aug 2, 2021, 3:05 PM

SINGING THE DHARMA

["A dense wave of solar wind crashed against Earth's magnetic field on August 2nd, sparking a G1-class geomagnetic storm. It may have been a ripple from a passing CME--one of several "near miss CMEs" that left the sun in late July." -- SpaceWeather.com]

It came as a surprise to me when I first discovered that Tibetans value their inner dharma changes more than their outer life facts. Never heard of such a thing, except perhaps in some of my own journal entries as a young person.

The most read Tibetan biographies are called Namtars, and they read like an account of one's spiritual progress through life, ignoring much of what was achieved in the mundane world. How cool, thought I. Of course, they also have something like we have, our standard biographies, what someone has done and achieved in this outer world, but these inner spiritual biographies are much more popular. Why don't we have them?

And often featured in those Namtars, those spiritual biographies, are what are called Dohas, songs and poems of spiritual experience, and they are most often sung, and not just read.

As for singing what the Tibetans call Dohas, the songs of our spiritual experience, we Westerners don't tend to do that, although I don't understand why we don't. Maybe we don't have that much to sing about yet. Just kidding; of course we do, even if we only sing about wherever we are at in our dharma path. It's all good, as they say.

How much realization is enough to sing about? I don't care for the thought that we must wait until we are fully enlightened to sing those songs. Why can't we sing along as we go down the dharma path, like the seven dwarfs did in the story of Snow White, "Just Whistle While You Work." We could do that.

How does a bird learn to sing and why? It seems to me they can't help but sing. I hear them right outside my window in the morning. They are happy about something. Are we too like that?

I have never really written any Dohas, but I have written some dharma poetry over the years, so I know that's possible. Here is a sampling of my poems, for those with open ears.

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.

TESTING THE REST

Learning to rest the mind,
Really puts my practice to the test,
So sometimes I just need to take a break,
And simply get some rest.

TIME FOR NOTHING

Excuse me for the moment,
No matter the reasons why,
I just need more time to do nothing,
But gaze into clear empty sky.

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.

SAMSARA

The same world,

That early on,

Makes it difficult,

To meditate,

Later,

Makes it difficult,

Not to.

RESTING

Sitting quietly,

Properly,

With tongue to teeth,

My body invites,

The mind.

To be,

At ease.

MANDALA OFFERING

The “offering,”
Is not the offering.

The offering,
Is the “offering.”

It’s the giving,
Not the gift,
That is,
The mandala.

MIND PRACTICE

Not an option,
But a refuge,
Less painful than
Anywhere else.

EMPOWERMENT

There are many,

Waiting,
To be known,
But few,
Who care Enough,
To know.

SOLITUDE

'Alone' is a simple mistake.
Like the disappearance of a sound,
Hearing cannot be heard,
And the finder never found.

MY POEMS

Poems,
A home for my thoughts,
Dear thoughts,
The very best of me,
All that's precious and kind,
Now sealed in words,
Like insects in amber:

Prayer flags endlessly waving
In the gentle chalice of the mind.

SEMANTICS

It's not just that being,
Is empty;
It's that there is,
An emptiness,
Of being.

It's never been there.

EMPTINESS

It's not just that appearances that arise are empty,
It's that appearances are the emptiness arising.

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.

Aug 3, 2021, 10:56 AM

FABRICATED EXPERIENCE

We like to believe that we experience life as we go along, as if “Life” is something out there to be experienced that is not connected or created by us. Yet, according to the dharma, that is not accurate.

We have five senses: vision, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching. The Buddhists typically add a sixth sense, “Mind” and mentation. To understand these six senses, it is important to understand that the five traditional senses

(vision, hearing, smelling, tasting, and touching) are direct, pure input, like a non-dual or a hard-wired connection, one that has to be decoded or interpreted by the mind for us to use them.

This makes the mind's mentation not a pure connection like the senses, but rather relative, and its job is turning those five direct sense-experiences into a relative or dualistic form, like "I taste this, "I hear that," and so on. The "mind" aspect is like a transformer station that turns the direct voltage of the five senses into the indirect and the relative (dualistic) perceptions we each have.

In other words, our direct experience of the five senses is empty of the presuppositions the Mind adds to this direct-sense experience of them to make sense of it. This "making sense" is just that, the making of the senses into a relative truth, something we can grasp, yet also a big step removed from being natural.

And the "Mind" as mentation is where the non-dual direct voltage of the five senses is transformed into relative truth, our conceptualization of that directness - pure fabrication. It is important to note that the five senses are pure, unadulterated sensations that only become conceptual when the thinking Mind intervenes, grasps them, and steps down that direct voltage into the relative dualistic thoughts we all use. Fabrication means conceptual and dualistic.

The process of iterative articulation is like the fact that the shark has no lungs to breathe with but has to keep moving in order to bring oxygenated water through its gills, forever. The shark can't just stop and still live, but has to be always on the move, with no choice. In a similar way, the "process" of Insight Meditation realizing insight into Samsara is continual, endless. Realization is a process that has to be expanded and extended.

What is processed in this process of Insight Meditation varies, the content of the process, but the process itself does not vary. And the byproduct of this continual process is like the oxygen the shark needs, continually expanding insight, a process of revelation, but also like the shark, the process has to continue, keep moving, and never stops until Enlightenment, whatever we can agree that is.

There can be a certain weariness in the process, aside from the rest, clarity, freshness, etc. that makes up the “oxygen” that apparently is needed. Perhaps the fact that, like the shark, we have to continue to do it in order to maintain our clarity of insight. This may be just a stage, but a long one.

However, the process of fabricating our experience, mentally making sense of it (making our senses into a dualistic experience) is contrasted to ordinary intellectual fabrication, which we call conceptualization.

Analyzing conceptualization is the intellectual process of examining with the mind, while “realization” is the process of deconstructing the Samsaric dualism, reducing it to its non-linear (non-dual) essence, an endless task, because like breathing, it keeps us alive on the path to Enlightenment. We don’t want to end it. And realization is a one-way street. We can’t walk back the process of realization, once realized.

Weaving the strands of our five senses into the fabric of our experience using the sixth sense (mentation) is a fabrication that takes us a step beyond the non-dual purity of the five senses, what the poet William Blake said in “The Marriage of Heaven and Hell” as “... clos’d by your senses five.”

We dream or fabricate a bridge of experience to hold back what we have; we fabricate what we call experience, our life-experience itself. In other words, we not only experience life (as we imagine we do), but we also fabricate that experience from our five senses, using mentation, what is called the sixth sense.

This suggests that Insight Meditation is the process of our realization of what has been fabricated through the accretion of Samsaric experience, Insight Meditation ever reducing or deconstructing what has been fabricated (Samsara) to its non-dual essence, un-fabricating it, so to speak.

Aug 4, 2021, 6:51 AM

THE EASIEST DHARMA PRACTICE

[IMO, here is a dharma practice that anyone of any age can do that allows you to log many hours a day without having to set aside a special time and place for practice. This is a form of Tong-Len, but instead of working with other people, this form of Tong-Len is working with only yourself. Very effective, IMO.]

Of course, having approached dharma since I was still in high school all the way up to today (over 60 years), there have been many facets to my study and practice.

As for my entering the stream of dharma, that too had trials and errors. Some dharma practices proved too difficult for me to sustain, to keep at them, while

others were too transparent that I quickly fell through them to more viscous practices until I stuck on one or the other.

During most of these years, I was a busy guy working a job pretty much 24x7. If you check my CV (Curriculum vitae), you would find that I have done a lot of stuff. As mentioned, I was busy.

Trying to fit dharma practice into some of those days proved too difficult, so although I tried to maintain a regular schedule for some meditation or dharma practice, too much business or often life excitement found me unable or unwilling to practice on those days. I put off until tomorrow dharma practice that I found too difficult to do on some days. However, mostly I was pretty good about practice.

Yet, when I consider how hard I worked to free myself from obligations and responsibilities, like not finishing high school, not working for others, staying the course of my own interest no matter what, going without, and so on, I can see how some of you might find this very approach difficult and painful. I felt I had no choice. For some folks, finding that bit of time each day to practice dharma is very difficult indeed.

Even in my own case, it was difficult for me to practice long enough, extensively enough, and effortlessly enough for the benefit of my dharma practice to amount to much, to accrue enough merit that I felt I was gaining. Too often for me, it was one step forward and two steps back, instead of two steps forward and one step back. And then (along the way) I had a pivotal event that related to my daily dharma practice, and which relates to this blog.

Mostly, I have not been susceptible to picking up on a single word or sign and responding to that dharma signal with realization. I am more a study, learn,

study-some sort of person, until I understood something. Yet, in this case, this dharma realization took place in one single moment or sign and grew from there all out of proportion to what I would have expected.

I was listening to an excellent Western dharma teacher (and translator) speak on one of the heart instructions of Gautama Buddha, the Four Noble Truths, something most central to dharma, which I list here.

FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

- (1) The Truth of Suffering
- (2) The Truth of the Cause of Suffering
- (3) The Truth of the End of Suffering
- (4) The Truth of the Path That Leads to the End of Suffering.

This expert says he felt it would be more correct, not to use the word “suffering,” but rather the word “reactivity,” and thus:

FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

- (1) The Truth of Reactivity
- (2) The Truth of the Cause of Reactivity
- (3) The Truth of the End of Reactivity
- (4) The Truth of the Path That Leads to the End of Reactivity

With that simple statement, my mind instantaneously just opened up and I felt empowered on the spot. It changed my dharma practice life just like that, at the appearance of that word "reactivity" as a sign!

And later in my practice, I came across another expert translator who said a similar thing, but using "stress" as the keyword.

FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

- (1) The Truth of Stress
- (2) The Truth of the Cause of Stress
- (3) The Truth of the End of Stress
- (4) The Truth of the Path That Leads to the End of Stress

Of the three terms, "Reactivity" hit home to me, and in that realization, I suddenly understood the value of the word "Reactivity," and in a short time began practicing and developing a whole dharma practice based on this approach. Later I presented this technique, which I will describe below, to my teacher the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche (and to a shrine room full of students like myself) and Rinpoche pronounced that this was indeed a legitimate practice, which I will now share with you.

REACTION TONG-LEN

I will first explain why this very simple practice is so valuable IMO.

First, we can do it anywhere, anytime, and all the time. In fact, once you are aware of the practice, it is hard not to do it. And it is VERY effective.

Second, it takes up no extra time to do it because it is based on our own knee-jerk reactions, something we are already doing anyway. We have already spent this reaction energy on reacting. This practice is a way to put our reactions and that energy to work for us.

And third, because we can do it effortlessly all day long, we accrue a large amount of dharma practice, while otherwise we would not, probably more practice than we have ever done in a day.

I have done this Reaction-Tong-Len practice effortlessly for many years, and have found it has been very, very effective as a dharma practice. Anyone can do it. There is nothing “religious” about it and it is not labeled as Buddhist or with any other tag. It just works. And now how to do it:

As you might expect from my introduction, it simply involves monitoring our ongoing daily reactions and becoming aware of them. Not only do we react to sonic booms and doors slamming, but you will soon discover that there are ever finer reactions that are almost too numerous to mention. It’s like that old rhyme called “Siphonaptera,” which goes:

“Great fleas have little fleas upon their backs to bite ‘em,
And little fleas have lesser fleas, and so ad infinitum.”

The range and number of reactions we have in even a single day is almost countless. Not only do we react to major interruptions or personal earthquakes, but we suffer micro-reactions that may be little more than a tremor, but react to them we do. And the process of this practice is simple:

We become aware that we have reacted, we take note that the reaction occurred, but we spend no time examining it or following it out with thoughts as to why, how, and what. We just note the reaction took place, own it as our own reaction, and right-away drop it.

- (1) We become aware we reacted.
- (2) We note that it is our reaction
- (3) We own the reaction as ours and only ours.
- (4) We drop it and move on.

As mentioned, we don't agonize over our reaction, don't spend time on what or who caused it, and just note that it is absolutely our reaction, and drop it.

The taking responsibility to own our own reactions is key. It does not matter who did what to us to cause it. That is their problem, whether it was warranted or not. Our reaction and owning it is our only problem here. We just own it, drop it, and go on with our day. We do not think about it.

The practice does not take more than a moment's time, and we have already reacted and spent our energy on it, so that is that. No point in adding insult to injury by then worrying or wondering about the cause, and all that. Just see it, own it, drop it, and move on.

It could be as simple as coming around a corner and you are face-to-face with someone you don't like or who does not like you. You react! Just own that reaction, drop it, and move on.

Or it could be as stupid as you don't like someone's tie, or their nose is too big. With reactions, anything goes, as you soon will see for yourself.

The idea is to tone down our reactions, which is why sometimes this technique is called "Reaction Toning," because we are toning back our reactions until they are what we would call an appropriate response to the event. This technique is NOT intended to suppress reactions, but to work them back, tone them down, until they are natural and appropriate responses.

And you can do this all day, every day, and the amount of practice compared to what you usually do will be dramatic. If you do this constantly, gradually all of that energy we spend each day reacting will be saved, no longer spent, and that energy will be free for us to use for a more useful purpose. Plus, we are not accumulating all that karma that knee-jerk reactions can bring.

Reactivity Toning is easy and, as mentioned, does not take up any more time than you are already spending reacting. Your whole reactivity and body of reactions will be calmed and replaced by appropriate responses.

There is no easier dharma practice than this that I know. If you find an easier one with these rewards, please share it with me.

Aug 5, 2021, 3:38 AM

LIFE BEYOND THE BUBBLE

[Yesterday I mentioned in a blog what I consider the easiest and most approachable way to start out practicing the dharma. Here, it will be just the opposite, pointing out the most difficult point (as I understand it) that most encounter in their ongoing dharma practice.]

A common dharma statement is “The absence of conceptualization is emptiness.” And you know how the dharma loves emptiness. However, as for us, we are pretty much encased in conceptualization. In other words, like it or not, it’s like we are at the movies, so to speak, all the time. We are already encapsulated by thought and cut off from the natural or raw impressions of the five senses by what is called the Sixth Sense, the mind’s mentation -- conceptualization. And so, it’s not like we are touching or seeing anything “real” at any time. We can consider that this whole world that we find ourselves in is like a hologram, a projection of our own mind, something that we ourselves fabricated. The initial point here is to understand that all of what we call experience is fabricated, and by us.

The closest we come to raw is with Insight Meditation (and the realization dharma), which deconstructs conceptualization and serves to strip-down dualism to non-dual meditation. And that non-dual meditation is about as pure and free as we get. I don’t know anything more pure than that.

I imagine that all of this hub-bub about Insight Meditation sounds to many of you like much ado about nothing, and that is just what it is, giving us more “nothing,” more space in time, without the clutter of mental business.

It is helpful, even remarkable, to discover a meditation process (Insight Meditation) that processes Samsara, continually revealing its essence to be one with Nirvana. Yet, like a bilge pump on a leaky boat pumping water out of the boat, a process like Insight Meditation still has one foot in Samsara and the other in Nirvana. And this because, as mentioned, it is a process that continues until everything that must be processed is processed. How many lifetimes is that?

Laying bare non-dual realization by shedding dualisms is an enormous relief from feeling trapped and smothered in our own thought processes and conceptualizations in general. Insight Meditation allows us to do that, yet it is not easy to learn. You can't just pick up a book or hear a teaching on the Karma Kagyu style of Insight Meditation and then do it. And that's a problem for almost everyone.

And why is this particular form of meditation difficult and others are not? Well, ANY realization practice (Insight Meditation, Mahamudra, Dzogchen, Maha-Ati, etc.) are identical in requiring that we have first recognized the actual nature of the mind, have it pointed out to us by an authentic master, until we realize it.

And so, the point here is that these realization practices are not just “more advanced” dharma practices. Yes, they are more advanced, but hidden from us by our inability to recognize the true nature of how the mind works. That's our problem, not being sensitive enough to have become familiar with our own mind

for that recognition to occur. And that's a Catch-22, not becoming familiar because we are not familiar, etc.

In other words, moving from the preliminary practices (Lojong, Ngondro, etc.) to the realization practices (Insight Meditation, Mahamudra, etc.) is not just another notch in our belt, a "next" practice, but another entire level in our awareness. That awareness must be there and having that is not a question of just "getting" it. It's not about acquisition, but rather about reception, being able to receive it. It is, IMO, a completely different mindset for dharma practice, one that we are not used to.

In fact, as mentioned, we can't just go out and "get" it; we first have to be able to receive it. It's not about grasping, and all about reception. And up to the point of Recognition, we have always been used to a linear point of view, going down the line from point to the next point and achieving it.

Yet, with the realization practices, as explained, it is not about acquisition, but just the opposite, learning to become receptive enough to receive it. Traditionally, the empowering master makes use of the pointing-out instructions to point out to us the true nature of the mind, not for us to go after it, but so that we can be flexible enough to receive or accept the nature of the mind. There is a turn-around here, and for most of us that is new to us, and we have to relax enough to be able to receive.

Anyway, that's a rough explanation as to why this is such a sticking point for many of us, our inability to turn on a dime and reverse our approach. Instead of coming, we are suddenly going, making a one-eighty. And the officiator of this change of direction is an authentic vajra master, someone who either has realized this recognition or who has been trained to enable it.

It's a little like brain surgery, teaching us to go from grasping and "getting it" to releasing and "receiving." We have to learn to be more receptive after a lifetime of linear thinking. It takes a dharma expert to do that or at least to seed the information we need for us to go through the purification practices needed to enable reception.

I was given the pointing-out instructions several times and never was able to grasp it (because it is not about grasping, LOL). And once I finally understood what I was doing wrong, it then took me three years of intense dharma training to prepare my mind. And lastly, it took a perfect storm of personal trouble to get me off my high horse enough to be open enough to receive Recognition.

I am sure there are other ways. I only know how it went for me, which I am sharing. This account may or may not be meaningful enough for you, and certainly not enough to receive it by just reading some words. LOL.

Aug 5, 2021, 9:49 PM

ALL THE NEWS THAT'S FIT TO PRINT

Well. New Moon is coming (August 8th) not too long. Marks a change for me. I can fill you in on a few things going on around here this summer.

First, my two cataract surgeries are done and healing. I got wheeled into the operating room twice, with a handful of nurses and one doctor, all dressed in green. I had light anesthetics, so didn't feel a thing. It was over in ten or so minutes, on two different dates, not to mention hours of prep and after-stay, etc. I now have 20/20 vision in both eyes and don't have to wear glasses for near visions, which is what I do most of.

I have been putting five different eyedrops in my eyes a total of nine times a day, for weeks, including antibiotics, anti-inflammatory drugs, swelling reducers, eye-pressure lowering drugs, and others that I don't exactly understand, not to mention trips to the eye doctor, over and over.

I don't like having drugs, especially antibiotics, in my system, but what can you do? The whole thing was kind of "featured" this summer, and everything has been mostly about that. The summer is almost gone and I am just getting around to appreciating it. Story of my life.

I am OK, perhaps just a little exhausted from always having all this health stuff hanging over me, not to mention that after more than three years of trying to sell our recording studio, it finally has sold. And that's another whole big deal, not only all the dickering, paperwork, lawyer work, plus I now have to remove all kinds of stuff to make way for the new owner. Working on that too. And that's literally a ton of stuff that has to be removed. I am working on that, although until now I have been unable to lift anything because of the eye surgeries healing. Now I am working, as they used to say, harder than a one-armed paper hanger.

So, that's a summary, not including my dharma practice and the writing of blogs, which continues. I won't even mention the Olympics, some of which I thoroughly enjoy.

And for a coda, I should mention my new weight bench. I am getting older, and my muscles are weakening. My friend (and daughter's husband) Dana Even, who knows marital arts and all about physical training, created for me a weight-training schedule for three workouts a week, Monday-Wednesday-Friday, using a weight bench and different barbells.

I did my first weight workout this morning and, ouch, am I sore! Shades of things to come. I almost want to do the exercises without the barbells for a while, just moving my limbs. LOL.

Here is a photo of my FLYBIRD Weight Bench, which is inexpensive. And then I have a bunch of barbell-pairs to work with it. No, that's not me in the photo. I wish.

Aug 6, 2021, 4:15 PM

1969: "THE SUMMER OF SOUL" AND THE HARLEM MUSIC FESTIVAL

[Putting on my hat as a music critic and reviewer.]

1969 was a pivotal year for music in America. Of course, there was the Woodstock Music Festival (August 15-18) that left its indelible imprint on our consciousness. Yet there was more. I never went to Woodstock because I was having one of the highlights of my life at the Ann Arbor Blues Festival (August 1-3), where I was working backstage in charge of food and drink for all the performers and bands. In the process I interviewed on audiotape scores and scores of Black performers, their bands, and even some of their families. It changed my life and put me in a trance for months afterward.

And to my surprise, there was another music festival that I didn't know about in the summer of 1969 until recently, and that is the "Summer of Soul," the Harlem Cultural Festival, held in Mt. Morris Park (today Marcus Greavey Park) in Harlem, a series of 6 concerts from June 29th to August 24th of 1969.

Featuring performers including names like a 19-year old Stevie wonder, Nina Simone, Gladys Knoght and the Pips, Mahalia Jackson, The Staples Singers, B.B. King, RayBaretto, the Temptation's David Ruffin, the 5th Dimension, Mongo Santamaria, the Edwin Hawkins singers, Sly and the Family Stone, and others, often called the "Black Woodstock," I have just seen the "Summer of Soul" (on Hulu) and this festival is so much more than what you can imagine.

For one, it was huge, lasting a full summer of six Sundays, and almost entirely attended by Black folk (some 300,000), with very few Whites. And many of these performers were still young and just being heard, really heard. I was expecting a very good concert, but I was not expecting to be thrilled to the bone by it as I was.

I have spent many years studying Black Music, mostly blues and jazz, but especially blues. And I mean I studied Black music intensely for years and played it too. That's all I did or thought about back in the mid-1960s. I say this only to point out that even I was not prepared for the "Summer of Soul." And to think that this music sat unheard in someone's basement for 50 years!

The closest I can come to describing my listening experience is with the Night Blooming Cereus, a succulent desert-like plant with foot-long trumpet-like flowers that only blooms one night and are then gone by morning. But the scent of these flowers is so poignant that it penetrates past my nose and directly into my brain. It is unique in my experience. Never forgotten.

"The Summer of Soul" did just that, but to my ears, and the concert went directly into my brain. Why, because I heard many of these artists singing their hearts out to their own people and going higher and deeper, and it took me way past anything I had heard by many of these performers up until now. This is raw music and the sound and energy just penetrated directly into my brain.

These performers let go and let go so intensely that suddenly I was in a new sound-space, being educated once again and my ears stretched, all at once.

I can't say all of you will like it, since it is not just good or even exceptional music, but raw mind-punctuating music that cannot be forgotten once heard because it also is enlightening as to a key moment in racial awareness. At least, that is my impression. I have been impressed.

You think you have heard it all? You haven't, and as the founder and developer of the All-Music Guide, overseeing (at one time) a collection of 720,000 CDs, I

have heard something from about everything musical. But I have never heard it like this!

And simultaneous with this summer-long festival of pure Black music was the change (around this time) from calling African Americans “Negros” to using the word “Blacks.” And that cultural sea-change is graphically dramatized in the “Summer of Soul” by the music and the attitude of the performers and the crowd. Amazingly clear!

And what a perfect time now to have this music experience. Woodstock was pivotal; “The Summer of Soul” was equally pivotal, culture shaking as well, IMO.

The duet of a young Mavis Staples and Mahalia Jackson is unforgettable and mind blowing. Reflecting today on the concerts, Gladys Knight states:

“But I knew something very, very important was happening in Harlem that day. It wasn’t just about the music. We wanted progress. We are Black people, and we should be proud of this. And we want our people, we want our people lifting us up.”

Aug 7, 2021, 8:27 AM

THE TRAILING SUMMER

It's been, for the most part, a cold summer. Nighttime temperatures often reaching 48-degrees Fahrenheit. Does that affect me? It does. As for reaching out, many of my friends have passed on, so there is a limited palette to choose from, not to mention that health concerns in my life loom always larger and never smaller.

With all that, I still feel like I am 25 years old inside. I've had a theory for years that inside each of us is like an umbilical cord that snaps somewhere in our twenties or early thirties. And, although our body continues to age, inside we remain at the age when that cord broke. As mentioned, I feel like I am forever 25 years old, not a bad age. What age are you?

And while I know and am some kind of expert in a variety of fields, talking about them to others seems more pointless than it used to, compared to the effects of what learning about something like the dharma can provide. I'm not interested in religion's solutions, and I don't consider the dharma religious. It is just the way things are. The dharma remains interesting to me and does not remind me of rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic as many things do, just treading water.

Yet, like most things, it takes work on our part, and to squeeze out the dharma requires interest from us in the topic. That's a hard one to jumpstart, because it is a true Catch-22. We can't imagine what having more awareness is like without having it. And we can't have it without more awareness, so here many of us sit, biding our time. I don't do that.

For years I have done my best to point out what I find interesting in learning the dharma, yet I know from experience that what floats one person's boat sinks another. There is such variation, IMO, in aptitude for dharma learning. About all I can do is talk about what works for me, knowing full well the incredible range of dharma that is available to us. What catches our interest is what catches our interest, and without interest dharma is, well, not that interesting. How's that for a tautology.

At the same time, trying to learn dharma by rote practice and recitation is not everyone's cup of tea, certainly not mine. It's a case of managing to fail ignorance by a meter or a foot. Should we just throw spaghetti at the wall to see what sticks? IMO, it is not that bad, yet it is a question of our sorting it until we find our natural thread of interest in life; that will be the fuel for dharma with us. Anyway, that's what I do.

I am already wondering what I will do this winter. LOL.

Aug 8, 2021, 2:57 AM

ERLEWINE PLANTS: CRAZY AS YOU WANNA' BE.

Margaret and I at our greenhouses in Ewart, Michigan.

ERLEWINE PLANTS: CRAZY AS YOU WANNA' BE

That's right, I used to have a 1966 Dodge van that had "Erlewine Planets" painted on both sides. Margaret and I were in the tropical plant business, both in Michigan and in Apopka, Florida. Here is a bit of that story.

There is no doubt I love flowers and green plants; just look at what I photograph. Did I ever tell you about when we went into the green plant business and ended up managing greenhouses in Florida with 19,000 Square feet of glass? Well, that happened. I will try to make this brief, yet it is a story.

I met my wife-to-be Margaret in March of 1971. We were married about three months later on July 3rd. Being impulsive romantically, I ended up proposing to Margaret in the alley behind the Fifth Forum Theater in Ann Arbor, Michigan. We were coming out the back door after watching a movie. I wonder what that movie was? I am sure Margaret will remember.

I act a lot on intuition and insight, and have learned to do what my mind tells me to do more and more of the time. Anyway, never paying much attention to persons or place, that was the instant when I was moved to ask Margaret to marry me. I had no plan, no ring, no magic place or atmospherics, just that moment in the night in the alley. She said yes and here we are 50 years later. But that's not the story I am trying to tell here.

Margaret and I lived at 114 N. Division, what was called at the time the "Prime Mover House," because that was the name of my band, and most of the members used to live there. Anyway, I had one room and a second very narrow entry-way room that was crammed with books from floor to ceiling, and so on.

For some reason around that time I met Margaret I began to collect potted plants. Before I even knew it, every inch of window space, every little bit of light, was

crammed with shelves of plants. Plants were everywhere. And I was studying them. I don't know why, except that I like plants. This was a sign of something, but what?

Well, the “what” was an abandoned broken-down greenhouse in Evart, a town in northern Michigan. For some crazy reason I wanted to have that greenhouse, so after what amounts to a lifetime in Ann Arbor, I resolved to move up north, restore, and run that greenhouse complex. Of course, we had no money.

So, I decided to sell everything I owned, a vast amount of books and an enormous number of LP records. Margaret told me later that she wanted to stay in Ann Arbor and enjoy the little mandala I had created there, but I did not know that at the time. So, Margaret and I left Ann Arbor, just moved out, and found ourselves in a tiny dark apartment in Evart, Michigan that was part of a shop and greenhouses. And it was all run-down. None of the three greenhouses were working and they were attached to a little store, above which was a tiny apartment where we lived. And it was a wee bit spooky at night. There were lots of long dark hallways, abandoned stuff, and, of course, the boiler room, the scariest place of all.

The boiler room in the basement contained a huge boiler that was the size of the front of a locomotive, and it produced steam enough to power all the greenhouses and whatever else was attached. Well, it had a life of its own. I kind of had to sneak up on it to even get near. And there it was, with its flashes of flickering flames in the dark, hissing and moaning like some great beast. And I had to treat it nice, turning on this valve just so, letting water in of a certain amount and, most of all, watching the pressure indicators to make sure that damn thing didn't blow up. Obviously, since winter was coming on, this huge beast was the heart of the greenhouse experience.

It was already Autumn when we took possession of the greenhouses, so it was a desperate race to close them up so they could be heated. There were broken glass panes everywhere and the putty had all gone out of the wood, so there I was, from morning to night, high in the rafters puttying and replacing glass, working against time to seal the place. And Margaret, brave soul that she is, was right in there helping.

I remember one day coming into one of the greenhouses and there she was on a ladder, reaching up and struggling to clean the glass as suds and water rolled back down her arms, soaking her completely. There were tears running down her cheeks, but game person that she is, Margaret was hell-bent to get that glass clean. And that is kind of how it was.

In the end, we only got one of the greenhouses closed in and running. Winter was already there, and I found myself on the road every day with a truck full of little tropical plants wholesaling them to flower shops across the state. I had sprayed the inside of my van with foam to keep the plants warm and on the sides of the white van, in dark green paint, it read "Erlewine Plants."

This story is already too long, so I will skip the part about where we lost everything and I ended up being hired to run large greenhouses in Apopka, Florida, the tropical-plant center of the state. That is a whole other story, but I will leave this topic with one tale from up north. It is about that beast of a boiler.

One day I was probably ninety miles from our greenhouses when I received a call from Margaret to the effect that she had forgotten to turn off the water to the steam boiler and it had overflowed and now the basement boiler room was knee deep in water and who knows what the boiler was doing. Help!

I got back home, driving as fast as I could drive, and with the help of a friend we waded into that dark hole. With boilers and steam pipes, typically the wrenches needed were like 4-feet long and took two men to turn them. They weighed a lot. I will never forget struggling through that water and looking that fierce boiler in the eye. There were little red flames of fire flashing from its face. I had no idea if it was about to die or blow up. That's how much I knew about boilers, and this boiler was bigger than a car. We stabilized it.

And as if scrambling the greenhouses before winter was not enough, our two English Bull Terriers managed to get together and suddenly we had a whole litter of puppies. It was cold out and the tiny apartment we lived in that was part of the greenhouses complex happened to be the only warm place. We raised those puppies in our kitchen. Please don't ask me for details.

You wouldn't like them.

The greenhouses were hard work and the business end of things was all downhill. We produced a great product, but as it turned out the little flower shops across the state were afraid to give us the business and thumb their noses at the big conglomerates. And they were right! We did not last long, at least with no customers.

I don't know if any of you have ever spent real time in a working greenhouse, especially in winter. It is warm, tropically moist, and filled with light and wonderful plants. Just going into it in the morning was a treat. If only time could stop and I could stay among the plants in that tropical spell. But no, time moves on and, as our money ran out and no business appeared, that happy place was doomed.

About our only escape was driving that old van to my parent's house, some 30 miles away, for dinner every once in a while. There Margaret and I would be, a

six-pack on the engine mount of the truck between us, popping those cans (I am ashamed to say), and driving into the sunset, happy to see my mom and pop, often with our two dogs with us. Those are real memories.

Also, quite real (and more sobering) were the times that infestations of whiteflies and other plant bugs caused us to have to bomb the entire greenhouse with poison gas. It was a little more complicated than that, because our apartment was part of the greenhouses and, with paper-thin walls, there was no guarantee that the deadly gas would not just creep in and kill us as well as the bugs.

So, there we are again, driving into the sunset (again, probably with a beer in hand), but with two adult dogs and a complete litter of puppies along with us. God bless my mom for being so receptive! She allowed the whole bunch of us, puppies and all, to stay over until that deadly gas was inert. And she even fed us!

The demise of the greenhouse project involved selling off all my stock plants to the big-plant boys, and eventually accepting a job from one of them managing, of all things, greenhouses. The only problem was that the job was in the greenhouse-capitol of the U.S., Apopka, Florida. So off we went to Florida, Margaret and myself, our two dogs, and what was left of the puppies, plus all our worldly belongings in a 1966 Dodge van. We detoured through Nashville to drop off one of the puppies and then went straight to Apopka.

How different it was to be where it was warm, to walk through greenhouse after greenhouse (19,000 sq. ft. of glass) and see volunteer plants under the benches competing with their for-sale cousins in the beds above. Florida is all about plants. I loved it, and knew all about soil mixes, and how to grow these little seedlings. But there was, as too often is the case, trouble in paradise.

For one, there was the moldy house/cottage we had to live in. There is so much humidity in Florida that the inside walls of our home had mold and the shower/bath and refrigerator were green scum beyond belief. I had to work the plants, so I am afraid this left my dear Margaret struggling to clean (with not enough help from me) that impossible-to-clean house, and she was a trooper. It took her a week of scrubbing just to get the mold out. There was not even a window in the bathroom, so you can guess what that was like. It did have a large screened-in porch off the back that was like sitting near the edge of a jungle. It probably was.

About our only escape there was a little Italian restaurant down the road that let you bring in your own beer in a brown paper bag and drink it while you enjoyed their food. We would steal off there every once in a while, but not really that often. And they had a drive-in theater. I bet some of you younger folk reading this may have never even been to one. This one had all the trimmings. It was like a warm summer evening every night in Florida and the drive-in was all grass like a carpet. We would bring whatever we wanted to drink and watch movies into the wee hours.

Of course, we maybe had time for this only once or twice. It was a drive-in set in a jungle. Meanwhile, back at the plant-ranch, things were not good. Oh yes, the plants grew great, and I love the smell and feel of large greenhouses. How wonderful!

But in such a fertile environment, the plant bugs had total encouragement and just went wild. They could never be eradicated; even management of them was touch and go. And it took poison, of course, to even do that. And the particular poison it took was Parathion, a very deadly poison that is cumulative, which means that every exposure to it adds up until one day you just keel over. Well, I knew how to manage that.

What I could not manage were the Mexican workers who refused to understand that Parathion kills. They only too readily handled it and let the deadly white dust wedge itself in their belts, against their skin, and so on. No amount of explaining seemed to help. And the management up north cared not a whit, no matter how many times I pointed out the danger. Simply put, they did not give a crap what happened to the workers. Well, we did.

I soon gave management an ultimatum. They either had to change the policy and educate the workers or I quit. Well, it turns out I had to quit and before we knew it, Margaret, myself, our two dogs (and what was left of our puppies, plus all our stuff) were in the van again and heading back to Michigan in the dead of winter.

We slowly drove back up through Georgia and the Southern states back to Michigan and Ann Arbor, the whole lot of us. We had nowhere to go. I had left my home of seven years and someone else was living in my rooms. I had given up my job at Circle Books, Ann Arbor's metaphysical bookstore. I was kind of limping back to a home we did not have.

Thank goodness that my old friend Jay Walker had an attic room that was free and that is where the whole lot of us landed, puppies and all. I don't need to tell you what corralling a bunch of puppies and two adult dogs, plus ourselves in one room was like. It was like what you think it was like. And it lasted until spring.

Oh well. That was the end of the plant business, but as it turned out, I was headed toward becoming a full-time astrologer once I found out that Margaret was pregnant. We were going to have a baby! But that is another story.

Main Browsing Site:

THE MOST EXPENSIVE RESTAURANT IN THE WORLD.

Most expensive in the world? For me this is true, because we built it, owned it, and my family and I ran it or tried to. It seemed like a wonderful idea at the time. We had this large building that had been built as a parsonage in the early 1900s. It had been a part of a business complex for a company I founded (AMG – All-Music Guide, All-Movie Guide, etc.), but I had moved that whole business to Ann Arbor and sold it.

So there the building sat. I tried to rent it, but no one seemed interested. Somewhere along about 2003, I had the harebrained idea to turn it into a restaurant. My wife Margaret would want you to know that this was solely my idea. And so, it was, but the kids liked the thought and we could not rent the building and.... well, you know how that goes.

Pretty soon I had workmen in there tearing the building apart and turning it into a restaurant which was a lot more complicated than I would have guessed. As it turned out, we pretty much had to do all new wiring, all new plumbing, including mammoth gas pipes and gas service to deal with the large stove and pizza ovens.

That's right, homemade pizza was something we definitely wanted to serve. Where did this crazy idea (as some friends deemed it) for a restaurant come from? There are different answers to that question. One is that there was no decent place to eat in town, but I know you don't want to believe that was the only reason, although it has merit. Most of all I was appalled at what restaurants had done to food in the ones I knew, like process almost everything. We would not do that.

Having been trained in macrobiotics years before, I knew more than a little about whole foods and what is healthy and what is not. But when I really look deep into my soul, I feel that somewhere in there I always wanted to have a restaurant AND I saw it as a way to bring the whole family together on a project. What fun and it was!

And I love designing space and creating mandalas – signs of something greater than just my linear life from birth to death. There have to be an oasis or two in every life and the “Two Sisters Café” was going to be one of them. In actuality it was financially a train wreck. The name of the café came from my brother Daniel, the second in line of five boys, I being the oldest. Since my daughters May and Michael Anne were going to help run it, we ended up calling it the Two Sisters Café and that stuck. It was a great name. Thanks Dan!

Of course, I was in full swing and high gear in creating atmosphere for the place. This is my specialty – actively creating space to live in. There is little I like more, and I was soon head over heels involved in the look and feel of the place. Of course, the whole family helped, only it was me that was down there from dawn to dusk, so to speak, directing the work team. That is my idea of fun.

Then there was the menu. Everyone pitched in on that and the girls (my wife Margaret and two of my daughters) knew a lot more than I did about recipes and cooking. We all knew that we wanted to create a menu with no processed food on it, as in “home cooked,” made-on-site, etc. And we did. We made our own salad dressings, peeled all our potatoes, fashioned all our soups from scratch, and on and on. For the town’s sake, we would serve meat, but no booze.

Crazy as I am, I insisted on only the finest ingredients, like \$6 a pound (our cost) for the corned beef that we used in sandwiches, real Genoa salami, really fine olives, and so on. You get the idea. It was from the start way over the top. As mentioned, we did serve meat because not to do so would be instant death in the small conservative town we live in. But even our meat was handled with care. Our homemade meatballs were just incredible (my daughter Anne's recipe), and we cooked our Salisbury steak all night in slow cookers. We ordered only the finest Ahi Yellowfin tuna and our salmon was hand-hooked in Canada. I could go on and on.

You would like to eat at the Two Sister's Café I can assure you. Maybe I just did it to make sure that somewhere in the world such a place existed! Even I don't know for sure. We had a \$6000 espresso machine and served up all the wonderful drinks you would find in Seattle and San Francisco. We had rare gourmet teas and all kinds of special coffees. And food and drink were not the end of it. We wanted to make the café a community center of sorts, so we had entertainment.

I had a special red theater curtain custom-made in Italy and a track of theater lights installed with spots out front. On Friday and Saturday nights we would curtain off one room and have bands, folk acts, magic, and even poetry. I am still a wannabe beatnik at heart, and a coffee-house atmosphere is part of this dream I call life.

We opened our doors in the fall of 2003. Let me start out with the good news, which was that the food was wonderful. It was all home cooked, handmade the old-fashioned way, and delicious. I should know. I put on a lot of weight eating there every night. We pretty much stopped cooking at home. In fact, we had a little table just inside the back doorway where the family would sit. I called it the "mafia table" because we were like Tony Soprano, eating spaghetti at the back of

the restaurant. I loved that and I ate all kinds of things I should not have eaten, and repeatedly.

And a certain group of townspeople saw it for what it was and loved it. The rest (I am sorry to say) could not tell the difference between us and Applebees, incredible as that sounds. And now for the bad news.

We knew nothing about running a restaurant. Nada. And my penchant for serving only the best was a pipe dream I smoked and it cost us to the quick. I am sure we were losing money on all kinds of stuff. And waste! We knew neither how to control waste or portion.

From the get-go, it was way over the top. We managed to limp by for about two and one half years before the economics really sank in. We were not making any money. Worse, we were losing money. And to top it off a general manager that I had hired was ripping us off until we caught on to her. She was not paying the taxes, but pretending to. This cost us a mere \$40,000 when the IRS came calling.

Also, one of the two sisters, my daughter May's music career suddenly began to take off and she was out of there and on the road. This was her chance. This left one sister, my daughter Anne, who bravely carried on with help from the rest of us. And so on. Michael Anne later became a gourmet chef who still caters to large groups every now and again.

The bottom line was that the place could not keep its doors open and had to close. Perhaps the biggest lesson learned was that just because you make a superior product does not mean people can tell the difference or care. We did not serve alcohol (on principle) and that hurt us big time. Kitchen and serving help

turned over like a Ferris wheel and it seems like we were endlessly training new folks. And half the workers were alcoholics or druggies. This is standard in restaurants.

We hit a brick wall. On the entertainment side, we had a mini-theater right in the restaurant, with lights, curtain, and a solid sound system. It was like an old-time hippie coffee house. We had poetry, magic, and lots and lots of music. My daughter May's partner at the time, Seth Bernard, courted her from the stage, singing love songs to my daughter. I totally approved. And so, it went. I must say that it was a wild ride and (aside from the cost) a fun ride, although I will never again drive by a restaurant parking lot without counting the cars in it and wincing if there are few to none. I have enormous compassion for anyone gutsy enough to open and run a restaurant. The profit margin is so narrow that you have to be totally dedicated to even survive. And you really need to have a family to make it economical. I had the family, but none of us knew the business. Still the food was great and good times outnumbered the bad ones. So, I can say without blinking that for a couple of years I ate at the most expensive restaurant in the world. I include some photos for your enjoyment!

Aug 9, 2021, 5:30 PM

FAMILY DHARMA WEEKEND

[A time trip back into the 1980s and the Family Dharma Weekends out by the lake]

Something that troubled me when I was learning the dharma and also raising a family was how to combine the two. In other words, Margaret and I had four kids, and so the question was how to include children into dharma teachings and get-togethers? As parents, we were not into leaving our kids, not ever. In fact, for 21 years we never had a babysitter. Why? Because we were not about to leave our kids. Period.

For example, at our monastery in upstate New York, KTD (Karma Triyana Dharmachakra), children were originally not allowed on campus. So, when we would come to the monastery, an 800-mile drive (each way), we would always bring our kids. As mentioned, we never had a babysitter for some 21 years, other than our older kids (my daughter Lotis) babysitting the younger ones. We just never had an event important enough for us to leave our kids with someone else, not ever.

Anyway, every year we would make the 14-16hr trip (each way), stopping overnight with the kids, to KTD Monastery and find a motel down in Woodstock, NY where we could stay and leave them with our oldest daughter Lotis. It was tough running up and down the three-mile mountain road all the time, like lunch, dinner, or whatever. During our trips to Tibet, we noticed that over there, kids and family were an integral part of the dharma scene. Of course, this all changed when Bardor Rinpoche (one of the two rinpoches at KTD) began having kids of his own and they were, of course, running all over the place to everyone's delight. Pretty soon after that, kids were finally allowed on the KTD campus. It made life a lot easier for families like ours. Kids didn't stay there, but they were tolerated on campus.

In the meantime, our center out here in Big Rapids Michigan, "Heart Center KTC," began having what were called Family Dharma Weekends, which Margaret and I organized and put on. These took place out at two cottages (next to one another) that we owned on Horsehead Lake, about 13 miles from our

home in Big Rapids, Michigan. We did this for a number of years, and either Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche (the abbot of KTD) or Bardor Rinpoche would come and officiate. These events often lasted 3-4 days and whole families would come as well as couples and individuals. Many folks camped out. These weekends were wonderful and lots of fun. It was wonderful to share the dharma as families.

There would be dharma teachings for the adults, lots of things for the kids to do, as well as swimming and boating, games, and really great home-cooked meals for everyone. In cleaning out my files, I came across some photos from the Family Dharma Weekend in July of 1987 and I thought some of you might get a kick out of looking at them.

At this particular multi-day event, we had teachings on “Tibetan Buddhist Festivals,” including the meaning of the New and Full Moon, eclipses, etc., “Dharma for Children,” and “Buddhism: The Path of Gentleness,” and “The Life of the Buddha,” plus a Manjushri Empowerment, “The Lion’s Roar.”

We had a meditation area under a large canopy, and various activities going on. Rinpoche and his translator Ngodup Burkhar stayed in the small cabin, and the rest of us stayed in the larger cabin or camped out. Some were in motels.

These family-dharma weekends were special events for us that, so special that after each event ended, it took time to adjust to regular life again. Here are some photos from that weekend or perhaps from some of the others.

In there is a group photo of the Family Dharma Weekend in July of 1987. Note all the Lamas! At that time, they were not yet lamas, but it just shows you what happens when you get around a great rinpoche.

Aug 10, 2021, 10:51 AM

MAY ERLEWINE AT THE WEALTHY THEATER

When I was young, in my early twenties, I was very interested in folk music. It was the American Folk Revival that actually began in the 1940s, but became very popular in the late 1950s and the early 1960s, just before what we call “The 1960s,” meaning hippies and alternative culture.

I was there in the late 1950s, but it was in those early 1960s that I was very active. I played the guitar, travelled a lot, mostly hitchhiking, and totally hung out. That’s about all I did back then. Well, Bob Dylan and I hitchhiked together, and things like that.

And then in the mid-1960s (1965), my brother Dan and I created our own band in Ann Arbor, Michigan, which became the Prime Movers Blues Band. I would love to tell you about that, but perhaps another time. Right now, I want to tell you about hanging out with my daughter singer/songwriter May Erlewine and her bands, a major perk in my life.

I have four kids and each one of them has blown my mind with the incredible things they have done and the talents they have shown me. I could not be more pleased, and I should tell you a story about each of them, but right now I want to tell you about my (Margaret and I) hanging out and traveling around following my youngest daughter May Erlewine, who became much to my surprise a very fine (and popular) musician.

I won't spend a lot of time here on May's early career, which is a story in itself. Her first recordings, first professional studio recordings, and the first gigs are a story too. And before that, how about the years May spent hitchhiking, riding freight trains, and busking music all over this country, complete with pink and blue hair, and some really big chains hanging from her belt. Back then, she was generally punked-out, and we saw her not nearly enough and worried about her out there in the world of busking a lot.

When the smoke cleared from all the punk stuff, what remained was May as you know her today, a sincere kid, who happened to be a really, really good songwriter and singer. And that is another story that I won't relate right now, although I should say at least something. Well, let me start with how much I did not see this coming, her ability with music. It snuck up on me. And to prove it, there is this story.

As a businessman, all my kids had to get used to all kinds of people coming and going around the house. Not only did I house visitors next door, but usually I insisted on feeding them, hanging out with them, and courting them as clients. Of course, rather than shield my kids from outsiders, I sometimes had half a dozen folks living next door or at least staying overnight. And we all ate together, kids too.

And one of the things I most liked to do, since I myself loved music, was when I had these guests over to eat at our house, I liked to play music for them (including kind of asking them to listen) and have them hear the music that I most particularly loved, which I felt was like "the best music in the world." I would serenade them with my favorite music artists, playing the artist's best tracks, and waiting to see (or pointing out) what is called the "hook," the most captivating part of each music track. I love to share music and founded the All-Music Guide

(AMG), which today is still the largest music database on the planet (Allmusic.com).

Playing music like a home DJ, was almost always disappointing for me because most of these visitors seemed unable to hear music or ever really listen. As often as not, or more often than not, just when we came to the hook, the part of the music track I wanted them to be struck by, they would talk over it and interrupt, just at the wrong time, showing me what a Philistine they were when it came to music. You know that was very disappointing. Of course, I should have known better.

Anyway, years went by as I wined and dined folks from some of the largest companies in America. I worked with Microsoft, Blockbuster, Borders, Barnes & Noble, CompuServe, Philips, and scores of other companies. For example, Netflix. My company provided Netflix with all their data on films and movies for years before they could afford to do it themselves. I saw that little red mailer probably a year or more before any of you did. Anyway, I digress.

The point of my story about playing music for those with deaf ears to my sounds was that years later, in an interview of my daughter May, after she became recognized for the talent she is, May explained to the interviewer that all those years that I was courting those executives, May (and the other kids) were right there with us, sitting at the same dinner table.

Only, unlike my guests, May was taking all this in. She was listening to it all, learning about the music I knew and loved. I should have been concentrating on little May's interest, but I was not even aware that she was listening. Shows how unaware I was. Nevertheless, it all worked out just right. She learned all that stuff; she listened to the hooks, took it all in, and got some kind of education in

the music I loved. Of course, she is a creative dynamo all by herself. Anyway, that's my example.

After May became well-known (appearing on places like "A Prairie Home Companion," and opening for stars like Lyle Lovett, and so on, Margaret and I (who love May's music as much as anyone) would travel (if it was not too far for us) to as many of May's gigs as we could, just to hear her and her husband Seth Bernard play. Bernard, also a singer/songwriter is one of the best guitar players I have ever heard, and I have heard a lot. And, of course, having been a performer, nothing is more fun for me than hanging out with musicians backstage, before and after the gig, or going out to eat with the band afterward, and all that. That's where I still live, after all these years.

I don't think May ever really understood that (how much hanging out with her and the band meant), but maybe she did. For me, it was like old times, being with musicians while they put on a show, and so forth. Often, I would bring my cameras and photo equipment and document the show.

No, I am not going to put you through all of the thousands of photos I have of May, Seth, and the bands. I will, however, subject you to just one gig, a gig May did at the Wealthy Street Theater in Grand Rapids, Michigan on May 21, 2010.

The band featured May Erlewine and Seth Bernard, and other band members that night included Josh Davis, Dominic John Davis, Mike Shimmin, Brad Phillips, and Ian Gorman.

What can I tell you about this band. For one, May is very particular about her band members. These are top musicians and also wonderful people. Joshua Davis, one of the winners on The Voice, is playing keyboards here just because

May asked him too, and as a friend. Josh is a top draw throughout Michigan and all around. Dominic John Davis is one of great bass players I have heard. Dominic lives in Nashville and among other things is in constant demand as a session player. Michael Shimmin is an incredible drummer and works with May often. Brad Phillips is a top violin player and another close friend of Mays. And Ian Gorman, is not only an accomplished player, but one of the most in-demand studio audio engineers in the state, and has recorded and helped produce many of May's albums.

I guess that the takeaway here is that these are great players, great people, and together they all are close friends, a tight-knit team. This particular gig at the Wealthy Theater was kind of special. It not only featured May and Seth Bernard, but May did one set doing just tunes of Michael Jackson, and dressing for the part and acting out the part.

All I can say is that the show was incredible, and incredibly beautiful. The whole audience was blown away as was I. And I believe that you can see the beauty in some of the photos, which is why I am doing this.

Now, for the hardcore May and Seth Bernard fans (and the band), here is a whole PDF with many, many more photos for those who want to see them, in particular a lot more of Seth and each of the band members, so you might want to see some of them. The text was written some years ago:

https://hwcdn.libsyn.com/p/4/e/4/4e4a03693a6b9514/WealthyTheaterRX.pdf?c_id=13302118&cs_id=13302118&destination_id=226490&expiration=1628632856&hwt=13a6cb47a06b2cdfbfa10e15d32cd41

Aug 11, 2021, 5:53 AM

THE SACRED TORUS

[I have been telling stories here lately, yet I should not tell too many stories or you might forget how crazy I am, therefore just to keep my foot in the door so some air comes in, here is a bit of a mind-tweaker.]

The geometric shape that I've fixated on in this lifetime happens to be the "torus," especially a torus in motion and revolving as shown here. That, for me, is an example of liberation through seeing.

Also, here I include an astrological diagram built on a torus that expresses what is called in esoteric circles "The Monad." With this astrological torus, if you follow its form, after feeling our way through what appears to be a narrow tube (created by Saturn), which then suddenly expands outward in all directions, leaving us with nothing to touch and therefore no way to feel. This is the difference between what in the dharma is called relative and absolute truth. Absolute truth has no object and no subject. Complicated?

Oh yes, but I don't make things hard to grasp just for things to be complicated, but quite the opposite, I do it to overreach the conceptual, forcing it into the relief of the non-conceptual and that's where we can get some rest. And we need it.

The dynamo-process of the conceptual mind is inexorably and everlastingly busy unless it has nothing to hang onto, at which time it quietly self-destructs. This is why I often like to run a thought out to the very edge of what makes sense, to the

very verge of nonsense, where it humbly expires and deconstructs. And in that emptiness, I rest.

In fact, I can't seem to find enough ways to defy and defeat what I experience as the burden of conceptual thinking, turning thoughts back upon thoughts until they devour themselves and become null. Or I mirror a thought until it reflects, sees itself, and vanishes.

To reach this requires overreach, and this ensures that no less than the same is certain.

Aug 12, 2021, 3:40 AM

THE SENSES FIVE

Our five senses are direct pipes into the brain, modified by the so-called sixth sense, "mentation," which filters these senses, making them dualistic and virtual rather than direct, thus one more step removed from direct in this dream we are living called life.

It seems we thirst and yearn to experience the five senses more directly, without the filter of the mind, thus we have, in dharma terms:

Liberation through Hearing (the Bardo Thödol)

Liberation through Seeing (the Bardo Thongdröl)

Liberation through Smelling

Liberation through Tasting

Liberation through Touching

And there is the mystic William Blake's:

"How do you know but ev'ry Bird that cuts the airy way, Is an immense world of delight, clos'd by your senses five?"

I believe Blake was talking about the sixth sense, mentation, closing off the direct experience of our five senses, but I could be wrong. At any rate, here we are with our five senses, dulled by the dualistic mind's (that sixth sense) compulsion to convert those senses into commodities that can be more easily handled.

It seems so many of our spiritual practices are concerned with getting conceptual thought out of the way and un-dulling our senses so that we can experience them more directly. We want to mainline our five senses.

Insight Meditation does just that.

THE POINT OF LEAST RESISTANCE

There is no point in resisting what “IS” because here it is. It’s already there. We have no choice but to accept things “as they are,” if only as the starting point to changing them. Once we accept our situation “as is,” then we can (perhaps) change it. This should be obvious to all, but of course it’s not. We often resist accepting what obviously is already there as a fact. In truth, there is no choice.

It’s not a case of “Go along to get along,” IMO, at least when it comes to what “IS” a fact. We best start by accommodating our situation just how it is, acknowledging it, including the good, the bad, and the ugly, as they say.

Moving in unison with the world of facts, instead of denial, beats working against the flow and the tides of life, if only to see and get a better handle on things. In other words, we can’t change what we refuse to accept. That’s the idea. For starters, we have to accept the facts of our situation, just as it is, and move on from there.

It is helpful to remember that resistance is just another form of reactivity and can be treated as such, just as with Reactivity Tong-Len. Become aware of our situation, own the situation and any resistance to it, and then drop it (without further thought), which if done repeatedly, results in removing or at least toning back the resistance.

Resistance is always resistance to something and it is always already in place when we feel it. By definition, it is already wasted energy on our part. It can be differentiated from the other kind of “resistance,” call it resistance fighting, where we are taking action, because by definition that kind of resistance requires our recognition and acceptance of what is being resisted in order to be pushing back. Here we are talking about only our resisting or refusal to accept the status quo. There is a clear difference.

Resistance, like knee-jerk reactions, is perhaps involuntary, yet once we are aware that we are resisting, we can do something about it. Learning to remove the sticking points, our resistance to the acceptance of the status quo, the way things are for our situation, is part of the purification practices, as mentioned -- Reactivity Tong-Len. This is the main point of much psychotherapy, acceptance as a precondition for recovery.

Personally, as for my using the Reactivity dharma practice, I seem to be gradually overcoming my resistance to whatever I resist, all kinds of resistance. It's like I am softening, opening up, accepting things more than rejecting or resisting. It's a form of giving that I call "giving in." From a dharma point of view, IMO, these are good signs.

Remarkably, also more absent, as far as I can tell, is my nervous drive to just always push on, as in onward and upward. Instead, there is now more a sense of contentment there, not being in a hurry, not so much a sense of urgency as I can remember. It's a relief to not be grasping for more, to be without the urge to want to get somewhere.

Instead, it seems that I am evening-out the current process, and finally letting the ripples in the middle of the pond reach the shore.

A FUTILE CONUNDRUM

Something that often comes up in dharma discussion is that talking too much about the advanced practices, like the pointing-out instructions and Recognition (recognizing the true nature of the mind) can make that recognition more difficult. Is this true?

First, all discussion (and language itself) is dualistic, what in dharma lingo is called a “relative truth,” which means it is conceptualization and by definition never to be mistaken for actual realization.

What worries me is that those who may be able to actually follow conceptual dharma-writing about the “realization” practices (Vipassana, Mahamudra, Dzogchen, etc.) are rare, because unless you have the actual realization, words cannot properly express or describe non-dual realization. All the pith texts tell us this.

And ALL writing is by definition conceptual, dualistic. More important, the more “realized” folks don’t need to hear about it because they already realize it. So, who could be listening and what good can such talk do?

And then there are those who perhaps mistake familiarity with this kind of conceptual dharma-writing for actual realization on their part, and they are, in my guess, many. It’s like preaching to the choir of the few who realize, while simply remaining unheard and unknown by the many. Why? Because their realization is not yet there.

The choir of the realized is small and those who know and realize what is being talked about don’t need to hear about it, while those who need and still lack that realization of “Recognition” don’t yet “know” what is being talked about because they have yet to realize it. This is not a criticism, but IMO a fact of dharma life.

There is a sense of futility about a purely conceptual approach to this kind of dharma, like the old axiom that insanity is defined as repeating the same actions and expecting a different result. Repeating a dharma technique or concept, something realized experts may be able (but don't need) to follow and expecting beginners who read the same words to somehow flesh out all that conceptuality with experience, much less realization, is not likely. It is understandable that this happens, yet it seems to bring few results. Is it any wonder?

Like the ocean waves that lap the shore, year after year, pounding sand into ever finer granules, there must be (or could be) fresh approaches that perhaps could liberate more of us sooner, if we can find them. The dharma gap, traditionally termed "Recognition" (the result of the pointing-out dharma instructions as to the true nature of the mind), this gap is in today's world perhaps widening, not narrowing. This could mean it's getting harder, not easier, to achieve Recognition in these times, if only because of the increasing public familiarization with the lingo, the dharma terms. A technique, any technique or template is, by definition, like freeze-dried dharma. Just add the water of realization. Yet, how is that done?

As usual, we are caught in a loop, in this case a serious Catch-22. Yet, where does "realization" come from? No matter how inspiring the outside world is for us, realization by definition still always comes to us from within; and that's within us just as we are, unrealized. The point is that "Realization" finally comes from within us, and not from outside. That's the nature of realization. "We" have to realize it.

Useful (to us) dharma teachings are what cause us to realize the actual nature of our own mind within ourselves, not the nature of the mind as abstractly or conceptually stated somewhere out there in the endless dharma texts. And a successful dharma teacher empowers us to realize our own inner nature, not the teacher's ability to have done so. That's a teacher's one job, introducing us to the

nature of the mind. Once that introduction is made, once we recognize the actual nature of the mind, we are on our own and just intuitively know what to do. Obviously, for budding dharma students, that is devotedly to be wished.

It's easy to point out what we don't have, what we have not realized, and what we have yet to do, but rather more difficult to empower us so that we can accomplish this on our own. And that's the whole point in the "pointing-out" instructions.

This idea, which is written in the pith dharma texts, of the fact that an empowering dharma master is not some generality or just window dressing but is crucial to acknowledge by each one of us. And this is a pivot point on which eventually our entire dharma practice turns. To my knowledge, there is no way around it.

It seems that the more we study and the more conceptual familiarity with the key dharma terms we acquire, at the same time, the distance and contrast that prevents our achieving actual realization may grow wider. Yet does it? And this appears especially true in this age of media we live in, where the distance between knowledge and the lack of it vanishes in the simultaneity media provides. Here is the point:

Knowing more and more about what we don't know, without actually knowing what we don't know (Recognition), may kind of harden the flexibility of our ignorance, perhaps making it yet harder to break through and just recognize the nature of our own mind. This is what is sometimes suggested, but is this so?

To me, this worry is one of the dangers of modern dharma, if not the main one. At the same time, I have to have faith in the dharma, that the strength of

Samsara will succumb to the power of the truth of the dharma even in this age of instant media communication. The dharma doesn't change because it is the change itself.

And that, becoming familiar with the outer shell of realization only intellectually, talking about it before actually having that realization, cannot hold a candle to realization itself, which is immutable. I know this. However, I do see that perhaps in this age of instantaneous communication, it perhaps makes the task of pointing out the nature of the mind not any easier (and perhaps not as easy) as past generations. Yet I doubt it, because that too must be relative, and the bigger the front, the bigger the back must also hold true.

If anything comes out of this discussion for me, it's that the task of the empowering master, the one capable of pointing out to us the true nature of the mind, or as my teacher put it to me, of introducing me to the nature of the mind, is very delicate.

And this, because the driftwood that's washed up on the shores of dharma realization attempts today must relatively be pretty much the same as it was in the past. Relatively. Conceptualization or talking about it cannot change this. That's what all the pith dharma texts have been doing forever and ad infinitum – conceptualizing it. In other words, there is no secret here to be protected, just the opposite. And, if we think that we are walking a tightrope or highwire and are uncertain, perhaps looking down is not the best idea.

Aug 14, 2021, 2:27 PM

IF AT FIRST YOU DON'T SUCEED, TRY, TRY AGAIN

I get that and I do try. I just find that trying doesn't always do it, doing does it. Yet, "how do you do?" so to speak. We can't force a seed, not really. We can only provide the proper conditions for it to sprout. For that matter, even that does not always help. Seeds just sprout when they sprout, in whatever conditions they find themselves, if they can. Having run greenhouses both here in Michigan and in Florida (19,000 sq. ft of glass), I know about plants.

Perhaps minding our own business and just walking on is the best example. No extra effort there. Let it be what it is because that's what it is. I don't like being a preacher, anyway. What do I like?

I like revelation. And to me revelation means increasingly realizing more completely, more fully, the nature of Samsara, this world that we find ourselves embedded in, and the mind behind it. Doing that, by increasing degrees, seems enough for me. That's my daily bread, so to speak. And that's all that I do in a day that is lucid and clarifying.

Why should I worry about what other folks are doing? About all I can come up with on this score is that my desire to do this, to share dharma with others, arose when my own awareness first arose. The two came up together. Of course, the dharma has always been there, but never so clearly until then. In the dharma, that arising is called Bodhicitta, and if comes along with "Recognition" as to the true nature of the mind, then it is kind of a compulsion, like it's on our mind all the time; it is then called Absolute Bodhicitta. Does giving it a name help?

Actually, it seems to, at least as a balance. Yet, what does it require? Well, for me it reminds me of the guy at the international speedway, who flags down a driver to come in for a pit stop. I feel like that guy, trying to signal to anyone interested, the actual benefits of dharma. Yet again, I don't want to be obnoxious about it. I'd like to communicate to those interested, and to the rest, it is like water off a duck's back..

Is that proselytizing? Not really. I don't feel that way, and my only concern is for those who might like to become more aware of what's out there for us. I guess, personally, I feel like I imagine a Christian who has just been saved feels. My life was so difficult before I got into the dharma that I have never gotten over it. It is like, before dharma I was going, I know not where. I can't help but want to share the dharma with others, meaning those who are capable of an interest. I find it difficult to do otherwise.

Aug 15, 2021, 9:16 AM

WHY "EMPTINESS" IS A MYSTERY

"Emptiness" in dharma lingo remains a relatively unknown or at least a little-understood term, as to what it means or represents. There is no reason for this and IMO it's due to sloppy semantics and how the term is defined in words. If not that, it is because we don't WANT to understand the word as it goes against our wish to believe in a permanent Self that survives death.

And although Buddhism favors nondual states of mind, ones that cannot be expressed in words and language, it is a fact that Buddhism has more words and language than any other “religion,” and this by an order of magnitude. Perhaps the dharma needs more words than other spiritual disciplines because of its being unable to be expressed. I used to joke with the Tibetans that it is because of all the caffeine in the endless Tibetan black tea that they drink.

Or is it because of all the teachings that are titled, or at least in English translations appear as things like “The Emptiness of Self,” “The Emptiness of Other,” and similar titles. What are non-Buddhists to think? Many dharma translations say things like “There is no Self,” and so on, and they argue this, when we can look into a mirror any day of the week or just check our schedule and know, of course there is a Self. There it is looking back at me. At best, our Self is our personal secretary, our Charlie McCarthy (ventriloquist Edgar Bergen’s dummy), and at the worst the Self is our captor and we, its slave. So, what gives?

If these dharma writers (or translators) would just watch their words, we might be miles ahead, and instead say things like “The Self is Empty” of permanent existence, “The Other is Empty” of permanent existence. What they are empty of is any permanent being, meaning “Michael Erlewine,” the personality, is a one-shot trip. Something moves from rebirth to rebirth, but it’s not our Self or personality. The fact is that when we die, our personal Self dies and is not carried forward to another life. That idea alone is hard enough to take, without our making it more mysterious than it is. And the following is important:

When the Buddha is quoted as saying things like “The world is empty of a Self or of anything pertaining to a Self,” this is not to say that we each don’t have a Self present, but rather that that Self is not itself a permanent entity going from life to life, but rather quite impermanent like everything else. And when in the sutras it

says “The world is empty,” they mean the world is empty of anything like a permanent being, including a self-perpetuating Self and a theistic god that exists independently of everything else. We find that concept hard to take because it is hard to accept.

In other words, there is no independent existence behind or above life, like a god out there or Self that is permanently independent and lives beyond death such that it persists through time, but rather, what we do have is called a dependent or interdependent existence, a continuing process that can be said to exist, but not independent of its dependencies. It’s all about interdependencies, and their interplay or “thread” to the point of appearing as “something” independent of their interdependencies. This just “ain’t so,” says the dharma.

The dharma does not state that all phenomena are empty (like a cup can be empty), but rather that all phenomena in their own being are empty of permanent or independent existence from one another. Instead, we are hollow like a hologram, both there and not-there at the same time. How’s that for a mystery?

In the dharma, “Emptiness” means being free from both permanence and also free from complete non-existence. At best, our being is “becoming,” but not permanently there. We are eternally poised somewhere between being there and being not-there, a convenient illusion that we reify like mad.

Aug 16, 2021, 3:04 AM

MIND READER

You guessed it! The Mind itself is my favorite read, and the older I get, the more this is true. To me, this is a bit amazing because as a child, in my youth, and even as a young adult, the mind was not even on my best-seller list. I kind of fell into it. It was not hard to do.

And the mind speaks! Fairly early-on in my young-adult life, the mind actually spoke to me a few times, mostly presaging various coming events or confirming one thing or another that I would have to face. Such messages are called “Direct Voice” by the psychic, and I seldom speak about them because they are too out of the ordinary to expect folks to believe they exist. But, at my age, who cares. So, sue me!

The first of these messages that I received by “Direct Voice,” so to speak, was that I did not need to travel and that I should stay put, and my own would come to me. And mostly, I stay put; that idea.

I was also told, and this is kind of interesting, that I had two natural “gifts” or talents. The first is the ability to stop bleeding. In other words, I’m a natural cauterizing agent, staunching the flow of blood. I am sure some of my friends would acknowledge that. Now, I had no idea where that message came from, except from the mind itself. I just heard it loud and clear in my mind, like a voice.

And I’m no doctor, but if I understand this as psychological bleeding, like feeling sorry for ourselves, etc., then it seems true. Contact with me does seem to stop the flow of mental bleeding. You can see it in my writing, if you look. I cauterize.

And the second quality or talent that I heard directly was the ability, by using my mind, to fit large objects through small openings. Now, this I have observed many times in my life when I or others are trying to fit something or other through a narrow channel or space. I do something with my mind and the object just slips through. I know. All this may sound crazy, but why should I lie or not say it. I am too old for that.

Anyway, that's it. Those are my special gifts, as I was told. There were two other direct-voice experiences that I had, when I also was notified directly, that in order to open my mind as fast as my generation needed it to open, the force of a more sudden opening would tear through or blow out some of my ability to remember fine details. Actually, it was put to me as a choice I had to make.

But there really was no choice, because the times I lived in were those where my generation was coming out of the 1950s mentality, and a slower, more natural opening, would have taken decades, time which we did not have. I chose to accept the responsibility of losing some detail, in exchange for opening the mind sooner.

I have no idea exactly what this meant, but I relate here that it happened. And I have had two strokes, that removed some of the mental bric-a-brac, for better or for worse. And lastly, I was told I would one day write an epic work or poem. I have not written that epic poem, but I have written an epic amount of writing. LOL.

Perhaps because of this kind of direct communication with the mind itself, over time, I became more and more interested in looking into and being receptive not

only to what the mind has to say, but to the mind itself. I guess the word we have for such experience is “intuition,” aided perhaps by insight.

I have become more and more intuitive, meaning I have learned (by trial and error) to trust my intuition as much as I do my insight, and for me this is not a small thing. When my mind “speaks” or intuits, I now listen, and usually act accordingly. The image of a blind person feeling their way along a corridor comes to mind. Intuition is not “blind,” but it is more dependent on feeling our way than is insight. It is another kind of seeing. We have to receive without alteration what is coming from deep within the mind, directly to us. You get the idea. Or, perhaps I am like the old saying “Even a blind squirrel will find an acorn every once in a while.” LOL.

If I try to mess with or alter my intuition in any way (perhaps because I don't like the message I hear), then, of course, it does not work. Purity of reception is a big factor in intuition. I had intuition before I developed true insight. And “true” insight only came with the help of the Tibetan Buddhist mind training and a practice called Vipassana, Insight Meditation.

The mind is a vast reservoir, what the Tibetans call the “Wish-Fulfilling Gem,” and so it is. Every idea, invention, thought, and concept in the history of the world came to us through the mind. Of course, we should all know by now that this world we live in is totally a product of our personal mental filter on reality, call it our rose-colored glasses. And some filters are not all that rosy.

Once access to the mind itself was open to me, I found myself using it (going there) more and more of the time. Instead of ignoring the mind itself, which I had done most of my life, I actively began to remove the various obscurations on my mind's filter, one by one. Of course, that just eliminated more and more of the

background noise that clouded whatever signal I was receiving. I found that direct juice was, well, enlightening.

Somewhere along in there, the “me” that was peering into the mind from the outside transformed into my identifying with the mind itself rather than my previous outsider view, and I found myself looking inside the mind from the inside, if that makes sense. This is a form of transmigration.

A better description would be that instead of following the content of my train of thoughts as I always had, I learned through Vipassana Meditation to look right through the thoughts themselves at their intrinsic nature, which is identical to the actual nature of the mind. In other words, each thought became a lens to look through rather than a habit of following the thread of the content it contained.

It is like the old analogy of water and waves. The waves and the ocean on which they arise are both water. Well, thoughts are the waves of the mind and, instead of being followed-on, thoughts can be seen through (like a looking-glass) to their actual nature, which, as mentioned, is the very nature of the mind itself. This is learned.

Looking through thoughts, nothing is seen but the seeing itself. The “Seeing” itself is an incredible place to rest our awareness in, and let it go at that. Rest there. By “resting there,” illumination, clarity, and lucidity arise, and, at least in my experience, pure intuition just naturally takes place. That’s as much as I know.

Now, the Tibetan Buddhists point out that there are different levels in the mind where our memories and fixations are stored. Of course, we have our personal “Self,” which amounts to the sum-total of all our attachments. We should be VERY familiar with our Self, because we personally created and made it up out

of whole cloth. It is literally a spitting image of our attachments, those same attachments which are the glue that holds what we call the Self together.

However, and this is a big “however,” beneath those layers of Self, is another vast accumulation of our impressions, imprints, and fixations called by the Buddhists the *alayavijnana*, which is often translated as a “storehouse consciousness” of impressions, fixations, and I-don’t-know-what-else. However, to use a computer analogy, the *alayavijnana* is like a personal hard drive with a firewall and a password that prevents easy access to it. We don’t have that password.

We are already somewhat comfortable with the fact that the makeup of our Self is always changing (impermanent), at a rate (I would guess) that we are kind of used to. In contrast to that, the *alayavijnana* (storehouse consciousness) changes too, but at a much slower rate. In other words, this deeper storehouse consciousness has a half-life that is much longer than those of our normal memories. And because of that, the following concept is important to note:

The upshot of all this, as I understand the Tibetans to mean, is that although we don’t have the password into our own *alayavijnana* storehouse of impressions, some of what is in there filters up anyway so that we, at least, know or sense that it is there. In fact, again according to the teachings, the fact that we feel or intuit that this storehouse is there, is said to fuel our mistaken belief that our Self is permanent, simply because we sense something deep in there there with a longer half-life than we are familiar with, i.e. our own faltering memory.

Another analogy might be the traditional one of two trains running in the same direction, but one is faster than the other. To the fast train (our Self and memories), it appears that the slower-moving train is fixed and standing still, even though it is moving at its own pace. We mistake the slow-train for a

permanent Self. Other analogies would be how the Sun seems static as Earth moves around it, or the solar system's motion relative to the motion of the Galaxy, and on and on.

The upshot of all this is that whatever we sense or intuit that is deeper than our Self (call it our subconscious, or whatever) appears to be static and unchanging, but in fact it too is changing, but just at a much slower rate. Anyway, the Tibetans say that this relative motion of the two banks of impression (Self and alayavijnana) accounts for our mistakenly believing that the Self (what we call "Me") is permanent and we assume that it is unchanging like an "Eternal Soul," when in fact it too is changing, only at a rate we cannot perceive.

Therefore, even the alayavijnana is impermanent, but it seems to carry over to our next rebirth more than our personal Self memories, which are left at death's door. And, as mentioned, while we don't have the password to directly access this archived Alaya Storehouse consciously, nevertheless, it influences us subtly. This, then, is what I understand is laid out in the Tibetan teachings.

I will try to elaborate this storehouse-concept in the next few blogs. Anyway, I know of nothing more informative than learning to directly access the mind itself, minus any filters we can remove.

Michael Erlewine

"Sempa Chönyi Rangdrol"

That Tibetan phrase under my regular name is my Bodhisattva or dharma name, as given to me by my dharma teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche. I took the Bodhisattva Vow at KTD monastery in the old retreat house in a large room

filled to the brim with many practitioners. Rinpoche was not able to give each of us a Bodhisattva name because there were too many of us and too little time.

Years later, I asked Rinpoche if he would give me a Bodhisattva Name. Sometime later, he told me that my name was “Sempa Chönyi Rangdrol”

“Sempa” is a general term that means Bodhisattva or “Compassion Warrior.” We all have this. As for the specific or personal name “Chönyi Rangdrol” “Chönyi” means Dharmata (True Nature of the Mind or Reality), and “Rangdrol” means Self-Liberating. So, the name translates to Self-Liberating the True Nature of the Mind.

WHAT PERSISTS AFTER DEATH?

[The Buddhist Subconscious]

And now for what I hope will be an interesting blog, at least for me. What I am going to discuss here is probably above my pay grade, the kind of thing that requires an intimate knowledge of Sanskrit, Tibetan, and perhaps even special practices. The best I can do is just sort of follow along with the texts and see what I can understand. That understanding, such as it is, will be what I share with you here. The gist of what is being looked at has to do with exactly what in us survives death and is thereby present and available for any future rebirth. I believe that we all have a stake in this topic.

The Buddhists say (and we should know this from the fact that we can't remember any past lives) that what we call the Self, our Persona, does not survive death. Perhaps savants can remember past lives, but most of us reading this cannot. As the poets say, we lay down the cloak of our personality at death's door. It is a scary thought, but I can't remember any of my own past lives. Oh sure, I have had weird dreams and even some overshadowing of my consciousness by what seem to be experiences from another time, but nothing stable or constant. And, as an astrologer, I have met thousands of other astrologers, so I am used to claims from folks about their past lives. However, aside from a few Tibetans, I have found none of them credible. Most of it is just harmless new-age banter, as we all know. The fact seems to be that we do not remember our past selves and personalities.

The Buddhists have discussed this issue of what survives death for something like 1500 years i.e., if our Self does not survive death, what in fact does? And many of us feel uncomfortable at the idea of the extinguishing of our much-loved Self at death, like blowing out a candle. If that is the case, what can we expect with rebirth and just who would we be if we are not our familiar selves? What then?

The answer from the Tibetans is something called the Alayavijnana (pronounced AH-LIE-AH VIJ-NAH-NAH), the Buddhist equivalent of the subconscious, which was being examined in Asia long before Sigmund Freud came on the scene.

Alayavijnana, more commonly called the Storehouse Consciousness, or the Alaya Storehouse, or just the "Alaya" does not store our particular life experiences like we do our normal memories, you know, in a story-like or threaded format, i.e. ideas in complete sentences. The Alayavijnana does not contain whole extended thoughts, experiences, memories, and the like as we remember them. It is more like a database that contains singular parts but makes

no attempt to connect them all, much like a box of Lego parts. And it is from these “parts,” these cravings, that we create a new Self at rebirth.

The scholars make a big point of saying that the Alaya is neutral, and contains both good and bad karmic imprints. Actually, if you read the various texts and commentaries by the experts, what the Alayavijnana does contain, apparently, is not all that easy to define.

I think of the Alaya Storehouse, which I pointed out before, as more of a parts-based toolkit in which all our propensities are stored. If you remember Mr. Potato Head as a kid, where you took a potato and then selected from an array of parts, the particular parts you wanted to use to create your Potato Head, you would not be far off. However, instead of consciously picking our attachments, like we do with our Self, in the case of the Alaya Consciousness, apparently our karma and cravings determine this for us. Indeed, we have a smorgasbord, but one that is tailored or designed just to our own karma.

Think of the Alaya Consciousness as the palette from which our new persona at rebirth is created, but with an array of colors dictated by our particular desires, cravings, unfinished business, etc. i.e. we may be missing some of the bright colors.

The Storehouse Consciousness contains all of the customized (by us) parts as created by our actions and karma, each of which is like a seed or icon from which we can regrow (and continue with) a particular part of consciousness or build a new persona (Self), and so on.. One analogy I use for myself is that, while the Alaya Storehouse does not contain the story of our personal experiences threaded and intact, it does retain the karmic residue of all our repeated actions, where each action is laid down in an ever-increasingly deep groove or track.

Some of our karma involves deeply repeated and underscored tracks. These deep tracks cry out for an answer.

Each track, through sheer habit, gets only deeper and deeper as it is repeated. And, just as the bullet from a rifle can fingerprint the gun, so our particular ingrained habitual grooves serve as a kind of personalized mold for our actions. They identify us in a very broad sense of that word, by our residue, our karmic actions, and in that sense, we may (in a sense) persist in our rebirth with some vague sense of what we are now. One time I asked my dharma teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, does anything remain of our personality after death that may appear in rebirth, and he said that we may, for example, have a preference for hot sauce. That kind of thing.

Our conscious mind is what it is, known to us, but we don't have the password to get into our unconscious mind, the Alaya Storehouse. Even if we did, we would not find anything coherent that we could understand. We access it subconsciously, not consciously, and automatically at rebirth.

In other words, when a habitual action is triggered, the Alayavijnana mold or groove provides a personalized form (molded to our specs) as a response. This storehouse contains the shape and degree of our every karmic trace, good and bad, and serves them up on demand and at a moment's notice. The wonderful Traleg Rinpoche writes: "We should not envision an actual storage place though, but rather see the storage space itself as part of what has to be stored."

Humankind is pretty much the accumulation of all the individuals that make it up. The same idea occurs in the case of the honeybee and the hive. The hive persists from year to year, but the bodies of the bees that make up the hive change each season. In a single human rebirth, the bodies may change, but the palette used to create our Self or "persona" in each rebirth remains the same –

our particular karmic traces and residue moves forward through time – until we remedy that through their exhaustion or dharma practice.

In other words, the form of our rebirths is shaped by the storehouse of karmic traces that we bring with us through time. Beneath all of that is what is called our Buddha-Nature, but we can't do much with that if we can't be aware and realize that fact. Instead, we are suffocating under a cloak of our own karmic imprints. This is why the Buddhists state that the first thing to do is to STOP accumulating yet more karma, and the second is to see about removing the karmic imprints from our Alaya Storehouse, which removal is easier said than done.

In summary, Buddhism is so very concerned with our intent. The Alaya Storehouse is where our intent, like a Rosetta Stone, is etched, engraved, and resides, just beyond the reach of our conscious mind. This is the palette from which our persona or precious Self is painted afresh each next life or rebirth. Like a huge barge moving upstream, the Alayavijnana is dragged behind us through time, life after life, while our desires and craving are the tugboat that drives us. Although it remains invisible to us, the Alaya Storehouse alone is responsible for the elephant in our room.

Aug 19, 2021, 8:13 PM

FASCINATING: THE BUDDHIST CONCEPT OF “SCENTING”

I want to continue looking at what there is of us that continues to exist after we die. Yesterday, we looked at the Alayavijnana or Storehouse Consciousness, that is something like what Freud would have called our subconscious. This Storehouse Consciousness is beyond our conscious grasp, but nevertheless it influences our actions and contains the various karmic residues that we have accumulated.

In the preceding episode, I left you with the idea that, according to the Tibetan Buddhists, our regular consciousness is not anything permanent like we might hope for, you know, a “soul” that flits between births, and also that our Self and personal memories (as we all know them) decay and are gradually forgotten. And they certainly end at death. I have always found that statement... concerning.

To repeat: the teachings point out that beneath our regular day-to-day consciousness is a subconscious layer called the Alayanijana (Storehouse Consciousness), which we don't have conscious access to, except perhaps through our intuition or whatever.

It is that Storehouse Consciousness that contains all of the remains of our experience, the karmic imprints (good and bad), and it has a much longer half-life, much greater, than our normal memories. In fact, it is the Alayanijana that persists beyond death, whereas our personal memories, Self, and persona are forgotten and are left at death's door, a residue epitaph. In this blog, let's look in a little more detail at just what the Storehouse Consciousness contains.

VASANAS

The teachings say that what is contained by the Alayavijnana (Storehouse Consciousness) are termed Vasanas, which are defined variously as subtle karmic imprints, latent tendencies, past impressions, wishes, desires, habitual tendencies, and so on. In particular, it is important to note that in all of this our “intent” is recorded, as well, I imagine, as is any recording of merit that we may have accumulated.

My dharma teacher once taught that every single thought we have is either, at heart, beneficent or maleficent. I had to check that out and I examined my thoughts carefully for some time, and he is right. Often, even what I think is rather funny has a mean edge (or not) to it. This is something easy for us to check out, and the result for me was kind of sobering. I am not as nice as I think I am.

Another approach is to say that the Storehouse Consciousness contains “Bija,” basically “karmic seeds.” Yet another (and even more fascinating) description is the idea of what is called “scenting,” that the Alayavijnana holds nothing but stains and smells that color or perfume what otherwise would be pure. It seems that the architecture of whatever about us that is NOT pure, whatever is bent and stained, is preserved in the Storehouse Consciousness.

The great Traleg Rinpoche has this to say about “scenting,” in his pivotal book “Karma, What It Is, What It Isn’t, Why It Matters”

“These impressions, or psychic energy deposits, that carry over are termed Vasanas. In traditional literature, a Vasana is described by the analogy of putting something very smelly, like an unwashed pair of socks, into a drawer. If we were to leave it for months, upon opening the drawer, we would most likely be overwhelmed by the smell. Even throwing them out and doing our utmost to

remove the smell seems to have only a marginal effect – the next time the drawer is opened, the smell is still there... the so-called perfume of the vasanas.”

That description by Traleg Rinpoche is pretty graphic, as is his above-mentioned landmark book, which I highly recommend. Vasanas are latent tendencies, karmic imprints, past impressions, desires, wishes, habitual tendencies, and whatever contaminates or colors our mind. And, as mentioned earlier, Vasanas record our karmic “intent.”

As to what is called “Scenting:” Just as smoking impregnates the clothes worn by someone who smokes, so that we can smell a smoker in a room even if they are not smoking, in a similar way, Vasanas, like a cheap perfume or incense, leave a karmic stain on whatever they encounter. They stink up our life. Vasanas are sometimes defined as “Imprinted-volitions-of-mind,” so it is here that our intent is captured and recorded. I would imagine, but I have not had it confirmed, that any merit we accumulate is also registered in the Storehouse Consciousness.

As to those threaded stories of experience we all carry in our mind that we call memories, some are stronger than others. But memories in general are still relatively fleeting and they don’t normally extend beyond death’s door. There is a deeper storehouse of life impressions that we don’t have conscious access to and, even if we did, they wouldn’t represent anything coherent. As mentioned, this is called the Alayavijnana or Storehouse Consciousness, and it contains what are called Bija or the seeds of our actions, seeds that will sprout and expand as the opportunity arises. I repeat, these impressions are not stored as threaded stories, but more as in a database of parts.

In one sense we could call what is stored there our karmic stains, including just how they can repeatedly stain our otherwise pure thoughts. I tend to think of the Alayavijnana more as a karmic parts-box, much like a cosmetic kit, filled with all

of the many ways and habits we can stink up ourselves with, but in seed-like or freeze-dried form, ready to expand instantly and shape our thoughts and personality.

VASANA REMOVAL

And this perhaps explains why the removal of these karmic grooves or stains is said to be so difficult, because we are not trying to erase a single stroke or karmic imprint, but rather deep-down stains or grooves that bears our particular signature. Each groove is the compounded result of thousands or hundreds of thousands of the same action on our part, each underscoring more deeply the identical action before it. An example might be: if every time we run into a certain person that we don't like, we wince and have "bad" thoughts, that imprint further underscores the groove or track laid down previously, and it gets ever deeper and "serious-er."

We can't just undue one layer of that kind of karma with a single stroke; the entire groove or mold must be worked out and removed. Vasanas are logo-like iconic forms, pressure-molds that can shape our future actions based on past impressions, a mold or form that can manifest the same bad karma again and again until the mold itself is dissolved. Indeed, these are stubborn stains, but they can be removed and eliminated from our karmic parts box.

We all know how hard it is to change our habits. It is the same with removing Vasanas from the Alayavijnana. It takes time and practice, but it can be done. The first step is not to double-scrub our mental self clean, but rather to simply stop recording any more karma by ceasing those actions that create negative Vasanas in the mind. The teachings point out that this is the most positive thing we can do. As Bernie Sanders might shout "Stop creating the damn negative karma!"

After that, we can undertake a course of mind training to carefully work on and remove our bad habits. It is akin to removing buried landmines in a battlefield, slow and painstaking. With some work, we can remove existing Vasanas and reseed our Storehouse Consciousness with positive Vasanas or, better yet, perhaps no Vasanas at all. We can, with effort, change, our personality and become a different person.

FASCINATING: THE BUDDHIST CONCEPT OF “SCENTING”

I want to continue looking at what there is of us that continues to exist after we die. Yesterday, we looked at the Alayavijnana or Storehouse Consciousness, that is something like what Freud would have called our subconscious. This Storehouse Consciousness is beyond our conscious grasp, but nevertheless it influences our actions and contains the various karmic residues that we have accumulated.

In the preceding episode, I left you with the idea that, according to the Tibetan Buddhists, our regular consciousness is not anything permanent like we might hope for, you know, a “soul” that flits between births, and also that our Self and personal memories (as we all know them) decay and are gradually forgotten. And they certainly end at death. I have always found that statement... concerning.

To repeat: the teachings point out that beneath our regular day-to-day consciousness is a subconscious layer called the Alayanijana (Storehouse Consciousness), which we don't have conscious access to, except perhaps through our intuition or whatever.

It is that Storehouse Consciousness that contains all of the remains of our experience, the karmic imprints (good and bad), and it has a much longer half-life, much greater, than our normal memories. In fact, it is the Alayanijana that persists beyond death, whereas our personal memories, Self, and persona are forgotten and are left at death's door, a residue epitaph. In this blog, let's look in a little more detail at just what the Storehouse Consciousness contains.

VASANAS

The teachings say that what is contained by the Alayavijnana (Storehouse Consciousness) are termed Vasanas, which are defined variously as subtle karmic imprints, latent tendencies, past impressions, wishes, desires, habitual tendencies, and so on. In particular, it is important to note that in all of this our "intent" is recorded, as well, I imagine, as is any recording of merit that we may have accumulated.

My dharma teacher once taught that every single thought we have is either, at heart, beneficent or maleficent. I had to check that out and I examined my thoughts carefully for some time, and he is right. Often, even what I think is rather funny has a mean edge (or not) to it. This is something easy for us to check out, and the result for me was kind of sobering. I am not as nice as I think I am.

Another approach is to say that the Storehouse Consciousness contains "Bija," basically "karmic seeds." Yet another (and even more fascinating) description is the idea of what is called "scenting," that the Alayavijnana holds nothing but stains and smells that color or perfume what otherwise would be pure. It seems that the architecture of whatever about us that is NOT pure, whatever is bent and stained, is preserved in the Storehouse Consciousness.

The great Traleg Rinpoche has this to say about “scenting,” in his pivotal book “Karma, What It Is, What It Isn’t, Why It Matters”

“These impressions, or psychic energy deposits, that carry over are termed Vasanas. In traditional literature, a Vasana is described by the analogy of putting something very smelly, like an unwashed pair of socks, into a drawer. If we were to leave it for months, upon opening the drawer, we would most likely be overwhelmed by the smell. Even throwing them out and doing our utmost to remove the smell seems to have only a marginal effect – the next time the drawer is opened, the smell is still there... the so-called perfume of the vasanas.”

That description by Traleg Rinpoche is pretty graphic, as is his above-mentioned landmark book, which I highly recommend. Vasanas are latent tendencies, karmic imprints, past impressions, desires, wishes, habitual tendencies, and whatever contaminates or colors our mind. And, as mentioned earlier, Vasanas record our karmic “intent.”

As to what is called “Scenting:” Just as smoking impregnates the clothes worn by someone who smokes, so that we can smell a smoker in a room even if they are not smoking, in a similar way, Vasanas, like a cheap perfume or incense, leave a karmic stain on whatever they encounter. They stink up our life. Vasanas are sometimes defined as “Imprinted-volitons-of-mind,” so it is here that our intent is captured and recorded. I would imagine, but I have not had it confirmed, that any merit we accumulate is also registered in the Storehouse Consciousness.

As to those threaded stories of experience we all carry in our mind that we call memories, some are stronger than others. But memories in general are still relatively fleeting and they don’t normally extend beyond death’s door. There is a deeper storehouse of life impressions that we don’t have conscious access to and, even if we did, they wouldn’t represent anything coherent. As mentioned,

this is called the Alayavijnana or Storehouse Consciousness, and it contains what are called Bija or the seeds of our actions, seeds that will sprout and expand as the opportunity arises. I repeat, these impressions are not stored as threaded stories, but more as in a database of parts.

In one sense we could call what is stored there our karmic stains, including just how they can repeatedly stain our otherwise pure thoughts. I tend to think of the Alayavijnana more as a karmic parts-box, much like a cosmetic kit, filled with all of the many ways and habits we can stink up ourselves with, but in seed-like or freeze-dried form, ready to expand instantly and shape our thoughts and personality.

VASANA REMOVAL

And this perhaps explains why the removal of these karmic grooves or stains is said to be so difficult, because we are not trying to erase a single stroke or karmic imprint, but rather deep-down stains or grooves that bears our particular signature. Each groove is the compounded result of thousands or hundreds of thousands of the same action on our part, each underscoring more deeply the identical action before it. An example might be: if every time we run into a certain person that we don't like, we wince and have "bad" thoughts, that imprint further underscores the groove or track laid down previously, and it gets ever deeper and "serious-er."

We can't just undue one layer of that kind of karma with a single stroke; the entire groove or mold must be worked out and removed. Vasanas are logo-like iconic forms, pressure-molds that can shape our future actions based on past impressions, a mold or form that can manifest the same bad karma again and again until the mold itself is dissolved. Indeed, these are stubborn stains, but they can be removed and eliminated from our karmic parts box.

We all know how hard it is to change our habits. It is the same with removing Vasanas from the Alayavijnana. It takes time and practice, but it can be done. The first step is not to double-scrub our mental self clean, but rather to simply stop recording any more karma by ceasing those actions that create negative Vasanas in the mind. The teachings point out that this is the most positive thing we can do. As Bernie Sanders might shout “Stop creating the damn negative karma!”

After that, we can undertake a course of mind training to carefully work on and remove our bad habits. It is akin to removing buried landmines in a battlefield, slow and painstaking. With some work, we can remove existing Vasanas and reseed our Storehouse Consciousness with positive Vasanas or, better yet, perhaps no Vasanas at all. We can, with effort, change, our personality and become a different person.

Aug 20, 2021, 2:35 PM

SUMMARY: WHO MANAGES TO BE REBORN?

[This is the last of several articles on our lives after death and the loss of the particular Self.]

I have little idea what others feel and think about our eventual death and what will happen then, because the subject is seldom brought up. I, for one, have always been very interested, to say the least, in this topic. Of course, there were all the years when I was young and had never even heard of the concept of reincarnation, much less “rebirth.” Early-on, I had little to no faith in the Catholic Church’s “Heaven,” at least as it was presented to me. The Pearly Gates and all that never made sense to the young naturalist I was; after all, I had the confidence of Mother Nature, and she does not tell fairy tales. And I could see what nature was like for myself. I could also see that few adults have ever really looked at natural law.

And I’m sorry to say that I eventually fell under the spell of the Schlitz beer commercial and their slogan “You Only Go Around Once,” but with the reservation: how could something as elaborate as my life and consciousness just end in a moment?

Of course, when I finally heard of it, I was relieved to hear about the Hindu concept of the reincarnation of the “Soul” and that it would allow me to take with me to my next life my dear old friends me, myself, and I.

But nitpickers as they are, the Tibetan Buddhists sorted that out and presented me reasons why it is not so, this idea of an Eternal Soul. They pointed out that such a soul had no true existence; find it! And also why it was to my advantage not to have to carry every last personal Self forward in time. They see rebirth as a fresh start on a self and personality, and are not so concerned about what we call our Self. Instead of reincarnation of the soul, so the Buddhists say, what we have instead is “rebirth,” but not with the same old, same-old Self.

Well, so I wondered, what then does that leave me of what I call “me?” If I leave behind my Self, with all its personal traits, as I exit this life, hmmm, just what then

of me powers forward? Anyway, the Tibetan view of that question is what these last couple blogs have been about.

What the Buddhists say does go forward is the Alayavijnana (Storehouse Consciousness), which contains a compendium of all our karmic traces, etc. This Storehouse Consciousness has a greater half-life than our normal personality memories, which means that it persists or endures for a much longer length of time than our conscious memories, which are lost at death and the bardo. However, it too is not permanent or “eternal” as in “unchanging,” yet it lasts not only into our next rebirth, but will continue to be with us from thereon forward, somehow, perhaps recharged by each rebirth, until we reach full enlightenment. A corollary to that statement is that it has been here with us all along.

But, like all things, it too changes, and it changes forever. In other words, it is a level of consciousness that will always be with us until we are enlightened, itself always changing, but more slowly.

I was disappointed that I have no eternal soul, no way of ferrying my Self across the borderland of death and on to another life without losing track of “Me,” but at least something in there related to me persists and endures. So, of course I need to learn more about this Storehouse Consciousness. Perhaps we all do.

While our personal Self disintegrates with the death of the body, our Storehouse Consciousness persists, driven by our desires, cravings, and karma, and seeks to be reborn in a new body, but not necessarily a human body. And that fact is another concept new to Westerners, which I will have to address in another blog, but it is a spine tingler.

And when we take rebirth in a new body, the forces of our karma embedded in the Storehouse Consciousness draw around us a new Self (and persona) based on the karmic traces and material from our Alayavijnana (Storehouse Consciousness). Thus, our habitual karma causes us to rise again, but as a new person with a different Self, one that fits the times (and body) we are born in, as shaped by the material in our Storehouse Consciousness.

Buddhist philosophy is all about change, the fact that all things change and nothing has permanent existence, except change. The key thing to understand here is that both our normal consciousness and the Storehouse Consciousness, like all things, change; neither is fixed or permanent, but they change at different rates, and that is key for understanding the two as well as a common misunderstanding.

However, the Storehouse Consciousness carries on (lasts) into our rebirth, unlike our normal consciousness of ourselves. It not only persists until we are reborn, but it then picks right up where it left off when we died, with our new birth. In other words, we will always have a Storehouse Consciousness, but it will always be changing with the sediment from our past lives blessing each rebirth with our cravings. The many selves of me, but not really any particular “me.”

Rebirth must certainly be more of an adventure than climbing Mt. Everest or something similar, IMO, and we don't have a choice but to do it. We just have to learn to love sky-diving or bungee-jumping from one birth to the next, love the gap or bardo-time when we forget one life, until we can build and reanimate another, after which we may be just as selfish as ever, but not with the same Self.

The Storehouse Consciousness exists until every last craving, attachment, and karma is exhausted, after which it is empty and does not provoke rebirth. Yet, at

the rate most of us apparently load up the Storehouse Consciousness, we are in no danger of running out of karma, and thus rebirths.

I am still learning all of this. The teachings suggest that the Alayavijnana (Storehouse Consciousness) has two (or more) levels, one of which is the true nature of the mind we are all trying to realize.

Aug 21, 2021, 5:07 AM

KARMA AND THE ALAYA CONSCIOUSNESS

[Free e-book of 28 essays on or related to karma and the Alaya Consciousness]

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/ALAYAVIJNANA-2021%20V2.pdf>

And here is one article from this free e-book”

“AWARENESS OF UNAWARENESS”

The Ven. Chögyam Trungpa said:

“The process of going through your birth and your death shocks you so much that you forget your past, which is what usually happens to ordinary people.”

In these last blogs I have been opening up a discussion as to what happens between death and rebirth, and what, if anything of us, survives. As the pulp magazine’s slogan states: “Inquiring Minds Want to Know.”

I want to know and am just beginning to get my arms around this whole concept of the Eighth Consciousness, the Alayavijnana or Storehouse Consciousness. This whole part of the dharma, called the Abhidharma, is probably the least studied and understood area of Buddhism for me personally. It is, in general, too intellectual for me to follow, as some say “Drier than dust.” But at this point I would like to learn more, so I am slowly poking around in it.

At the same time, I realize that I have studied little else all these years, although I call it “Phenomenology,” and have always seen myself as a phenomenologist, one who directly monitors the internal structures of experiences and of the mind. So, go figure.

One concept that I am clear about from the teachings is that the Storehouse Consciousness is very hard to alter or transform in a lifetime. Although, as they say, it is ever changing, it is also very fixed and difficult to change within ourselves. In fact, the situation is so tough that great lamas like the Ven. Traleg Rinpoche say that the best approach to removing these negative patterns from the Storehouse Consciousness is simply to stop creating “bad” or impure karma, so that it is not recorded in the Alaya Consciousness in the first place. For me, that is something of a radical statement, because ceasing to record karma, itself, is a very difficult proposition. This suggests to me that the statement that the Alaya Storehouse is hard to modify must be very, very true.

Traleg Rinpoche's advice, to head it off at the pass and just not record karma, is really saying something. It is not likely that many of us could just up and do this, if we could do it at all. Apparently, my worries about finding some kind of consciousness that persists through time are answered by the staying qualities of the Alayavijnana. If it is really that persistent, then that makes sense, because the teachings point out that this Storehouse-Consciousness will remain with us, fully active, until we reach enlightenment, and that might be a while. And by that fact, it must equally be true that it has been with us since, well, forever. That is staying power enough for me, but how to properly use it?

So, the first advice, as mentioned, is to stop recording karma, because as hard as that is to do, apparently it is easier than trying to remove karmic stains from the Storehouse Consciousness once they are sown. We should know this by the simple fact of how difficult it is for most of us to alter or change bad habits into good ones. That is not easy for me, and this is what is being pointed out here that has to be done.

Not that removing karmic stains can't be done, but that it can't be done easily, and some lamas say that, in practical terms, it can't be done in this lifetime. Period. In other words, whatever we do in that regard in this life may effect (and show up) in our next lifetime, but don't hold your breath about seeing much change in this current life. That's how I read the instructions.

It occurs to me that this information is a sword that cuts both ways. If the Alaya Storehouse holds the negative karma in, it must do the same for positive karma. If we can learn to stop recording negative karma and gradually remove the traces and tracks of what we have already accumulated, we have a better karmic reference-field to draw upon. If I read it right, the Tibetans also point out that when we finally become enlightened, the Alaya Storehouse is absorbed into that enlightenment and vanishes. Wow! I have no idea what to make of that.

And they also say that it is superior or better not to record any karma, either good or bad. Most of us think that the more good karma we can have, the better. But it seems that the great Buddhist teachers say that with enlightenment we have neither good nor bad karma. We don't need it. All karma is a diversion. I need to learn more about that.

So, it looks like I have some studying to do on all of this, and that, which for me, will be interesting. If some of you find this upsetting, then I suggest that you not read here for a while. The same is true for those who are apparently not interested in this topic. Find something better to do, while I am still learning about this. Hopefully I will be able to be more articulate down the road. Come back later and see how it strikes you then.

DRUGS AND THE DHARMA: LIGHTNING IN A BOTTLE

[Before you moan and point out how uninterested folks are in this day and age to the story of psychedelics and the birth of The Sixties, I feel duty-bound to sketch out, once again, the influence of LSD on an entire generation.]

I should know better than to talk about drugs and the dharma in the same sentence, and I usually don't. Encouraging drug use is not my intention. And it would seem that there really is no obvious link between drugs and the dharma in this country. However, there is one indirect link that to me it is very interesting, and worth risking a discussion.

In my experience drugs are not per-se dharmic, with one exception, LSD (and perhaps other psychedelics). And, although they may not be popular, here are my thoughts:

For me the direct result of LSD in America had to do with the nature of the mind and how it worked. When acid came on the scene in the early 1960s, it was not just another fun high like marijuana. It struck at the core of the fixed mentality of the 1950's and split it wide open. The genie was out of the bottle.

It is a testimony to the universality of the truth of the dharma that it does not have to come in a Tibetan or Japanese wrapper. Rather, the dharma is like the laws of nature, right up there with gravity and sunshine. It just is. We don't break the laws of nature; they break us. It is the same with the dharma. We work with it and not against it.

When LSD came along and laid bare some of the internal workings of the American mind, that was my first real dharma lesson. Like a mental tsunami, acid left in its wake chaos and instability, but also insights and clarity for many of us at that first taste. And LSD certainly did not have the name of dharma stamped on it, but it was very dharmic. And when almost a decade later, great dharma masters like Chögyam Trungpa came along, they made quick work of our acid trips. It suddenly all made sense. And unlike those of us with acid experience, where we might have this or that insight right but had no idea where it fit into the overall scheme of life, the dharma had a place for it. Everything we saw in the light of LSD fit together with the dharma teachings like plugging a piece into a jigsaw puzzle. For me, that was a life saver.

I had been to the brightest minds I knew (like the Catholic Jesuits) and shared my acid experience asking for an explanation, but they did not have a clue. "Have faith," was about all they said. With my LSD experiences, I had somehow

ventured beyond the pale of society's consensus and found myself quite alone in uncharted waters, territory usually reserved for shamans and those who find themselves in alternate realities and states of mind. I was like a voice crying in the wilderness and there were suddenly millions of us. We could not really sort it out. What we were seeing was just too different. Like the dharma, acid was a wakeup call.

When the great dharma teacher Chögyam Trungpa came on the scene in the early 1970s all that changed. He was totally at home with whatever we had come across in the mind on acid and never blinked. In fact, it is reputed that Trungpa once took LSD and his only comment was "Nothing happened!" Not only was acid not a challenge to Trungpa, but he was able to show people like myself how each insight into the nature of the mind that LSD had given us fits into an overall approach to Tibetan mind training. How comforting it was that someone could embrace LSD and help put it in perspective.

Everything my generation could throw at Trungpa just became more grist for his mill. Believe me friends, THAT was impressive and he immediately tamed thousands of us who had fallen into the scary habit of thinking that we must be the Lone Ranger (and somehow unique) because of our LSD experiences. Trungpa could settle that question with a simple comment or two. Nothing we saw in the mind on our "trips" was news to him. Out of the chaos of our acid experiences Trungpa made order. And we, humbly, just got in line.

What we had seen on acid was the truth or part of it. Like a piece of a puzzle, we had no idea where this or that insight fit in. Trungpa showed how all our pieces fit into the larger picture and we got it. At least in my case, these two powers changed my life, first LSD, and then Trungpa, who us helped make sense of it all.

I tell this story because it explains my ambivalence when it comes to drugs. I never got much out of any drugs (except some entertainment), with the exception of LSD. But I would be a liar if I denied that I learned an inestimable amount from taking that drug. It was mind altering and thus lifechanging.

That being said, I should hasten to point out that I sincerely believe that acid was useful at a particular time in history when the fixed dichotomy of the current thinking of the time needed some air, and acid was a shortcut to that future. It paved the way for what we call the 1960s and, IMO, was the principal catalyst for that revolution or evolution. Nothing else came close.

And the fact that what we saw on LSD turned out to be part of the dharma is a testimony to its truth, universality, and pliability. Thank goodness that the Tibetans, driven out of their own country, wandered into America, and showed us where the pieces of the puzzle of the mind that we saw on acid fit. Once I found the dharma, drugs no longer interested me because they were just a subset of a larger system.

SOME ELABORATION

I would be surprised if many readers know how much of our worldview is embedded in what we call the self and its perspective. I had little to no idea that what I saw out there in the world is very much what I project in here from my mind. We are brought up to believe that what we see in the world around us is objective fact, simply the way things are, the way it is. How wrong that turned out to be.

I had my first clue that I had it pretty-much backward on May 6, 1964, while I was living in Berkeley California, and I had just dropped LSD for the first time. And

acid was so new back then that what I took was some from the original Sandoz Laboratories in Switzerland, just a drop of acid on a sugar cube. And it was lightning in a bottle, so to speak. No need to describe my whole trip or to warn you off from running out and taking LSD today. That was then and this is now. For one, acid has changed, in that the need and the times for it have really changed, but back then LSD was a segue, opening into a new time for an entire generation – The Sixties.

My point here is, aside from literally blowing my mind, the main take-away from that first acid trip was the real-time realization that much of what we see out there in the world is what we project from deep in our minds here. I don't mean that I just understand this as a concept, but rather that it was then, that night in Berkeley, that I realized that most of what I saw (and was fixated on) was just my own mind's projections. I will give one clear example from that night that shattered that previous view and it humbled me.

Back then we had mostly heard stories of acid, and few had yet experienced it. The rumor was that LSD was anything you thought it was, which turned out to be more-or-less true. There was also the rumor that acid was capable of permanently altering our mind, and that was scary. In hindsight, the truth turned out to be that LSD did not alter our brain or anything physical like that; what LSD did was alter our view of how we saw life. And that it did and for most of us, that was a good thing.

Despite my attempts to make sure I was in a secure location when I dropped acid, I was not. I made the person who was chaperoning me promise that no matter what I said to the contrary, she would not leave me alone that night. I was afraid what I might do. Clear enough? Yet, the first time I told her I was fine and that she should go on home, she split. Bam! My influence with her was just too strong. She just believed me and left! I was anything but fine.

Anyway, there I was, totally immersed in the phantasmagoria of an acid trip and loose on the streets of Berkeley California very late at night. As I passed a dark alley, I could hear laughter. And as I peered into the darkness, I could see someone coming toward me. It was a black couple. They were drunk and kind of stumbling in my direction. I could see that the woman was leaning into the man and clinging to his waist. I was apprehensive because back then blacks and prejudice went hand-in-hand. I drew back.

Then the couple emerged into the streetlight at my end of the alley and they were white! Not only were they white, they were just a couple of college kids out on a date. What was I to think about that fact as opposed to what I had just imagined? On the speed of acid, there was no time to rationalize my view and experience and explain it away. It was already way too late for that.

In the quick-silver speed of acid, I had somehow intercepted my ingrained prejudice and in the slow-motion time that LSD can provide, I could suddenly see the wizard behind the curtain, who perhaps was more like an idiot. As mentioned earlier, this was not a thought or an intellectual understanding. This was a real-time living movie that I was in, and I, as mentioned, had just stepped behind the curtain of the self for the very first time. My bias, prejudice, and ingrained reaction were suddenly out of the bag and obvious to me. I was doing this! I was projecting (me the "projector"), turning a simple truth into a prejudice. It floored me. In all my life up to that instant, I had never noticed this before. Acid had broken the seal and the genie was out of the bottle.

I had actually caught myself in a contradiction and had seen for the first time that the world I lived in was a movie screen upon which I projected what I had learned or been taught to project, all my likes, dislikes, biases, and prejudice. I was stunned. Wow! So, this is how it is. That night changed my life. Acid HAD altered my mind, but for the better.

And the whole acid trip that night was like that. In that LSD experience, I awoke to real-time psychology. I was suddenly a player within my own mind, and no longer just a deer-in-the-headlights onlooker. From that day forward I became a full-time phenomenologist. I had stepped behind the curtain of the self where the projector is located, rent the veil, and was soon fiddling with the gears. I was never the same again, and that is good thing. I have acid to thank for that.

In the crew-cut straight-jacketed world of the 1950s from which I was emerging, I (along with everyone I knew) was wrapped way too tight to have any real kind of life. The whole society was similarly frozen, staring at the same locked-step movie that I had just stepped out of. Imagine that!

And I was not alone. My whole generation soon joined me, and we stepped through the back of the mirror together and then down the rabbit hole without as much as a goodbye to the status quo. It was total freedom compared to where we came from. I finally understood... something. I had found a differential.

Of course, it is not quite that simple. What I saw on acid took me years to absorb and even longer to stabilize, which is why I don't recommend drugs.

Anyway, dharma practice can provide the same thing and without the dangers and need for stabilization by trial and error. Yet back in 1964, dharma in America had not reached so far as Ann Arbor Michigan, at least not in a form that I could assimilate.

It was then that I "broke into two," so to speak, and began to study my own reactions in earnest. And they were not few, but many. It soon appeared that I reacted to almost anything and all the time. My personal likes and dislikes filtered almost everything I experienced, and it was not like my tastes were something

special. The net effect was that I was looking through prescription eyeglasses that were anything but rose-colored. Pure, unfiltered experience was almost not on my menu. I was a creature not only of habit, but of bias and prejudice, slammed against the walls of the mind by my every passing reaction. And until I began to develop some awareness and distance from all this, I never even knew all this was happening. That all changed on May 6th, 1964 and that sugar cube with a drop of acid.

The social mind that emerged from the 1950s was pretty much closed, airtight. Those my age that I knew had no clue either. All of this started to loosen up in the early 1960s, in my opinion largely because of the advent of LSD on my generation and its effects of changing and altering our view. That may not be a popular observation, but to the best of my experience it is the truth. Acid exposed the unity of the observer and the observed to most of a generation. We began to witness our own projections and in particular the fact that the strict dichotomy of the subject and the object was not true. It was the Heisenberg principle incarnate, the fact that the state of our mind directly influences what we see and believe is out there in the external world. LSD unhinged an entire generation and the door of the mind just blew wide open. I am grateful for that opportunity.

Suddenly there was lots to do. Watching the kaleidoscope of the mind reveal its secrets one by one was riveting. The concrete iceberg of who knows how many previous generations was melting and breaking up, a chunk at a time. And whatever spirit had been trapped in that frozen state was freed and lived again. Suddenly it was the Sixties.

So, even before the dharma poured into this country, it was already at work here. When great teachers like Chögyam Trungpa arrived on the scene, they just showed us how to do it properly, how to practice methods that really work. However, even before that, the mind was already waking up.

Aug 22, 2021, 4:23 AM

THE INVISIBLE MIDNIGHT SUN

That null spot, commonly known as “boredom,” is a mystery to most of us. We avoid it as much as possible. Either way, periodically, there it is staring us in the face if we dare stare back. I have seen it up close with no possible escape and have never forgotten about it. Yet, what is it?

Perhaps we avoid boredom because we don’t know how to enter this unwanted or “forbidden” space. I am so used to turning back or away from it that I have seldom done anything else but just that, turn away.

Everything else around me goes on apace, normally, all but that “dead spot” in my mind known as boredom, and I think about it more than a little, ever since I was introduced to it by having a major stroke, when it was unavoidably there and thrust in my face. Rather, as I look around me, I seem often to end up being aware of this null or empty spot known as boredom, the one door that I do not or cannot enter, if only because I don’t know how or want to. This has been lifelong.

Perhaps more to the point, I don’t know how to endure or remain in that null place, that void; the only thing I know to do is leave that empty space ASAP and revert to refuge in Samsara, anything else but there. And it has to be more than that; there must be a reason for it that we all avoid what is called boredom.

If I think on it, the only answer that comes up in my Magic 8-Ball is that in this null spot, there is absolutely no entertainment, no refuge from simple exposure to it, and I can't seem to stand that. I am not entertained. My only experience with this up-close comes, as mentioned, from the major stroke I had a couple years ago and the time after that when it was not possible for me to find refuge in anything other than this present moment and boredom. I could not reach my personal history or any of my entertainment filters. And there was no filter for the brilliance of not-being-hidden, as in: naked. I had no veil. And mark my words.

When I refer to the "brilliance of not being hidden," of there being no refuge from it, I am speaking of the brightness that remained so bright when I could not cover myself in the usual entertainment that Samsara offers us. That null place remains, even today, as an impossible situation, at least impossible for me to endure. So, how could I forget it?

It seemed at that time that this present moment was too bright to endure without the "polarizing filter" of the many layers of entertainment and cover that Samsara provides me. And in that Samsara, hidden beneath all that shielding and opaque layers, is where I am most comfortable. For example, when looking at the sun in the sky, it requires a filter that transmits only 0.00001% of the sun's light. Think about that and then give a thought to our habituation for obscurity.

We are walking around, at best, covered by the dense layers of our habitual entertainment, and all that obscures is the obscuration from our own busyness, attachments, and distractions. For certain, we never look (and never have) in the direction of a light too brilliant for us to even peek at, much less stare into, yet that same light is the light of this world of the mind. In summary, we don't, can't, or won't look into the brilliant light of the mind.

And if we wanted to look at this “Midnight Sun,” how would we go about it? I don’t have an answer for that because I still can’t look at that light. Yet, I have fully experienced it and for days and weeks at a time when I had no choice. For me, it was terrifying, being exposed like that. And yet, if I study the dharma, I can’t avoid learning that through the purification practices, we will be increasingly removing our own obscurations and exposing ourselves to that light. It’s very much in our future and not in our past.

Aug 22, 2021, 9:54 PM

BEYOND BOREDOM

[Not much interest in this topic, but a few. I, for one, am interested. Some of you must know boredom and can share some information.]

I have to ask myself, what is boredom? We have all probably been bored, but what exactly is boredom a symptom of, like pain is a symptom of a possible health problem? What does boredom signify?

Learning to tolerate boredom and not immediately hunt for cover in entertainment and busyness is an issue that I find worth examining. Getting used to boredom is not sudden, like a switch, rather just the opposite, more like settling into a very hot bath -- getting used to it. Ultimately, is the proverbial “white light” of the bardo dimmed by gradual exposure to it? Or perhaps a better image is like driving into fog, which at distance seems impenetrable, yet every foot that we advance sees the fog vanish away and our seeing into it possible.

And so, much of the initial uncomfortableness of boredom, when relaxed into, is tolerable, even comfortable when taken with time. We are just not used to it and ARE used to, instead, taking refuge or cover by busying ourselves with entertainment, anything but whatever boredom is. It's almost like creating noise to keep the spooks at bay. What is it exactly to be bored? And, more to the point, what is boredom?

We don't really know because we are afraid of boredom to the extent that we turn away from it, turning back into where we came from, to our usual entertainment and busyness. Boredom remains an unknown because, while we experience it, we don't have time for it or won't take time to get to know it. Perhaps we never have, and therefore don't know what is behind and beyond being bored.

Is boredom, as mentioned, just like walking through fog? If we only will "walk on," can we actually see what is in front of us, step by step? And does the "fog effect" only appear as a solid wall (impenetrable) from a distance? Actually, it is quite walkable. Why have we never explored this, because it's boring?

Or the big question: how can we best prepare for the brilliant white light of the bardo, and when confronted directly, does it give way and to what?

Aug 23, 2021, 4:57 PM

SKY BURIAL

[Actually, I've seen an actual sky burial in Tibet, where the vultures come to pick the bones clean, high in the Tibetan mountain peaks. This is a photo of a sky burial on an all-day hike to reach She-Drak (Crystal Cave), Guru Rinpoche's first meditation cave. It was here that he bound the demons and Bön influences under oath. Many terma (mind treasures) were hidden and revealed here to practitioners like Orgyen Lingpa and others. However, in this blog I'm using the term 'sky burial' in another way. Perhaps I should tell the story of the Crystal Cave in another blog?]

The web of words totally surrounding us in today's media has perhaps been drawn too tight. How can we squeeze any juice out of language that's so intellectual, hype-like, so out-of-the-body? As the great poet Gerard Manley Hopkins put it: "Suck any sense from that who can." Yes, of course, please do.

Our language, especially written language, has to contain within it at least enough sense to mean something, yet unfortunately, in my opinion, it seems too often these days that most prefer the high arc of the sky bird to getting our hands down into the clay. I, for one, need to be grounded and repeatedly brought down to earth and not puffed ever higher and higher skyward. Whole societies have been pushed out of the body to float away because the heart can't sustain the intellection. Much of today's hype is meaningless to me.

So, I can't help but yearn to break it up, take it apart, and deconstruct the intellectual and conceptual bind of language itself, to reduce it to non-duality. Great intellectuality is said to clarify, but IMO, too often it just suffocates, so starved is it of oxygen. It's too 'up in the sky' for me to feel much of anything. That could be just me, but I doubt it. Often the language gets tighter and tighter

until there is practically no sense left in the prose at all. What is the reason that we want to fly so high? Who are we trying to reach or just 'who' is it we think we are? Why are we so obviously trying to leave the body? Is it getting that bad down here? Perhaps.

For me, the only value of going so intellectual (and I said, "for me") is getting all the problems of too much conceptuality all in a bunch so I can see how empty they are of real meaning, and I can see that today. Yes, I know that the more intellectual writers are trying to say something too, but for the most part, IMO, they are just obscuring what miniscule meaning they have with their overage of conceptuality. I can't read this kind of prose, at least not for long. The lack of sense and "oxygen" leaves me cold and I can't or won't follow that. If you are going to write intellectually, be sure to include some sense.

What are we thinking? I imagine that the overly conceptual writer is trying to leap over or fly high above the topic, and beyond this earthly body, yet something is lost, and that's usually me. It's not that I can't follow it, but more like I won't bother. It's mentally constipating, and what's the point of that?

As mentioned, for me the "overly conceptual" operates like a roadside warning sign, and the point of what it signs is not to go that route. Stay in the body while we have it. Perhaps this is why more and more instruction manuals these days are just using all illustrations.

This is the way that dharma instructions work too. It's not that you can't go the conceptual route, but that if you do, the pith teachings say it will take some untold number of kalpas to get enlightened by going that way. A kalpa is said to be something like 16 million years long. That's not exactly a shortcut.

Instead, what I like is to just rest in the nature of the mind itself as much as I am able, without all this conceptuality and stop just talking about life. As they say, “He who hesitates is lost,” so jump in. All writing and all language are conceptual by definition. I’m just suggesting that we make plenty of sense as we go along.

[Photo by Margaret of visiting Lumo Durtrö, a female naga cemetery dedicated to Tamdrin, the horse-headed deity. That’s me in the hat and some other folks on pilgrimage. My daughter May Erlewine, on the right, was also with us.]

Aug 24, 2021, 11:09 AM

INTO THE BOREDOM

[Note: Yesterday we had a more active sun with a couple of B-class solar flares, including a B9 solar flare. There are two CMEs (Corona Mass Ejection) headed for Earth in the next few days. A high-speed solar wind will graze Earth’s magnetic field today (August 25th), probably followed by the two (weak) CME strikes I mentioned on August 26th and 27th. To me, this means a more active inner mental life, with perhaps some churning.]

For myself, I don’t even consider boredom as ‘boredom’ as most define it. I am more aware of this phenomenon, especially when I find myself trying to run away from whatever we can agree boredom is. IMO, boredom is something like the occult concept of the ring-pass-not, a barrier that we can’t bridge, but yet we must pass through eventually.

It seems that most think of conventional boredom like a blind alley or cul-de-sac that marks an end point, from which the only option is to turn and go back the way we came. Yet, my own personal experience from a couple of strokes proved to me that it is far from an endpoint, but rather boredom marks an area that is uncomfortable for us to go beyond, uncomfortable enough that we mistake it for a point of no return, one that finds us turning around and returning from whence we came. It's not that.

Yet, my experience with the major stroke shows me that when the comforts and refuge of what we call Samsara are denied (unavailable), that the sheer nakedness or lack of Samsara's adequate comfort cover reveals the light of the mind and that it is unavoidably present in the sky of our mind, so to speak.

If that experience is waiting for me when I can eventually stand to not take refuge in Samsara all the time, as I now do, then, sooner or later, I am going to have to confront and deal with this brilliant awareness. It is there all the time right now, but I manage to shield myself from it and ignore or avoid it.

I know this because, in the midst of the stroke, I had no choice but to cope with this brilliantly bright light that dominated my interior landscape to the exclusion of any possible shielding or cover. And, although here I describe it as a bright white light, that is not actually what it was, which I will try to express more accurately.

The brightness of the light was caused by the utter lack of any Samsaric cover, no darkness for me to take cover in, none of my usual entertainments and busyness to distract me, nada. And this nakedness of any cover, itself, was what I am calling here the 'bright light,' the pain of being exposed. I believe something similar awaits us in the bardo after death.

As you perhaps can see, in fact, it is a little complex. During the time after and around my stroke, being unable to take refuge in my history, my familiar haunts and entertainment, I was restricted entirely to being in this present moment. Now this is something yogis perhaps dream of, but for me the present moment (without past or future) was very, very intimidating. The stroke provided that.

And at the time of the stroke and after, this present moment was perfectly clear, only I was used to peeking at it or experiencing it from the shadow world of Samsara. To suddenly be fully exposed was excruciatingly painful, due to the 'brightness' of no shade or shadow. No filter. That's about the best I can describe it.

Now, to have had that experience and contemplate boredom, which is the sister of that stroke experience, is then not to see boredom as something that eventually can be ignored or avoided, but rather this kind of boredom is our future, something each of us is going to have to negotiate one-on-one. And it is that fact which I find sobering, plus that I DEEPLY underestimated the descriptions of the bardo experience in the various dharma texts.

And that is because my experience with the stroke was unequivocally devastating, putting me on the floor, and not something I imagine I could take standing up, so to speak, without some kind of preparation, which brings me to the present moment.

I realize that I must experiment (as best I can) now, before death, in gradually exposing myself to the brightness of the light of 'boredom', which is not 'nothing' or boring as I had imagined, but rather is vivid beyond endurance. I need to get used to it on the chance that when I encounter it after death in the bardo, I stand

a chance of not cutting and running into the darkness to hide my face, thus embracing the womb of rebirth as in “any port in a storm.” By facing that light, I may have a choice as to my rebirth.

I realize that it is asking a lot for you to read this, but I would not be serving you well, if I cushioned the truth, as I see it. You can color me crazy, yet from my point of view, this is a reality.

The Ven. Chögyam Trungpa said:

“The process of going through your birth and your death shocks you so much that you forget your past, which is what usually happens to ordinary people.”

Aug 25, 2021, 4:00 AM

TIME'S FLOW

Change is wherever it is at in the flow of time, and so are we. We don't want to be dragged behind time; that would be masochistic. On the other hand, we don't want to push time beyond its limit; that would be sadistic. What does that leave us?

That leaves us with time just as it is naturally. There is no point in being in a hurry, trying to be where we aren't yet, like wishing we were more advanced in

the dharma than we are. And conversely, no point in being delinquent, being pulled behind the flow of time, always bringing up the rear, and apologizing.

If we will just look for a moment, things are exactly where they naturally are. We can accept that without pushing or being pulled. It does not matter if you are years ahead of me in dharma practice (or vice versa), because neither of us are near the end of anything. If I could be happy if I were where you are in dharma, then I can also be happy right now with where I am. There is no difference whatsoever between the two. With dharma, equal opportunity is the same. It's not where we are that is important, but rather how we handle it.

So, why not accept and be happy right exactly where we are because that happens to be where we are. There is no hurry for us to be ahead of where we are now. If we could be happy then (in the future), we can be happy now in the present. Relativity knows no difference, if all things are relative. And if they are not relative, then where you are now is where you will be then, because beyond relativity, there is no there or then, only now. So, like the old saying goes, why not "Be Here Now."

The purity of our dharma intent right now is all we have to worry about and, if we do, then we are good to go. If we do our best, more than that we cannot do. Each day's best intent is just that. The dharma is the great equalizer.

IMO, there is nothing at the far end of any line of time that is not here and present right now. All the opportunity in the world is also here right now. And having made our best effort is just that. As mentioned, more than our best effort we cannot do.

The great Mahasiddha Tilopa said don't live in the past and be dragged by time and don't invite the future and attempt to force time unnaturally. Don't pull or be pulled, but just let go and rest in the present tense 'as it is', the now of this present moment. That's the beauty of the dharma and why anyone, no matter what their gifts and aptitude, is equal in the dharma because our intent can be pure regardless of who, where, and what we are, old-young, advantaged or not, advanced or beginner.

If you are waiting until the future to celebrate, you are wasting time. Celebrate today with what you have; it's the same opportunity then or now. You have come all this way until now, which will be no different 20 years from now. Don't wait until you are an accomplished and successful whatever. Celebrate all your 'thens' right now, and live your 'thens' here and now. Don't wait until then. Then is now and far is near.

Each of us has enough of what it takes to master the dharma in our own way every day. In other words, it's like the old "Give us this day our daily bread." We have that leeway, enough room in the present moment to be true to our nature, neither too far ahead of the curve nor too far behind the curve. We have the whole of the present moment as does every other person on the globe. We can rest in that. What joy that we have this opportunity!

MUMS THE WORD

But why? Here we are, a couple of decades into the 21st Century and learning about the dharma. I've been at it since the late 1950s when we used to talk about Buddhism, Zen Buddhism, and stay up late smoking cigarettes and drinking

instant coffee with powdered creamer. Dharma has come a long way in America since then. Yet, where are we?

If we own some dharma books and have done a little bit of studying, perhaps we can quote the great siddhas and share that. I don't have trouble with that approach, but what I am most looking for are those dharma students who want more than just an intellectual exchange of quotes and reading one more book. How about those of us who want to share our own dharma experience with one another, whatever that is, where we are at, and what questions we may have? There is no shame, no matter where we are at, with our dharma practice and wherever we are at is a perfect place to start.

Sure, quoting the great dharma masters is interesting, but it kind of does what? Probably, we ourselves have not had those realizations we quote, so these classic quotes cannot prove the validity of our own dharma practice in any way. Here we are quoting dharma to each other. As for me, I look for a different future when it comes to how we practice the dharma.

Why is it that we cannot speak from our own direct experience with the dharma, whatever it is, share what we know, and ask about what we don't know? Is it that we have no dharma experience? We each have some. All of this endless conceptualization, quoting of the dharma masters, etc. is just that, quoting. I'm always glad to see such quotes, but I have more or less stopped reading that kind of post. I'm not sure what it accomplishes other than to see that we are on the same general page with one another. Which page is that?

If you know nothing and are ready to learn, no problem. Just say so. If you know something, say that too, and ask questions about what you would like to know more about. I will do the same. Be prepared to receive information and also be ready to make efforts in behalf of your own dharma.

Back in the 1960s, it seemed that we never spoke about our meditation practice. Somehow, we all assumed that our meditation was supposed to be private. Where did we learn that? Who said so? I have no idea, yet back then, we each would give a thumbs up as for our meditating, and at the same time remain silent, with endless questions that were never being asked. I'm afraid we didn't know what we were doing. What a lonely time that was. And where did that get us? Not much of anywhere as far as I can remember. Perhaps we were just shy.

So, if you are quoting Milarepa songs to me, I may well listen, but unless we talk about our own dharma experience, where we each are at, I am not so interested. I can read Milarepa songs on my own and have. However, we could actually exchange information about what practices we are doing and what questions we have about them and maybe one or both of us could learn something. I always have lots of questions. If we can't come up with an answer, we can find someone who knows. That's my view and I look to that.

These years I look for people to discuss our practices with, and keep an eye out toward bettering them. I would love to learn more! And I would bet that few of us are actually dharma scholars; I know I'm not. And while we could quote at each other until the cows come home, IMO, that's only somewhat better than trading jokes. I have been there and done that, years ago. It's time to mix it up a bit and rub two sticks together.

What I am looking to see is more of us stating (as best we can) just where we are in our dharma practice, and able to ask for feedback from those with more training, and to, if asked, do our best to encourage those who are just starting out. We can all work together. Otherwise, it can be separating. While we each have to turn the wheel of our own dharma, it should not be such a lonely affair. If you are happy with that old pattern, be my guest, but leave me out of the

intellectual dharma banter, please. Talk about your actual practice with me. Yes, I will listen.

I have been experimenting privately with small groups of practitioners for some time as of late, being open and free about where we are in our practice, exchanging experience and perhaps advice with one another. No secrets needed. I find this very effective and encouraging.

Dharma practice is not ascetic, and we should not be fearful of cross-contamination. There is nothing I know of that is secret about dharma practice. The only area I ever heard tell that is secret is one's Yidam, and I know that there is no secret there. A yidam is our personally tailored dharma practice and path, the one way that will work for us. A yidam is not at all secret, but it is unique, and because of that it won't work on another person. That's all they mean by "a yidam is secret," which only shows they don't know what a yidam is.

Traveling in Tibet a couple of times, it seemed to me that the monks, and they were legion, talked about little else other than the dharma with each other. Here in America, back in the 1960s, it was like we were in a cloister and with a vow of silence to boot. Pretty cold, IMO. Is it that much different today? I don't think so. Are we afraid to share our practice and why?

So, please don't quote to me what you have read in a book somewhere or do it sparingly, and I will do the same for you, but rather share with me what it is that you have personally experienced and realized. That counts with me, and I will do the same for you. If there are areas of our dharma experience that make sense to us, let's say so and discuss.

[A photo of a group of us at the Ten-Day Mahamudra Teaching at KTD Monastery in New York. This was 2016. My teacher Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche is circled, as are Margaret and myself. I am down front because I am taking pictures, and my camera set up, with someone else clicking the shutter while I slip into the frame.]

Aug 27, 2021, 12:54 AM

LETTING IN SOME AIR AND LIGHT

In yesterday's blog "Mums the Word," my dharma friend Heather MacKenzie asked some questions about sharing our practice with others; see that blog for her post. And here are some of my thoughts about that.

My view is that these questions are complex. One of the traditional chestnuts against sharing dharma experience seems to be that we will be influenced by hearing too much about it and harden that conceptualization and thus tend to stray. I bought into that for a while, until I realized that we are totally imprinted and influenced by the dharma we read, hear, and observe from many sources. And it is all conceptual.

We have no realization when we start practicing dharma. And it is not so much that our dharma teachers and sources are wrong or misled, but the simple fact that since we have never realized these teachings, we can't help but come up with our own take and idea of the whole dharma equation. And we can be certain we are off base, otherwise we would have the realization and need no teaching

at all. The difference between understanding (conceptualization) and realization is vast, IMO.

To repeat, my worry is not that I feel our original sources and dharma teachers are off base or off center, but rather that we, by definition, start out by seeing through a glass darkly, so to speak. Our idea of dharma realization is a total construct, created by us, and made up from our expectations. How could it be otherwise?

So, who is going to set us straight on our own expectations, imagination, and tendency to reify whatever we conceive and are conceptually attached to? We are too often left to our own devices without any corrective measures to clarify us. At what point in our dharma practice can this be straightened out?

I feel that if we can be more open with others on the same path, share our dharma practice, then perhaps the sheer friction of relationships is bound to give us pause for thought. In other words, someone needs to monitor us close-up, to make sure we are not drifting too far from the shore of dharma reality and are getting lost in a inferential conceptual world of our own making. There is no question that we have fabricated such a dharma world.

It can be difficult to find authentic and experienced teachers, and of course they should be accessed, as much as they have time for us. In the meantime, my own view is that honest exchange and talk among sincere dharma students about any of the preliminary practices (and others) can be educational. At least I find it so.

Perhaps, in response to Heather's comments, all I am really saying is that perhaps we might have more discussion and exchange right here on this blog, than we do. I have been around the dharma long enough to know there are no

dharma secrets that I have ever seen. However, I have seen a lot of mistaken views, attitudes, and expectations that either set us back or keep us from moving smoothly forward with our dharma practices.

If we can honestly share among ourselves where we are at, which itself is an art, there is a chance that we can begin to have those unrealistic conceptual views and attitudes straightened out. If we don't reveal and expose our own dharma practice, where will the feedback come from? There is so much to learn when practicing dharma.

If you have enough dharma council, you are fortunate. However, if you are not being tended to, perhaps you would benefit by discussions that address what you or I specifically believe but are not quite certain about. After all, conceptualizations and indirect valid cognition are somewhat of an intellectual guessing game. We need to weather our practice with feedback.

I feel it is not helpful to allow a student who has never realized the dharma to just run wild with their imagination and expectations. If we want to learn to play the guitar, we can always put on a CD or a recording of guitar music and see what we are pointing toward. However, in spiritual disciplines, there is no recording or video of what realization will be like, because realization is non-dual and cannot be expressed in words, and that by the definition of 'non-dual.'

So, here we are running around with conceptualizations we have put together and made up out of whole-cloth, which by definition can't be correct, otherwise we would already be realized. So how are we to convert our concepts about realization to the actual realization itself without some help? That is traditionally the job of an authentic dharma teacher, through the pointing-out instructions.

Well, it would be nice if we have an authentic teacher who could spend as much time with us as we need, but that is not always the case. I believe we can learn from sharing practice questions with one another, during the time when our main dharma teacher (if we even have one) is not available to us. We have to air out our dharma practice and expose it to light.

Since the unspeakable dharma instructions simply can't be put into words, many of us depend on picking things up from whatever words we can manage to hear or read about the dharma. What we can't learn directly, we perhaps can learn indirectly, out of the corner of our eye, so to speak.

After many years as a counselor, full time, and later as I had time, one thing I have learned is that, to put it succinctly, "We cannot change what we do not accept," and that simply means that we have to get in the car before we can drive it, so to speak.

I feel that our dharma practice has to be kneaded and worked like we would work clay or dough. The dharma is not fragile; it does not need us to make the ends meet. The ends already meet. The dharma can take it and stand on its own.

EMPTY OF WHAT?

[Is emptiness that we cannot feel there enough?]

For all our seeming concern with finding permanent being, "an eternal soul," it seems that we gravitate not to the external hard facts of life that face us, but

more often just the opposite, we run from the facts; we get as far out of the body (up in our heads) as we can without facing, much less incorporating, the hard facts, or so it seems.

It can be painful how much we don't know (or perhaps don't want to know), yet we often persevere in repeating practices we are unclear about. We try to MAKE sense of our situation, out of what does not yet make sense to us.

Again, I am reminded of the shark, that in order to breath, to oxygenate, must always keep moving and never stand still. Like breathing, air going in and out, perhaps we too continue to move in and out of the body like the way people use worry beads (or mantras), to feel and re-feel, and focus on anything.

What about reification, making something more real in our mind than it is? Do we pile it on just so we have something more to feel, the futile illusion of existing in a more permanent or real sense? Do we dream (imagine) a bridge to hold back what we have, to give us a sense of accumulation, so that we can feel anything at all, like rubbing a tiny piece of grit, a grain of sand, between our fingertips. Is that feeling something?

After all, what is emptiness? Is it emptiness of being that worries us? Not just an empty of something, like an empty cup that can contain everything, but rather empty of a permanent being, of really existing in any sense -- Impermanence. Impermanence, meaning not that we all will die, but rather that we were never permanent enough in the first place. Thus, an emptiness of being itself.

An impermanence that reminds us that "All things are empty of intrinsic existence and nature." Are all phenomena empty of being? Is everything void, hollow, and coreless? As Thanissaro Bhikku puts it, "This mode is called emptiness because

it is empty of the presuppositions we usually add to experience to make sense of it.” By this, it seems Thanissaro Bhikku means that true ‘emptiness’ precludes our attempt to reify everything we sense and experience, turning it into a thread that we can weave into the fabric of our Self, a story we can tell.

I used to think that reification was just our wish to aggrandize our situation, to pile it higher and deeper. Yet perhaps the true reason is that we reify to have something that feels more like “something” at all. This is a rich-old world we exist in, but one that can also wax pretty thin from time to time.

The dharma concept of “Emptiness” is an emptiness of being permanent, being much of anything at all and feeling just that, i.e. an emptiness of being. It’s like a little poem I wrote years ago:

“It’s not just that appearances are empty,
But that appearances are the emptiness arising.”

Aug 28, 2021, 2:49 PM

NOW: INTENSE SOLAR ACTIVITY

From SpaceWeather.com, where they just issued a Major Flare Warning and I quote:

“Sunspot AR2860 is big, angry, and it's directly facing Earth. The active region just unleashed a significant M4.7-class solar flare (Aug. 28 @ 0611 UT), probably hurling a CME toward Earth: movie. If current trends continue, a major X-flare could be in the offing, so stay tuned.”

Sunspot AR2859 erupted on August 26th, producing a flare, which always precedes a CME (Coronal Mass Ejection), which IN TURN releases a massive solar ‘tsunami,’ and since the sunspot was directly facing Earth, it is predicted that the CME will impact Earth late on August 29th, perhaps causing G1-Class geomagnetic storms through August 30, 2021.

In fact, there has been considerable intense solar activity for the last few days, and I have been meaning to mention this to those here that are interested. You can check sites like Spaceweather.doc and SolarHam.net for additional details on the physical affects, and bookmark them because as we come into the upward surge of the sunspot cycle, I may not have time or space to keep up with the solar happenings. Those interested should learn to do this via the above-mentioned web sites.

As to what these solar events mean, I have written many blogs, made videos (YouTube), and also authored a couple of books (SpritGrooves.net) on solar storms and intense solar activity. And I can only share how these solar events affect me.

I have always studied not just the external physical effects of solar activity, but especially the internal mental and psychological affects, which are what most interest me. And our internal experiencing is still too new for science, so I have had to read in the book of my own mind.

Intense solar activity like we see now can powerfully affect us by interjecting ‘change’ into our life situation. At any given time, we may or may not welcome a shot of change into our life situation, as it can gum up the works, throw us off track, and into a destabilizing spiral. It all depends on how stable we are when it hits.

At the same time, a sudden influx of change can be very creative and push us to unimagined breakthroughs and inspired activity. Yet, just as easy, so much energy can just give us a headache and make us feel like going and lying down.

In my own case, for the most part, I welcome solar change and do my best to use it to accomplish whatever projects I am working on. Yet sometimes it is too strong and kind of blows a valve or too and is just too much for me to handle. I can also find myself trying to juggle too many loose canons and not able to keep them all in the air.

Right now, this little series lately of intense solar activity is both, insightful and also a nexus for too much cross traffic. I may have to get out of the way and just punt. We shall see. It’s certainly not uneventful; I can say that.

Solar change, IMO, can also act as a surrogate for the ennui we sometimes feel, the dharmic sense of emptiness caused by our lack of an ‘Eternal Soul’, so to speak, impermanence, a permanent sense of being there.

And so “Make Hay While the Sun Shines” is my motto, and if it shines in sudden intense solar bursts, there is nothing we can do about it so, clear the decks and

batten down the hatches. It is easy to get lost in the nexus of solar change, which layer on layer, can churn us like one of those old-time washing machines.

All and all I like an active sun, yet at the same time it can be difficult to keep track of all the interacting inner and emotional threads, each pulling us in a different direction. I have to keep reminding myself to just relax and not get caught up in all the brouhaha whirling around me. LOL.

Yet, it seems to me that most people are not even aware of the solar immersion when it is going on. They just seem to close up their tentacles like a sea anemone and wait out these inner storms. Me, I like to look around.

Aug 29, 2021, 9:46 AM

SOLAR ENERGY: BEHIND THE BEYOND

[Every once in a while, I need to do a little “Blue-Sky’ thinking. I know that this is pushing some of your envelopes, so I apologize. It’s just something I have to do, and for some few of you who might just resonate. Let me know.]

I link intense solar activity with ‘change’, inner change, yet I have never shared all that I have to say about this particular kind of change. And the reason for that

is because I am still deciding myself just what solar change means for me, and perhaps for us.

Some of you who know my history enough to know how much the Sun has been part of me, first perhaps astrologically, but it also has a dharmic sense too. In 1997, at Tsurphu Monastery in Central Tibet, the ancestral home of the Gyalwa Karmapa, the 17th Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje, gave me a name. He said “You are ‘Tenzin Nyima’,” which means holder or keeper of the Sun. So, I have that connection with the sun, as well.

In astrology I helped to pioneer heliocentric (sun-centered) astrology in many ways. I produced the first 400-year accurate heliocentric ephemeris in 1975, “The Sun Is Shining!” and went on to pioneer a number of helio techniques by 1976, including Interface Planetary Nodes, StarTypes (whole-chart patterns), “Astrophysical Directions,” etc.

And so, when I speak that intense solar activity like solar flares, CMEs (Coronal Mass Ejection), and other solar events bring to Earth change, I may mean ‘change’ in a slightly different manner or context than some of you are used to.

Yes, I see intense solar change as something that is injected into our life equation, suddenly. A sudden influx of change can spur us on or upset our applecart, depending on our current stability. I believe we could all agree on that; at least I would.

What I find harder to convey, what is perhaps more subtle than words can easily make sense of, is the idea that solar change is perhaps not best understood as typically dualistic, meaning that scientifically this solar change causes this or that. Of course it does.

The way I see it is that intense solar change not only changes things in our life and surroundings mechanically, more importantly solar change directly changes us inside. And we can't simultaneously ourselves change and at the same time witness that change. When we internally change, when "We" change, everything changes, because our very view changes.

And so, when intense solar events inundate us, there is no perch or peanut gallery from which we can observe our own internal changes change. Yes, of course, we can see the results of those internal changes, eventually, yet by that point those changes have already wrought themselves, and we are seeing dualistically what was wrought. Yet, when we, our Self, actually changes, we cannot witness it because "we" are what is changing. That kind of change is non-dualistic. There are no subject and object, only the change itself and we are swimming in the middle of it.

I see the inundation of sudden intense solar change as quite magical, because it can't be seen objectively, but only experienced, and observed retrospectively. The moment and act of change itself is sacred and self-secret at that.

And I will take yet another step behind the conventional beyond and also say that solar change (which of course normally appears as daily sunlight) is a conduit or lifeline through which our internal life energy can flow, ebbing and flowing like the ocean tides. With these solar tides, our heart becomes a highway, over which our life can run.

And this conduit or constant connection to the life of the sun (sunlight, solar wind, solar flares, and sun events) is perhaps, physically speaking, the chief or main information-line or artery that informs our Earth (and all of us on it). It is through

this information conduit or flow that the Earth, the solar system, and all higher-order structuring (Local System, Galaxy, Local Group of Galaxies, Supergalaxies, etc.) manage to cohere and remain physically coherent. This coherence and control are what is called Cybernetics, the way the universe regulates all of the systems within itself.

We all know that if any system or organism becomes incoherent (ceases to be coherent), it ceases to exist in a stable form. So, what's my point?

My point is that this solar influx, both by regular sunlight and solar wind as well as punctuated by intense solar activity, provides us with a way to regulate ourselves through constant change (solar influx), which in turn allows us and the Earth itself to cohere, and to remain coherent.

And so, while this constant stream of solar change can be seen in its mechanical sense as the distributor of solar change, as much as there is anything 'sacred' about this process, we are also the subject of and blessed by it.

This endless stream of solar change (sunlight, etc.) is the pulse of life that keeps us not only physically warm, but it is also in line and one with source of this present moment, which we call "Now." I'm not saying that this present moment is like the old Magic 8-Ball we had as kids, our crystal ball, so to speak (although it is), but rather that the non-dual element of solar inner change within us, that which cannot be monitored but only experienced, is indeed magical and sacred and needs to be recognized as such, IMO.

ENNUI

Ennui, the French word for boredom, and that can be followed on by the emotional flood of the German word Weltschmerz, 'world sorrow' or simply world weariness.

If we are talking Weltschmerz, I am reminded of my youth, where "world sorrow" was much more the order of the day, a delightful ennui, and the perfume we all wore.

It seemed, back then, that we had too much time on our hands and far too little with which to fill it, and today, as we are much older, this same feeling, but based more on a gradual loss of interest in entertaining ourselves all the time, along with finally ignoring that compulsion to always keep busy. Perhaps, we are starting to let go.

Somehow along the way, we let lapse our usual entertainment and samsaric cover, and perhaps even allowed ourselves to drift a little too far from Samsara's shore, only to be caught up and intrigued by the boredom of doing absolutely nothing at all. And we find ourselves waking up to an ennui that, although agonizingly uncomfortable, seems to promise liberation.

I wonder how this is related to the "Fourth Thought That Turns the Mind Toward the Dharma," the sense of revulsion or a surfeit of Samsara, this cyclic world of ups and downs we live in; Perhaps we are just tired of it all. Is this type of ennui a harbinger? If so, of what?

Aug 30, 2021, 4:33 PM

THE HARD STUFF

It's not so much fun to write about the "hard stuff," like when I wake up and feel my mind is encased in fog. Those days.

Of course, I wonder how to disperse all this fog I feel surrounding me when it happens, the veil that has somehow fallen over things. We all know that the sun can burn off the early morning fog. How do I do that too?

Well, my first thought is to "Take it to the path," as the dharma says. Yes, good advice. For me, it's more like "write about it" until I am clear. In other words, turn that glove inside out or outside in, in and out, enough times to purify my atmosphere. For me, this urge for clarity usually involves some form of articulation on my part, itself a form of exercise that brings clarity – a workout. It takes me some kind of workout to recover clarity.

And of course, it's usually something I did to myself that casts a veil over things. Somehow, it's my own fault every time. And how long am I going to hang my head until I manage to forget about it and just move on. Is the glass half empty or half full today? This morning it was half full, tonight it might be half empty. How did that happen? Who is to blame other than myself and what's the good in that? How long do I want to punish me? When is enough? There is humor in there somewhere. And I certainly know that a little time will wash this off and I will feel clear again. Time is always good for that.

As you know, I like to write, but pushing language to its limits as exercise can only take me so far before it is obvious that's what's taking place. And doing that alone, without intention, runs out of wiggle-room pretty fast. Conceptualization (my thinking about it) is also limited and, as the dharma texts state, thinking cannot express the non-dual state, which is where I wish to be. At best, thinking or me worrying just rattles my cage.

Because of this habit, my own reflection as seen in my writing is not always flattering, often not what I thought I had in mind. Sometimes my writing is different just to be different, which is not a good thing for me; it leaves me twisting and turning in the wind, navigating a very narrow gate, almost a tightrope, and don't look down.

And there are times, when all the bellwethers are gone and yet I continue on anyway, hoping to crack and shed what feels like a concrete shell and somehow emerge anew or beyond that. There's really no turning back or around because at heart there is no direction but one, continuing on. Perhaps this is just another form of boredom, with me out there treading on the ring-pass-not, pushing the envelope beyond the limits and still hoping for a different response. I believe that is a definition of insanity. LOL.

I see that some kind of change or reformation on my part may be required, something that will shed this caul-like skin I'm smothering in, all in the process of finding a new form of me that I can live with. Of course, I tell myself that perhaps I should not use words at all for a while, instead expressing just with my photography. Yet words replaced my photography some time ago now. No doubt, I'm painting myself into a corner with a blind faith that this is a chrysalis, not a tomb. Anyway you spell it, dharma is grist for this mill.

It's a cold wind that sometimes blows from the North and the waning of summer does not help.

Aug 31, 2021, 2:01 PM

Sep 1, 2021, 6:31 PM

HARDENING OFF

As a commercial grower of plants years ago, I know what 'hardening off' means, which is allowing what is called a 'leggy' plant, one growing too rank and thin, to thicken up and become stronger by putting it in the sun, thus hardening it off.

In a similar way, there are parts of our own inner psychology that could do well to harden off, if we can endure it. I have used the idea of 'boredom' here in several blogs to point at one way we all experience this, but boredom is just one example that I figure most people will understand and is inadequate to cover all of what is being described.

Other words that have been used here on this topic include the French word 'ennui', the medieval Christian word 'accidia', the Welsh word 'hiraeth,' the German word 'Weltschmerz', and no doubt there are others. The point is that anytime we feel bored, naked, a sense of void or emptiness such that we want to

escape or seek cover from experiencing it, may be signifying this same state of mind. What is that?

In my own experience, through sudden sense of loss (death in the family, etc.), often resulting in the shattering of our Humpty-Dumpty Self image for a time, etc., all these conditions point at the same general state of mind, the loss of stability, lack of busyness-as-usual, no entertainment, or something that upsets our applecart, and so on.

At any rate, we suddenly find ourselves outside of what we would call our normal self and routine, often very alone and sensitive to the same world that only yesterday we were comfortable in. Anyway, that's what we are talking about here.

It is similar, if not identical, to what the dharma texts point out as the "Fourth Thought That Turns the Mind Toward the Dharma," often traditionally defined as a sense of "repulsion for Samsara," our normal life and routine, and disgust with the everyday world we are usually used to.

The main difference, as I see it, is that this same type of experience can occur just by medical intervention. In my case it was by a large stroke, leaving me totally unable to bring to mind or find cover in my normal comfort of entertainment and losing myself in sheer busyness for its own sake. I was forced to reside for a time only in this present moment that we call 'Now'. And I did not like it. I felt totally exposed and no amount of whining could change that. I had no choice but to endure it.

The question I raise is just what is this state of mind where the stability of our normal comforts is suddenly deconstructed and gone void? I know this void state

exists because, as mentioned, I experienced it at the time of my stroke, plus the weeks and months it took to reestablish my normal sense of comfort and busyness. I watched it change day-by-day, but I could do nothing to hurry it up, try as I might. I had to reconstruct my shattered Self, brick by brick, so to speak.

And so, I wonder. Is this whole samsaric world we find our selves in something we have mentally created over time immemorial, our own construct and cocoon of comfort in which we then live and hide in? And can it be extinguished in a moment's time, leaving us naked in the present moment? Well, I know the answer to that question. It can and it did.

Yet, the remaining question is: what is that empty state we fear and, more important, is that in any way similar to the state we will be in when we die, abandon our body, persona, Self, and all that, which the dharma texts tell us is impermanent? Should we be looking into this state of emptiness and learning to know it now, getting used to it, and how it can be handled?

That's a fair question, IMO. Sure, I can understand if you don't want to bother with such a (seemingly) abstract conception, and just let the waters roll as they will. I get that, yet I don't like the idea of having no choice in a choiceless situation as to what may arise in the bardo for each of us.

If what we exist in now is something like a house-of-cards that will vanish in death, where do we find more solid footing than that and what can we do about this? And what have I been doing about this?

Sep 2, 2021, 3:59 PM

GRIN AND BARE IT

As for me, I have been working on how to prepare for the bardo, although so far it is slow going. I'm like an old man putting his big toe in a cold swimming pool. Actually, I am an old man! Or it's like trying to ease myself into a hot bath, if that sounds better. When I reach that point of no return, whether it is boredom or just something I can't stand and seek retreat from, I am now learning to, instead, wait it out and not be quick to run.

And it's not limited to ennui or standard boredom; it could be anything, like not feeling well, or waking up in the morning all foggy and not myself. Or, perhaps as simple as not knowing what to do with myself, wherever I balk at in life. All that works just fine for me.

As mentioned, instead of bolting and heading the other way, whatever that might be, I am learning to just hold on for a minute and not try to erase this 'bad' moment. Is any moment that bad? Well, yeah, I think so, but most are just uncomfortable, and I just feel out of sorts or, as they say, for some reason I'm just beside myself.

Instead of scrambling for the door, I am now experimenting with just bearing it, letting myself soak in it, if I can, and see who or what of me is still there. And I am being there, perhaps not so happy, but able to put up with it. And where does that get me?

For one, it suggests that I might be able to breathe in and live within this off-putting state of mind. Yes, I'm still there, despite feeling less than ideal or even normal. And wonder I do. Could I learn to be aware and feel more-or-less normal in such conditions? It's kind of like asking myself how much pain I can stand, but not really. It is more like pushing through fog, where I can't see far, but if I persevere, I can see.

And how is this related to the dharma maxim that, no matter what happens to us, whatever comes up in our life, take it to the path, use it directly rather than avoid it. Could this open up a whole new area of my life that previously has been off-limits or made me uncomfortable. Could I become more comfortable where I used to be uneasy?

As for my feeling out-of-sorts; how is that related to the uncomfortableness of being exposed to the brilliant white light that is said will appear for each of us in the bardo? Are they related? Certainly, if I look around my life, there are all kinds of limits or limiters that I observe. If I push those limits, what happens? Do they give? Of course, it depends.

Can I learn to be more-or-less comfortable more of the time and make previously unused areas of my life inhabitable by me? Can I exist in these strange (to me) lands and places? Is anyone else there and does that matter?

I am now making a point of doing this? Will I reach a point where I want to go deeper yet and at the end of that tunnel will I find that brilliant white light I saw after my stroke, that I was so terrified of? These are questions I have, but you get the idea.

I am making overtures, clearing away the brush from these alternate paths and considering setting up house here. It's clear that what's driving me came from the insight into my stroke experience where I was totally exposed and unable to do anything about it, but instead had to wait the days, weeks, and months for my history, my Self, and all of my ways of busying and entertaining myself to reanimate once more. And while they for the most part have returned (or something like them), it took a very long time, and I'm not sure I am totally happy about that. I am working on it.

I have opened a door that, once opened, does not exactly close again. It is hard to forget. I have not forgotten it at all, and it seemed like that experience shown a light on an enormous house-of-cards that, if anything, is an embarrassment. This is Samsara. And this because it is such a blatant hidey-hole, and I had hoped I was better than that. Apparently not.

In fact, my excursions into the dharma of my stroke experience are now like my day job, and I scurry back home to my samsaric hidey-hole each night, back to wrapping myself in the blanket of my entertainments and apparent busyness -- comforts. Much more of my time is spent hiding in the self-made tombs of Samsara than I spend forging into the daylight of dharma. I had to admit to myself that I was mostly taking refuge in Samsara, with only a part-time job exploring the dharma, much less able to fully take refuge in it. Samsara is paying my rent, so to speak. Of course, this was, aside from being a surprise, a bit of a hard pill to swallow, yet it was true, nevertheless.

And this is not to mention how difficult it has been to share my story, as I am here, with others. This is not dinner-table conversation. And at the hospital, soon after my stroke, several stroke experts gathered around to listen to what I am describing here. They had never heard anything like it before. And one of them even gave me his home phone number and began asking me questions about

his marriage and what he should do about it. Now that was a first for me with doctors, but I digress.

Of course, all of this has sent me on a safari into the history of anything similar in the literature to what I had experienced, everything from medical journals to studying boredom, and any areas of the mind that are remotely akin. If nothing else, it's been a real trip to learn about all this and compare it to my medical experience. The funniest parts are the times where I finally come across something on the Internet about this subject that makes sense to me, only to find out that I wrote it. LOL.

Sep 3, 2021, 9:47 AM

PHOTOGRAPHY: LIBERATION THROUGH SEEING

[There is some interest as to how I fell into being a photographer, never professionally, but always only for the love of it. And I have to warn readers that this is another of the thankless tasks that I endeavor, which I know beforehand are practically-speaking impossible to put into words, mixing the conceptual with the spiritual. I like to attempt it anyway; in case anyone is on the edge of this insight.]

Actually, I started out seriously taking photos when I was fourteen years old, and my father loaned me his Kodak Retina Ila, a 35mm camera made by Kodak AG, a German subsidiary of Kodak, along with a light meter, some close-up lenses, and a tripod to take on a six week trip with a bunch of kids on a couple of school

buses across America, dipping into both Mexico and coming back from the West Coast all across Canada back to Michigan. My father (an excellent photographer) was blown away by the quality of my photographs, probably one of the few times he was that pleased with me. And so, here is the story of how I mixed photography with the dharma. It is quite long.

As photographers, we look through a camera/lens at an object and I am a close-up photographer (not usually a macro photographer), so in the mix there is me the subject looking through the camera/lens at the object that I am photographing. That's the traditional order of things when photographing: I take a photo.

What is not usually seen is this whole process all at once and our resting or being one in that, subject-camera-object, which I will call here the 'Seeing' seeing itself seeing, if such a phrase makes sense. We the subject usually see the object we are photographing, and not the seeing in photography 'Seeing' itself seeing. However, when the traditional conceptualized duality of the standard subject/object scenario is short-circuited (deconstructed), we then can perhaps see or experience the seeing 'Seeing' itself, and that then is a loop, which is not only unusual, but a very special form of seeing. In that act, when it happens, we have stopped just doing photography and are mixing photography with a special form of meditation that is called Insight Meditation. We might also call it 'Liberation through Seeing'. How can that happen?

Answering that question is difficult, difficult not because it requires a long complex answer (like the above), but difficult because it can't be expressed by words alone but has to be experienced and individually realized. It is very hard to point out to someone how to see the 'Seeing' and rest in that, so to speak. I can talk about it until I am blue in the face, but your chances of realizing what I am talking about are slim to none. So, why bother? Good question.

Probably, the value of talking about it at all is because a lot of talk can eventually help to (at minimum) lay the groundwork for us to eventually be able to experience this 'Seeing', or at least recognize it should that 'Seeing' appear to us, as it did in my case. And that can be a help.

However, as far as I know (which is as far as I know) it could take (or in my case, did take) a very, very special set of circumstances for me to snap into seeing the 'Seeing' and not just continue seeing the object of my photography through the lens in the traditional manner. Yet it can happen.

Another way to express "seeing the Seeing," if you don't get carried away with it, is to become one with the subject, the object, and the process of seeing. And even that description really is easier said than done. A conceptual description, like I just gave, itself amounts to an almost total misdirection from actually experiencing, much less possibly realizing what I am talking about. Experience is beyond thinking and conceptualization, yet many of us find it next to impossible to circumvent our ingrained conceptual habits and just 'be'. Period. End of story.

Traditionally, Insight Meditation is like being lost in the process of the moment, a time without a beginning or an end, yet eventually we do pop out of it; otherwise we could have no memory of it at all, and might never return. I believe there is no way of teaching this through conceptually alone that I know of, so you might as well (right now) despair of doing that because it won't happen. And with that, we are back around to where we started. So, what DO I suggest?

This is where we, like the dharma student and the master, get slapped across the face with a slipper or something to that effect, to wake us up. And I can't forget the classic story of the very high Tibetan tulku (reincarnate lama) who, to his monastery's chagrin, had never managed to realize the nature of the mind. Everyone knew this. And then one day, in a full assembly of monastery monks

and lamas, as the young tulku came in and went to sit down on his high cushion which would start the event, he accidentally let out a very large fart that was heard by all. In Tibet, it is considered very impolite to fart in public. And the tulku was himself so shocked and embarrassed that in that moment he finally recognized the true nature of the mind. That's the story. I have always been afraid that if I did that, I could manage the fart, but probably would not recognize the nature of the mind.

And, when I review and go over how I first learned to 'See the 'Seeing', it was very much a process that had particular parameters. Chief among these parameters were at least a couple of things. For example, some three years before the event I am about to describe I was given by my dharma teacher what are called the 'pointing-out instructions,' being the instructions that point out to a student how to recognize the true nature of the mind.

And I had been given these pointing-out instructions a couple of times before and been unable to realize them, so how was this time different? It was different because this time I realized from this teaching what I had missed understanding the previous times I had received these pointing-out instructions. In other words, I got the idea, but it had yet to be fleshed out.

And, in a nutshell, what I had previously missed was my mistaking conceptual understanding (thinking about it) for the direct (and visceral) experience that was apparently required. When I did realize this, I went home from that teaching with a new view and for three years, I practiced very, very diligently. That, and I also concentrated for those three years on what I encountered when I first got into Buddhism, which are called "The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind Toward the Dharma." My point is that during those three years I went through some very vigorous dharma practice, not because I had to or was told to, but because I wanted to. And since I am a hard case, that alone was not enough. For me, it took a perfect storm of events to jar my attention away from my ingrained

conceptual habits and onto what we could call the process of recognition as to the mind's nature.

And what turned out to be a pivotal ingredient in this mix was an untoward or unfortunate life event for me. I was let go from my full-time job as a senior consultant for NBC (and their astrology website ("Astrology.com")). It was not personal, as some thousands of people were also let go, as a way of reigning in the budget, but the fact that it happened to me I took, well, very personally. And there is something else you might want to understand about that particular time.

When I was told the news that I was to be let go from NBC, it was at a large astrological convention in Denver, Colorado where I was a speaker. My NBC boss, who was also there, told me soon after I arrived at the convention of my being let go, and you can imagine what a damper that news put on my participation and any joy I was feeling. And there is more.

In fact, around the middle (or later) part of the convention I received more (and for the better) news, that the head of our dharma lineage, the Karma Kagyu, His Holiness the 17th Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje, was coming to America for the first time, and suddenly at that, within the next few days. And I was being asked could I come and work with the video crew since they know I am a photographer. I was also told that because I was such an old-time student, they wanted me to cover some events with the Karmapa that were, more or less, private. They didn't want these events photographed by anyone other than an insider.

And I did just that. I left the convention early and flew directly from Colorado to New York, where my wife met me at the airport, and we served in various ways in welcoming the Karmapa, mostly me on the video team, but that would be another story. Yet I did get to see the Karmapa again. I had last seen him in Tibet at his ancestral home, Tsurphu Monastery in 1997. Seeing the Karmapa and

being around him in close proximity greatly raised my spirits and perhaps helped to prime the pump for the photography experience, which I am about to share with you.

Anyway, soon I was back home from the monastery, but still in the Limbo of having no job. If nothing else, I had always been a good provider for my family and to suddenly be without any job whatsoever was like a slap in the face. I was immediately ejected from being a provider to having no job at all. It threw me right out of my orbit and into a space-void I don't recommend to anyone. There was no consoling me. I even stopped sitting on my meditation cushion and practicing dharma. That had never happened before, and I had been practicing dharma for decades.

Instead, I fled back into my most distant past to where, as a youth, all I did was study nature and natural history. I once again went out into the fields, meadows, streams, and so on, and spent a huge amount of time there. In fact, I was out before dawn each morning for something like six months straight, watching the sun come up. Before that, I can't even remember the last time I watched the sun rise.

And I took a camera, if only to keep me busy and for it to look like I was doing something. My family didn't know what to think of me, nor did the neighbors as I appeared around our small town, like at the back of our local cemetery where it gets wild. There I was with my camera and tripod doing what no one but me knew. And, as mentioned, this went on for all summer, every day that it did not rain, until the cold weather of deep fall forced me inside. This was a pivotal event in my life. It was not just about the loss of a job, but what I am explaining came out of this time. And I didn't see it coming.

And as to what happened to me during those summer months, I only fully pieced that together later. At the time I was totally involved in the sheer doing of it, which in effect meant I was doing nothing at all, so to speak. I didn't want to think about it. The perfect storm I mentioned earlier was leveraged by my loss of any means to make a living and provide for my family. It effectively brought me down a peg or two, like: level to the floor. It humbled me, no doubt, and laid the groundwork for my introduction to the nature of the mind and Insight Meditation.

I don't mean to be vulgar, but I didn't give a shit about much of anything at all at the time. My family could not help but notice that I was not sitting on the cushion or doing my dharma practice or even around home much. I was out in the fields, camera in hand at dawn, doing they did not know exactly what. And this had to be, because I did not know exactly what I was doing. I was just doing it. And what was I doing?

Well, to begin with, I was crawling around in the early morning fog and dew through the grass (getting soaking wet) and waiting for the sun to rise. There is that. And I was all the time photographing small worlds, tiny critters, and plants. To do that, I was peering through special camera lenses, while I waited for the incessant Michigan wind to die down long enough to photograph. And very soon, I found that I was investing in finer and finer lenses, peering through them, seeing through them, more and more.

Well, somewhere along in there, driven by my job loss, I stopped looking just at the object of my photography, the small critters, etc., and instead of seeing those objects through the lens, I began instead to see the 'Seeing' itself, the whole enchilada of life, so to speak. It just snapped into place. And once introduced, there was no end to that special kind of 'seeing' until I popped out of that moment. And it was not long before, as mentioned, I was doing this early morning sunrise experience more and more, like every day. In fact, after a short time I couldn't wait to get out there in the fields each morning and see that

‘Seeing.’ And I gradually realized that when I eventually came home each day, my mind was back to being perfectly normal, ordinary. I didn’t like that.

In other words, if I did not grab my camera and go out in the wilds each morning, my mind remained quite ordinary, full of conceptuality, not to mention all that I had on my mind. And it dawned on me that I no longer liked my ordinary everyday mind but lived for the extraordinary direct experience of seeing the ‘Seeing’ itself that I so easily was getting used to. And this explains my going out each morning with my camera and peering through exquisite lenses at little critters. Something had happened to me. But as in the Dylan song, I didn’t know what it was, did I Mr. Jones?

And I also noticed that in the process of looking through these camera lenses I was taking a lot of photos. In fact, I took hundreds of thousands of photos, which is, well, a lot. And, although my reason for doing so was the Insight Meditation that I was discovering, the quality of my photos also began to improve, although they were a byproduct of this special ‘Seeing,’ IMO. I couldn’t get enough of that.

In other words, the net effect of this whole process was that I had found what is called Insight Meditation, the type as used in the Karma Kagyu Mahamudra training. I didn’t peg it at that time because it did not happen on the cushion, so to speak, as I always had assumed it would, but rather it just happened quite naturally out in the sunrise and fields, crawling around in the wet grass. I didn’t identify it, but I loved it. I did it.

I can say that the type of photography I was doing was very precise. And it was not long before I was doing what is called ‘focus stacking’, taking dozens of even hundreds of photos of a single flower and piecing them all together to make one image in almost perfect focus. Later, some of this required working in a studio, which I did in a little room I set aside in my house.

And as previously mentioned, because of the constant Michigan wind, because Michigan had been scraped flat by glaciers eons ago, I had to hold very, very still for long periods of time. All of this added up to what I would call the 'special circumstances', part of the 'perfect storm' that jettisoned me out of my ordinary mind and introduced me to the Kagyu style of Vipassana, Insight Meditation in the Mahamudra tradition. At the moment, I didn't identify it as such, but simply was transfixed by the experience.

It's not like this was planned or even at first recognized as such by me. I was still engulfed in my reaction to my job loss, busy throwing myself at nature to the exclusion of thinking about my problems. I totally immersed myself in nature out in those fields with my camera and the rising sun. I didn't know what was happening to me, or really care. I only knew that out there in nature, watching the sun come up, my mind was crystal clear and totally involved, to the exclusion of thought. Not that there were no thoughts, but that whatever thoughts there were so unimportant, in the background, and no longer the focus of anything. I lived for that insight.

And back home each day, as mentioned, I did not want to revert to my ordinary mind once again. Insight Meditation was, for me, totally addictive. So, how did that all play out?

Well, I was deep into the experience of Insight Meditation after that summer of watching the sun rise. And I had the good fortune to have a visit from a close friend, a Tibetan lama who has done two traditional three-year retreats. And he came out in nature with me and we walked and talked, as I explained what I had been going through that summer. He was the first person I could explain it to because I did not understand it myself. And yet, he knew exactly what was happening with me and said so.

What he told me is that just as my dharma teacher of many years, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, was the lama who gave me the traditional pointing-out instructions as to recognizing the actual nature of the mind, the one person who first introduced me to the mind's nature, there were other kinds of 'lama" that I should be aware of, and he explained each of these.

Aside from the Lama that taught me, my guru, there was also what is called the 'Lama of the Scriptures," all of the extant teachings of the historical Buddha. They were also a 'lama" from which we could learn. And there was also the "Lama of the Dharmadhatu," meaning we could, in advanced cases, learn dharma directly from the Dharmadhatu, the nature of the mind itself. And last but not least, as concerns my current situation, there is what is called the "Lama of Appearances." And this was his point.

The Lama of Appearances means that appearances themselves, in particular Mother Nature herself, is a perfect teacher and reflection of the dharma. He felt that this was what I had encountered and was learning and taking instructions from. And it was here, at home in Mother Nature, that I was first able to enter Insight Meditation.

I took all this in, of course, and it made perfect sense to me, because I WAS learning directly from nature, and this was the fruition of the pointing-out instructions I had received from Rinpoche three years earlier, and which I had practiced diligently for those last three years. It was all coming home to me at once, not on the cushion as I had always assumed it would, but where I was most comfortable, out in Mother Nature, which I had known so thoroughly as a child and through my teens. I had come back to nature like perhaps some Christians come back to God, and this is where, for me, where I was most at home that this particular initiation took place.

It was the last thing that I ever expected, but it made perfect sense in retrospect. Where am I more comfortable than out in nature, even though for years Mother Nature's directness (and impermanence) was not always something I was ready for. Yet, that year, having lost my job in the way I described, not only was I ready, I was also willing and able to embrace nature whole-heartedly once again as I had done as a youth. And I did.

And relaxing as I was (historically) able to do in nature, driven by my having popped out of my life track through the loss of my job, and not caring for appearances one whit, I was ripe for something. I was ready. And I never thought about this at all, as in expecting something spiritual to take place. It just did because of the perfect storm I have described above. I was the last person to know, so to speak. It was a total surprise because at the time I was not thinking about anything. I was just immersing myself in Mother Nature and happy being one with that. I was not sitting on my meditation cushion or doing any kind of dharma practice whatsoever. In a sense, I was as far away from dharma as I was from everything else at that point. I had let it all go. I didn't care or worry. And that's when it all came to me. There is a lesson there somewhere.

And so, this account may be encouraging or discouraging, but you can be sure that your experience will be your own as mine was.

Sep 4, 2021, 4:12 AM

STORY: THE CRANES AND THE TOOTHACHE

Here is one story that is related to how I learned to mix Insight meditation with close-up photography. It is part of a book I wrote called "Experiences with Mahamudra," which is a free read here:

http://dharmagrooves.com/pdf/e-books/Experiences_Mahamudra.pdf

Only here I want to say something about the reverse process, how I learned to separate Insight meditation out from the photography I was doing and use it on its own, not an easy process. It is a story that should interest at least a few of you. It all happened the spring following that summer where I first learned to mix my mind training with the

close-up and macro photography I was doing.

The following spring, I was out photographing nature as early as January and February, a bunch in March, and constantly by April. And all winter I had been gathering my equipment and upgrading what I could afford. But something had changed internally for me and in a quite unexpected way, but it would take me some months to figure this out. At the time, I was hell bent to immerse myself ever more deeply in nature photography, and my outings were now ranging ever farther from home.

Instead of spending my early mornings at the back of the local cemetery, at the fringe where the wild vegetation meets the well-groomed lawn, as I had done the year before, I was now actively planning trips to nature spots all over Michigan. I was studying maps, marking locations, and so on. I became fascinated with Michigan bogs and the life possible in those very special environments. It turns out that bogs only really thrive at latitudes higher than 45 degrees. Big Rapids,

Michigan (where I live) is almost 44 degrees of latitude, so we have bogs in this area and just an hour or so north of here are really vast bogs.

Why bogs? I have no idea. I am an enthusiast, and there is always something that fascinates me. Perhaps it was that bogs are so very, very fragile, tiny microenvironments that hardly anyone has ever seen, much less spent time in. Isolated from nutrients, since the plant life on bogs can't get nutrients from below (the peat is anaerobic and won't let anything through from below), many bog plants have become carnivorous, depending on food from above, insects and what-not. Bog plants include the Pitcher Plant, the Sundew, and the Venus Flytrap, among others. Whatever the reason, I was fascinated by bogs and found myself traveling many hours to visit them and carefully photo-documenting what I saw there.

The point here is that I had taken my photography yet another step, not only shooting whatever was available each morning near my home, but now traveling long distances

to sample this or that special environment, this particular plant or that one. Without realizing it, my enthusiasm had caused me to overstep the boundary between mixing my Mahamudra practice with nature photography and that of becoming even more of a naturalist than I already was, and I was.

From the time I was about six years old until I was in my late teens, I had studied nature with a fierce passion, so I already knew about nature. I knew all the little woodland critters, and I knew them well, their habitat, behavior, and life and death struggles. And here I was further upping the ante as far as being a nature photographer was concerned, big time.

Yet even in my enthusiasm I could vaguely sense something was slightly off, but for the life of me I could not place the problem. It took time for this to gradually sift out and surface in my consciousness, but eventually it did become clear to me that I did not really want to become a full-scale naturalist once again. This is that story. I was (as I do so often) once again confusing the baby with the bathwater, a bad habit I have. It was like a 'Mara', an illusion that confused me. And this all came to a head during a trip up to the top of Michigan's Lower Peninsula, and this story.

I had been invited to join a very select group of naturalists who were given permission to enter a rare bog preserve at the very top of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan in order to take a survey of wildlife there. Bogs are very fragile environments and even walking on them is destructive. But this conservation society allowed special teams to enter these closed reserves once or twice a year and I was to be the team's herpetologist. I had been trained in reptiles and amphibians since I was a child, specializing in amphibians, in particular salamanders, and so knew all about them. I was geeked.

I could not wait to get to Michigan's wild Upper Peninsula and out on those endangered bogs with my camera. The trip was to last a number of days, and I was up before dawn of that first day and in my car heading north. It must have been around 4:30 AM when I hit the road, which is like me. The only hiccup was the fact that I had just had some fairly protracted oral surgery (several days of root canal work), and the tooth in question had developed a really nasty abscess beneath it. I was already on my second dose of antibiotics, this time really heavy antibiotics, the first round having not even touched the problem, but I was not about to be stopped by a wayward tooth.

Although I was in some pain and my lower jaw was swollen, I assumed that as time passed and the new antibiotics kicked in, the swelling would just naturally go

down. Anyway, hell or high water would not have kept me off those bogs, so on I went.

My first stop was at a small bog at the top of the Lower Peninsula, just before you get to the great Mackinac Bridge over to the Upper Peninsula. I was out on the bog in the full morning sun by 8 A.M., already hours from my home. It was a magnificent crisp morning. Yet I was still having trouble with that dumb tooth, a certain amount of throbbing punctuated by needle-like shots of pain in my jaw. I did my best to ignore it and again told myself that it would die down.

There I was in my hip boots, far out on the surface of the bog, surrounded by moss and small bushes, and carefully stepping my way along in the deep ooze. Each step made a suction sound as I lifted a leg and then placed it back in the thick matrix of the bog. Moving was very slow. I was maybe halfway around the periphery of the small lake-bog when I first saw them, a pair of large Sandhill Cranes picking their way through the bog on the opposite side. I was thrilled to see them, of course; these birds are incredible.

As I threaded my way along, I must have somehow began to encroach on the area where they perhaps had their nest, for they became increasingly animated. Now these are large birds. They can stand five feet high and have wingspans of six to seven feet across. And their piercing red eyes were on me, and they were not just casually looks. Then slowly I realized these birds were moving in circles around me.

Many of the bushes on the bog were several feet high, so I could not always see the cranes, but I could hear their frightening calls. I didn't say 'frightened' calls; I said frightening calls, which they were – eerie. And then the cranes began running through the bushes, circling me closer, working together, and they moved fast. Much of the time all I could see through gaps in the bushes was a

sideways profile of one of their heads as they circled me. I could see one bird as it ran through the bushes on my right, and then suddenly on my left, there was another bird circling in the opposite direction. I was constantly off balance, and I had to watch my every step lest I step into muck so deep that I would begin to sink down in it. I was carrying over \$12,000 worth of camera equipment, not to mention my life. Bogs, like quicksand, can be treacherous places.

One of the birds would rise in the air and cut directly across my path (only a few feet in front of me) only to disappear into the bushes and take up running around me again.

And the cries were now getting really scary. At some point I began to feel like I was being stalked, and visions of the movie Jurassic Park and velociraptors came to mind. These were very large birds and they didn't like ME. It is easy for me to see how birds were once reptile-like creatures.

Well, that is as far as it went. I finally managed to plot a course through the bog that apparently took me on a route away from their nesting area, while all the time I was moving one gooey step at a time very slowly through the muck, carrying a large tripod, camera, and accessory bag. I finally got out of there, found my way back to the car, and drove to the nearest town.

By this time, it was beginning to be clear that my tooth was not going to just calm down, but instead was only getting worse. I had super strength Ibuprofen and even some Vicodin that the dentist had given me, so I had to dip into those a bit. And this was just the first morning of the first day of a five day journey. I had to decide what I would do.

I went to visit some friends who lived in a nearby city to where I was. I was now safe in a nice home in a town only a few hours from my home. But I had the

strange experience of feeling that I was somehow embedded in a scene at which I was no longer fully present. Part of me was elsewhere. It was like a dream or a movie set in which I was only an actor. In other words, I was beside myself. It must be the medicine.

At the same time, I was kind of leaning out of it, like you might lean out the back door to get a breath of fresh air. Something had stirred or moved inside of me that day and I was damned if I could figure out what it was. Somewhere back in there I had lost my incentive or my direction.

Perhaps these combined events with the birds, my tooth, etc., schooling (like fish), now appeared as signs that pointed that something within me had changed (or was changing) at the core.

Yet by tomorrow I was supposed to be across the Mackinac Bridge and way at the tip of the top of the Upper Peninsula, hours from where I was now, and out on those remote bogs, miles from any town (much less a hospital), and the temperatures up there were predicted to be very cold, even for a spring day. After all, way up there it was still hardly spring. HmMMM. What's the message here?

In the end, the throbbing of my tooth and those little sharp spasms of shooting pain told me that marching through a bog for a few days, miles from anywhere, might not be the time to try and push this 67-year old physical envelope. As it turned out, that was the right decision because the second round of antibiotics with its very large dose also failed to do the trick. My abscess overcame all attempts to control it and spread much farther into the bone of my lower jaw. In the end, the tooth had to be extracted and the jaw treated. And I only tell this longish story because this became a real turning point for me. I will try to explain.

Like so many times in my past, I had once again managed to confuse the inside with the outside, the important with the unessential. What had been going on over the last year was that I was now using the outside (nature photography) to look at the inside (my mind) AND I had fallen into the mistake of confusing the two, which was easy to do.

Since it was through photographing nature up-close very exactly that I was realizing something about the nature of the mind, through 'Insight Meditation', I began to elevate photographing nature as the goal or object of my passion, when it was only the means through which I was experiencing a glimpse at my mind's nature, which is my real passion. I hope that makes sense.

Yet here I was, trying to upscale my nature trips when all they were to me in the end were the lens or means through which I was viewing the mind itself. It was the seeing nature of the mind that was illuminating. And here I was, buying more equipment, planning longer and more extensive trips, and ordering every kind of field guide I did not already have, and I have many shelves full. Well, this all changed, and that early morning faceoff with the Sandhill Cranes was perhaps the turning or pivot point. That experience was thrilling and not really that scary, so I was not scared off by what happened there. But something else did snap around that time and I woke up from that particular dream. It seems that in this life, I wake up from dream within dream from within dream.

After that I began to realize I was unnecessarily further complicating my life with all these lenses and nature trips, when what I wanted (and needed to do) was simplify it. I was extruding the naturalist in me at the expense of the simple clarity of resting my mind when out in nature, and it was the clarity of the mind that I was in love with, albeit, as seen through the lens of nature. It is the old baby and the bathwater thing. I had once again confused the two, but I am getting a little ahead of myself. Let me summarize.

Quite early on in the spring of that year I began to notice that the very special lucidity that came when I patiently peered through the camera lens, waiting for the wind to die down (or whatever), was now present without any camera at all. What before was made possible only by my intense concentration and a really tack-sharp lens had now overflowed and begun to mix into the rest of my life. Then one day I realized that I did not even have to bring a camera along with me out into nature at all. What a thought!

This clarity that I had very carefully nourished the entire preceding year through my photography had become the rule rather than the exception. It was not about cameras; it was not about lenses, but about clarity of mind. That was it, and I began to realize this. I finally understood what was troubling me way back in there and I am so glad I did. I could as easily have been lost in an endless Odyssey of cameras and nature.

And now I found that just walking along a road, looking at the vegetation or whatever, produced the same result as hours of painstakingly peering through a camera lens. My mind was already somewhat lucid and I could more and more just rest in the beauty of the nature around me just as it is, and it would just present and reveal itself to me without the need of a camera. It became clear that I really didn't need a camera at all anymore, and this at first really puzzled me. Whoa, I thought. Now I have these great cameras and all these fine lenses, and whatever technique I had managed to acquire... and I don't need them?

That's right. That's just what happened. It took time, but I increasingly became aware that what I had loved all this time through the photography is what was happening within my own mind. All that gear was just a scaffold to build a stable Insight-meditation practice and, once built, the camera equipment (as wonderful as it is) was just an empty cocoon as far as I was concerned, for I was now already gone beyond. I guess the moral of the story, for me anyway, is that it is easy to mistake the joy of meditation clarity with any of the objects through which

that joyful clarity first appears, again, the baby and the bathwater. It is a question of priorities.

Anyone else notice this?

[Here are some photos I took by hand (not tripod) of the Sandhill Cranes stalking me out on that bog.]

Sep 4, 2021, 8:56 PM

LOVE AND COMPASSION

As a naturalist since I was a child, I know firsthand that Mother Nature is a harsh mistress. I could ask you where in all of nature is there compassion and love? You might have to think for a moment, but the obvious answer is there is love and compassion between a mother and her children, almost all the way through nature. How far does that love extend?

Well, we could agree that in humans it extends to the family, to the father, mother, the kids, and to the grandparents. And how about to friends? And then there is our tribe, race, creed, countrymen? Where does it end? Is it too abstract to say to all humankind?

And of course, naturalists like me, love animals almost more than people sometimes. How about our dharma brothers and sisters? Is there dharma without love and compassion? Is there perhaps a “technical” dharma, a secular dharma with no love and compassion? I don’t think so. I have not seen it.

And what about the relation between a Root Guru and his student? What’s that relationship all about? Anyway, what is a Root Guru? In our lineage, the Karma Kagyu, our Root Guru is the one person in our life who first points out to us the true nature of our mind so that we recognize it. It can only happen once for the first time, so that person is singular in our life. No one else has ever done that with and for us.

I have had a number of dharma teachers, but only one Root Guru, and this was the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche. I was with him for 36 years until his passing about a year and a half ago. Rinpoche introduced me to the true nature of the mind and is therefore my Root Guru.

I don’t have words to describe how I feel about Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche. How I met Rinpoche was fated. How fortunate to have come across someone like Khenpo Rinpoche in the sea of life in which I found myself, although it was anything but an accident. In fact, believe it or not, Rinpoche first came to us in a dream. Here is the story:

It was in the fall of 1983 when I received a phone call from my old friend James Coats of Ann Arbor. He just called to say that I might want to come to Ann Arbor and see this Tibetan rinpoche (we used to go “guru” hopping together). However, at the time I was a businessman, and busy at that. I thanked him, of course, for the invitation, but pointed out that this was a work day and that I no longer was meeting every new teacher that came to Ann Arbor. I wished him well and went about my work.

It was a couple of days later that I had the dream, very early in the morning, just before dawn. I dreamed I was driving to Ann Arbor to meet this radiant golden being, some kind of monk or lama... but resplendent, and then I woke up. I sat bolt upright in bed and tried to reach in my mind to recapture the dream, but too late. And as the dream vaporized, I suddenly felt a great sadness come over me, sadness that my life had become so work-oriented that magical moments or events of wonder no longer really interrupted my routine. All I could see was my life stretching on to a dead end.

The dream was better than life, and I regretted that this was the case. I woke up my wife Margaret, who, amazingly enough, had a similar dream. We looked at one another and I decided that there was no way I was going to work today. Instead, we would drive to Ann Arbor and meet this “golden” being from our dreams that my friend told me was visiting Ann Arbor. By this time, it must have been around 7 AM. I dialed my friend James in Ann Arbor, although I knew he was a late sleeper usually. I said we were coming to meet the Rinpoche. His answer was that we were too late. Rinpoche was leaving Ann Arbor for Columbus, Ohio at around 10 AM, and it is a three-hour drive to Ann Arbor.

My answer to that was that we are coming anyway. I just could not rejoin my normal life after the dream. The rinpoche would either still be there or have gone. Margaret and I grabbed our kids and, literally, with toothbrushes in hand we

jumped into the car and headed out. We brushed our teeth as we drove, and we drove as fast as we dared.

When we finally got to Ann Arbor, James was down at the end of the long driveway, waiting to flag us in.

By luck, it turned out that the Rinpoche was still there. As we drove up the long driveway I spotted a young Tibetan man with long hair out in the yard. My heart fell, because this was not the golden man in my dreams! I soon found out that this was Rinpoche's translator, Ngodup Burkhar, who became a dear friend of our family. So, there we were, Margaret, I, and the kids waiting for Rinpoche in the living room. And then he walked in.

And here was, indeed, the radiant being from my dreams, and in living person. We connected at once and, although the visit was brief, when Rinpoche left on his road trip, Margaret and I were already transported into a transcendent state. And we went around in that state for days afterward, being kinder to others than perhaps we had ever been. Of course, we took this as a good sign.

And from that day onward, we were students of Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche. Later, he became my Root Guru, and all that. My kids grew up around and within his influence, his mandala. Of course, to me, he has been the perfect teacher. So, it becomes even more amazing when the Karmapa himself, singles our Rinpoche out as an "incomparable master... a powerful example of being learned, venerable, and good." Indeed, that is just what he is!

We are so grateful for his presence in our lives. Rinpoche was everything supportive to both Margaret and me, teaching us from the beginning dharma

practices all the way through the purification practices and beyond. We became his devoted students.

I am a critic by trade (music, film, rock concert-posters, etc.), so I am very critical. Khenpo Rinpoche was impeccable every moment I ever spent with him over those 36 years, and that included 31 years of 10-day teaching intensives on Mahamudra, never showing anything but stability, love, and compassion to all. And he showed both love and compassion to us in real time.

[photo of Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche taken by me.]

Sep 6, 2021, 9:10 PM

AS TO DEVOTION ...

As usual with language, there seem to be many different ideas of devotion. It's not that I am devoted because Rinpoche ever became a buddy or pal, or that he treated me much different than he treated everyone who knew him. So, where did the devotion come from and what, exactly, is devotion? I would like to discuss that.

For me, I guess it is more like Rinpoche became a fiducial in my life, an unwavering and stable reference point. While everything else I knew seemed to always be in flux, Rinpoche was rock solid. He treated me the same as he treated those rude college boys who asked him improper questions at a talk at our local university. For example, asking Rinpoche (a monk) about his sex life, that kind of rudeness, only to have him say something like “Me, a fat old man?” Rinpoche gave these guys as much airtime as he gave me or anyone else, which was amazing to me. I would have put them out the door in a New York minute, as they say.

And to my mind, there is nothing ‘mushy’ about devotion or being devoted, nothing unclear or wavering. Rinpoche wasn’t cute or dear to me, not something or someone that needed my protection. As mentioned above, what Rinpoche was is an unwavering and stable reference point in my otherwise changing and morphing world, the world as I knew it.

And Rinpoche held that position for 36 years, until he passed on, and even now, remains as an unmoving presence in my mind. There was not a blemish or single untoward appearance in his behavior in all the time I knew Rinpoche, while my own experience was often whipped around like a flag in the wind. And I spent serious time with Rinpoche, sometimes driving him from here to there, like from northern Michigan (where we live) to Columbus, Ohio, and things like that. Rinpoche was right there, sitting next to me in the passenger seat every second and minute; there was no down-time, or getting more familiar. What became familiar was Rinpoche in his authentic presence.

As mentioned, if this is about devotion, what is that? I looked it up in the dictionary and read things like “Devotion is great loyalty, affection, or admiration for someone or something.” That’s pretty much correct. Rinpoche stood out in my life as a guide or example that I could measure against, set my own course by, and this because he, to my knowledge, never wavered or changed direction.

Rinpoche was always just right there, stable, while the rest of my life was sometimes more like an earthquake slowly happening.

If the dharma is stable and true, Rinpoche was like that too, something unmoving, like the North Star, the one unmoving star around which all else turns and moves. I don't see anything emotional or 'soft' about that definition of devotion.

[Photo of Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche by me.]

Sep 7, 2021, 5:10 PM

“COMPARED TO WHAT?”

The title above is a pivotal jazz tune with Less McCann on the piano & vocals, and the incredible Eddie Harris on sax. This is a tune I believe everyone should hear at least once, so here it is. If you want to hear the good stuff, you do have to listen a bit, since it is longish. This tune is unique.

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

And I include it because of some dharma conversations I have had recently that reminded me of it, and that is why I am writing this.

I am definitely getting older, as I recently found out when I had a talk with someone from another dharma sangha than my own. I have spent some 40 years more or less myopic, busy with my particular sangha of dharma practitioners, as taught by the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche.

As it so happened, we ended up talking about different dharma sanghas. Without even thinking about it, we were comparing sanghas, something like that, and this is something that apparently I have never done. It never occurred to me.

The takeaway from that conversation is that perhaps the kind of dharma training I've had, having never compared it to (or thought to) other sanghas, apparently is quite traditional. I get that and I kind of knew that my teacher, Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche's (KKR) students were perhaps thought of as 'country cousins' compared to the more modern sangha of Trungpa Rinpoche's students, yet it never bothered me, and anyway, who is comparing? Apparently, I thrive on a more conservative and traditional approach to dharma, because I already knew how to take liberties and needed stabilizing. My thirst was for authenticity and stability in a dharma teacher.

I had met some of Trungpa's students in 1974, but what they were into (no offense intended) never interested me. I had been a performing musician for years, playing in bars, etc., so alcohol was something that I had been there and done that. And you had to die to get me into a suit, so Trungpa student's parties, which back then were legendary for their dress up and drinking, were not where I wanted to be. Yet I have the utmost respect for Trungpa Rinpoche himself. I think of him as a siddha.

Even so, all these years I have kind of assumed that other sanghas around the world were more or less like my own, yet it sounds like, after this recent conversation, that they perhaps are not so much alike as I imagined and that is particularly true today. I had no idea. Never thought about it.

And, if I get it right, our sangha actually IS perhaps more traditional by comparison, more conservative, and even more secular as compared to some of the more modern non-secular versions. Whatever exactly they are, I'm trying to find out. Is that true, and if so, what fuels those sangha's practice if it does not include devotion? I may have been kind of cloistered in the past, staying close to Rinpoche and our sangha, rather than reaching out for a comparison.

And I didn't know there were any 'non-secular' flavors of dharma in the Kagyu Lineage or what that even means. If I heard right from these recent discussions, it's almost as if modern Western dharma has banded together to gently exclude or cull out some of the 'devotional' elements in dharma. What's wrong with devotion? Why is this?

Is this perhaps out of embarrassment or is it just some modern trend? I always knew that our sangha was seen as perhaps a bit of a 'weak sister' compared to the Trungpa (and others) tribe. We may not be so modern, but I never imagined that they were not every bit as devotional as we were. Certainly, Trungpa's sangha was devoted to Trungpa Rinpoche. How could you not be to such a brilliant leader?

However, when I read the pith dharma texts or consider KKR's teachings, I can see that much of it is keyed to the devotional (having confidence in your guru, etc.) that, without that kind of intense devotion, for me there appears to be little to

no compass, much less direction. I was told that today's approach is more oriented toward reason rather than to devotion. OK, yet how does that work?

Perhaps it is like that we (our sangha) were not as prone to the analytical, not so interested in concepts, yet that does not mean that we only depend on 'devotion' to get us through, although there is some truth to that. Yet I never felt that I was not analytical enough, yet perhaps KKR's students ARE more in the Kusulu meditation way rather than in the conceptual way of the analytical Pandita. And whose syllogism or construct is that? In other words, who says so?

I don't feel that 'devotion' need only be an alternative or viewed as an opposite path to the intellectual and conceptual, at least for our sangha. There are plenty of sharp thinkers in our group. I don't have many friends in the Trungpa sangha, other than perhaps the translator Larry Mermelstein; I met Larry when I first met Trungpa back in 1974 and consider him a friend.

So, I was surprised to learn, for example, that the term 'Tsawi Lama' (Root Guru) was not much used in these times or that as one practitioner explained, had not even thought about that term in years. And, if I heard right, the whole idea of the lama who points out the nature of the mind to his or her students is perhaps not as 'key' or important now as it was (and is) with me. And further, perhaps the term 'Root Guru', instead of being limited to one lama as the pith texts say, can now be shared by a number of teachers, rather than just one, as I have always understood. And finally, that the dharma event called 'Recognition' of the true nature of the mind, the result of the pointing-out instructions, today seems a lot fuzzier (and more gradual) to some practitioners, rather than clearly demarked as a clear dharma articulation-point, a key event. If this is true, it is all news to me. Or is it just that 'Recognition' is not striking to the heart these days as it may have in the past? Is it somehow old hat or is 'Recognition' just not happening much these days?

Anyway, I would like to learn more about this trend, if it exists, and of course, also hear what others have to say, since we are all students of the dharma. Let's look into and discuss this, because, based on some of what I hear, it seems today's dharma is less clear (fuzzier), at least to me, than my own experience shows.

The idea that 'Recognition' (being introduced to the nature of the mind) need not be a singular event, a dharma turning point, introduced to us by an authentic teacher through the 'pointing-out instructions'. And that today, perhaps 'Recognition' can be spread over several lamas, and still add up to the same thing; this is foreign to me. It's true that we may have several very key lamas we learn from, but my understanding is that the introduction to the true nature of the mind can only happen once and from the lama who points it out to us (and we get it), which is why they are called a Tsawi Lama or 'Root Guru'. If all this is changing, I need to understand how and why, if I can. Explain it to me, please.

And to repeat, it never occurred to me that our sangha's version of dharma training (or at least my view) is any different than other sanghas. I assumed that while there are different roads to Rome, we all arrive at the same Rome. And the idea, explained to me by a dharma friend recently, that Buddhism today may be based more on reason than faith and devotion as in the old days. Where did that come from? I need to hear more on that concept if it is true. Perhaps I am just getting old, yet I'm fascinated with all of this and look forward to having a good exchange on this topic here or soon.

Perhaps the more traditional or old-fashion flavor of our sangha comes from our teacher Khenpo Rinpoche not being willing to abandon the Tibetan tradition in a hurry, but instead, he seemed to suggest that there may be truth embedded in the Tibetan language itself and its various methods. And this is why he suggests that practicing in Tibetan (which we have done for decades) is appropriate, and that it not be retired in a hurry, but only very gradually, as we Americans

ourselves become realized and write our own sadhanas, and it seems a little early for that, IMO.

Here is a little poem I wrote back in the 1960s that kind of sums up what I understand 'faith' to be. It is a little compact, for which I apologize, easier to remember:

THE FORCE OF FAITH

The form of force enforcing form,
Finds freedom from that form in fact.

And in 'fact' forced is freed,

A form of force with faith in form that finds in fact:

Faith itself a force.

Thus, force finds itself in form on faith.

And force enforcing faith in form,

And form informing faith of force,

Faith is that force in form

Faith is our form of force.

[Photo of Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche by me. This is a photo I took of Khenpo Rinpoche, when we were both waiting in the vestibule of the Tara Shrine Room

at KTD Monastery for His Holiness, the 17th Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje, to arrive. I was there to hold the door for Rinpoche to go out and greet His Holiness, and for them both to come back in from outside. Many folks were just outside in a line waiting to greet the Karmapa.]

Sep 8, 2021, 4:55 PM

A CHAIN OF FRIENDS

I have practiced Buddhism in one way or another since the late 1950s, and Vajrayana Buddhism since 1974 when I met Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche and the 16th Karmapa, Rangjung Rigpe Dorje in person. As for what dharma practices I do, I can only say what kind of dharma up to now I have found that works for me. And as to where I began in all of this.

Of course, I agree with the fundamental statements I heard when I first paid attention to the dharma back in the late 1950s, statements like “All sentient beings want to be happy and no beings want to suffer.” Many decades ago, it seems that every introduction or talk on dharma I heard or read began with that statement.

Starting from there and that introduction, there are many roads that opened up. For me, as I often have mentioned, I was next attracted to (and my attention on dharma confirmed by) what are called the ‘Common Preliminaries’, more often called ‘The Four Reminders’ or ‘The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind Toward the Dharma,’ simply “The Four Thoughts.”

Those four thoughts were pivotal for me, and I identified with them because on my own I had come up with something roughly equivalent. For me, this made the dharma not overtly religious like my Catholic Upbringing, where the words of God were literally said to be written in stone, as in the Ten Commandments, but rather the dharma seemed to fit into my own upbringing as a naturalist, someone who learned from Mother Nature. That idea.

And from that point forward, what I learned (other than from nature) was from books or lectures from visiting spiritual teachers, Buddhists if I could find them. Yet, for me, there was not just one clear path, but there seemed rather a myriad of paths stretching from where I stood in my life, out in all directions, and I had no one teacher.

Yes, meeting Chögyam Trungpa in person in 1974 and spending time with him as his chauffer was striking. It imprinted me. Trungpa personified the essence of dharma as a path, something to do and not to just talk about, and no doubt he magnetized me unlike anyone I had met around that time.

I did have a powerful dharma teacher some years before, a retired Rosicrucian initiator, who also understood the dharma. He too magnetized me, got my attention, and helped to narrow my choice from talk to an actual path I could take or travel. Yet, with his passing, I was soon on my own again, although greatly confirmed by his influence.

However, it was almost ten years after meeting Trungpa Rinpoche before I met Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, a Tibetan Rinpoche who was to become the major influence in my dharma life. Those ten years were a struggle for me to determine and find a consistent dharma path. I was all over the place.

However, once meeting Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, all that changed. Here was someone I identified with, someone who unconditionally accepted me just as I am, and who helped me define a clear path of dharma practice. And as I write this, the following thought occurs to me.

I was brought up by loving parents, but my father was unable to talk, to get personal and talk with me at any depth. It never happened in my whole life. And I had no grandfather on either side, so a male figure of influence that I could look up to was just absent in my life. I kind of had to be my own grandpa, so to speak. I did have two grandmothers and an incredible mom, but no older father figure to take me under their wing or advise me. This affected me because I believe that such an influence is important for a young child. I had none.

And I feel that this fact made finding an older male influence or guide all the more important, and so I sought out such an influence in spiritual guidance. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche filled that requirement perfectly. His unconditional acceptance of me, just as I am, warts and all, staunched the sense of emptiness within me for a father figure. That emptiness healed and I could move forward and did.

And so, it was natural that I bonded with Khenpo Rinpoche in the traditional way that Vajrayana Buddhism describes, which is called 'samaya'; a bond formed. I trusted Rinpoche to guide me and was certain that he had my best interests in mind when I reached out for direction. He became my guide or guru and at a deep level. Rinpoche stopped my psychological bleeding. It was a natural fit.

And from that first moment of meeting Khenpo Rinpoche, both Margaret and I knew that we had found what we needed and were looking for in a dharma

teacher. And for the next 36 years we worked with Rinpoche until his passing in 2019.

[The enclosed photo, taken by Margaret and me in 2008, the first time that H.H. the 17th Karmapa (Ogyen Trinley Dorje) came to the United States and visited Karma Triyana Dharmachakra (KTD), his main seat in North America. Here is the Karmapa in the tiny shrine room of Karmé Ling, our three-year retreat center, meeting with Khenpo Rinpoche, eyeball to eyeball.]

Sep 9, 2021, 7:42 AM

THE RULE OF CHANGE

I love the lyrics of my singer/songwriter daughter May Erlewine in the chorus for her tune “Heart Song,” which goes like this:

“And everything goes round and round

And up and down

And side to side.

My heart

Is a rodeo clown

Distracting the pain so that I

can just ride,

Ride on by,
So that I...
Can just ride..."

"Heart Song" by May Erlewine

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0k_aosfFKYk&list=PL34DmmyO6js602Z6zKGTLMWnnKa6YYjUX&index=77

I'm not going to parse those lyrics or try to make them fit into any dharma concept. They do, but why bother to explain. Just listen to the song. That's what I do.

These days are, for me, turbulent times, times that trim me down to size and overturn my applecart. For what it's worth, I tend to see the cause in this burgeoning solar cycle we are entering, and the increase of inner change brought on by solar flares and CMEs (Coronal Mass Ejection). Yet, no matter the reason, the fact is, at least for me, my life has been awash recently in the tides of change. And, of course, I'm swept along with it.

In this case, as usual, sooner or later I trip up, and fall head over heels into this massive change, get dunked, and come up somehow a different person. I try to be a good sport, but even after all these years, it's still disorienting. It takes me a moment to get my balance.

This particular inundation, I had some of my rough corners clipped and rounded off, which is not nothing. And, at first, it's like I was plunged intact into a tornado

and left to my own devices as to how I recovered. I have. Yet, it's like I was suddenly dunked at the county fair by a direct hit. As to what this was all about, it's hard to say in words, but I will try.

I could start by saying that where I was feeling like a big frog in a small pond, I now feel like a little frog in a big pond. Does that not tell you something and give you the gist? I was whittled down to size and that for me can be a painful process, yet one that feels clean afterward. I feel much better and where I was feeling cramped and about out of wiggle room, now I have plenty of room, the whole world. How refreshing, yet painful. What more can I say?

Well, I could say this, and only hope you understand and don't take it wrong. Where before I had fallen into thinking that there was someone out there I needed to talk with, even to push against; that is now gone. As the Greek philosopher Parmenides said, "Being Alone Is." And there is a big difference between being alone and being lonely.

When I find myself feeling lonely, that's a warning sign that I'm already in trouble and have probably drunk some of the Cool Aid once again. And another of the warning signs is finding someone or something other than myself to 'blame'. If there is someone to blame or to have arguments with, that tells me I am already past reaching the point of no return again and had better turn around and return. There is much that each of us can do and must go through.

Sep 10, 2021, 2:45 AM

DUMBING DOWN THE DHARMA

As to where am I in my dharma thinking, that's a good, yet sensitive, question. It's increasingly clear to me that my particular training and take on the dharma is pretty narrow, meaning that it perhaps is not mainstream enough to reach many people. That in itself does not make it wrong, just more traditional, conservative, and perhaps not as useful to others in today's dharma world as I had hoped or might expect.

I'm a practitioner of Vajrayana Buddhism and that, in particular, requires working very closely with an authentic dharma-master rather than just generally learning the dharma through books, teachings, and the like. It seems that Americans, as a group, don't much like the idea of a 'guru,' in particular some kind of foreign guru, especially if that guru appears to influence us too much. I understand and originally had those doubts myself many decades ago. However, that's just not how it is.

There is a point however when, layer upon layer, there are just too many strange or foreign terms or ideas piled one upon the other for the average public to absorb without balking. My point is that the more esoteric we become, we are narrowing our audience. And Vajrayana Buddhism is quite esoteric to the American public, IMO, the idea of a guru. Yet, that's the dharma that I practice.

And while there ARE some Vajrayana students out there reading my FB blogs, I begin to realize that there are also all kinds of varieties of these students too, each doing various practices, often quite different from what I may know. And I recently realized that my own training is very conservative, traditional, and perhaps not at all what today's students are doing or willing to do. And, of course, my teacher was very traditional and conservative, with all that entails. Rinpoche

saw to it that we learned the traditional or 'old-fashioned' way. And of course, things change.

And so, while I could write here (and have) for those trying to navigate the Varayana teachings, that seems to be exactly the opposite of what's needed. The more advanced students don't need to hear from me, so perhaps I should write more for those now just getting interested in the dharma. Let's see how that works.

If modern dharma is somehow diluting the teachings so that they can do them, do I feel something is being lost? It's difficult not to. If the modern view of dharma here in America is that everything should be dumbed down, made more homogeneous, without so many hard and fast rules, and more water thrown on the Fire & Brimstone in the teachings compared to the Tibetan take on dharma, so be it. Not much I can do about it, except represent my own training, which was quite clear when it came to some of the harder truths. IMO, Rinpoche was kind enough not to pull punches, but give us strength.

If everything seems too difficult for this modern-day sangha, my only germane question becomes: why not toughen up Americans rather than water down the tradition? Obviously, we could have some discussion on this.

The dharma without devotion is, IMO, pretty much an oxymoron, like a family without love, or words without sense.

Sep 12, 2021, 2:18 AM

ROUNDING UP OR ROUNDING DOWN

I'm in favor of rigor, and I don't mean rigor mortis. I'm talking about toughening us up with our dharma practice so that we are strong enough to handle what life brings. I understand softening the harder edges of dharma training, yet I question the value of doing that. And I reject the thought that the fire & brimstone of traditional Tibetan dharma practice needs to be gentled out to meet the demands of 21st Century life. IMO, it's just the opposite. We need to strengthen our dharma 'immune' system for daily life these days, not take away all the sharp corners, so to speak.

I can see it both ways, but from my own experience, this is a one-way street, and that one way is building up our immunity to handle change, rather than softening our approach to practice to make it easier on us. I well understand that the current drift is to homogenize, to round off the corners of life in this, our so-called 'more enlightened age', yet to me such sentiment is misplaced.

In the Buddhist texts, this is not said to be an age where the dharma is growing stronger, but just the opposite. At least many of the pith writings say dharma is in decline and we need to learn to lean into the wind, so to speak, not back off from the hard stuff. I understand that we can see it both ways, and I encourage considering each of the ways, yet my feeling is that we need to become stronger, to build and keep up our strength.

I only say this because, in my own life, it took an untoward outside event to get my attention and not the other way round. Life had to put my nose to the grindstone for me to wake up a bit, because apparently, I was not about to rise to

the occasion of doing so myself. In retrospect, I have examined this point very carefully.

What I see happening today in the dharma community is like a mutual-admiration society, where most seem to agree to disagree with the rigor of traditional Tibetan dharma techniques and, IMO, water down what they find too difficult to do, whether this decision is actually good for them or not. I do know that my personal dharma teacher went to great lengths to see that we learned and practiced dharma traditionally, as they have done in Tibet for centuries and that we not give in to abandoning tradition in favor of 'progress', if that progress weakens or softens our dharma practice. I trust Rinpoche's approach as I received it, as difficult as it can prove to be at times.

However, I was not always of this opinion; originally, I too also tried to lessen the load and severity of my dharma approach, until I realized that going too easy on my practice made me a pushover for what seems to work against the grain of a strong dharma. It's a tough call for modern minds to tighten up on our dharma practice, rather than to follow the modern idea of increased freedom to do what we want, which for too many practitioners today means letting go of what we find too difficult or arduous, even though we don't actually know what we need or will need down the road.

This was why, perhaps, that my dharma teacher, after I announced to him that I had finished the quite arduous practice called the Extraordinary Preliminaries, The Ngondro, told me to do it all over again, which was not what I expected him to say and not what I felt like doing. More important than my 'feelings' (what I 'wanted' to do), was my faith and belief in what Rinpoche thought was best for me. So, of course, I did Ngondro all over again, which otherwise would have been a tough sell since I just had finished it.

That was the price for Rinpoche's guidance. How would I know that what I needed was to do Ngondro again, because what I wanted to do was move on from Ngondro, and start the various deity practices, because they were to my mind more advanced and that's where I imagined I wanted to be, of course, in the 'advanced' class. The truth is that I did not know what was best for me. The value of working closely with an authentic dharma teacher who cares more about our welfare than we know to care for ourselves cannot be stressed enough, IMO.

Sep 12, 2021, 11:26 PM

THAT NO LESS THAN THE SAME IS CERTAIN

How do we modernize the dharma? I don't think we do. The dharma is the dharma is the dharma ... Yes, IMO, we may have to extract dharma from its Tibetan envelope, yet that's not too hard. As for deciding which parts of the traditional dharma-training we want to do and which we don't, it is way too soon to think we can figure that out. Yet, I see that being done or have heard about it, and that rings false to me. A "convenient dharma" for this age is, to me, mostly an oxymoron. With all that the world is facing these days, the idea of making dharma easier on ourselves makes no sense, especially if we have our finger on the scale because we don't want to navigate the hard stuff.

I am not speaking about dharma in general, which is learned from books and teachings, but rather to Vajrayana Buddhism in particular, which is based on working hand-in-hand with an authentic teacher. Perhaps this began, and this is what I have been told, back in the 1970s when Chögyam Trunpga Rinpoche decided not to teach Westerners what are called the 'Extraordinary Preliminaries'

(Ngondro), because the practices were too austere and difficult for Americans, who basically refused to do them. Instead Trungpa first taught basic Tranquility Meditation (Shamata), which again I am told in Tibet is traditionally taught AFTER Ngondro.

And so, right off the bat, Americans were denied (and unable) to practice what every Tibetan monk practices. Gradually, Trungpa's sangha, some of them, did the Ngondro. As for my sangha, with all its practice in Tibetan, and following the Tibetan program, most all of our sangha does Ngondro, and there are some who did it too quickly (like me) were asked to do it again, from a "Once more, with feeling" point of view.

And so, if today's practitioners have gradually nickel and dimed the more austere practices to better suit their temperament, I'm not sure how that will work out. Does a watered-down practice produce watered down results? This, we shall see in time. As for myself, just as my dharma teacher had us do our practice in Tibetan to be sure nothing was lost, I favor doing the various preliminaries thoroughly and by the book, to be on the safe side.

The bottom line for all of us (as I understand it) is that when it comes to lineage, passing the dharma practices down intact (that enable and ensure realization), we each have to make sure that: no less than the same is certain.

“THE PALE CAST OF THOUGHT”

Thank you, William Shakespeare, for always finding just the right words. No other author of the English language comes close to your mastery.

“And thus, the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought.”

Just so. Never better said, IMO. Shakespeare comes as close to singing dharma than any non-dharma writer I know. And what about that pale cast of thought?

The dharma writers are all over it, calling it conceptuality, intellection, or just ‘thought’. It’s the nature of language to be dualistic and conceptual, and it’s hard to get beyond it. It’s sticky like glue.

So often we are stuck not only in conceptuality, but in reifying that conceptuality, and basting it recursively at that; it’s like a sealed loop. And the sad part, IMO, is that as often as not we don’t even want out because with intellection, we have locked on to something that to us feels real enough compared to where we came from, that we don’t want to abandon it and wake up. What ultimately is lacking in concepts is lucid-clarity and certainty.

And, if we don’t want to be disturbed in our closed conceptual loop, well, there you have it, we won’t be. Who is going to invade our privacy and root us out? No one. Perhaps fate will shock us out or puncture language’s caul-like veil, freeing us to change. It’s hard to say, because IMO getting out of conceptuality is very difficult.

Are we a diamond or a pearl? A diamond is created under enormous pressure, and is clear and, well, diamond-like, while a pearl is a bit of foreign matter that irritates and is coated over and over to obscure the pain. It is opaque and not clear. Language is a pearl; our natural essential nature the diamond.

What can we do if we find ourselves stuck in conceptuality time and again, smothering? Well, before anything else can happen, we have to realize and admit we are caught up in concepts and can't get out. That's not so easy for most folks to do for a couple of reasons, one, to be aware that this is the case, two, to break the hermetic seal of conceptual recursion.

Conceptuality is more like a flexible membrane that stretches as we try to remove it, only it gives but still holds us fast. And I am speaking up to now as if this is a momentary discomfort, but I don't believe that is true. This is a permanent situation until we can break through the membrane of conceptuality, like a baby must be freed of its caul at birth. And I am sorry to say this seems virtually impossible to do by ourselves.

An initial problem is that all of the exposure to dharma, through books, teachings, teachers, sangha, and friends results in our building a model or concept about dharma practice and its results. What we then have is an expectation, a 'sounds like' concept that itself obscures the reality we are trying to realize. It's like the old saying "gilding the lily," or perhaps a newer way of saying this is that we reify our concepts, trying to turn them into an actual experience that we then can realize. That is very difficult to impossible to break free of. So, what can we do?

Well, the traditional dharma remedy, one practiced for many centuries, is to work with an authentic dharma teacher, one who has been introduced to the nature of the mind or at least has been taught to assist others in how to do this.

I have said this before, but the process of Recognition, recognizing the true nature of the mind reminds me of the classic sci-fi movie “Blade Runner,” where Harrison Ford, who plays the blade runner Rick Dekard, uses a small machine and his wits to determine if the person being questioned is real or just a replicant, an android.

In the pointing-out instructions as to the nature of the mind, an authentic dharma teacher works with the student, helping them to snap out of their conceptual bind and into a non-conceptual state of mind, which is no easy task.

I can well remember my own arrogance, determined NOT to have any help, certainly not to seek out a ‘guru,’ whatever that was, to help solve this problem. It took me years of ramming my head against a wall for me to admit to myself that I could use some help, because I couldn’t be in two places at once, being instructed and also doing the instruction, in particular as I did not know how. I would have to have realized for myself what I was then trying to realize to have done this, and of course I could not. How many years I wasted trying to do it on my own, is sad for me to think about.

Sep 15, 2021, 1:27 PM

ENFOLDING AND UNFOLDING DHARMA SPACE

We're caught out in a trap that's already (and always has been) home to us, our habitual conceptual construct or point of view. It's the only vehicle we have known and is our take on 'being' itself. How do we deconstruct that view if we have no idea what non-conceptuality would be like? We have no idea, much less any experience. And this is very clear from examining dharma and its practice.

Our view and dharma concepts (at least at first) are completely made up from what we have picked up from dharma books and teachings, much like iron filings that cling to a magnet. However, that accumulation, burdened down with all our constructs, is a heavy load we each carry and have never known otherwise.

Even hearing about a possible relief from conceptuality is like water off a duck's back, not likely to sink in. And if we do have a clue, the more we are interested in it, the heavier it gets from further conceptual accumulation. In other words, by studying it, the very idea weighs itself right out of awareness. I ask you; how can we shatter that incrementing conceptual accumulation and begin to transfer our attention from concepts to the reality they refer and point to. That's the problem that dharma practice attempts to resolve.

As mentioned, attention or interest only adds more accumulation to the pile and down we go, sinking away from insight. If I have been taught correctly, we can't solve this condition ourselves and waiting for fate to break the seal, according to the teachings, takes an infinite amount of time. The answer to this is why we have Vajrayana Buddhism, which involves seeking help from an authentic guru who has themselves solved this problem or been taught how to deconstruct our conceptual habit and shatter it. That's why gurus exist, to help us outwit ourselves.

And the process of the extraction of reality from our encased conceptuality is next to impossible, even in theory, yet it apparently can be done. It may take

everything plus the kitchen sink to do it, yet where there is a will, there is a way, as the saying goes.

This is rocket science and takes a mind-surgeon to accomplish this liberation, plus a student who is trained well enough to receive it. In other words, this Vajrayana practice is not a hobby or a casual undertaking, but takes our undivided attention and fulltime effort to realize.

And all the countless writings and teachings on Mahamudra and Dzogchen meditation are by themselves impervious to realization, without a guide. They are conceptual and can but point toward the non-dual state of Mahamudra and Dzogchen meditation, yet never define or describe it. Conceptuality always points beyond itself at the reality it attempts to represent and never at itself, which is what would be required. It can't define itself. There is no loop. That's the idea I am trying to explain. What can we do about it?

In this world are masters of this process of liberation from conceptuality and we have to find them. This is made more difficult because we don't know (have not ourselves experienced) what we are looking for. That's why we are looking for it.

To achieve this, we have to put our fate (in this area) in the hands of someone who has the authentic recognition we seek, and trust that they will guide us to that recognition. Even then, IMO, it is very difficult.

In summary, it requires the process of guidance from an authentic master to give us the pointing-out instructions as to the nature of the mind, yet even that is not enough. It also requires that we, the students, be prepared enough to receive what has been pointed out. The two must be like magnets and have the proper polarity. That's what is needed and has to happen.

In American, authentic masters of the Vajrayana lineages are few and far between. When I suggest you seek one out, I know from experience that most folks would not know where to begin or how to do that. Let me just say this:

Don't be put off by the (imagined) almost impossibility of this happening to you, that you could find an authentic dharma teacher. And this is because, as we take even a single step on the path toward dharma, our whole life equation morphs and changes with that action. And before we know it, by putting one foot in front of the other, what seemed remote and impossible comes nearer and clearer.

Something like what is called 'space enfolding' takes place with each forward step until what seemed impossible in the beginning becomes possible. With each fold, each effort and step, the space between where we started, and the finish shortens until we are within reach of what we need for Recognition of the true nature of our mind. In other words, the dharma path, if entered with full confidence, is an exponential curve. The person we started out as changes with each step and so do the possibilities. We are soon a very different person by virtue of our effort and that person has options and possibilities that were not available before.

I have seen this unfold through my own experience, where each step I took brought me in contact with what I needed until I was face-to-face with an authentic dharma teacher, who was willing to work with me. Watch that first step; it is key.

Sep 16, 2021, 12:03 PM

IMPLICATE AND EXPLICATE ORDER

I cannot read the work of David Bohm without relating it to dharma and its practice, particularly the 'implicate' and enfolded order of the whole as the deeper and more fundamental order of non-dualistic reality, like Buddha Nature, which we are generally not aware of. And the 'explicate' or unfolded order that makes up the outer concepts and abstractions that define our normal dualistic conscious perception.

And Bohm's analogy of enfolding space in on itself, like folding a flat sheet of paper, making cuts in it, and then unfolding that sheet to reveal the cuts at widely diverse parts of the sheet. Even before discovering David Bohm, I had my own take on this, being something like that folded paper analogy, where karma and action, each step and move we take, rearranges the space surrounding us, bringing far things closer and perhaps putting what was near at a distance.

Our every action changes both time and space, IMO, similar to David Bohm's enfolding space, where what is distant can be near with enfolding. I like Bohm's idea, but I know very little about it and the mathematics involved. However, I feel, as mentioned, that something similar happens when we each take action and create 'karma', like our first step on the path of dharma. We are not the same person who took that first step not long after taking it. The results of our actions generate both 'good' and 'bad' karma (results), and I don't feel that is only linear, like taking a step down the road, but our karma, our action, can change how and what we see, feel, intuit, and react, changing our reality moment by moment.

In other words, we can propel ourselves not only through physical space, but more important, our actions can reconfigure space-time much like David Bohm's enfolded space. Our acts, what we do, can bring about drastic changes in space/time through how we act, and if we act.

I wonder if we appreciate what making an act, like a simple gesture, can bring forth from the universe to greet or block us. To those of us who are dharma students, Bohm's explicate order, with its separative unfolding is similar to what we call the dualistic and conceptual, while what Bohm calls Implicate or enfolded order is similar to what in the dharma we call non-linear or non-dualistic, like Buddha Nature. Bohm calls this law of the whole, holonomy.

And this enfolding and unfolding of the whole, like various algebras, displays one facet outwardly, while suppressing the rest inwardly, and vice-versa. Bohm's view, which is very important for humanity to understand just now, is that the welfare of the whole determines the parts. A crude example might be that when I go to a football game in Ann Arbor (where I grew up) to watch the University of Michigan Wolverines play, I am a part of the group of football fans. I am quite different when I am whooping and yelling at the game, a part of that smaller whole group, than I am as I sit here writing this, where I am now a part of a group of writers or dharma students, perhaps.

Bohm suggests that our obsession with 'being' or the lack thereof, the need to separate or remain distinct by reifying ourselves, drives or pulls and points the whole world in a certain direction and (seemingly) is not recognized as just an extreme, one-sided, point or edge of the whole. Instead, we can begin to deemphasize that one-pointedness, deconstruct our reifications, and relax back into what Bohm calls the implicate or non-dualistic order of things, which is another part of the whole.

Sep 17, 2021, 5:27 AM

STREAMING SERIES: "THE EDDY"

I was a slow convert to watching the many streaming series now available, movies streamed into my home. Once I caught on to the magic of binge-watching them, I have stayed with it ever since, seldom watching individual movies. With these series, I can watch a little or watch a lot, depending on my mood. What used to be, at best, a two-hour movie, becomes days of watching the same series, if I need that.

I could name off some of my favorite series, but instead I want to jump to point out the Netflix series "The Eddy," which must be made just for me. First, it's about musicians, and jazz musicians at that and they play great music live throughout much of the whole series, so for me it is part concert and part story. I could watch the concert and forget about the story, yet the two together are wonderful.

"The Eddy" takes place in modern-day Paris and is about running a jazz nightclub and also trying to record an album. This is about adults, older musicians, and not about younger musicians. When I first heard the band, I was not sure how I felt, but before I knew it, I was lost in the sound and loving it. The voice of Maja, played by Polish singer (and actress) Joanna Kulig is trancelike and mesmerizing, and by the time the series ended, I wanted to find the CD.

As to other series that I value, to name a few, they would be Yellowstone, Fouda, Last Tango in Halifax, Vikings, Breaking Bad, The Queen's Gambit, Ozark, and so on, yet be aware that I am not afraid of a little violence if it is not gratuitous.

Sep 18, 2021, 12:50 AM

"TO BE, OR NOT, TO BE"

The 'Age of Science', which is coming to an end as far as being emphasized, is just that, an age where we have pushed granularity, analysis, separateness, the need to be distinct and 'particularized' about as far as it can go. With this kind of legitimate scientific analysis and particularization also came separation, isolation, division, and loneliness, the lack of empathy for others and for the whole cosmos or universe in general. We are now beginning to react to that kind of analysis. It's like we have been clenching our teeth, and it's time to just relax and stop doing that, which perhaps is why we have so many stress-reducing therapies available, as symptoms of this problem.

While we used to believe that science and the scientific approach is just the way life is, this separateness and the loneliness we sense and which we try to ignore (or remain unaware of), this goes on because all that we are doing is continuing to push the science envelope in the direction of separateness (analysis) and have been doing this for some time. It's a habit, yet one that has consequences.

Science was all about this and that was a good thing, for a time. Now, if we would just stop that drive for scientific analysis, turn around, and head in the opposite direction for a while (what we could call the direction of unity, wholeness, and togetherness), everything could relax, including our sense of division or isolation from the whole. After all, we could then once again embrace the whole and our togetherness, or at least find a balance between the two. That would be another and welcome direction, a happy medium, one the world could use just now.

However, shaking off our undue emphasis on scientific analysis is not the only pitfall that awaits us. In addition, there is another and equally deceptive habit that the modern mind falls prey to and that is attempting to leave the body in advance of actually dying, through a mistaken sense of spirituality based on out-of-body experiences and the avoiding of any real physical experience. I will get to that in a moment.

Theoretical physicist David Bohm called the 'explicate,' the topside (conceptual) or visible part, 'appearances', so to speak. And that is what's driven by the 'implicate', the inner, not visible and non-particulate part of this universe we live in. It's all wrapped into one, be it mystery or obvious.

As Winston Churchill said, "...just a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma..."

As to the obvious appearances, they are very obvious, right out front, and hard to get out of our mind. What makes up physical and mental appearances is flanked by the implicate, whatever is enfolded and non-particular, like a crystal suspended in sugar water, where the outside (explicate) is inside and the inside (implicate) is outside, or a fetus that is surrounded by amniotic fluid. That should

tell us something. The visible top of an iceberg is tiny compared to what is under water. We could go on and on.

What is appearing to the mind, 'appearances', hold our attention because they are obvious and visible to us or to all. If these appearances (concepts) are but mental constructs of convenience, sitting in for what is even more complex, then they become the low-hanging fruit, using the popular jargon. This is like the poem "Siphonaptera, which goes:

"Great fleas have little fleas upon their backs to bite 'em,

And little fleas have lesser fleas, and so ad infinitum.

And the great fleas themselves, in turn, have greater fleas to go on;

While these again have greater still, and greater still, and so on."

In other words, as mentioned, with science there seems to be no end to granularization, smaller and smaller particles, and they all add up to what we are discussing here, outward appearances. Are appearances also conceptual? And if we can deconstruct appearances, that gets us where?

Well, perhaps it gets us identifying more with the sugar water (implicate) than the sugar crystal (explicate) that forms within it. What is at issue here are outer appearances, whether physical or mental, to be examined to see if they are constructs, but in particular 'conceptuality' in all its forms. Our mental concepts stick in the mind and are a shorthand or convenience compared to shoving off from them into the vast sea of non-conceptuality and actually living life.

Concepts are a life-raft for expedience, floating in a sea of solutions. These concepts are, as mentioned, a substitute for actual experience, shorthand for going to where the rubber meets the road and enduring total immersion in life.

And concepts are sticky, easily attached to and hard to let go of. Not sure what motivates all of this attachment, probably our likes, dislikes, and cravings, but fear of the unknown has to be considered, and also fear of life. There is a simple mistake happening here, IMO and this is what drives this other approach, as compared to the analysis of science.

What passes for faux spirituality, which was rampant in the 1970s and is still quite feral even today, is the rush to leave the body, in what are called 'out of body' experiences, an almost unconscious attempt to leave the body long before death would require it.

I can't claim to fully understand it, but the gist of it is that individuals struggle to get as high up in their heads as possible, conceptually, as far away from the body and the senses as they can manage. And this means taking refuge in the intellect, concepts, and conceptuality in an attempt to avoid the flesh and blood of a life lived.

Of course, those who hide out in their heads like this don't see it that way, but that only adds insult to the injury of their avoiding reality. They speak of heaven and 'heavenly' and of higher powers, of the higher Self, and attempt to surf the intellect, while imagining they are dispensing 'wisdom' from on high.

Unfortunately, all this highness is hollow or shallow, filled with reasoning, yet empty of wisdom, and why? Because they don't 'know' what they so glibly talk about. They have no 'well of life experience' to draw upon because they have

steadfastly avoided the visceral end of life, avoided getting their hands down in the clay of life and dirty, putting their money where their mouth is, by living.

The German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel in his seminal work “The Phenomenology of the Mind” perhaps said it best in his description of what he called 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.”

The modern version of what Hegel wrote we find in the refugees from the New Age spirituality of the 1970s. And it is a perfect example of what was described above in the implicate and explicate model, a clinging to the explicate and avoidance of the implicate, simply meaning living in the intellect and conceptuality as opposed to tempering the intellectual with the flesh and blood of life, or to simply use Shakespeare’s classic line:

“To be, or not to be, that is the question.”

Sep 18, 2021, 8:59 PM

A 'NEW AGE' PROBLEM

My guess is that anything out-of-the-body is considered spiritual these days. Even if we are scared out of our wits, when the dust settles, this is often seen as some kind of unusual behavior, thus alternative or even 'spiritual' in nature, or is at least grouped with ecstatic experiences.

Even getting the 'Big Picture' of seeing the 'Forest and the Trees' is considered rare enough that this too is bundled along with the spiritual. I guess it's time in this blog to ask just what is 'spiritual'?

Well, of course we have the many religions, so they all can be colored spiritual. Beyond that, it all seems to branch out. And we have what I would call alternative realities, spiritual experiences that we have had that may not make sense to anyone else, so those are all at least spiritual-like. And I won't even bother with drugs, which can also be spiritual. There are others, yet what I am trying to hone in on here are those conceptual riffs that we have that we get attached to and that are endlessly reified and usually recursively too, so that for whatever reason, we think of them as spiritual. These reified experiences are kind of tricky, IMO. And those that subscribe to them are legion.

And these faux-spiritual experiences are not too hard to understand because having never been aware of the true nature of our own mind, or so say the great dharma teachers, just what else do we have to go on?

And a quick look around tells us that absent the vivid awareness of say Insight Meditation (Vipassana), we are left with whatever we have managed to put together on our own, and that is all conceptual. Absent having recognized or

been introduced to the actual nature of the mind and reality, we are left with our expectations, what we have read or been told, but with nothing concrete, no actual experience of Recognition or even if we have some experience, no recognition of what we have experienced. This is a problem for many, a big problem.

In other words, despite having the nature of the mind pointed out to us by an authentic master, having failed to recognize what was pointed out, we are left with only our expectations and wondering, all of which are still conceptual, to kind of guess at the nature of the mind.

And since that guess never eventuated into Recognition, this collection of conceptual intellections is then (this happens) reified or made stronger. We reify our spiritual experience because we are attached to them, since even though we have not realized it, that's all we have to go on, so of course we make the most out of what we have, and this often results for many folks with reification, our gilding the lily, so to speak. And this reification only solidifies a miss-take.

That's it for we dharma folks, yet what about regular New Age people, those who don't have authentic masters to guide them. What do they do, and this is where it gets more sticky, IMO.

Having no one to guide them, many New-Age style folks were on their own. They did the best they could, making what amounts to a patchwork quilt out of odd spiritual facts, experiences, wishes, and expectations, nothing like whole-cloth. The end result is that they became content with a crystalizing conceptual spiritual view, and by that I don't mean 'crystal' clear, but rather crystalizing like hardening, as when ice freezes. And all of this pushes them out of the body, if only because they are now accessing the body and the senses less and less,

while depending on their conceptualizations more and more. We go up into the intellect and concepts to make our home.

The result is to literally lose touch with our senses bit by bit, along with the feedback loop that a roundtrip to the senses involves. It's what the 'esotericists' call failing to round the nadir, meaning failing to touch earth as Shakyamuni Buddha did with his earth-touching gesture, and instead we began to leave the body or avoid the body before the body has confirmed our experience definitively. We cling to conceptual experience. This is all too common.

In other words, these folks turn back before the body of experience matures and before it is time to begin to naturally withdraw. They withdraw into abstract conceptuality prematurely and have some conceptual understanding but not enough confirmation or certainty via life experience (and the senses), much less than the wisdom that actual realization of our experience can confer.

This kind of out-of-the-body experience is rampant, especially among the intellectually inclined. What can we do about that? How can we be of use?

The first step, which is very difficult, IMO, is to gently help these intellectuals to realize their situation, and the fact that they are pulling the plug too soon on life and isolating themselves in the mind unnecessarily. They would have to reverse the process, and to use an analogy, take some deep breaths, put their hands deep into the clay of life, touch, feel, sense, and immerse themselves in this sensual world of the senses, and by that reanimate their sense connections with the body. And this because they never took the plunge when they had the change, when it was ripe.

In my experience, arguing with these folks is futile. They always 'know better' and are not aware that they are closing off contact in order to be a 'higher-Self', when the self is nothing more than an abstraction to begin with, something we created out of our likes, dislikes, and attachments. The theoretical, that is conceptual understanding is not wisdom, especially if it is not backed up by real life-won experience.

The bottom line here is these out-of-body types don't know what they are talking about. They can talk about it abstractly, sure, yet they don't know from experience what they are talking about. In that sense, they are stillborn and have cut off (or are cutting off) access to the senses and thus experience. They have ceased to service that interrupt and are literally out of touch.

This is the danger of reification, of gilding the conceptual, recursively and then using it as a surrogate for actual life experience or, in a word, suffering extinction by degrees.

Sep 19, 2021, 6:22 PM

Sep 21, 2021, 2:43 PM

NOTIONS OF LANGUAGE

[This is a hard one for me to formulate, so you are warned.]

Something I am sensitive to are ambiguous pronouns, pronouns for which I have no idea what the speaker is referring to or I am forced to guess at.

“I ran into Mary and Martha; she is coming over.” Who is coming over, Mary or Martha? Or “I will send it to you tomorrow.” What are you sending me? That sort of thing, but often more confusing than these simple examples.

I have friends in which I encounter this again and again, the use of ambiguous pronouns instead of clear nouns. And some do it all the time, so I often have no clear idea what you are talking about. Here on Facebook, I can only respond to how clearly your comments are written. I am amazed at how serious many of you are, yet I hope some of your comments (how they are written) are not a reflection of your state of mind.

It seems some folks always assume that I must know what they are referring to, and I mostly do or can guess, but often I have no idea and have to stop them again and again to verify the referent. They often seem annoyed that I am not clairvoyant.

This could drive me crazy, but I just chalk it up to this assumptive mode, where the person speaking just assumes I know what they are talking about, and often I don't. They are assuming that everyone knows their universe and never bother to tie down a pronoun by using a noun to help make it clear for us. As for me, I try

not do that, so I use less pronouns than most. I read all of your comments very carefully and don't understand some because I don't know what you are saying because of the writing.

I am sensitive to language, and while I'm not a grammar expert, I value clarity in conversation in my writing and what I read. And I'm not sure where folks came up with the idea that on the Internet in chats, messages, emails, etc. that it is OK to be sloppier with our grammar than we otherwise would.

On the contrary, to me, these media messages require more diligence with grammar and language, and not less. I can't help but measure people by their clarity with words, not because I am a grammarian, but because that's how I follow what you say, which is the basis for my response to you. I sometimes ask you to rephrase and at other times don't.

And while I understand that language by definition cannot capture reality in words, at the same time I see that writers like Shakespeare manage to use language to express life much better than the average bear. Who could miss that?

And while, as the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins said, "Suck any sense from that who can," trying to glean sense from language and concepts alone is a futile gesture. Language functions as pointers to the senses but language is not sensual in itself. Language points always beyond itself and refers (and encourages us) to experience with our various sense organs: eyes, taste, hearing, and so on. Words essentially point beyond themselves, 'over or out there', to an actual experience we can have and sense. Anything in language that does not make at least a little sense is, well, nonsense.

When we try to ‘Suck any sense from that who can” from concepts and the intellect alone, the sense from that effort, IMO, is very slim pickings. Concepts are not sensual in themselves. In fact, trying to make language a body of work in itself, which is often attempted, results in a rarified body indeed, and not one made for the senses or sensing.

And if we avoid the sense that language points to, and try to make conceptual language itself sensual, this is where reification rears its ugly head, and we are soon lost in a recursive conceptual loop, endlessly feeding on itself, and resulting in what the dharma calls a ‘Hungry Ghost,’ the inability to be satisfied.

We all appreciate a rich language and feast on poetry that suits our taste. However, substituting language for actual living, as a surrogate for flesh & blood experience is what I am pointing out here.

History has reserved this for the intellectuals, those who mostly live in their minds. And this is where, to my belief, that with conceptual language we have to be very, very careful not to fall into reification, trying to make something more real than it is, gilding the lily, as they say.

Language is a tool or process and not a state. Words, no matter how well they are woven together, for their meaning still all point beyond themselves to the ‘sense’ they make. If words are not themselves sensual and do not result in an experience we have, then those words are, as mentioned, what we call nonsense. And out at the edge of language, where words cease to make sense and begin to fall into nonsense, there is also what I call the music of words, which may contain more music than meaning, like alliteration and other effects.

This very edge of sense is where the sound of words coming together, the clash and clatter, and being inset with one another, overpower the sense they make and we, like skipping a flat stone on a still ponds, lose our attention and fall into a trancelike reverie. It's a natural way of getting high. This is all quite natural, IMO.

What is not natural, IMO, is when, by reifying conceptuality (to make it more real than it is) results in the atrophy of our senses. The atrophy of the sense factor in words, which is caused by our not following the references that words by definition make or point toward (references beyond word's mere indication), the actual sense-world and experience. And by that failure to ground and experience, we begin to close off or ignore our five senses and cease to record actual experience in our mindstream, thus closing off the certainty that can come from it in favor of the 'academic' world of hollow concepts and mere intellectualization.

In dharma terms, we lose what is called 'Insight Meditation', the vivid awareness of the moment 'Now', and instead, find ourselves increasingly distracted by out-of-the body states and no longer punctuated by the pulse or rhythm of an experiential life that language can but point toward. That's when we forego experience and have no ground.

Proper language, using grammar not as a rigid set of rules, but rather to carefully articulate what we communicate is, at least for me, very important. Just as our body is articulated and exercised by the movement of our limbs, etc., so is language articulated and exercised by our words. And 'meaning' depends on that quite deliberate articulation, since how we use language and grammar effects the efficiency of our connection to the senses and thus, as mentioned, the sense our words make. If we lose the 'sense' of words, the physical reality, we are left with only our understanding conceptually.

To keep our inner channels open and fresh between language, its projected meaning, and our resulting experience is crucial, and this because the punctuation and articulation of language (in its timing and spatial form) serve to maintain the mind's mental and the body's physical connection, their shared conduit. Without that conduit kept open and active, our senses start to dry up and our experience becomes mostly conceptual and barren -- the purely intellectual.

IMO, we need to ground our concepts in experience and not by reification.

Sep 22, 2021, 5:10 PM

THE LATENT ECHO

[Fall is here, the Equinox arrived, and it is cold and rainy out.]

I have been writing here on Facebook for years (since 2007), often trying to explain the history of my dharma practice, and about the particular dharma practices I do. And try as I might, year after year, and day upon day, I more or less can now state, something which all the dharma texts declare, that the realization practices, the non-dual practices like Mahamudra and Dzogchen, cannot be described or expressed in language -- words. In my experience, what those pith texts state is true.

Early on I hoped to express my practice and state of mind and get feedback from readers with similar experiences about what I am doing. That never really

happened. I gradually understood and learned that even though the books and teachings do their best (and have for centuries) to describe these techniques and their results, they cannot be expressed in words.

Furthermore, although given the same general instructions, how we each receive and act on those instructions are individual, perhaps unique. The final path to complete those instructions are called our 'yidam', and the yidam is based on our upbringing, personality, history and so forth. It is personal to me and not a general prescription for recognizing the actual nature of the mind that can be used by others. IT may or may not be useful.

After all these years, I am certain (at least for myself) that the individualism for each of us as to our dharma may be different and is different. As for my worry or questions, am I doing the practice right, well, that has subsided and over time has more or less faded from my mind.

At a certain point, so it seems to me, each of us as dharma practitioners of the non-dual meditation practices are almost entirely on our own, as scary as that thought is. And while this fact was at first disturbing to me, to be alone and have to make my own mind up, I now see that it is necessary that we, each and every one of us, must do this ourselves.

My fear gradually subsided due to the lack of any response, any echo. Nothing came back and I find that over time I am just moving on, because life moves on. And so, I am retiring my expectations or hope of getting any substantial support from outside in the world. In some situations, no matter how loud or long we call, there is not even an echo. We each have to be our own echo.

Actually, I should have known better, because from the first time I realized that I had been introduced to the true nature of the mind, that I had recognized how the mind works, everything changed. And this despite that this recognition was very familiar and not something like a lightning bolt. It was more like coming home.

As I suddenly found myself able to be familiar with the mind and how to use it, after never having done so before, and that was my sign, from a dharma meditation point of view, that my umbilical cord had snapped and that I was separated from what we call the preliminary dharma practices.

Now, by saying I was done with what are called the Preliminary Practices (purification), I can't say that I was complete as regards purification, but only that I had pushed through some threshold, ready or not, and recognized and was becoming familiar with the nature of my own mind. It was not an 'Aha" in one second, but it was a very, very intense or vivid time (and process), that introduced me to just how the mind worked, during which I took over as the arbiter of my own dharma practice. And afterward, there was no going back or reverting to how I was before.

Put another way, I no longer had any doubt, not even a shadow of a doubt, about what happened. I realized I had changed forever during that short time. And for the first time, I was certain just what I had to do as regards dharma practice, and just as important, I was certain that I had everything I needed to do it on my own, just as I am, warts and all. That was an entirely new realization, and for me pivotal.

And if you asked me where the courage came from that I would dare do this, it is simple. The arousal of Insight Meditation in my mind was so compelling and so addictive that I would not dream of not doing that from then on. That's the fuel.

And this was years ago now, and from that point forward, I found I could extend and expand my recognition through doing Insight Meditation and have diligently worked at it every chance I can. I should add that, where before, for me, dharma practice took effort and diligence to keep up, from the point of Recognition onward, there was nothing I wanted to do each day more than expand and extend my recognition. This is still true now.

And, where before any Bodhicitta that I had was, I'm sorry to say, mostly manufactured, ginned up, from Recognition and beyond, I am absolutely committed and remain so today, committed to sharing the dharma with anyone interested. And that is not manufactured, but just there all the time. I became the opposite of a 'hungry ghost'. Everything is fuel for this fire.

I don't consider myself a teacher, nor do I want to be. I am a sharer of dharma and that's enough. And I want to share with anyone who, like I did, struggles to complete the purification practices and help them to finish those practices and move on, to be there with and for them.

As mentioned earlier, I have stopped crying out in the wilderness for someone to find me or recognize what I am doing as far as dharma practice. I see that we each have to recognize for ourselves and hold our head up high. After all, at essence we are Buddha Nature. It's not that no one cares, but that we have to care and respond on our own, and I have and am getting the message.

We are each a case of "pick up your bed and walk" as Lazarus was told. After waiting and looking around for someone to come to help me turn the wheel of the dharma, I am now doing that myself. Yet, it is still a bit strange for me to look around and realize that I have all that I need and must even bless myself and

enlighten myself. Not even the Buddha can do that for me. To repeat: we each have to enlighten ourselves. The Buddha's teachings and my own guru have given me the teachings and done all they can. Now it is up to me, and as mentioned, I realize this and also that I can do it.

I have no idea how long it will take me to expand my recognition until I realize Enlightenment, probably many lifetimes, yet, and here is something else that is new: I don't care.

I don't care how long it will take because I am complete and happy doing what I am doing, meditating as I do each day. A main problem I have had, which I am just now recognizing, is that my own doubts, hesitation, wondering, and worry are and have long been the main obscuration that is holding me back. As I once wrote:

"I can clearly see all that clouds this stream of consciousness is but a searching, is itself but a frowning, a looking to see, a pause, and hesitation that, caught and unfurled in the eddies of time, finding nothing, becomes clear and, laughing, I leave it go clear and turn from a darkening or dimming of my mind to light. And it came to pass, and I let it pass."

Sep 23, 2021, 9:08 AM

THE LATENT ECHO REDUX

[I am running this one again, because it is a bit definitive of where I am at and may signal I will post less here on FB, as I have something say, rather than try to post each day. We will see what happens. And questions usually bring a response from me.]

I have been writing here on Facebook for years (since 2007), often trying to explain the history of my dharma practice, and about the particular dharma practices I do. And try as I might, year after year, and day upon day, I more or less can now state, something which all the dharma texts declare, that the realization practices, the non-dual practices like Mahamudra and Dzogchen, cannot be described or expressed in language -- words. In my experience, what those pith texts state is true.

Early on I hoped to express my practice and state of mind and get feedback from readers with similar experiences about what I am doing. That never really happened. I gradually understood and learned that even though the books and teachings do their best (and have for centuries) to describe these techniques and their results, they cannot be expressed in words.

Furthermore, although given the same general instructions, how we each receive and act on those instructions are individual, perhaps unique. The final path to complete those instructions are called our 'yidam', and the yidam is based on our upbringing, personality, history and so forth. It is personal to me and not a general prescription for recognizing the actual nature of the mind that can be used by others. IT may or may not be useful.

After all these years, I am certain (at least for myself) that the individualism for each of us as to our dharma may be different and is different. As for my worry or questions, am I doing the practice right, well, that has subsided and over time has more or less faded from my mind.

At a certain point, so it seems to me, each of us as dharma practitioners of the non-dual meditation practices are almost entirely on our own, as scary as that thought is. And while this fact was at first disturbing to me, to be alone and have to make my own mind up, I now see that it is necessary that we, each and every one of us, must do this ourselves.

My fear gradually subsided due to the lack of any response, any echo. Nothing came back and I find that over time I am just moving on, because life moves on. And so, I am retiring my expectations or hope of getting any substantial support from outside in the world. In some situations, no matter how loud or long we call, there is not even an echo. We each have to be our own echo.

Actually, I should have known better, because from the first time I realized that I had been introduced to the true nature of the mind, that I had recognized how the mind works, everything changed. And this despite that this recognition was very familiar and not something like a lightning bolt. It was more like coming home.

As I suddenly found myself able to be familiar with the mind and how to use it, after never having done so before, and that was my sign, from a dharma meditation point of view, that my umbilical cord had snapped and that I was separated from what we call the preliminary dharma practices.

Now, by saying I was done with what are called the Preliminary Practices (purification), I can't say that I was complete as regards purification, but only that

I had pushed through some threshold, ready or not, and recognized and was becoming familiar with the nature of my own mind. It was not an 'Aha' in one second, but it was a very, very intense or vivid time (and process), that introduced me to just how the mind worked, during which I took over as the arbiter of my own dharma practice. And afterward, there was no going back or reverting to how I was before.

Put another way, I no longer had any doubt, not even a shadow of a doubt, about what happened. I realized I had changed forever during that short time. And for the first time, I was certain just what I had to do as regards dharma practice, and just as important, I was certain that I had everything I needed to do it on my own, just as I am, warts and all. That was an entirely new realization, and for me pivotal.

And if you asked me where the courage came from that I would dare do this, it is simple. The arousal of Insight Meditation in my mind was so compelling and so addictive that I would not dream of not doing that from then on. That's the fuel.

And this was years ago now, and from that point forward, I found I could extend and expand my recognition through doing Insight Meditation and have diligently worked at it every chance I can. I should add that, where before, for me, dharma practice took effort and diligence to keep up, from the point of Recognition onward, there was nothing I wanted to do each day more than expand and extend my recognition. This is still true now.

And, where before any Bodhicitta that I had was, I'm sorry to say, mostly manufactured, ginned up, from Recognition and beyond, I am absolutely committed and remain so today, committed to sharing the dharma with anyone interested. And that is not manufactured, but just there all the time. I became the opposite of a 'hungry ghost'. Everything is fuel for this fire.

I don't consider myself a teacher, nor do I want to be. I am a sharer of dharma and that's enough. And I want to share with anyone who, like I did, struggles to complete the purification practices and help them to finish those practices and move on, to be there with and for them.

As mentioned earlier, I have stopped crying out in the wilderness for someone to find me or recognize what I am doing as far as dharma practice. I see that we each have to recognize for ourselves and hold our head up high. After all, at essence we are Buddha Nature. It's not that no one cares, but that we have to care and respond on our own, and I have and am getting the message.

We are each a case of "pick up your bed and walk" as Lazarus was told. After waiting and looking around for someone to come to help me turn the wheel of the dharma, I am now doing that myself. Yet, it is still a bit strange for me to look around and realize that I have all that I need and must even bless myself and enlighten myself. Not even the Buddha can do that for me. To repeat: we each have to enlighten ourselves. The Buddha's teachings and my own guru have given me the teachings and done all they can. Now it is up to me, and as mentioned, I realize this and also that I can do it.

I have no idea how long it will take me to expand my recognition until I realize Enlightenment, probably many lifetimes, yet, and here is something else that is new: I don't care.

I don't care how long it will take because I am complete and happy doing what I am doing, meditating as I do each day. A main problem I have had, which I am just now recognizing, is that my own doubts, hesitation, wondering, and worry are

and have long been the main obscuration that is holding me back. As I once wrote:

“I can clearly see all that clouds this stream of consciousness is but a searching, is itself but a frowning, a looking to see, a pause, and hesitation that, caught and unfurled in the eddies of time, finding nothing, becomes clear and, laughing, I leave it go clear and turn from a darkening or dimming of my mind to light. And it came to pass, and I let it pass.”

Sep 24, 2021, 7:16 AM

WE ARE EACH ALONE, YET WE ARE ALL ALONE TOGETHER

It has taken a while to finally get it through my head that I am going to have to turn the wheel of the dharma alone, all by myself, every last bit of it, from here on out.

It's so obvious, yet I keep looking for someone to help me, although by definition, if I think this through carefully, when it comes to the dharma, we each have to make it right all by ourselves. This means that we, each of us, are alone, yet in this together. That's the way it has to be because that's the way it is.

Sep 27, 2021, 4:34 AM

VAST EMPTY SPACE

I've been doing hard physical work these last weeks, instead of writing, and talking to the empty sky while I'm at it, or so it seems, this vast space. And I'm dusting off my Zen hat lately. After all, that's where I thought to start out with the dharma, back in the late 1950s. There were no alternatives then.

VAST EMPTY SPACE

I've been doing hard physical work these last weeks, instead of writing, and talking to the empty sky while I'm at it, or so it seems, this vast space.

And I'm dusting off my Zen hat lately. After all, that's where I thought to start out with the dharma, back in the late 1950s. There were no alternatives then.

Sep 28, 2021, 12:00 AM

DIRECT SOLAR EFFECT

[While I don't have much to say (and write) about my personal changes these day, which I am monitoring, I would like to keep folks informed about our linkage to the solar influx.]

There is a CME (Coronal Mass Ejection) head toward Earth, which will sideswipe Earth on October 1, 2021, generating G1-class geomagnetic storms. My own

inner experience with solar storms is that, while we should be aware of this sideswipe on October 1st, we are in closer contact to the Sun than that, meaning: we feel and react to changes on the Sun not only when that solar influx reaches Earth, but also when it is first emitted from the Sun, during the trip to Earth, and as it reaches Earth.

Or simply put, we are connected to the Sun directly, and somehow connected to the point that when it hiccups, we react in unison, not just after the influx reaches Earth. Therefore: I find my own reaction to solar change that varies from normal sunlight, to be immediate and sustained.

OVERWHELMED BY SOLAR CHANGE

[More details on the current solar influx, for those interested.]

And we are not even aware of it. Certainly, right now in my life, I appear to be very sensitive to solar influx, rising and falling with its cycle of steady sunlight and sudden influxes of high intensity. Astrologically, I suppose, I could blame this sensitivity on the fact that for the last year, transiting Pluto is sitting on my Sun/Earth axis and only just now has finally moved off that axis (heliocentrically), while geocentrically continuing to retrograde (and then re-conjunct) around that axis.

Be that as it may, I seem to be dancing with the solar energy for a time, moving and swaying with its influence. Well, I wouldn't call it 'dancing', more like coping and working with change. And change is just that, 'change', and as I like to make

clear, solar change does not just alter our environment, but rather alters us and then we alter our environment.

I favor change over the alternative, mainly because there is no alternative. Change is eternal. Favoring change and working through it are always two different things, IMO. Given the fact that it is 'me, myself, and I' that changes, it's like going under anesthesia or getting on an airplane. Things are out of our direct control.

Is solar change and its effects like a roll of the dice or more like bobbing for apples? Well, perhaps not that unpredictable, but close. Recovering from a spurt of solar change can be a bit unnerving, as we are dunked, immersed in it, and then come up for air, and it is a good question if we are the same or different and just don't know it.

It reminds me of tales of the bardo after death that I have read, where with rebirth we take on a new personality, but one driven by our old unfinished cravings and graspingness. Absorbing intense solar change very definitely 'dunks' us and brings with it a form of anesthesia. We black out and emerge from it feeling confused. We have been immersed. And when we come up for air, we have little idea just how much we have changed, yet we can feel that something happened when we lost control or lost track of just where we were at only the day before. 'Wha' happened?

Most of us don't even know this is happening. We chalk our confusion up to hard times, a crazy day, a loss of direction, and suddenly "don't feel like doing" this or that. IMO, solar change overwhelms our ability to control our direction and inject the possibility of change.

Sep 30, 2021, 2:44 AM

MOVING INTO THE LEELANAU PENINSULA

Something emerging through these last few weeks, amid all the solar influx, is a decision by Margaret and me to relocate, to move up north to the Traverse City area, in particular, to move into the Leelanau Peninsula of thereabouts, long a favorite vacationing spot and place for us to go. IMO, the Leelanau is one of the most beautiful places on Earth. Yes, moving North is colder, but many places on the Leelanau are actually considerably warmer than where we now live, which is a cold spot. The 'Lake Effect' is warming, but there will be more snow, spring will come slower, and the high temperatures will be less, and so on.

[If anyone has insights into property for sale in the Traverse City area, please send me a FB message.]

We have been in Big Rapids for 41 years and built a couple of successful businesses here and have a very comfortable home and complex. If I dwell on the past, then I would never leave the comfort of here. If I imagine the future, I don't have a great desire to move, being a stick-in-the-mud, but neither do I have all that much against moving.

I am pretty much happy wherever I am, but Margaret very much loves Lake Michigan, one of the Great Lakes, and would appreciate being nearer to there. The process of moving is almost unimaginably difficult because we have so much stuff. We just finally sold our recording studio (and former library) and

moved an enormous amount of stuff either to storage or into our home and dharma center here. Exhausting. What we face in moving away from here is almost unimaginable.

This last month or so, I have already been packing up things, like the 60 or more boxes of dharma books and materials we will be sending to our sister sangha, Columbus KTC. And now, of late, I have been in the basement of our dharma center for days sorting through an enormous number of things. And I am about to start packing up my music CD collection, some 9000 CDs, yet in a way that I can still access them. All of this change and its momentum is cascading or beginning to. I always choose to accept change, than to resist it.

Nothing is written in stone about the move, because finding a place that checks all (or even most) of the boxes is very difficult, because there is not much on the market. And many days of scouring the real estate listings, not to mention a one-day 300-mile drive (a few days ago) by Margaret up into the Leelanau, was more discouraging than not as to finding a place. So, it may be a long wait. Finding a house as comfortable as the one we have here is a hard ask in these times. We shall see.

I am more or less speechless in this process. Both Margaret and I would like a place where we can watch the sun set each day.