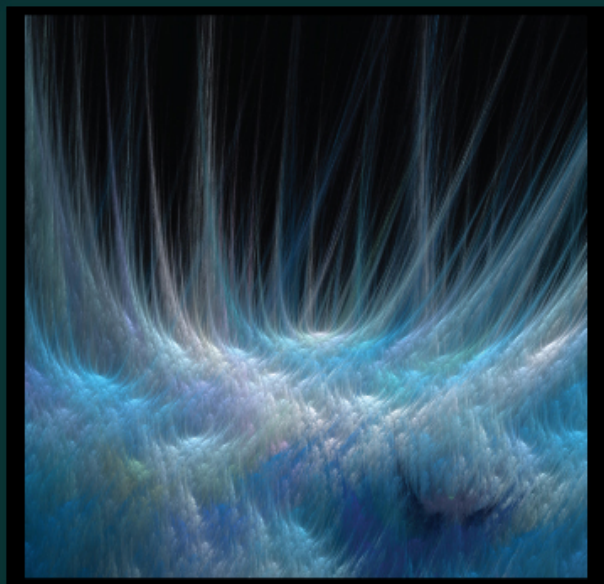


The Spiritual Anatomy of a Stroke



by Michael Erlewine

The
Spiritual Anatomy
of a
Stroke

By Michael Erlewine

INTRODUCTION

This is not intended to be a finely produced book, but rather a readable document for those who are interested in my particular take on dharma training and a few other topics. These blogs were from the Winter of 2019 posted on Facebook and Google+.

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Here are some other links to more books, articles, and videos on these topics:

Main Browsing Site:

<http://SpiritGrooves.net/>

Organized Article Archive:

<http://MichaelErlewine.com/>

YouTube Videos

<https://www.youtube.com/user/merlewine>

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I am a phenomenologist by nature, meaning I examine my consciousness and day-to-day first-person experience and often comment and write about it. My recent stroke is a good example. It was an unfortunate event, but is also grist for the mill, so to speak. I write about it and learn from it.

The following are (not all) but the many of the daily blogs I write since the time of the stroke, March 18, 2019. They are roughly edited, but readable. Many are long, but I don't have time to edit them further. My suggestion for those interested in strokes and how we can respond to them: just scan through these blogs and perhaps find sections of interest. I am easy to reach if you have questions at Michael@Erlewine.net

I offer this that others with stroke can possibly learn from my own experience.

Michael Erlewine
May 31, 2019

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HOSPITAL

March 19, 2019

I am sorry to report that I am in the hospital. I had a small stroke and am undergoing a series of tests. Not sure when I will be able to blog.

Finished MRI, Ultrasound Carotids, ECHO Cardiogram....all done and waiting for the doctor. Then go home. It turns I do not have a TIA or a small stroke, but rather a real stroke.

THE SITUATION

March 20, 2019

Two separate doctors decided that there is not a TIA, but a regular stroke. Not the best news,

I can't read at this point. I can't do much for a while. I have to be patient. I need a rockin' chair. LOL Can't not do much. I cannot practice. These words are very hard to write.

I hope to be able take photos of Flowers.

A CLOSE FACSIMILE

March 20, 2019

I seem to be coming out of the pain, mostly. It's basically just on my left side, which makes sense. I have like a god-awful headache and I have almost been unable to write in sensible language until now and then only for a while. Margaret has had a good laugh on me. I have been unable to talk clearly unless I am very refreshed. And the more tired I get, the more undecipherable I get, until its gobbledygook.

I might have to become like the inscrutable Zen monk, saying nothing at all, and just raising one finger and gesturing in the air once in a while. LOL.

Unless I keel over, I believe I will gradually recover. We have decided not to move up north for many reasons. Instead, we will just stay here and fix anything that needs fixing up. Also, we did not find a single house (after looking at hundreds) online and a few in person. Our kitchen and bathrooms are just way better than any that we have seen. It could be just us, but I doubt it.

And so, I have just zapped the external envelope and cleaned out the cobwebs. It will take me a while to get back online again with my own body, but I feel it is going to happen. Aside from some downtime, I should be just as good as new again or a fair facsimile.

Now, what I am I going to with all those hundreds of packed boxes!

GLEAMING

March 22, 2019

Well, I'm not allowed to do much for a while, like unpack the hundred boxes I had carefully packed. There the boxes sit, blocking the whole center. Not much I can do for now. I have to cool it. Apparently, a stroke is like an earthquake with aftershocks. It takes time for them to "ring" out and settle down if they have do. I'm waiting and keeping my head down.

As for my comments on the entire experience, it's hard to crystalize. I certainly know what it's like to have ups and downs and even to have my "Self" crash and burn. And while I had a TIA-stroke a couple years ago, this one was as they say "more different," like surgical steel. There was no messy fuzzy-stuff, at least in my experience – just a clean cut.

I am left with no questions. Nada. Just an exclamation mark ringing in the silence! And no echo.

It's like I wiped all the bric-a-brac and cobwebs out with one swell swoop. It reminds me of when ladies (mostly) use adhesive (waxing) to rip out unwanted hair. It hurts and it's over quick. In other words, I got reamed out pronto.

If you want to talk about no thoughts, try having a stroke. The mind is as clear as you can see, not a thought in sight or at least not one that disturbs you. It's like you are mentally straight-lining it.

Days have gone by since my stroke. It's like the little denizens of my mind have been hiding out and now are starting to come back up for air. I don't wish more of the same treatment by life, but the cleanness of the mental air is remarkable. It goes on forever.

It's hard for me to be still and just take it easy. However, I've been told to cool my jets and give it a rest. I am very sensitive to sound just now, same with taste. Things tend to irritate me because I'm still very touchy from the stroke.

For example, I don't like to think a lot just now. Thoughts are for the birds; they just fly away.

“A BEAUTIFUL MESS”

March 23, 2019

Indulge me, if you will. Here is a song written by my daughter May Erlewine. Since I am somewhat out-of-sorts these days, I find it comforting to wander into a tune like this and rest for a while. Won't you join me? All of my four children have given me so much over the years. In this song, the words “Find a little love, along the way; die a little, every day.” Here you can hear this subtle creation.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XAq_6ehZp2o

I was totally moving to Traverse City and then it didn't happen. Instead, I will stick around Big Rapids and work on our dharma center, which is fine by me. I was going to have some outreach dharma-discussions in Traverse City, but I can do the same here in Big Rapids on perhaps a Sunday afternoon at the center. People are not different. I used to think Ann Arbor people were better (“Special”), as in the professors and students, and the same for Traverse City but to a lesser degree.

But, when it comes to dharma there is no “special.” Dharma-wise, people are the same everywhere; few get it, and even then it's seldom the “smart” or intellectual ones. LOL. The smorgasbord of life is available and open to all and dharma is the most egalitarian thing around.

When I was a young man, my wife and I ran commercial greenhouses here in Michigan and we then moved down to Apopka Florida where we ran 19,000 sq. ft. of glass. If you can grow plants, you can grow dharma. Dharma is nature and natural. That's my view.

However, I find it very difficult to just take it easy and sit around. I don't feel like reading because right now it is difficult for my eyes. As for movies, yes, but I tire before the end is reached. Mostly, here I am, just sitting around for long stretches of time. I hardly let Margaret get her stuff done because I would rather sit around and gab with her. She is

not used to that. Usually I am like a blue hornet, busy, busy, busy.

Yet, right now I'm all ears all the time. LOL. I am quietly putting back some of the shelving over in the center, although I am supposed to just do nothing until next week. And I can't exercise until I talk to the doctor next Tuesday. Etc.

So, you get the idea. Here I am floating around the house, trying to remind myself that I am not being sidelined or benched, but just resting up. Not too much of an appetite either and since I am wearing this heart monitor, it makes showering a pain.

Spring is beginning to happen. How wonderful. I have a desire to eat Baklava. And that's about all the news fit to print.

MY CURATION DILEMMA

March 24, 2019

My recent brush with impermanence, which term I call the “smelling salts of the dharma,” woke me up from my cryogenic-like sleep (as in the movies). Looking around, as I am right now, it is clear to me that I’m not going to live forever. “Who would ‘a thunk it, “as they say. LOL.

There are lots of loose ends for me to consider and the one fact that only I have been taking care of all of them. My family, Margaret and the kids, don’t know how (or want to) care for all of the various things I have been tending.

And, so it’s up to me work this out. Many of my responsibilities have already been shipped out to various libraries and universities, but the cause of this all is still alive and living, for now. That would be me. My mind is the cornucopia that keeps producing.

I have to laugh. Here I am, someone who is not a history buff, and who is not interested in the past, yet ever so carefully gathering all the popular culture around me and saving it for the future. I know that Samsara is impermanent, that everything changes, and everything fades away. I know that.

And yet, I have spent the greater part of my life (with my Sixth-House Moon in Taurus) extending the culture I grew up into the future. I came up in the 1950s and saw and heard first-hand the birth of rock-n’-roll and other music. With the help of some 150 full-time staff and 500-700 free-lance writers, we created the largest single music database in the world, everything from 10”-records onward. That is All-Music Guide (allmusic.com).

I have no idea how they are keeping up today (probably not well), but we saw to it that all of that earlier music was locked-in with albums, tracks, biographies, discographies, and so on. Then we turned around and did movies, all recorded film and video (cast and characters), one of the two largest film databases in the world (allmovie.com), the other being IMDB.

And I personally did this for 33,000 rock concert posters, including photos I took myself. I have placed that database in several non-profit organizations around the country. Which brings me to astrology, which is my point here.

Some years ago I donated what may be the largest astrological library on the planet. It took a full-sized moving van to relocate it to the University of Illinois, where it now is part of their permanent collection. And they followed that up with a UPS-sized truck full of my papers and correspondence. And now I have just one more lap to go.

I still have a lot of the sources, taped interviews and videos of famous astrologers, documents, digital, and graphic creations -- on and on. I need to find a curator, an astrologer or group of research-oriented astrologers who could care-for, work through and make available whatever makes sense to be released and shared. This could also be a source of income if used properly.

So, I'm tossing this idea out in case there is a young person or two who knows and loves astrology and wants the responsibility of bothering with all of this.

Is there anyone? Are you interested? You can message me here on Facebook or email me at Michael@Erlewine.net with your reasons for being interested.

[Graphic image showing my natal helio and geo charts and something about how each are.]

“As Bodhicitta is so precious,
May those without it now create it,
May those who have it not destroy it,
And may it ever grow and flourish”

For those of you who would like to have access to other free books, articles, and videos on these topics, here are the links:

<http://traffic.libsyn.com/.../Links to Michael Erlewine-V2.pdf>

AFTER THE BAKLAVA

March 25, 2019

I have not eaten honey for many years, except very occasionally. Lately, I have a strong desire to eat some baklava and have sought it out. I ordered some online and it clearly said “made with pure honey.” And when it arrived, it said cane sugar on the box and tasted nothing like honey. I don’t eat sugar and although it said money-back guaranteed, they would not take it back. I no longer trusted what the online ingredients said.

And so, I made my own baklava. It looks like hell, but it has only a few simple ingredients, Filo dough, cinnamon, freshly ground walnuts, some olive oil, and a good quality honey poured over it. Aside from the looks, my baklava tastes perfect and a little piece of it saves a whole lot of trying to satisfy that sweet itch without ingesting a lot of stuff. I am tired of deserts that don’t satisfy. LOL.

Unfortunately, the residue from my stroke has left me irritated and raw. My patience is very thin and everything hurts. It’s probably best I not see friends or family just now, for their sake. LOL.

I find myself being very direct, which I already thought I was, but now I really am. “Direct” is not round-about, but rather instantaneous. Of course, I am trying to relax, which only points out that I’m not. It’s all involved and convoluted, goes round and round, and ends up in the present tense. There is no escaping reality even though we think we have. LOL. I am reminded of this short poem I wrote years ago:

THE REST OF THE MIND

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

Right now I am too tightly wrapped to fully float free. Relief would be nice, but is not likely for a while. It’s like I’m at right-angles to everyone and everything until time gradually

desensitizes me so that I can rest. Meanwhile, here I am, a silhouette against the sunset trying to keep his head down. How exhausting! LOL.

Nevertheless, I am OK. Nothing is paralyzed, at least not yet. I'm hoping there is no other shoe to fall.

“STRANGER IN MY OWN HOME TOWN”

March 27, 2019

An original song by the great jazz-blues singer Percy Mayfield comes close to communicating my current state of mind. If you have never heard Mayfield, he is a very special songwriter, one of my most favorites. Give him a listen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ubp1QVvL1k0>

This blog is about how I vary (minutely) within myself from day to day, but when an event like my recent stroke comes along I have trouble recognizing myself because the change in me is so palpable. You can't miss it. Suddenly I am of two minds and you know I hate that. LOL.

In a word, I outgrow myself and witness it. I'm remarking how close a fit I am to myself, yet still I'm now somehow different enough, so much so that even skipping the beat or rhythm for a day or two is enough to find me beside myself like a sore thumb. I stand out. In other words, I've changed just that much and no longer feel comfortable in my own skin. This happens slightly all the time, but when a sudden event like this health crisis imprints me, it marks and changes me.

It's one thing to forget stuff, but another whole thing to not quite forget, but yet not be the same either. LOL. I coined a line years ago: "To fail ignorance by a meter or a foot." That's how I feel about now.

My resent stroke and the time in the hospital was more than enough to see me skipping a beat, losing track of myself as I know me, and finally turning up as a relative stranger to myself. Surprise! That's how fine-tuned the beat that we live by is exact. But what has changed?

Well, perhaps I have not changed all that much so that you would notice, but certainly enough for me to find me beside myself and slightly out of whack. In a word, I've changed or at least grown enough in the last week that I now zig when I used to zag and vice-versa. In that short time I've outgrown myself by just enough that I can see around it. Usually we don't witness our own change.

It could be the solemnity of the health event or the more sobering nature of it all. Whatever the case, I've managed to pop out of my cocoon or familiar shell just enough to notice the difference. And you can't shoehorn your way back into what you once were; at least I can't. We can't go home again, so to speak.

So, I have to somehow catch up with myself, but it's impossible to catch up with the past. The past catches up with me and has to be updated or fails to. Instead, I've got to soldier on with the future and let the past go, cloying or clinging as it can. I have to reform my habits, update them; it's like molting my skin and I find it very uncomfortable.

At least I have a handle on it now; it took me a bunch of days when, as the song goes, I felt like a stranger in my own skin. I am just enough out of step with how I remember myself to not fit back into the shell I was in only days ago. I find it very irritating, but find myself facing it at every turn. Just my luck. LOL.

Anyway, I get it now. I've changed in these past days, probably via the hospital and all of that. As they say, we can't go home again. This is why they say that with marked health-events like this one, we have to get used to a new normal. That old normal won't cut it anymore.

I morphed! This is another kind of pain, witnessing my own change.

A CODA TO CHANGE

March 28, 2019

Yesterday, I blogged about when sudden change intrudes on our sense of self creating a kind of temporary “schizophrenia.” There are two of us. We are used to each day (like the sun coming up) bringing its degree of change to our life. That’s how change normally ripens. We change gradually.

However, change can also appear through the depth or impact of sudden change. The example I used was the stroke I experienced recently. The stroke demanded change beyond my experience and not at all gradually. I was unprepared for what I had to go through. I wrote about waking up kind of beside myself, with the new (and altered) “me” upstaging and pulling away from the old me I was used to. That’s the idea.

Something I perhaps did not mention clearly enough was that this whole doppelgänger-thing is not something passive, something that I can suffer in silence. In other words, I don’t take this person-doubling lying down. One of me is enough. I imagine that eventually the old me will wear out and the new me will wear in, but that’s not how I approach it; it’s just not my style. The sudden-changed “me” is foreign.

As a remedy for this, “Carpe Diem” is very much the order of the day, IMO. I have to make sense out of the moment. I have to seize the time and go with the new-me and politely jettison who and how I was (and used to be), even if I am fond of it. My point is that it is BEST to choose the future, the emerging self, and not backpedal trying to regain or stay the way we were. It is hard to do, like: impossible.

But as the reality of sudden change emerges, I find it generally confusing. I am torn. Here I am as whom I have always been, but the ring of truth is no longer there. In reality, I’m already marching to a different drummer and don’t like it. So, I’m torn between trying to surf on as I have been and facing the new music I’m presented with. It takes me time to make (to accept) the transition from how I am used to be to the emerging circumstances, the updated me. It is humbling at best.

And this in my experience is not a lazy-option, but one that requires, as mentioned, a positive choice on my part and with as little delay as possible. Clinging to the past, fighting these unavoidable emerging changes, never works and this is true on principle. And, IMO, it's harder than it seems.

And this is because we come from our own history and giving up that comfortable history goes against the grain. After all, the past is everything we know and are; at least we think so. And shoving off from one personality and being forced onto a new (and more foreign) personality is not a natural act, at least for me.

In my case, it takes persuasion (and copious trial and error), comparing my old personality flavor with the new one, deciding whether to give up on who I have been until now. But the writing is on the wall and like the Gertrude Stein line "Before friendship faded, friendship faded," eventually, change is unavoidable, as the old is dying and the new is being born.

However, I come to this choice in the beginning reluctantly and only later with acceptance, and only much later yet finding some of the silver lining in the emerging personality. Of course, there is no choice regardless. LOL.

Really, my only point here is to remind readers that resolving this mini-schizophrenia (the two personalities) into one is best done actively and not dragged out, like masochistically. The sooner we can close the gap the better, IMO. It feels better, truer.

MY HUMPTY-DUMPTY SELF

March 28, 2019

Now we have to talk about Humpty-Dumpty, familiar to us all.

“Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall;
All the king's horses and all the king's men
Couldn't put Humpty together again.”

No one's immune from change and sudden change at that. It's like on my elliptical machine, when there is no resistance; life just turns the intensity level up. It's a sure cure for getting too glib. Like the ancient mariner, we wrench the helm from fate and try to find safe passage through the narrows. Perhaps if we relaxed this would all be done for us naturally. LOL.

The Self is a very precarious fabrication, certainly a house of cards. The Buddhists endlessly articulate that there is no permanently existent Self. They don't say there is no Self, because of course there is. What they do say is that there is no eternal Self or soul, no unchanging existent that is called “Me, myself, and I.”

The self is basically the sum-total of all our attachments and fixations, positively, negatively, or neutral. Or, as I like to talk to myself, my attachments are the glue that holds the Self together.

And the Self can crash and burn as near as the hour's heartbreak, a death in the family, or a crushing blow. The Self is easily devastated and our coherency is wiped clean in a nanosecond. The self is an assemblage that easily shatters into a million pieces. And once shattered, it takes hours, days, months, or in some cases years to recover. This is true.

And while we struggle to stabilize the self, it does not occur to us that perhaps the most valuable experience is with our Self blasted to smithereens, blown wide open, with no cover and total vulnerability. Yes, the Self re-animates itself, pulling itself back together like the undead until we feel secure, but by that

point we are no longer sensitive to the quick and are snug in our cryogenic sleep as we usually are.

SONAR PINGS

March 29, 2019

Recovery from a stroke takes time. You can't rush it; at least I can't. And I'm not saying I can make a complete recovery or that things add up exactly to the way they were. They wouldn't add up even without the stroke. Things change all the time. However, usually we are not aware of any difference in ourselves.

Concurrent with my recent stroke experience it seems I have a type of natural ultrasound scan, a natural probe or sonar ping that creates something like an echogram from where I am right now to where I used to be.

About the best I can do is continue to check in on where I'm at. I like to think of it as "pinging," sending a ping that bounces off my state of mind. If that ping comes back with a bit of a lead thud or thud, I know that I am not back yet, at least not back so that I don't know any difference. I look for the ring of a bell, not the thud.

It's like a piece of frozen ice that has not yet thawed. We just have to wait a bit longer and perhaps work the wrinkles out of that frozen stiffness. Yet, the fact that I can hear a ping or an echo is encouraging. Otherwise I would not notice a thing. Something would just be gone, missing, without leaving a trace.

Resolving the difference between call and echo will take time, but the fact that the difference is there means it's doable or still in transition.

LIFE GOES ON

March 30, 2019

I don't want this blog to be only about my health, so my health is going to the back burner for a while. All this recovery stuff is going to take time. Reading is readable, but not easy or enjoyable just now. My hearing is less acute than it was. And my attention or interest in movies or films is shortened. It is clear I need to relax more deeply.

I have various doctors to see, tests to take, and on and on. I am wearing a heart monitor for a month and you know how I like that.

It may be a good time to pick up with my close-up photography again, especially now that spring is coming and we will have flowers. Photography seems natural for me and is all visual and time intensive. It could be something that is natural for me to do just now.

DHARMA -- TRYING THE TEST

April 1, 2019

I'd like to give readers a break from my personal journey, but it turns out that's much of what I write about these days. It's what's happening. LOL. And, as you can imagine, I am learning a lot lately.

I am so much a child of the moment that I can't ignore what I'm going through, even if it is also health related. So, here is an update for those who have time or interest.

I feel a little like the Greek king Sisyphus, rolling the rock uphill only to have it roll back down, and lately you can add to that something of the flavor of both the Tibetan yoga saint Milarepa and even some of the Old Testament, where Abraham is asked to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice. I don't mean to sound grandiose, just that there are classic lessons to be learned.

I have spent almost 46 years putting together our center (starting in Ann Arbor) and some 40 years creating our home, dharma center, and compound here in the city of Big Rapids, Michigan, an old logging town on the banks of the mighty Muskegon River.

Through the 1980s (and beyond), a steady stream of very high lamas from the Karma Kagyu Lineage of Tibetan Buddhism flowed through our dharma center here in Big Rapids, Michigan. Such a stream would be unthinkable today, partly to do with impermanence and mostly because of the circumstances (at the time) of these great Rinpoches having no particular place to be as they do now. Today, these great dharma teachers are seated in their various monasteries and centers in India and elsewhere. Yet, back in the 1980s they were free to travel and did.

As the years passed and the kids have grown up and moved on, Margaret and I each have thought of moving from Big

Rapids. We had originally moved here to raise our kids, because my parents lived here and kids could be raised in a small town near nature. Well, the kids are gone and here we still are.

Margaret has wanted to go north to the Traverse City area and I have wanted to go south back to my old home town of Ann Arbor, Michigan and live there. Aside from inertia, because we could not agree on a direction, we have stayed where we are.

But what would take too long a story to relate here, as it turned out, it occurred to me that it did not matter so much where I lived and since we had kids both north and south and Margaret loves the Great Lakes, what do I care? I agreed to move north to Traverse City and the Leelanau peninsula area. Did I have pangs of attachment to our center here? Of course, I did, but I felt that I would be me wherever I went.

And with that thought I agreed that I would move north and, although the snow was much deeper there, I would join into that wonderful upstate community. And to show my willingness to scatter the mandala of our center into the river (so to speak), I proceeded to take apart the dharma center, room by room, something like seven rooms-full before I stopped. And I did it with a glad heart and happy mind. I got into moving 100%.

Anyway, I deconstructed the center, room by room, packing up hundreds of boxes. I bought \$1000 worth of boxes of all sizes. They came, to my surprise, on two entire pallets via a 53-foot tractor trailer and filled the house with collapsed boxes. I had no idea they would be that bulky. LOL.

So, like in the Bible, with Abraham and his son Isaac, I was willing to sacrifice our entire compound created over 40 years and just move, but it turned out I did not end up doing that.

Both Margaret and I independently decided to stay where we are and visit more often both up north and down south. And like taking a small page from the book of the Tibetan saint and yogi Milarepa (who built and rebuilt a tower for his teacher many times), I tore down and then put back every piece of each room and did this room after room after room,

so there was some discipline in that. LOL. It has been a lesson.

CLOSING THE OPEN DOOR

April 3, 2019

[Notes: I had a chance to wait in the doctor's office for 1-1/2 hours today until the doctor was free. They had no magazines, so I browsed through my Facebook stream of friends with my iPhone. It was like a waterfall. I did have a chance to see what everyone is writing about and you folks are doing great. There is enough that you cover that it is OK for me to drone on about my recent health episode. I got a complete neuro exam and the doctor declared that he could find no damage from what was an actual stroke, which he said was unbelievable. So, forgive me while I complete the autopsy on the shattering of my Self over these last two weeks.]

Those of you who have tired of this health theme, I apologize. Come back another day. These are my notes on the breakdown of the sense of self during my recent health attack. I am still learning from the experience and am not done examining it. However, the corner has been turned. My Self has come back, returned. I don't know whether to laugh or cry.

In each of our lives there will come times when sudden events are so upsetting or disrupting that the stability of the Self is lost, even shattered or vacated, exposing us more to the nature of our own mind for either a short or longer time, the time it takes for our Self to reform and reanimate itself. This can be caused by any shocking event, an upset, a death in the family, loss of job, whatever stuns the self into vacating its function of protecting us from being vulnerable.

My recent self-shattering time, something less than two weeks, has come to an end. For those interested, I would like to sum that up with yet a few MORE words about that shattering of the self, its closure, and eventual reanimation. I.e. the self's coming back together again. It happens to all of us sometime. It's only a question of when and for what length of time the Self has vacated. This recent vacation was a good long time, in my experience.

For many of us, it does not take all that much to upset our apple cart and certainly having a stroke qualifies. In a manner of speaking, when that happens, our inner-slate is just wiped clean, our Self abandoned. From time to time, under duress, we all become creatures of the moment, wanderers in the instantaneous present and we can easily lose track of the ties that bind us to the past and instead find ourselves cast out on the sea of voyages.

It's a bit like when we see lightning strike in summer and wait however many seconds until we hear the thunder clap which tells us how far away the lightning strike was. The shattering of (and loss) of the sense of self is similar. How long does it take for the Self (which is very industrious) to get itself together and reanimate? Is it hours, days, weeks... or longer?

In the case of my recent health-event, it took just shy of two weeks for my Self to bridge the gap between how I used to be and how I am now. That's a long interval. For that many days, the dualism of the mind was laid open before me and if I could stand to look, which was hard, much was there to be seen. Vulnerability was the nature of the day. At least this is true in my case.

Like a self-sealing puncture wound (or a hive of bees), the Self is incessantly busy around-the-clock covering its nakedness as if its life depended on it. It is almost comical. And while we may welcome the return to normalcy (when the self returns), it is not often that the very void (like a pair of eyelids) is held open to our vision whether we like it or not. There is an enormous amount that can be learned about the nature of our mind in that short period when the Self has been vacated and we are at a loss... of Self.

And while I am glad to be of one-mind again, who knows how long before I will again be privy to such a view of the mind laid out for me to see. By now, it's zipped, all closed back up and I like the security of that feeling of a secure self, but at the same time I no longer have any reference to go by, past or present.

IMO, the point here is that with no reference there is, well, no reference. I can't know what I was then or am now, what is missing or was lost. That solves a lot of problems but is not all

that comforting. Belatedly, I realize that when the Self was vacated, there was a lot of information available that is no longer visible now. Self-sealing is a fact; it's inexorable.

So, while on the one hand I am glad to finally feel more secure, at the same time my own desire for security has once again closed and locked the doors to the mind. Go figure!

RE-ENTERING THE STREAM

April 4, 2019

Well, I'm settling down to something that's a lot like life again after a bit of a wild ride. I think I will skip the local carnival this summer. LOL.

Since I had torn apart our dharma center in preparation for a move, I had to put it all back. And I did it very carefully. When it came to the dharma items, books, shelves, etc., I did it all myself, piece by piece. And I ended up with a renewed respect for the center and the awareness that it is my responsibility to keep everything "prime," even if we have few visitors these years. It was a lesson.

Life is more of an open book than it has been, "open" meaning not-closed. Spring is a big plus just now and I like to sit outside in the Sun with my coat on and do nothing.

I can maintain my online activity like Facebook with not too much trouble. I want to be of use. I am considering having a Sunday afternoon get-together here in Big Rapids for dharma discussions and perhaps to walk together in nature. I am trying to figure out how fragile my health is and how much one-on-one people-traffic I can handle in person. I still tire easily.

I'm finding my way back into some photography after quite an absence.

HARD-SCRABBLE

April 5, 2019

I have tried my best to wrap this recent health crisis up and move beyond it. That's my intent. However, life is not quite as convenient or cut and dried as that. I thought that once I managed physical recovery and moved on from trying to piece my shattered-self back together, the rest would follow like a walk in the park. Well, that my friends was wishful thinking.

Getting myself back together in one piece was a good thing. No doubt. However, it's not as simple as that. I also managed to negotiate the recent New Moon, turning the corner on the month. For me, New Moon each month is always a struggle and a time of transition. I got through that, once Margaret reminded me I was in the throes of New Moon time. Knowing that, I relaxed.

What I am finding out is the physical recovery from the stroke is just like the outer shell of the event. There is more. And while I would just as soon put it all behind me and blog about something else, I find myself still unearthing the reality of the extended event and it goes on. I feel I owe it to those of you in a similar health-place not to just gloss it over or sugar-coat what I am experiencing.

What I'm finding is that there is a longer recovery than just the physical process that I had anticipated. The mental and emotional recovery (which I originally did not consider) takes even longer than the physical process and is more arduous; or, so it seems.

As mentioned, my physical healing is going well and I assumed that with it would come whatever mental healing was needed as a reflex. I'm sure that's true, but this mental and emotional healing does not follow the physical like day follows night or like thunder follows lightning. It looks to take a GREAT deal longer indeed, like: a long time. That's why I feel obligated to share with those of you that are interested or know what I'm talking about.

Beyond the physical recovery, beyond the reanimation and the coming back together of what we call our Self, is the mental damage done; although it may appear more subtle; at the same time this is more devastating. It's like a bomb blast or the crater left by the event. Mentally, these days, I'm pretty much a tabula-rosa, a blank slate. Where once was a forest is now a desert plain. In a word: nothing is to be found as far as I can see and I have looked. There is no profile; it's all just quite flat.

I am sure that all the filigree and mental vegetation will gradually grow back and the sheer starkness of it all once again become overgrown. However, it is too early for that by a long shot. I am grateful for the physical recovery, but when the smoke clears it's like there are no haptics, nothing to feel but no-feeling. The other shoe seems to be taking a very long time to drop. LOL.

The day is filled with things that have to be done. And everything that I have to do in a day seems hanging over me. I don't mind having to do things, but for some reason I don't like having them out there before me waiting to be done. I just want to do them and have them over. This reaches ridiculous proportions like doing my dharma practice for the following morning tonight. Or, taking my morning shower before going to bed tonight. That's how much I want nothing to do.

It seems the only thing I am comfortable doing lately is something physical, like cleaning out this room, sorting through that, fixing whatever needs fixing, etc. What does that mean?

I have no idea, but I'm certain it will take its course and come back around. As I always say to myself, the straighter the line, the finer the curve. Everything circles or spirals. I know that. I also know my mind has been pruned, so to speak, cut way back and I have to let whatever grows grow back as it will.

It's not all foreign to me. Part of me is relieved to have nothing to do. Or, as mentioned earlier, I feel so much that way that I want to get things done ahead of time just so I could properly do nothing. Perhaps I need to do nothing for a long time.

I can see (or think I see) how, in time, I could be much more to the point, less glib, and more real – something like that.

Yet, right now, like the old sci-fi novel, I'm a "Stranger in a Strange Land" or more correctly I would accent or emphasize the "strange land" component.

This here is a stark landscape and not one I can easily just walk out of or away from. There is no escape, but rather only cultivating this seemingly barren soil and growing from it the reality of my truth. To that degree, or in that sense, I am very positive that as I crystalize, my form will follow function better than it ever has.

However, in the meantime, I have to slow down because I can't speed up and get there. Am I clear?

KARMA KOAN

April 6, 2019

[This blog is for those who have experienced and perhaps understand grief or sudden shock and have wondered what we can do about it. There is something that I want to share with you. I am by function a phenomenologist, which means I study my own consciousness and describe it. I came up with the following as relates to sudden shock or the shattering of the Self that I find very useful. My style of dharma does not have koans, but we have similar challenges that require a working answer. Here is one.]

This is a new insight, so I am probably not articulating it well enough yet. Let me know if you understand it and feed some of it back to me.

Since my stroke, up until now I've been looking in the wrong direction, that wrong direction being back there and then, you know, where I came from and the back there I have trouble remembering who and what I was. And I believe this is a common problem, actually a mistake.

Here I have been mourning or counting the blessings that I used to have, instead of counting the blessings that I now "have." That's easy to say, but I can back it up. And in my defense, it is hard to count what I'm not yet aware of, meaning my new situation that is just now coming into focus. LOL.

I have spent years sharing with folks in books, articles, videos, music, here on Facebook, and in public talks what I understand, have had experiences with, and sometimes even realized about astrology, music, rock concert posters, photography, nature, and of course the dharma. As a child of the 1960s I believe in sharing information.

So, it's no wonder that after my recent stroke I reached for those topics, to see if they are still intact, since that's how I am used to representing myself. And I am confounded when I can't quite get back into those topics to the degree that they snap to attention for me like they used to. For some reason, they are veiled or obscured. Sure, they are still back in there somewhere, but like under a caul. They are my history, but for some strange reason I'm just not into them (can't get into

them) at the present. They now have a hollow ring. How frightening that since of loss can feel.

So, of course I have spent time, and not a little anguish, over the fact that it seems I've lost my lifelong interest in these subjects, even if only "somewhat." They don't have the edge for me they had only weeks ago. That quickly became the elephant in the room. How's that?

And the answer turns out to be quite simple. All of those life-topics are not happening as much with me lately as what I've been going through with all these health-related issues. The historical me has been sidelined. They are history. To put it another way, my past has always been history. And what I have discovered is that I'm not being honest with myself. And here is the important point:

Instead of paying attention to what is most fresh (which is the whole dharma tradition), the most real just now and what's actually happening, what is spontaneous and alive in me, I find myself trying to reinvent who it is I think I was just a few weeks ago and who I have been for as long as I can remember. The great Rinpoche Chögyam Trungpa said it: "First thought, best thought."

I never used to do that (read from the past) because my whole blog here is about riding the moment, seizing the present as the fiducial for my blogs. And there, at last, is where I found the problem, the little bugger. I'm no longer paying attention to my own present moment out of fear that I have lost some (or something) of whom I was and always thought I was. Like Lot's wife, I am looking back and turning into a pillar of salt.

For sure, the stroke popped some kind of balloon-ride I was on and I fell to earth. Of that I'm certain. All my party tricks and glibness were swept away in one fell swoop, leaving me standing there naked and vulnerable on what initially appears very much like an arid desert plain. No adornment; no elaboration.

However, I'm just starting to get a glimmer and see that most of what I lost was just my collected parlor-tricks and perhaps the oil that greased my glibness. And, as mentioned, the reality of the health-event knocked the wind out of me, leaving

me gasping for air, fighting for breath. And of course I reached for what I knew, what I was used to, in other words: me as I used to remember me.

Armed with the above realization, I find myself giving up the way things were (used to be) with me, not because I am denied or have lost this memory, but rather because it's ME as I was and I am no longer focused on all of the bells and whistles that I once was. I never was focused on the past except as a touchstone, a memory. Instead, here I am, stark naked and stripped of what no longer interests me, yet feeling I should identify with the past to recapture what I am, what I was or think I was. I have checked this point out repeatedly and verified it to my satisfaction. I just want to make sure readers get the point properly: that I'm doing all this to myself. I will try to explain.

It's not that the stroke or any sudden devastating event has stripped me of memories that I had and used to treasure. That's not it. It's not that I have no memory of what was, but rather that (at heart) I'm just no longer interested in what was, in the past. Try as I might, what was (used to be) glittering and shiny now falls flat and no longer holds my interest. Nothing was taken away. That's what is so hard to face up to, IMO. The fact is that I don't care. Imagine that, me not caring? LOL. For me, that is the truth.

In other words, it's not forgetfulness or a sudden loss of memory that was wiped out by the stroke as I most feared. That's just not it. What is "it" is that I don't care anymore. I have changed, but not in a bad way, but for sure in a different way. And that, at first glance, is a very scary observation. Yet, it has a big silver-lining.

And that is: I have lost or had stripped away an enormous mass of inessentials, what I would call B.S. And so I feel like the emperor and his new clothes. I feel naked without my old persona or bag-of-tricks and have not yet figured out how to create a new face that I can stand to be. It's mostly vanity folks. So, to make a long story even longer, here is the gist of what I'm seeing:

I'm not able to reanimate my past, not because my memory has been wiped out and somehow lost, but because I am (at

heart) no longer interested in it, and for at least two reasons. Number one, I am too busy dealing with the present moment's health issues to attempt to reanimate my past just for what turns out to be cold comfort. And, Number two, I don't really care about all that water over the dam (the past) and need to be (and kept) busy determining what is essential in this more modern stripped-down version of my person, the one that is just emerging, i.e. in the present moment.

And so, I can see this transition could take a long or a short time, depending upon how much I cling (or attempt to cling) to my past. And it's not like there is a real choice. The only real choice is this present moment and seizing on whatever opportunities it presents. I am starting to get that idea.

And instead of thinking I have lost so much that was valuable, instead I can see that I've had so much that is inessential removed, leaving me with the essentials from which I can build a much more integral personality, if I will just keep my eyes front and in the present.

And for my fellow dharma practitioners, there is this: There is nothing wrong with my mind and certainly nothing wrong with the absolute nature of my mind. Providing all our basic senses are working, nothing essential has been (or could be) removed. I'm just not used to working with my new set of personality-tools without all of the familiar (and non-essential) bells and whistles I am used to. And so, I'm looking backward rather than forward, which I seldom ever do.

The takeaway for me is that I need to stop thinking about the past, who and what I was (or used to be), and keep my mind on the present moment from which I can fashion a much more aerodynamic and integral "me." In a word, my whole dharma training has been about remaining in the present moment, not in the past or the future. And so, because I have had a big upset in health is no reason why I should suddenly be pinching myself every other second trying to secure a witness as to what I have been and where I have come from.

I never did that before and it would have not worked well if I did. It does not work well now. The past (or future) has always been veiled compared to the present. And it's no different now. It was a mistake to dig in the past looking for a present.

Instead, I should remain in the present and make out of whatever I have something of value. It's far easier to make of the present a life than to endlessly try to prolong a past I can't quite remember and never could. It has never been any different, this remembering of the past.

The moment I realized the above I entered the present fully again and felt like myself. I am more sober now and taking less for granted than I did, but I am reminded of an interview I did with the great bluesman Howlin' Wolf in 1969, in which he said:

“Just like a flower. You see, we're trampin' on this grass. We stay here a couple months and tramp right around here, we gonna' kill it. Just as soon as we stop trampin', the first warm sunshine, and then the grass gonna' start a growin' again.”
It's the same idea.

THE ANATOMY OF A STROKE

April 7, 2019

I should say autopsy, but either way what follows are just some general comments I've had about my recent stroke. For those of us who have had strokes (I had a previous TIA – minor stroke), I find it interesting to understand (at least for me) what is something to worry about and what is mostly in our imagination, not that there is anything too benign about strokes.

I had to remind myself that just as illness, injury, and disease obviously physically can affect us, as long as our mind is clear, we are good to go. Of course, if we lose our mind, then all bets are off. We can't do much.

A severe shock (like a stroke) is like snuffing out the candle of our attachments with one blow. Gone! Strokes, as I understand them, are not about losing our mind in the classical sense, but rather about losing track of our mind, which (I'm sorry to say) is a bit like herding cats. Mostly, it can't be done.

The "Why?" is because it's the nature of the Self, which is to be a collection of our attachments and fixations. And when in a stroke the Self is shattered, the problem with getting all our attachments or fixations back in one piece is that after (and through) a stroke We change and not only temporarily lose our particular fixations, we also have new and different fixations and attachments and often very few at all.

In that sense the Self can't come back just as it was and, most important, WE change through the stroke-process, so we often don't want attachments back. LOL. Now, that's an insoluble problem, especially when we change as to what we like and dislike.

I got a personal tour of all of this during my recent stroke (my second stroke), which totally disrupted my life, turned it upside down and, like changing the course of a river, is still changing my life's course. There is nothing like first-hand experience of a health crisis to absorb you. It's confusing by nature. LOL.

Now, keep in mind that as the stroke came on I am told I was pretty-much babbly some incoherent stuff. And acting strange too. For example, Margaret tells me I was standing at the stove frying tortillas and when I got to about the ninth tortilla in a row, Margaret knew that something was off. Being unable to articulate or find and put words together lasted for a while and then reoccurred as I tired.

Aside from being incoherent, the first flush of the stroke-experience found me running around trying to figure out what I had lost. Did I still have all my fingers and toes, so to speak? And, of course, that is kind of an impossible task, since if we really lost something other than one of the five senses, how would we know we lost it? So, there is was a lot of self-inflicted suffering in the beginning, in my case.

What I forgot to remember at the time is that aside from impaired senses (I lost a little hearing for a while), we can't lose the actual nature of the mind, nor our intrinsic awareness. In other words, I can be aware that I have been harmed by the stroke, but that awareness that is aware of my injury itself is not injured or harmed. That is what I mean by intrinsic awareness. Our native Awareness is alive and well and very much still there – unharmed and taking all this in.

In fact, that may be most all we have right after a stroke, a pure awareness stripped of any self-attachment and fixations, something quite unusual for us. The Self has been vacated almost totally. In fact, for most of us, the only time we are not compromised by fixation is when we undergo a personal shock strong enough to shatter our attachments. Then, indeed, we are (temporarily) like a yogi, at least enlightened of our attachments. We still may be running around like a chicken with its head cut off, as they used to say, but inside there it is like new-fallen snow: there are no bells ringing. Silence.

Just as we stamp in a puddle, the force of our shoe forces the water out of the depression, yet it soon flows back in. This is what happens when our Self is shattered by a powerful or frightening experience; our self soon re-establishes and reanimates itself, but it takes time. It took me a lot of time, like more than a week.

In my case, I found the force or shock of my recent stroke stunning yet absolutely clarifying. There was not a thought in the mental sky, aside from the flurry of worry-thoughts about losing my mind. LOL.

I was not worried about “losing my mind” in the classic sense because there my mind was doing the worrying, but rather I was worried about losing track of my mind, which was a losing battle. Like William Blake wrote “Nothing of equal value was lost.” Most of my lost attachments I’m better off without. The Self naturally is like a kaleidoscope, so compound that by a forced vacation and its anyone’s guess just how the Self will reanimate itself.

In summary, I was upset enough that I did not even stop to remember that we can’t lose our mind, but we very much can lose our sense of Self (and fixations) for a shorter or a longer time. In my case, it was for a week or more and that tide of self is still coming in. Some of my previous attachments will never make it back as part of my Self, which is fine by me. One the other hand, I need a little something to fixate on if only for old time’s sake. It’s been like Antarctica around here; no fuzzy-wuzzy. The home decorating of our selves is a very personal matter.

As mentioned, it’s been an austere sense of cold-turkey I experienced with the stroke, one mostly with little attachment or fixation. All that just vacated. Nothing. How scary that was, but also strangely refreshing. Not a cloud in the mental sky.

Weeks later, I’m still on a shoe-string diet as far as attachments go, getting along with less and liking it more. In fact, many of those attachments I use to have now kind of nauseate me, so obvious to me now that it was just me pandering to myself, now that I see them clearly.

I believe each person could benefit from studying the Self and the self’s particular collection of attachments and fixations. I see that most of them are just diversions or pure entertainment..

THE SHOCK OF THE DHARMA PROTECTORS

April 8, 2019

[Continuing on with my health issues, but this blog is on how what I have learned affects my dharma practices and preparing for the bardo realms and rebirth.]

A strong health-event like a stroke can shatter the Self, but wipes out only so much, mostly the inessentials, what we commonly call the Self. When the Self is shattered and vacated, what remains is the actual nature of our own mind, which is inviolable. That nature cannot be altered or affected now or ever.

Yet, when we lose the personal grip on our Self, when it is vacated or shattered, we are kind of helpless until we reassemble or reanimate some functional persona or Self image. The Self is the habitual interface we have to the mind. It has taken me almost three weeks to get a handle on my stroke, which means to get enough of a self back to functioning well. That is more than just a bit of a hiatus. LOL.

And the problem with the Self throughout the stroke was one of simple misdirection, but don't imagine finding the proper direction is easy. In trying to hang on to what I call "myself," I was too focused on the past (constantly checking to see if it was there) and trying to recover what I could of it; I was not aware enough of the present. This was my big mistake. In the long run (or any run) the present moment is the only way to recover or recreate anything, so my fixation on checking-on and salvaging the past was futile – understandable, but pure misdirection. LOL.

This flattening of my user-profile (i.e., the shattering of the Self) has got to be similar to what happens in the bardo after death. The pith teachings all clearly say that we leave the Self behind at death and find ourselves increasingly coping with the bardo without a Self, so to speak -- up the creek without a paddle. The logic in the dharma teachings is crystal clear, but it is convenient to ignore the reality.

In the training for the realization practices, we are told over and over again that a sudden surprise, gunshot, car horn

(almost anything) is an excellent opportunity and time to look at the nature of our mind, because in that moment of surprise or shock, we might just get jarred out of our fixations enough to see the mind's nature. That's the concept and it's traditional.

Any great shock, like a death of a loved one or any shocking event, can be enough to throw us out of our habitual fixations and attachments so that in that moment or time we might see the nature of our own mind.

A shock such as a stroke (or whatever) is capable of devastating the Self, thus clearing or unveiling the mind for what could be an extended time; and this too has to be just another form of how the nature of the mind can appear or be seen without the normal amount of fixation or attachment. Health-evens are nothing that special or different. They follow the same trajectory.

The takeaway for me here was to realize that the mind with the Self shattered, vacated or removed, (even curbed) is like seeing an eclipse of the Self.

Up until now, I had liked to imagine death and entering the bardo to still be with the full use of the Self. And this, even though all of the texts say we have to check the Self at death's door or that it is phased out very soon after death. I heard that, but I never really heard it. The Self does not accompany us beyond death except perhaps for a short way. That needs to be registered by readers.

Having experienced the eclipse of the Self during my recent stroke (and once before) did NOT leave me with the sense there will be the facileness of a Self at death as our primary interface and, to the degree the Self persists, would only succeed in further obscuring the true nature of the mind. The Self after death (with its attachments and fixations) is only an obstacle to clarity.

Let's face it. As sentient beings, we speak the language of the Self, with all of its clinging, fixation, and attachment – positive, negative, and neutral. That's almost all we know and are familiar with. We are not familiar with the nature of the mind WITHOUT the Self as our interface and interpreter. My dear friends, to me this concept is stunning.

What it means (as I see it) is that what I have just experienced through my recent stroke-event is the coin of the realm in the bardo and not an anomaly, and unless we have thinned out and very much cleared our Self, we will never see the true clarity of the mind's nature and thus we will be unable to best guide ourselves to rebirth.

Others have told me that they understand the Karmapa or some great holy being will appear in the bardo and guide us to safety. I cannot say if this is true or not because I don't know. About all I can say is: don't count on that and thus not prepare your mind for the bardo. I'm sure I have been guided in my life by great beings, but mostly I have seen progress when I turned the wheel of my own dharma. My point is: don't rest on your laurels.

As the pith teachings point out, "don't prolong the past" and "Don't invite the future," so we can't reference the past or the future, but only the present and even then we are told not to alter the present. We are a child of the present moment and whatever we have at hand is what we have. All the references, conceptualization, and elaboration in the world won't help. We each have to submit ourselves to reality.

The Self, while inconsequential (as in: impermanent), is still necessary, meaning it is necessary for us to have some self or interface to the nature of the mind. It's conventional, if nothing else. At least, at present, that's the only language we speak: the Self. So, from such a shock as can break out (via a stroke, etc.), it may be easier to build a new, more streamlined, Self than it is to carry out the obligations of our past self that we are so addicted to -- our history of fixations.

To be severed suddenly from my past, as in my recent stroke, was stark and austere. As I like to say, I was like a stranger in a strange land. This is NOT familiar territory.

IMO, we need to take that sheer starkness to heart, turn ourselves away from the past or future (and any imagined loss of our Self), and keep our awareness peeled on the present moment. From that association (with the present moment) and our diminished or uninflated Self, we can perhaps fashion a new, more aerodynamically-sound, Self, one that is more the interface a Self should be, meaning as

low-profile as possible. This could actually aid us in negotiating the bardo and future rebirths by not obscuring our mind. Another way to say this is the Self won't be there in the bardo. LOL.

To repeat: from what I have just gone through, dexterity or flying without a Self (so to speak) is very much more difficult than I had ever imagined it. In a word, I am totally addicted to my own B.S. and, as my kids say, that's true big time. How do we learn to let go of our fixations or attachments (with all their elaboration) and take the mind, as we might say, neat.

Right now, I am not even close.

SPRING TRYING TO BE HERE

April 9, 2019

[Days warmer and then colder. Getting out for walks. Working in the center basement organizing project (still cold down there). Drive to Grand Rapids tomorrow for doctor's appointment. Here is a fun poem on dharma practice.]

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.

SPRING FLOWERS

April 10, 2019

[I'm doing a major spring-cleaning in the dharma center basement. Blog postings may be intermittent or inactive for a while.

Best to all.

Michael

Here is a poem i wrote a while ago.

SEMANTICS

It's not just that being,

Is empty;

It's that there is,

An emptiness,

Of being.

It's never been there.

PRECIOUS QUIETNESS

April 11, 2019

Some folks have asked for an update on my health. I don't want to bother folks endlessly on the my ongoing health issues, but here is an update.

I'm still going through tests and that will continue. Yesterday, I went 50 miles to Grand Rapids for tests with my neuro-ophthalmologist and she wants me to take on a regular stroke specialist, so that apparently is in the offing.

As for how I feel in the here and the now, I'm still treading water these days. I've got all my fingers and toes plus my senses, so that's good. The following poem (written some time ago) pretty-much sums it up. Sorry if it is a little maudlin (or sci-fi like), but this is what comes out if I am honest.

It's like standing out in a vast plain after a bomb blast with nothing to be seen in any direction and you can't hear the sound of a pin dropping. There is no profile and no way that there is an echo because (although I am writing words here) there is nothing to be said.

It's been weeks, but I still don't have the first feel of anything. I'm just taking it in as it comes up and I keep trying to get ready for ... nothing, which is the whole point. It's more of a start-over point and it is also refreshing.

Indeed, this experience is outside conventional reality as I know it and so unless you have been here, it will sound foreign. It's not all bad. It's also a relief not to have all of my fixations whirling about. I still have plenty. LOL.

Are poems prophetic? I wonder, as this poem written some time ago sums it up.

TIME OUT

In the middle of time,
Without a thought,
It comes,
Like the tide coming in.
(Not at life's end).

I had planned,
To get away from it all.

Too late,
Now,
For retreat;
Distance is close,
Far is now near.

Motions are going,
Every which way,
Striking me dumb.

I'll speak while I can.

The rest I am seeking,
Overtook me;

It's already here!

And it's:
Precious,
Precious:

Stillness in chaos,
Silence in sound.

THE TWO SIDES OF LIFE

April 13, 2019

I have been asked what have I noticed that is different since my recent stroke. Aside from “everything,” I’ve notice one remarkable thing and I’m remarking on it here. LOL. It has to do with grasping a subject as opposed to letting a subject just arise, and I will have to attempt to explain.

I no longer find myself suggesting or putting things forth, i.e. thinking things up out of the blue. Instead, I now find myself more able to RESPOND to situations, but with a much more accurate and direct response. I probably should expand on this a little since it could go in one ear and out the other.

Where before I came up with all kinds of things, most sort of spontaneously (ideas, suggestions, themes, and so on), now I don’t find myself doing that. Yet, I do find myself more able to respond in immediate situations (quite spontaneously) and with useful information.

Whether this is a natural response on the part of stroke victims because of the clarity that results from blasting off a large part of the Self or what, I can’t say. And I don’t know how to phrase this, but I will hazard a try. For example, I find myself listening to what I myself say more than I can remember. In other words, instead of just understanding what I am saying, I too now feel I am benefiting and being informed by what I say (or what comes through me) in response to questions or situations that naturally arise.

I am not saying I feel any more “psychic’ than I use to or am in any way “telling fortunes.” That’s not it. What I do experience is the ability to strike to the heart of a situation, separating the wheat from the chaff and getting right down to the nitty-gritty. I was always pretty good at this, but I don’t remember my being part of whatever listening-audience there is, like: hearing myself speak. Now I do. I am going in deeper and with much less distraction than before. And it’s just happening instead of my doing it, if that makes any sense.

At the same time, as mentioned, I don't find myself naturally coming up with much, which I used to. Instead, I now find myself responding more meaningfully to questions. Another way to phrase this is that instead of grasping topics or ideas and bringing them forth, I now depend on letting these same topics and ideas reveal themselves as they will. It's basically 180-degree reversal in technique.

So, gain some, lose some. Another way of saying this is that I am able to listen better than before, but not just passively. My response to what I hear (like verbally) is to get right at the point. That is quite different than I remember.

And I have been watching this kind of switchover for decades, each of us gradually transitioning from coming up with stuff, making things happen, to the reverse, letting things happen. However, since the stroke, this trend seems to have sprung forward more emphatically. It always takes some getting used to, learning to let-go and allow things to just naturally happen instead of making them happen. It's a major difference, but also it is kind of subtle. Which side of the equation are you are? Ask yourself that.

Another way to say all this is that there is no real choice. After a certain point, this is the only way one any of us can do things, letting them happen as opposed to making them happen. Like the old song by Anthony and the Imperials, "Just Two Kinds of People in the World," any one of us is biased (or even limited) to one approach or the other. And, in my experience, it is time or age related.

When we are younger, we make things happen; as we get older we let things happen. Either way, things still happen from both sides

THE FORCE OF METAPHOR

April 14, 2019

There are some places where western esotericism or occultism has a lot to say. What follows is one of them.

There is only so much directness that we can assimilate or absorb at one time. Too much and it can quickly assume the proportions of just some more fire & brimstone. It's like burning a plant with too much sunshine. Sometimes images or metaphors are an easier way to realize an idea because they can act like time-release capsules and be absorbed by us gradually. They can be not so much in our face.

In the back of my mind (and often in the front), I have the repeating image of the Sun shining in the dark firmament, radiating light always. And in procession to the Sun are all beings, starting from a distance at birth, each presenting themselves to the Sun, bowing, and gradually withdrawing from the Sun into old age. I wrote a little poem about this some 50 years ago:

Ah! Who could let such a bargain pass,
As this poor century will allow.
On coming in, I'm asked to leave,
And when asked to leave, I bow.

That point where we perfectly present ourselves we could call our Prime of Life and those stages before would be our youth, while those stages after would be old age.

Those stages of youth are our formative years, years during which we reach our critical mass and those years past our prime-of-life are our deconstructive years or old age.

Sometimes I have the image of reaching for and grasping something like a baseball (youth), gripping it, and then letting go and releasing it (old age). We could also see it as presenting and offering our self to the Lord-of-Life, and the subsequently withdrawal.

The point of all these images (if they even speak to you) is that there is a season and direction to life, with a motion

toward the prime-of-life (Sun center) and an equal and opposite motion away from the prime-of-life.

It is the directionality that I am focusing on here, the formative or “taking a hold” of our youth and the releasing or “letting go” of old age. The idea here is to not work against the directionality of either youth or old age. However, most people can’t help but do it or at least try.

In other words, in youth don’t release or let go until you have reached the nadir (most gravitational point) of the prime-of-life and, correspondingly, don’t try to push or grasp after the prime-of-life, but rather release and learn to let go.

Going against either of these directions will have inharmonious and debilitating results, to say the least. I have studied this since a young adult, thanks to my first dharma teacher who trained me to go through my first Saturn Return (29.4 years) with my eyes open as opposed to going through the return without realizing it and then waking up to its implications later on, as in “Never trust anyone over thirty.”

The concept is to not withdraw from the body until the body is full-formed (youth) and not push to get things done after one has crossed the nadir, the prime-of-life, and entered old age. We do either at our own peril.

Or we could say, don’t exhale until we have fully inhaled and don’t inhale before you have fully exhaled. Either one is harmful to our health. We miss something that way.

The western esoteric schools have something similar when they say don’t attempt to enter the path or arc of evolution until you cross the nadir, your densest point, meaning your prime-of-life. And don’t start on the path of evolution until you are fully involved (grown). We might simply say don’t attempt to leave the body before you are in the body completely, that is: fully involved.

In my experience, failure to follow these directions is one of the greatest causes of both mental and physical suffering I am aware of; young folks trying to leave the body too early, so to speak, can mean they never complete their incarnation and are “putting on airs,” so to speak, before they should be airborne. In other words, they don’t know what they are talking about and never will if they B.S. their way intellectually

through youth and don't garner enough experience to have something to talk about..

And, on the other hand, those older folks, those who have passed the prime-of-life (the point of no-return), yet still feel they have to make their point by force like they perhaps did as a youth, run the risk of stroke, heart-attack, and so forth by pushing against the grain, not to mention severe disappointment and a perpetual sense of loss or losing.

These are signs of working against nature, either coming or going. One may have to train with a master experienced in these two arcs, the arc of involution and the arc of evolution. Fighting against time never works in our favor. I wrote an entire book about this many decades ago and it contains a lot of my journals from the 1960s, although they are a little embarrassing to read today, but what they heck. They were how I experienced it then. It's called "Astrology of the Heart," but it's about much more than astrology.

<http://www.startypes.com/.../e-boo.../Astrology-of-the-Heart.pdf>

COMMITMENT

April 15, 2019

[Notes: a last-minute winter storm rolled in and dumped a pile of snow on us. And it was the wet, stick-to-the-branches kind of snow. It won't be here tomorrow or the next day, but it's here now. We are going to curl up and watch a movie.]

As for taking on responsibility in adversity, we often must step forward and into the breach. That "stepping into the breach" is an act of commitment on our part, a sign that we are willing to put our actions where our mouth is and do something about the situation. It means we have some of our own skin in the game, providing protection to the one (or whatever) we sense is in danger.

Times of increased upheaval or danger can motivate us to take on additional responsibilities as a gesture of concern. I could give several examples, but they are probably too personal to be of much use. Let me use a generic example.

Let's say someone I care about has a health problem, one that is serious. I want to do something to help and of course I can add them to my daily prayers, praying for their well-being. Yet IMO, in this case it's not enough. And this is because I don't feel it is enough.

I am already doing as much daily practice as I want to, but still feel that I must do something to get some skin in the game. So, I might add another entire sadhana or liturgy to my daily practice and do that sadhana from then on each day forever. This, of course, takes me more time and is an effort on my part to show my intent and sincerity.

I have done this, for example, years ago in some cases and am still doing that added practice. It's like a subscription service to this day. I am subscribing to this practice that I otherwise may not have done. And it adds up. LOL.

It probably sounds a little weird or silly, but my guess is that we each have our way of signifying to the cosmos that we are serious or mean business and are willing to back up our words with actions. Whether this helps or not, I can't say, but

it does send a message that I am concerned enough to make such a commitment.

Or, on a more short term basis, if someone dies that I have a connection to and I worry about their well-being in the bardo realms, I will say special prayers for them morning and evening for the 49 days after their death, which days are said to be crucial for their rebirth. This is another example of committing ourselves to action through actual deeds.

I don't add on more daily practice on a regular basis, but when I do, usually that practice is here to stay. I only do this when I have reached points where lip-service on my part was not enough, IMO. I had to put my foot in the door or jump into the breach in some very tangible way. However, as mentioned, the practices I have added on remain today, years later. Again, I can't say it if helps or not, but it helps me to know that I'm serious and to back up my thoughts and words with deeds.

I can remember a time when I was too shy to even pray.

WHAT, ME COMPROMISE?

April 16, 2019

There are some things I don't compromise on and never have. Then again, there are things I have learned to compromise about, mostly health related.

Until I got ill, I liked to believe I would not compromise with food, health, and so on; instead I felt that I would stick to my guns. Well, that was BS.

One of the imagined defects (and actual benefits) about serious health events is that we have to compromise. I found out that I had no choice, but that does not mean that I was happy about the compromises I had to make. I still had to make them. LOL.

For me, this seriously started in 2016 when I had a small stroke (TIA) and it was discovered (in the process of examining me) that I had had 2-3 silent heart attacks and didn't even realize it. And, after being doped up and wheeled into the operating room, surrounded by folks in green garb and masks, and going through what is called catheterization, it was declared that my condition was inoperable. There was nothing they could do on the operating table, so they backed out of the catheterization and placed no stents.

Bottom line, I had to compromise as there was no other option. The only thing keeping me alive (and this is still true) is diet and exercise, neither of which I was particularly skilled or interested in prior to the event. They told me that three major arteries (including the "widow maker") were not blocked or clogged. They were gone! Instead, some adventitious new arteries had sprung up that were never there before and helping to keep me alive. This was all news to me. LOL.

Suddenly, my diet was reduced to the simplest foods, with no dairy, sugar, caffeine, processed foods, white bread, meat, fish, fowl, and on and on. I was instantly deprived of everything food-wise I was used to and most appreciative of. When I asked my cardiologist: can I not even eat any cheese and he said, "Oh, yes you can." And he went and came back with a bar of cheese and a knife. He then proceeded to cut

four tiny squares of cheese about ¼-inch square and said. You can have this much cheese once in a while.

The tiny cheese chunks were almost invisible and it just was his way of telling me “no cheese.” And I never did have any of those tiny cubes out of sheer disdain. And so it went.

I was quickly reduced to whole-grain, unprocessed, foods, with no meat, cheese, fish, nor fowl. No white bread, white pasta, and the list went on. I learned to eat kale, greens in general, whole-grain spelt and kamut bread, lots of tempeh, and so on. And most remarkable of all, I learned to like it all. It is easier to adapt than to fight change in most cases. We humans are very adaptive.

It's remarkable that we eventually learn to like what's good for us. And I did and am still working on it.

And what in the past, all the unhealthy foods, seemed so pleasurable to me were also so deadly. By compromising, by adjusting my appetites to what was actually good for me, it was not long before I was enjoying plain food almost as much as I had the fancier (and bad-for-my-health) food that I had relished for years before. I guess I just like food.

And while the adjustment to this new diet was perceived (perhaps) as somewhat painful, it was nowhere near as painful as the results of the health events that unhealthy food brought to my door.

As the artist Michelangelo (who was also a poet) wrote “What if a little bird escapes death for many a long year only to suffer a crueler death.” So I avoided healthy food for many years only to suffer a much crueler fate than if I had learned to eat healthy food earlier. And once I learned to eat and like healthy food, I am as happy with that as I was eating food that was not good for me. I am still working on a few hold-outs.

The occultist and poet Aleister Crowley wrote “To snatch at a gnat and swallow a camel,” which says what I consider another important point. While we argue over minutia, life slips past us.

Or, as my first dharma teacher said to me (many times) using a traveling circus as an analogy: “Michael, if you spend all of your time in the sideshow, the main tent will be gone.”

All of these sayings have much in common. While we are busy sweating the small stuff, whole arcs of our life pass us by without our realizing it. While we are making sure none of our freedoms are forfeited, we freely forfeit almost our entire freedom by spending our time resisting and arguing through it.

Indeed, I found out that compromise is the nature of life. That part of me that won't compromise, compromises. LOL.

CLIMACTIC YEARS: DO YOU KNOW WHAT THEY ARE?

April 16, 2019

I find it interesting to realize that not everything is up to us, meaning dependent on our will, as in: either I will or I won't. Yes, I believe we can always force things, but that takes energy and effort and can carry a penalty. Energy wanes in time.

I first came across this principle back in my early and mid-20s, where it was clear to me how much depended on our will, as in "I will do this" and "I will do that." It was only after I finished my first Saturn Return (29.4 years) or as my first dharma teacher used to say. "Michael, at what degree does ice melt?" and "How old was Christ when he died on the cross?" and I then surmised "Never trust anyone over 30 years of age."

The way my first dharma teacher, a traveling Rosicrucian initiator, taught it to me was as follows: In the first 30 years (1 to 30 years) of our life (1st Saturn Return) we spend building our vehicle-body or spaceship, after which around 30 years of age we are launched into orbit. It is as complete as it is going to be, physically.

In the second 30 years (30 to 60 years) of our life (2nd Saturn Return) after we go into orbit in our vehicle, it cannot be worked on any longer and in that 30 years we spend repairing the damage we made being launched into space (getting out of our body and what the Christians call "being born again"), and in the 3rd 30 years (60 to 90 years), if we live that long, we become an actual co-creator with the life force. That last statement is the one people seem not to be familiar with, so consider it very carefully.

These words run deep, so if you toss them off, that is your business. In my life, and with my training, I was taught about this principle very carefully. My teacher saw that I experienced my first Saturn Return wide-awake and with my eyes open. I went through that first Saturn Return fully (and before my 30th year) conscious as to what was happening to

me and I witnessed this divine transition personally, what is called a climactic event.

This took training, as most folks sleep through it and only wake up to its purport later in life, often quite some time after the age of thirty, if ever. As mentioned above, this is called by Christians “being born again,” but of course this event is as old as time and belongs to all people and all faiths. Christians just made a big deal of it, which well they should.

Those first two Saturn cycles (culminating at year 60) and their meaning are clear enough. You should be able to work that out on your own, but that 3rd Saturn Cycle (years 60 to 90) could stand some commentary, so here goes.

And this concept ties in nicely (and directly) with my own recent comments about learning to stop forcing thought and to instead, as we grow older, allow thoughts to come as they will and not at our bidding or demand. The idea is that as we age we allow thoughts to arise naturally and come up through the mind (and through us), we have the opportunity to help shape the form of thoughts and the life they represent. That is news.

As my teacher Andrew McIver said, we can (if we are open) become co-creators of the universe, allowing ourselves to align with the forces of life and (like the fronds of seaweed in the current of the sea) work to shape what is and what will be.

I have no way to prove this to you or wish to for that matter. As the Tibetans say, a single word or even a single syllable or sign is enough to direct and to awaken someone who is not in too deep a sleep. Let those who can hear the sound or see the sign act on it. I had to work hard for these concepts myself. They are subtle.

If you can move with the music and dance of life, those of us who are older can be of good use, both to ourselves, others, and the world. All we have to do is to relax, let go, and flow with the creative forces. Perhaps the Christians would say “Let go and let God.” Your choice, but that’s the idea folks.

These are just words and concepts woven into a fabric that I find wears well on the mind as I grow older; and also, it sees
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LET YOUR WILD THOUGHTS GO UNANSWERED

April 17, 2019

That advice appears in many pith-dharma teachings and is right on-point. We are bombarded with a deluge of wild thoughts, any one of which we could easily follow and for a long time. Here the counsel is to NOT follow wild thoughts.

Sure, there are tiers of scary thoughts out there and, yes, they could conceivably be applied to us if we are the worrying type. We are not obligated to follow these wild thoughts out just to keep a check on ourselves or to make sure we are not straying to far from the fold, so to speak.

Following such thoughts endlessly as a worrywart is also a downfall, something to be resisted and not indulged. How much of our life do we want to spend in doubt? My guess is that most of us have already indulged that bad habit more than enough. We have doubted and have followed such doubts out until they are lost in the white-noise of life. And have still not come to any conclusion.

There comes a point where we have to have faith in ourselves and give confidence in ourselves at least equal time to the amount we squander on our doubts, our constant willingness to entertain doubts. Most of us have been there, done that, as they say.

And here the great Mahasiddas just come out and say it: "Don't follow after wild thoughts." You know whether you are susceptible to wild thoughts. I know I often (and still tend to) grant the errant thought credence which I should better reserve for my own sense of confidence in myself.

There comes a point when we just say "No" to entertaining every stray thought that pops up and don't assume they all have to refer to us and that each be followed out until the last dog dies.

I'm not saying to ignore the signs in our lives that flag us down to be examined. What I am saying is to have enough confidence in ourselves to spend at least equal time having

confidence in ourselves as that we would spend in following out every scary thought to the bitter end to make sure we are not liable for it. Enough is enough. Stop the bleeding.

And, in dharma training, we need all our energy and especially our attention on the path in front of us and not on every side road that beckons. As mentioned the other day in my blog, my first dharma teacher used to say to me (and all the time): "Michael, if you spend all of your time in the sideshow, the main tent will be gone." He was talking to me. LOL.

There is a time to worry and question ourselves and I am not saying we should not be vigilant. What I am saying is look to the right and left before you cross the street, but then just cross the street." We don't have to follow every wild thought that invites us to investigate it.

DHARMA: WHY WE ARE ONE OF A KIND

April 19, 2019

Each of us ultimately is different from one another, adding up our differences as they accumulate until we are uniquely individual. We have unique fingerprints; how much more do we have a unique mindset, repeatedly stamped with our own personal experience until we stand out. We differentiate ourselves or are differentiated, try as we might to remain the same. It is unavoidable.

And so, our dharma path or solution, however much we resemble one another, is also unique, hand tailored to fit us like a hand to a glove. My point in pointing this out is simply that we should be ready for this individuation and not expect a cookie-cutter solution. What am I saying here?

Of course, we are talking about dharma realization. We always are, so what this means is to look closer to home for dharma realization and not somewhere out there beyond our own skin. Realization comes from within, inside us, and not from anywhere else. It's not like it is coming from on-high or in a strange language or tone. In fact, far from it.

As the pith dharma teachings say "From within the midst of experience, realization can arise." Again: realization comes from inside. It dawns on us. And, as pointed out, realization comes in our own speak, our mother-tongue. In other words, we will first hear it as filtered from the one person we always listen to, ourselves.

Realization will reach beyond or beneath what we know as ourselves and into the nature of the mind itself, at which time it will be obvious that it is totally familiar and has always been there. That's why there is no possibility of mistaking realization, because it changes everything at once, including ourselves and how we measure anything. The measuring stick by which all is measured itself is transformed. That's why there is no going back. Realization is a one-way street.

It's more like "Back to the future" of what we have become or are becoming. The glove is turned completely inside out. That is the nature of realization: transformation.

And transformation means just what the word says, that we are transformed. Our history also is transformed. It's what I call the "Last Judgment," the idea that the most recent view rewrites history in its own image. It's a moveable feast.

I find that it's good to remind myself that realization of any kind is non-dual and not a relative-truth. In other words, with realization there is no room for subject and object, but only a straight shot at what is, what has been called eternity.

THE POINT OF NO RETURN

April 20, 2019

Recent events in my life have stirred things up and make sleep difficult, although I need rest more than ever. Since I can't sleep, tonight it has me thinking back to my very first dharma teacher Andrew Gunn McIver and his main teaching.

Andrew was a traveling initiator for a Rosicrucian order. I met him in the mid-1960s Inn Ann Arbor, Michigan where he had retired to. He was the first human (outside of my family) that cared for me more than I knew how to care for myself. He tamed me and I became his student. When he died in 1969, I saw to his burial and designed his tombstone, the symbol of the Sun.

I received my first transmission from Andrew McIver and I will share something here of what he taught me. I warn you that this is esoteric and abstract, so please feel free to pass it by.

It is not for everyone.

One thing my first dharma teacher was perfectly fascinated by was palindromes, words or phrases that read the same forward and backward. Examples of palindromes are phrases like Bonaparte's "Able was I ere I saw Alba" or "Do geese see God?" What was his point?

His point was that life reads the same forward as backward. The fact is that this simple statement is terrifyingly true, although it can take decades to sink in. What can I say? I could repeat what I just said, underline or underscore it, and emphasize it in ten other ways, but it still might not register... yet. It is 'The' esoteric truth par excellence.

Like the snake shedding its skin or the glove turning inside out when it comes off, life is a palindrome. It is reversible and the pivot or turning point is thirty years of age, that first Saturn Return, and what is called the Prime of Life. I have written many articles about the return of Saturn to its natal place in the zodiac at that age. This is one of the great climactic years in life that marks a rite of passage that, sooner or later, cannot be ignored. Our physical vehicle stops growing and

goes into a gradual decline. Are we to believe there is no emotional or subtle meaning and interpretation to the physical fact of the prime-of-life?

While this may appear as just a clever piece of writing on my part, you will be humbled to find (as I did) that this is a profound truth from which there are no variations. Even more incredible, the concept is not even linear, but rather spherical, like the Sun! It was no accident that the title of the first book I ever wrote (back in 1975) was titled "The Sun is Shining!" Note the exclamation mark!

Feel free to note my remarks and move on, for now, but I promise you that this principle will bookmark itself in your mind and, if you consider the mysteries of life much at all, you will return to this concept in the future. Why? Because like the bird who flies from the mast of the ship far out at sea, you have nowhere else to go. The truth of life is no beggar. It does not need me or you to help make the ends meet. The ends already meet. We just have to become aware of them.

As my teacher pointed out to me, life is a palindrome, and the pivot, balance or turning point, is around thirty years of age. A rite of passage is something we pass through. It has a before and after, and after we are not the same as before. We have passed. There is a turning point in life for each of us. Words of prose fail me, but this poem I wrote some years ago says it as clearly as I can.

THE POINT OF NO RETURN

The point of the "point of no return" is that:
When you have reached the point of no return,
From which there is no return,
The point is to turn and return.

That is the turning point.

Every life has a turning point,
Whether it's in the echo of age
Or in the very midst of life's prime.

As we reach our point of no return,
We pause,
Then we turn.

And, in turning,
We begin to reflect
In our reflection,
And rising into view,
Perhaps for the very first time,
The Sun.

Where before it was we who were seen,
And others seeing,
Now we are the mirror in which they see themselves,
And we can see our self in them.

What we once saw shining before us, as youths,
That which we gladly embraced in our prime,
And what we now see etched in the mirror of reflection,
Is our eternal Self,
The Sun,
Ever burning in the darkness of our life.

That's it.

I understand this.

What I find harder to understand,
Yet still believe is:

We didn't know it then;
We don't know it now.

We never knew it.

In truth,
It never was.

IT NEVER WAS;
It never will be.

It is not now,
And still, it is.

It still is:

This most brilliant illusion,
Shining in the mirror of the mind.

Feb 14, 2006 2-4 PM
Grand Sextile Helio

A Poem for My Daughter Michael Anne

THOUGHTS ON REFLECTION

April 21, 2019

[Happy Holiday everyone. I know I'm wearing the following observation out, so forgive my persistence if it is irritating. Even so, I encourage you to give this concept some thought please.]

Am I thinking a lot these days? No, I am not thinking a lot these days. I can't find the thoughts or don't care to. Instead I have spent a lot of time lately in the basement of our dharma center working through the incredible mess that has piled up over the last several years, a lot of it from the water damage to the upper floors and the months of repair work. Everything was dumped in the basement, aside from the fact that it was like cavern with water dripping from the ceiling. A big clean-up project.

I go into the basement, turn on a little heater because it is cold down there, switch on the radio, and go to work. As to what kind of music I find is best for cleaning basements, it is country music and not even the classic country I know something about, but just the ordinary modern "hat acts" that I usually ignore.

For cleaning house, modern country music is just fine, in fact preferable. I'm just down the basement without a thought in my mind, cleaning and sorting away. This can go on for hours and does. And day after day of this suits me just fine right now. It's better than staring out the window, because it's hard to impossible to think these days; enough stress has been put on my mind and thinking of late. Instead, if I wait long enough, thoughts do come. And those thoughts are for the most part very pure, not as tainted with the "me, myself, and I" as in days of yore. What do I think about this new habit of not-thinking?

I have written about this a lot lately and in various forms, so no need to spend a lot of time on that here. In a nutshell, thinking purposefully is IMO a young person's game, while reflective-thinking (like I am doing now) is for older persons. "Trying" to think as an older person is an oxymoron and can

lead to serious health issues. The same goes for a young person, trying to wait on thoughts to arise. It does not become them and also has serious consequences, mostly indulging intellectuality to the point of missing out on actual life-experience that would be useful later on, as in: having something to reflect on. LOL.

Since I'm not conjuring up thoughts just now, that leaves those thoughts that just arise on their own and these do tend to make a lot more sense. They are not so much about me, which is a relief; I find I am kind of sick of thoughts about me; nauseas would be the word.

In summary, my thinking has kind of turned away from the purposed-thinking I used to do, which was thinking real-hard a lot about this or that, to instead receiving thoughts and reflecting them -- being open to what arises. I can't seem to do otherwise and it all stems from the stroke.

Perhaps it's just too hard for my mind to have to think just now. Or, it could be that I have tired of it all and am not moved except by what comes up naturally, without effort, and can't be avoided. You tell me.

So, in summary, thinking is a young person's game, while reflecting is for older folks and the transition as we age describes a grand arc across the span of life that pivots on the prime-of-life.

As you can imagine, I am taking this all in and processing it. As the old song goes "The music goes 'round and around and it comes out here." We shall see.

If I were a French philosopher, I might say:

I THINK, THEREFORE I'M YOUNGER

or

I REFLECT, THEREFORE I'M OLDER

A mirror reflects.

MOURNING THE SELF

April 22, 2019

This may be one of the stranger blogs I have ever written and I hesitate even to write it, but as I tell myself: 'In for a nickel, in for a dime.'

In recent days I have been monitoring myself and I seem to be not-so-much a fun person as I remember; it seems I am too serious and perhaps somewhat depressed. This is unusual for me, so what gives?

First, I don't fully know if this is true and I could be just grasping at straws or wanting to come up with a solution just to have a solution. However, it occurred to me that in some way I may be in some weird kind of grieving. As strange as this thought is, perhaps part of me is lonely for my Self that vanished in the stroke or, if not the Self (itself), then the familiarity and cozy comfort of that constant companion (the Self) who has been with me all these years, BS and all. Most of that was wiped out as far as I can see. And, although I imagine a new version of a self has to be forming within me, apparently it's not in any hurry. And I'm hoping for a better, more true to reality, self, so I have to expect I will be different.

It's almost like a loss of innocence. I hesitate to say it, but this smacks of the "ignorance is bliss" syndrome and the "something-like-monotonous" forward plodding from day to day ever since the stroke has exacted its pound of flesh from me. Is it as simple-minded as that I am perhaps a little lonely for my old Self or for a self and time of ignorance that I now have only a dim memory of, but still feel a sense of loss of familiarity for? Maybe I miss "me." LOL.

As a dharma practitioner, the loss of Self is a good thing and welcome -- less fixation and attachment. And it's true that there is an increased clarity and depth that I was not aware of before, but which I now really appreciate. Yet, there is also a lack of "fun" and the appearance of a no-nonsense-ness that I don't like so much. It could be that I am just tired of all the medical tests and concern; I may yearn for a time when none

of this chaos had reared its grim head, so to speak. Or, I do feel that I could have a very light cold that seems to have a grip on me, which can happen after a shock-event. Not sure.

I do appreciate the silence and emptiness of my state of mind since the stroke. My mind seems pristine, vast, and empty like a moonscape. On the other hand, I also seem to be more easily irritated than I remember and, while I understand why others go through this or that syndrome, the elaboration and endless chattering in everyone around me seems to stretch on and on into meaningless gestures. And I repeatedly find myself ready to move on with “whatever,” long before others seem to let go of a riff or a theme. I have the sense of enduring a situation longer than I would like, instead of just saying what needs to be said and moving on. It’s like folks are desperate for contact, yet I am not.

I know that this is my problem to solve, if only because it’s there. And I mean no disrespect, but much of what goes on around me seems so meaningless and the rest often tedious and repetitious. It could be a product of all the endless medicines, precautions, demands, and routines that were not there before. They are not a lot of fun. I feel I lack a certain compassion at this point that I used to have. Yet, at least I am aware of the lack. I have hesitated to post this blog and in the meantime I see that my sense of compassion is just fine, not diminished. I am however more easily irritated these days.

Or, it could be that life is not as much fun as I thought it was or used to be. LOL. The times I am happiest (and those when I do feel very much there and full) is when I am being put on the spot with a question or a real concern. At those moments there is no part of me hanging outside finding it all tiresome.

I’m sure I have to get used to this new take on life and everything that comes with it. I’m doing my best, but again, using the “innocence is bliss” theme, perhaps I miss the innocence. I do know that at the end of each day I am very tired. It may not just be physical exhaustion as much as I am tired of the ordeal of the day and ready to just give it all a rest, if not physically, then mentally. Sound familiar?

Suggestions or reflections are welcome.

DEAFENING SILENCE

April 23, 2019

There is nothing like a stroke to plunge one into virtual silence and pronto! Otherwise, holding still or allowing ourselves to be exposed to silence and stillness may be a door we would never willingly choose to go through, but, nevertheless, it can happen and suddenly. I know this from my two stroke experiences.

Certainly, as I have found out, silence is not silent. Just as the Tibetan Book of the Dead states that in the bardo state after death, while transitioning from this life to rebirth, the brilliance of the light of the inner mind can be so sudden and intimidating that it drives beings into the shadows, which is said to result in a less than optimal rebirth or prevents entrance into what is called a Buddha Realm. Basically, it's a fear of the true nature of our own mind. And that nature is with us right now. Do we realize it?

IMO, the total absence of sound is equally terrifying, let's call it the deafening sound of nature living that we call silence. It's like trying to fathom that this Earth we live on is circling the Sun at 67,000 miles-per-hour. Or that our Milky Way Galaxy is moving through space at 1.3 million miles an hour. It's not like we are standing still.

I am still learning to cope with my recent stroke, which I can only liken it to having a freight train pass between my ears or a nuclear bomb flatten the surrounding terrain as far as I can see. I have often written about how our Self can be shattered by an untoward event (like the death of a loved one), leaving us teetering on the edge of the void and peering into it.

Well, while that shattering I just mentioned is uncomfortable and may take our Self some time to reanimate, a stroke cleans our clock more than we will ever know unless we experience one. As a phenomenologist, it is my nature to examine and experience whatever happens to me, health events included. And so I am.

And after the shock, there is the aftershock, as the waves of reality begin to roll in. The immediacy of the stroke event blows everything it can right out of the mind, certainly our Self composure and whatever fixations we were honing at the time it struck. Gone, without notice!

And in its place, at first there appears what to me seemed like some bleak moonscape or barren planet-scape that remained. And after that this was followed by total silence from the hum and drum of the constant chatter and internal comments I was so used to. Nada. Familiarity be-gone. It was then that I thought of the Robert A. Heinlein book "Stranger in a Strange Land." I felt that way.

Is it a relief? Well, not at first crack; that's for sure. It was scary, my being empty of sound and thoughts. I was so used to being filled to overflowing with minutiae, with the non-essential -- my cozy little cocoon. Realized yogis speak of non-elaboration. The Self is pure elaboration.

And suddenly, there just aren't any thoughts other than the immediate "do this" or "do that," "take this test" and "take that medical test" -- the silent blast of the present. If you want the truth, it was like the deep foghorn of an immense ocean liner resounding in the night, only it was silent. It was the silence itself that was calling and I had no choice but to hear it.

There was no history to fall back on. My chatty old Self was eliminated by the initial blast in one fell swoop. It was just vacated. Where did it go and what was it made up of? Apparently: nothing memorable. In its place: eternal silence, if only for the time being. But for me, that time is still being... now many weeks later.

Here I was, standing on the verge of eternity, looking out as far as I can see at nothing, with my ears overflowing with silence. There is only the immediate present. No past and no future.

THE EVER PRESENT

April 26, 2019

Does anybody spend time in the present and for what? It seems like we are endlessly shuttling between the past and the future. Who has time for the present and how can we remain there? What would that mean anyway? And if we spend so little time in the present, even though everything that is or ever was only comes from the present, why is that? I would like to figure that one out. LOL.

And this, despite the suggestions from the great Mahasiddha Tilopa, in his classic "Six Words of Advice," which clearly say "Don't prolong the past" and "Don't invite the future" and then went on to say "Don't alter the present." Yet, we do prolong the past, invite the future, and alter the present, like: all the time.

And, as mentioned, we know for a fact that every thought, word, and deed finds its origin in the present. The present is the cornucopia or channel through which it all comes. Yet, for some reason we have trouble remaining there. How come we seem to avoid the present and instead roll out of it into the past or the future, rather than rolling into it and staying there? Why is the present not the pocket we always naturally remain in? What the heck is the present moment?

Is it that we have to be out of the present (moving from the past to the future and back again) in order to be aware of the present? Is the present something we are forever just passing through, touching on, or into, but not remaining in? Is the present at best a taste of eternity -- forever? Is being in the present in fact a non-dual truth, while the past and the future are dualistic -- relative truths? Without the past and the future, would we be lost forever in the non-dualism of the present? I don't know; I'm just asking.

Is the present only made sensible to us when we move into it, through it, or pass over it from the past to the future (or vice-versa) and return? Does it take the past and the future to be able to be aware of the present? We have no trouble spending vast stretches of our life in the past or the same with

noodling the future. Why is the present difficult-to-impossible for us to remain in? Is it because we have to fall out of the present to know that it exists?

I think of the present as a wellspring, a source from which everything comes, bounded on the incoming end by the future and on the outgoing end by the past. The present is more like a fountain that sheds or sloughs off its skin into the past, while grasping at the future for its makings.

We all know that the present is where the future becomes the past, where the future turns into the past. And philosophers nit-pick and tell us the present is infinitesimally small or of short length. Some say that it does not exist or cannot exist. Does infinitesimally small also mean the present is of an endlessly long duration?

My point: is the present endless or timeless, beyond time, beyond duality, beyond existing? I sure don't know, but I do wonder.

Is the present like the brilliance of the light in the bardo, something that is just too bright for us to stand? Or is it like the roar of silence that is too much for our ears? Why does the present make us feel uncomfortable? And finally, why can't we remain in the present, yet all the great dharma texts recommend out remaining in it? These are questions that I have and will attempt to continue in another blog.

“As Bodhicitta is so precious,

DHARMA -- PRESENT TENSE

April 27, 2019

To me, the present reminds me of those little Scottish Terrier dog-magnets that we played with as kids. If you reversed the magnets, they would not stay together but repelled one another and jumped apart.

For me, the present is just like those magnets. It seems to repel me from it; I can't seem to stay in the present. I know Ram Das wrote the book "Be Here Now," and I remember hanging out with him back in the day. However, I find myself taking refuge in the past, in memories, or whiling away my time planning and anticipating the future. I did it all the time. Anything, but sit-out the stark-nakedness of the present. LOL.

Sometimes I think that the present is like a gusher (or fountain), a raw spring and cornucopia from which everything comes, but also, like a flood tide, it pushes everything into the past.

During my recent stroke-event, when both past and future were just blanked out, gone, all I had (and still have) is this present moment, But, for me, it's not like this present moment is an oasis in a desert, but just the opposite. It's more like a desert in an oasis, if that computes. Absolutely nothing is going on and that makes me nervous. I'm used to being coddled and entertained by my Self, who is apparently on vacation or was deconstructed in the blast of the stroke. LOL.

It's like there are no crickets chirping or roses to smell (my personal Disneyland is gone), but rather it's just my inability to be entertained by "nothing," to sit still and just be. LOL.

Both the past and the future are so entertaining, so easy to get lost in. All of this is a great reminder of how much I was used to being entertained and demanded it. Otherwise, like now, unless I am busy doing something in the present, I just sit tapping my fingers and looking around -- not very creative.

Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche would never have done that. The one time I spent a couple of hours alone with Trungpa Rinpoche. when he first visited Ann Arbor in February of

1974, I was his chauffer for the time and he was staying at a professor's house. This was when he taught me how to meditate, but before that happened, I watched him peruse the professor's office, examining every last object, nook, and cranny.

There he was, picking up things, holding them up to the light, squeezing them, and so on, totally engrossed in his examination. And there I sat in the same room, on a wooden chair, nervous as hell, and probably with my fingers clinging to the chair seat. I didn't know what to do with myself and so didn't do anything other than observe Rinpoche, which was a life-lesson in itself in how to be in the present.

I have not changed that much since those days back in 1974 with Trungpa Rinpoche. I still don't know what to do when there is "nothing to do," i.e. when nothing is going on. Of course, these days I am making serious forays into nothing-to-do-ness, little by little and bit by bit. I am forced to wait out my own uncomfortableness because there is no alternative. For me, this having no alternative is a blessing!

I have to continually realize (continually, mind you!) that my current state of mind is not a "disease," but just that, a state of mind that is quite natural, but one that has been obscured from me all these years by the convenience of my sliding into the past and future for entertainment. I can't find that entertainment just now, so here I sit with my fingers gripping the seat of the chair on which I sit. Yet, I am getting used to it. LOL.

These days I am happiest just doing things, particularly various household tasks – anything in the present. For some reason, my connections to the past or the future take effort. And that reminds me of the stroke, so I don't make that effort just now. LOL.

It could also be because the past and future don't interest me that much these days. A stroke is a kind of specialized form of amnesia. Instead of the "boy in the bubble," I'm the "boy in the present," the one with no past and no plans. The awareness of my current state is the same awareness that was there before the stroke, just plain old vanilla-awareness,

the kind we all have. It is also the kind that the great yogis point out, the one beyond our ability to alter.

Rather, it is what I am aware OF that is different. And it's not the past or future; instead, I'm aware of the present, but as mentioned, I'm aware of the present with the same awareness that has always been there. You might like this poem I wrote.

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.

DHARMA -- PRESENT PERFECT

April 28, 2019

[News Notes: A rare treat this morning. Margaret and I sitting here in my office in Big Rapids, Michigan listening to a live broadcast of my daughter May Erlewine (and her trio with PG George and Charlie Muench) on the BBC from London. They interviewed May and she sang a couple of songs. How sweet!]

Trying to recover from a stroke has some very clear similarities to learning Insight Meditation and the Mahamudra practices. One of the goals of Mahamudra meditation is to rest in the present moment, which is non-dualistic. The only difference is that with a stroke you have no choice but to be in the present, at rest or not, so the problem there is getting used to the present, not reaching it.

The thing is that the Self is all about attachments and fixations. When something like a stroke strikes, the first thing it does is kill off any desire and attachment, thus suspending our fixations, at which time the Self self-destructs because our attachments are the glue that hold the Self together. Without attachments, the “Self” disincorporates, leaving us holding the present with no references. It just deconstructs.

What remains is “us,” stripped of our attachments (Self) out there standing in the naked Present, a place which we are not used to. Now the irony is that this state (or something close to it) is exactly what budding meditators learning the Mahamudra practices are trying to achieve, but in the case of stroke, we came in the back door – grandfathered in.

While the meditator wants to be in that present moment, the average stroke victim does not, because they feel stripped of everything they associate as their Self, including loss of the sense of past and future. So, there is a silver-lining for stroke victims, if they can relax and appreciate it. I don't encourage you to run out and have a stroke and I'm glad there is not a pill you can take to have one. LOL.

Yet, it was for me a mind-blower that after my second stroke I realized that what I was experiencing was not just a bunch of

stroke-medical stuff, but simply my mind without a Self or close to it. As a student of meditation I found this amazing. And aside from struggling to recover, I am at the same time, taking careful notes during this opportunity to tour my life without being chaperoned and prejudiced by my own Self.

The great Mahasiddha Tilopa in one of his classic “Six words of Advice” said “Don’t alter the present.” That’s clear enough. And by that he was saying that we can (should) be in the present without all of the elaboration of our conceptual, dualistic thinking. In other words, we should just rest in that eternal present, without attempting to alter it or any effort. And that’s exactly what Mahamudra practitioners do or attempt to do.

And that is what a stroke commits us to, ready or not. Not sure how a “non-meditator” experiences this, but I have been training in meditation since 1974 and, aside from being shocked by the event, I was amazed to find that there was nothing especially different that I could find from my years of mind training. The after-stroke-shock is still just the mind and the awareness was the same awareness we already have (and cannot alter). And, for sure, the Self is (if only temporarily) banished, vacated, or shattered, leaving this present moment in all of its nakedness and directness.

And, although at first I was a bit terrified by the sheer vacuity and emptiness of the present moment, after a few weeks I have become increasingly used to this state and have come to appreciate its directness and in particular purity. And that is purity compared to the old me, myself, and I. It so beats the elaboration of my historical Self, by having in the present one mind instead of the two minds of conceptual thinking.

LOSS AND SELF -- RIDING THE TIME

Just an update on how things are going with me. As previously pointed out, my personal entertainment guide has not shown up since my stroke; either that or my subscription to "My Self" magazine has expired. At any rate, when I run out of specific things to do (that I have to do in a day), where before I would lapse into some kind of entertainment La La Land, these days I come up short. There is no longer any way into the kind of self-entertainment that I used to indulge in. It's just too obvious an escape. Instead, when I turn up the entertainment dial these days, nothing happens; I just sit there not-entertained. That's my status in a nutshell.

It's not that I don't know where the doors to entertainment are; it's that (at least for now) I don't find them entertaining, which for me means a standstill. I hadn't realized how much I depend on all that my Self likes for entertaining me. Between tasks, there used to be the entertainment, but now between tasks its nada, nothing, just sitting there like a sore thumb. I don't (quite) know what to do with me.

Obviously, I have to do something about this situation and I have been inching away on it, but still, unless I am very clever, I end up with the harshness of nothing-that-I-want-to-do staring me in the face. And I value clever less than I used to.

It's clear that I have to learn to enjoy the present moment without demanding to be entertained and I have been making inroads and with some small successes here and there, but still feel smacked in the face by my lack of creativity and my inability to savor the unadorned or non-elaborate life. LOL. It is a challenge. That's the hard part.

On the easier end, I relish the pristine freshness and clarity of the present moment, even though it may feel like I am sitting somewhere not far from the North Pole. And I appreciate the directness that is possible without a thousand filters and qualifications being inserted between me and reality.

And I stand witness to the circuitous and round-about way it seems that most folks wend their way along life's bread-

crumb trail searching for directness, but always seemingly to come up just shy of it. Either that or their thirst for substance and meaning finds most conversations unending because the participants are still not finding satisfaction. Most are like a couple of teenagers sitting with their bamboo poles fishing by a pond and hoping something will strike. That's a long afternoon.

Sometimes I just have to walk on from all that and try not to be rude. It's amazing that people are starved for basic communication (and separated from it) by their own filters, prejudices, judgments, and of course shyness. They are hoping for drops of water and there they sit in the middle of a lake -- that idea. It's like the emperor's new clothes.

And so, am I lonely? Well, I flirted with being lonely from myself, but that dog won't hunt. The Self that was lost was not worth much more than lip service. As the great poet William Blake wrote in the "Marriage of Heaven and Hell," "nothing of equal value was lost." And that's the truth.

Still, here I am, fit perhaps for some business like knitting a sweater, yet with empty hands and very little imagination. LOL. Serves me right.

And all around me is a world of everything there is or that I could ask for. At some point I will have to shove off from shore and learn to enjoy it all over again. I'm not worried that the Self (of some kind) won't return; if anything, I am afraid of it, and that I will be sucked back into distractions and misdirection to the point of not having the oxygen of the present moment as I do now.

And so, here I sit, somewhere between the devil and the deep-blue sea, as they say. And I'm just getting started. I can see why recovery from a stroke takes such a long time. It is hard to get things moving, to grasp the fine edge of what must be unraveled. You start very small and struggle to find a differential. I feel like the kid that does not know how to appreciate what I have and yet I have it all.

LOSS AND SELF-RECOVERY

April 28, 2019

What does “recovery” mean, getting back to where we were or regaining something that was lost? Or both? Just as we can’t step in the same river twice, getting back to where we were is hopeless. You can’t go home again, especially when you never were home in the first place. As for regaining something that was lost, do we even know what was lost? LOL.

The doctors and hospitals are filled with the phrase “new normal.” What a depressing thought. There is no such thing as a new normal. There is just normal and “normal” is as normal does. Pick up your bed Lazarus and walk. That’s the way to find “normal.” I tried to follow the doctors and nurses suggestions to go for the “new normal,” but finally gave that up and just worked with what was there. That then felt normal.

“I ran to the rock to hide my face.
The rock cried out “No hiding place!”
The rock cried out “I’m burning too,
And want to go to heaven the same as you.”

We are thrust or plunked down or back into life after sudden change. How do we know where we are? If it’s not obvious, then it is in the knee-jerk reactions, reactions that happen before we can reach them with any self-control.

These reactions, when realized, can be overwhelming and sleep or lying down is often the only solution. Rather than face the awkwardness of the moment, the raw uncomfortableness of being a sore thumb, we retreat into the shadows of sleep. We turn away and hope or vow to try again later.

I can’t manage to stay naturally on-point forever, but I give it my best shot and then seek shelter. My attention is not unwavering, except perhaps briefly. Then, like a gutter ball, I roll off course instead of continuing straight on. I take refuge in shadows rather than light. It’s just too bright.

What I tell my kids is, “just put one foot in front of the other and carry on.” I know from my greenhouse days that plants

have to just harden off or they will be too rank – weak. Things are still in flux, but I can feel the “setting in stone” coming, as change hardens into form. And waiting for the mold to set is nerve-wracking and I try to remain flexible while I still have any control. These times without Self are precious. I know that I should cherish them, but I can only do so much cherishing, like: when I feel like cherishing. We all know that the surest way to make something go away is to like it. LOL.

Each day I make some progress in taking life straight, just as it is. And where and when I fall down is just that, the end of that day and the moment when I seek shelter in naps or sleep. I can face it more each day; each day I’m tougher. Change brings change, and change (for me) takes some getting used to, acclimatizing. It seems that I form and reform, endlessly.

As for getting comfortable, I believe we sentient beings can pretty-much get comfortable almost anywhere. Before we know it, we have set up shop and are already in reanimation-mode, populating our environment with our Self, building cocoon after cocoon – housekeeping. It’s suffocating when there is no fresh air. And the Self is dead-set on closing all the loops and plugging up all the holes to reality, preferring cloying claustrophobia to fresh air every time.

I will add on here a comment I made for my friend Heather MacKenzie yesterday because it clarifies something about our inherent inner-secretary and executor and what we call “The Self.”

Let’s be clear. We could not function day-to-day without a personal secretary or executive. That’s hard-wired, so to speak. Where it rises to what we call “The Self,” IMO, is when our attachments, prejudices (for, against, or neutral), and fixations begin to accumulate on the executor. Like barnacles on a rock or pilot fish on a shark, whatever we become attached to or fixated on is what in the dharma is sometimes called “elaboration,” anything more than is needed to function.

And so, to answer your question, I am not without an executor. The same Awareness that is (at heart) within you is also within me, meaning the awareness that cannot be altered. That’s identical from before my stroke and after my

stroke. And that was reassuring to discover!. What is missing or very-much less is the elaboration, what we pejoratively call "The Self," everything that is added on by us as a matter of housekeeping, prettying up the executor with our preferences until it amounts to an obscuration.

So, we are talking about encumbering the executor with our crap, so to speak, our BS, prejudices and druthers. And, even now, in the comparative silence of the present (so to speak) I can hear the scurrying of the rats and mice of elaboration working overtime to dress up this empty space of light with curtains and clouds of obscuration.

Any changed state, once changed, lends itself to decoration. As I become comfortable in my new space, there are those tendencies who want me to be more comfortable than is necessary and before I know it, I will find myself ensconced in a new Self, one with all the bells and whistles I don't need, but can't say no to.

To me, a more interesting question is, since the present is not dualistic, how much dualism or relative truth (from the past and future) is required for us to know we have been for a swim in the present and what we have learned from that experience. The present is the home of all experience. Even when we dwell on the past, we do it at the expense of the present. That concept interests me a lot.

DHARMA -- RIDING THE TIME

April 30, 2019

Just an update on how things are going with me. As previously pointed out, my personal entertainment guide has not shown up since my stroke; either that or my subscription to "My Self" magazine has expired. At any rate, when I run out of specific things to do (that I have to do in a day), where before I would lapse into some kind of entertainment La La Land, these days I come up short. There is no longer any way into the kind of self-entertainment that I used to indulge in. It's just too obvious an escape. Instead, when I turn up the entertainment dial these days, nothing happens; I just sit there not-entertained. That's my status in a nutshell.

It's not that I don't know where the doors to entertainment are; it's that (at least for now) I don't find them entertaining, which for me means a standstill. I hadn't realized how much I depend on all that my Self likes for entertaining me. Between tasks, there used to be the entertainment, but now between tasks its nada, nothing, just sitting there like a sore thumb. I don't (quite) know what to do with me.

Obviously, I have to do something about this situation and I have been inching away on it, but still, unless I am very clever, I end up with the harshness of nothing-that-I-want-to-do staring me in the face. And I value clever less than I used to.

It's clear that I have to learn to enjoy the present moment without demanding to be entertained and I have been making inroads and with some small successes here and there, but still feel smacked in the face by my lack of creativity and my inability to savor the unadorned or non-elaborate life. LOL. It is a challenge. That's the hard part.

On the easier end, I relish the pristine freshness and clarity of the present moment, even though it may feel like I am sitting somewhere not far from the North Pole. And I appreciate the directness that is possible without a thousand filters and qualifications being inserted between me and reality.

And I stand witness to the circuitous and round-about way it seems that most folks wend their way along life's bread-crumbs trail searching for directness, but always seemingly to come up just shy of it. Either that or their thirst for substance and meaning finds most conversations unending because the participants are still not finding satisfaction. Most are like a couple of teenagers sitting with their bamboo poles fishing by a pond and hoping something will strike. That's a long afternoon.

Sometimes I just have to walk on from all that and try not to be rude. It's amazing that people are starved for basic communication (and separated from it) by their own filters, prejudices, judgments, and of course shyness. They are hoping for drops of water and there they sit in the middle of a lake -- that idea. It's like the emperor's new clothes.

And so, am I lonely? Well, I flirted with being lonely from myself, but that dog won't hunt. The Self that was lost was not worth much more than lip service. As the great poet William Blake wrote in the "Marriage of Heaven and Hell," "nothing of equal value was lost." And that's the truth.

Still, here I am, fit perhaps for some business like knitting a sweater, yet with empty hands and very little imagination. LOL. Serves me right.

And all around me is a world of everything there is or that I could ask for. At some point I will have to shove off from shore and learn to enjoy it all over again. I'm not worried that the Self (of some kind) won't return; if anything, I am afraid of it, and that I will be sucked back into distractions and misdirection to the point of not having the oxygen of the present moment as I do now.

And so, here I sit, somewhere between the devil and the deep-blue sea, as they say. And I'm just getting started. I can see why recovery from a stroke takes such a long time. It is hard to get things moving, to grasp the fine edge of what must be unraveled. You start very small and struggle to find a differential. I feel like the kid that does not know how to appreciate what I have and yet I have it all.

THE SPRITUAL ANATOMY OF SHOCK

May 1, 2019

One takeaway from my postings here on my recent stroke is that there is a lot of misunderstanding about what is involved in a stroke as it affects our spirituality. And by “spirituality,” I mean our basic or intrinsic awareness of life. Our “Awareness” of having a stroke is not itself affected by the stroke. That Awareness is what it has always been. It is beyond the physical.

In other words, a physical stroke is just that “physical.” A physical stroke is not only not-spiritual; it does not directly affect our spirituality. I will try to explain using a simple analogy.

The onslaught of a stroke directly affects the physical brain, but is NOT connected (or hard-wired) to our intrinsic Awareness such that if we turned up the volume on a radio, both the brain AND our awareness would get turned up. Only the brain would get turned up, so to speak. Our intrinsic awareness would be unaffected except, of course, perhaps indirectly.

A stroke happens in our brain and not in our awareness. That’s why we can be aware of having a stroke. That Awareness does not itself have a stroke. That is a crucial fact to understand.

Yes, there I was after the stroke hit, unable to speak or mumbling words that had no meaning. However, aside from the shock of it all, my mind inside was still crystal clear. While gibberish was coming out of my voice, inside I thought I was clearly saying something. What appeared as a non sequitur was not.

In other words, nothing had changed in my intrinsic awareness. This fact might be of interest to those who have never had a stroke and certainly it should be of interest to those who have. Stroke victims know their mental Awareness is still functioning as it always has, subject to brain or bodily impairment. That, IMO, is a key point.

There is another important effect from the stroke that was not so clear to me at first. In fact, this effect was a total surprise,

one I believe that as a dharma practitioner I was completely unprepared for. It never occurred to me, yet dominated the aftermath of the stroke.

And this was the fact that when the stroke shattered my Self and its composure, causing my assemblage of personal attachments and fixations (i.e. my Self) to vacate or be voided, this included ALL of my attachments, the good as well as the bad.

And so, a lot of bad personal habits of attachment went right out the window in a flash, leaving me in a kind of no man's land, one without a past or a future. As scary as that was, there was a certain sense of refreshment as well that was undeniable.

Yet, what was totally shocking to me was that along with the loss of my personal Self's attachments, went ALL of my attachment and fixation on the Dharma. Aside from the physical aftermath of the stroke, with the endless tests, scans, and blood samples, I found myself without ANY of my attachment to the dharma as well. Just imagine. That was a real shock.

If you think I had my finger on the scale of my likes, dislikes, prejudices, and judgements, imagine what I had ginned up over 40 years of attachment to the dharma. My attachment to the dharma was immense and it was stripped from me at the stroke like all of my other attachments. Voila! This I was totally unprepared for. And it was devastating.

In fact, it has been so devastating that I have not even written about it until now because I was still plumbing the depths of what it meant and putting that puzzle back together as best I can. So, there I was, stripped raw of every attachment I had accumulated since I-don't-know-when and then thrust back into the center of my life with no clue of how I felt or was used to feeling by habit.

And it was refreshing to suddenly have much of my personal excesses removed in favor of what I can only call reality. And what remained was who I am without so much of the "me, myself, and I." In other words, I experienced myself as pretty much purely authentic. "Authentic" is the only word I can come up with that characterizes how I felt or was. Yet, there

was the caveat that this loss of attachment also included my attachment to the dharma and dharma was a mainstay of my life.

In other words, just as my life's fixations and attachments that went beyond reality were removed by the stroke, so was whatever undue attachments to the dharma that had accrued. And I experienced this as soon as I was able, for example, to sit down on the cushion and do my daily meditation practice, which was not possible for some days after the stroke. Sure, I had said prayers and mantra all along, but something as formal as a sit-down practice was not possible until the winds of change from the stroke had blown themselves out a bit.

And then, when I did manage to sit down on the cushion, fill the offering bowls, and all of that, I had a rude awakening. Everything and anything that was put together, trumped-up, and in any way artificial about the process of my dharma practice was also gone. You might think that this is good, to be totally natural and unelaborate with my daily dharma practice.

Yet, I soon found out that much of what I had put together as a formal practice was, in fact, one kind of elaboration or another. And in that first attempt to formally practice, I had no attachment to it at all. The practice left me cold. Just as my Self's attachments and fixations had been stripped out, so had any and all attachments to the dharma as well. Attachment is attachment, plain and simple. And that was another whole kind of shock, in a way worse than the stroke. LOL. What a tangled web we weave.

The patina of practice that I had built up from 45 years of dharma-practice was completely gone and there sat I practicing dharma in what, to some real degree, seemed like an artificial manner. My finger was no longer on the scale and much of the practice seemed so unnatural and unnecessary. It's like the decades of trying to practice and all the scaffolding I had built to make that happen were politely removed, leaving me stark naked of attachment.

And what remained was my mind with no elaboration and no attachment, one way or the other. My respect for the dharma was still there, in fact so much there that it could not accept or

tolerate any artificial or exaggerated attempts on my part to support my practice through good-will gestures on my part. The dharma does not need our good will; perhaps we think we do. I am reminded of a line my first true dharma teacher drilled into my head back in the 1960s. "My god is no beggar! He does not need me to make the ends meet. The ends already meet."

In a similar way, the dharma did not need me as its pimp, to additionally pull for or promote it. It is already everything, just as it naturally is. As mentioned, all of the devices or aids to get into my practice that I had accumulated for decades were not only unnecessary, they were completely absent in that they had no effect on me. Nada. They were even somewhat repulsive or at least of no use and totally redundant. And so, that is how my formal practice went, my dear dharma friends, which should make for an interesting read.

If fact, it took weeks for me to find a new approach to my daily practice, one that still included the bare bones of it, like filling the offering bowls, etc., but came at it in a deeper, more natural manner. I am still working on that.

In summary, the point is that along with losing my Self's fond attachments and fixations came my Self's attachments and fixations on the dharma, which themselves got no special treatment and were not grandfathered into my life after the stroke just because they were "dharma." No such thing occurred in my experience. Attachment is attachment, good, bad, or indifferent. They are all part of the bathwater and not the baby.

This has got to be part of some cosmic humor pageant or other. So, there you have what I came across that was entirely unexpected and somewhat devastating. I am working through it and am better off for it, but I can't say it has been a walk in the park.

I will write more on this, if you have some questions.

ATTACHMENT TO DHARMA IS JUST THAT

May 1, 2019

[Let's take a break and I'll tell a bit of a fun story that came out of my recent stroke-time. It scared the bejesus out of me. It will take a little while to tell, so you may not have time. You dharma friends, let me know what are your thoughts about this concept.]

What does it mean that in the aftermath of my stroke, when the smoke cleared and the changes stopped changing, I found that my Self had been cleaned out like a chimney? I had experienced something like this shattering of the Self before in my life through various untoward life events, including a TIA (small stroke). So I knew what it was to have the Self to destabilize and go void on me.

Yet, what was total news to me this time (and most worrying) was that the part of my Self that had done dharma practice for 40 or more years had also been cleaned out too. That cupboard was bare or seemed so. And that realization was more terrifying than the stroke. LOL.

My investments and attachments to this or that in my Self had been voided by the stroke. Yet, I had no idea (and was not ready) to find out how irrevocably and totally attached I was to the dharma. In other words, my personal investment in dharma was huge and I had never realized it until it too was shattered. LOL.

To repeat, I didn't care that much about my attachment to all the things that my Self was fixated on or attached to. Seeing them vacated was nothing but basically good news, because even I could recognize how much BS or unessential most of it was.

However, I had never (and could not even dream) that anything connected to the dharma on my part that also was pure attachment was just as much BS. I had always thought that being attached to good things like the dharma was OK. After all, that was "good" attachment, right? I couldn't have been more wrong!

The proof is always in the pudding, as they say, and as it turned out the truth of it was. I was horrified to find out that the slate of my dharma-attachment, that part of my Self, had also been wiped clean and was gone. I couldn't believe it.

How upsetting that fact was for me is hard to convey; there I was, sitting down on my cushion for my daily dharma practice and nothing happened. It was as if the wheels of my dharma practice were no longer greased with familiarity and my long history of practice. It was like it was suddenly all gone. I had to go to the back of the line and start over. And that's a lot of years in time. LOL.

I never even imagined that when it came to dharma practice, I would not somehow be grandfathered in. But I was not. It was the dharma's way of telling me that no matter what I think, there is nothing special about my attachment to the dharma. Attachment is attachment. If anything, perhaps I had more bogus attachment to dharma (and my practice of it) than anywhere else in my life. As they say, "Who woulda' thunk it?" Certainly not me.

It's like I was stripped of all rank from 40 years of sincere practice and told to start over. All of that built-up attachment to the dharma was just gone. That's about as bad as it got and eventually that was only for a time.

In the "good news" department, I found I had actually accrued some benefit from all those years of dharma practice and perhaps even some tiny bit of realization. And these qualities stood me in good stead. How do I tell? Because they are still there; I already had them and that part of my practice was untouched.

And, as truth would have it, being humbled by my obvious attachment to dharma was ultimately a tonic for me. After all, it's spring! It cleaned out my dharma house, so to speak, ready or not, and I came out better for my self-humiliation than I was before, stripped of a lot of excess attachment and perhaps even better streamlined for practice.

Yet, it was at first a bitter realization to find that attachment to dharma was still attachment and had to go. It had to go because it went, just like that! It was permitted. We know that attachment to bad habits have no place, but I had to

experience first-hand that attachment to good things were no different. They too have no place. I had always thought that good attachments were harmless. I don't know about that, but they are useless when they are not existent.

It's a valuable realization that when death comes and the bardo beckons, my attachment to dharma will be no more help me than any other attachment. I have to think on that and what to do about it. A start would be to stop unreasonably attaching myself to anything.

One of the characteristics of "realization" is that it is irreversible and stays with us. And although I probably have only the tiniest bit of real realization, nothing, neither stroke nor bad weather could take that away from me. So, in a nutshell, the kernel of my dharma practice was still there. All I had to do, which took some time, some doing, and reorientation on my part, was to rework the more formal and outward form of my practice that were more like rote recitation.

And what this boiled down to was to stop parroting or blindly reciting prayers and practices and do my practices from scratch and with heart. Nothing but good could come from that and it did. Sure, I'm not as arrogant as I was about my practice after the stroke, and the dharma has seen me through the hurricane of the stroke and I have come out more or less in one piece.

"If it doesn't kill you, it makes you stronger." That's some truth! The stroke has done nothing but make me stronger, although perhaps a little more physically frail.

DHARMA -- NATURES MUDRAS

May 3, 2019

I love the concept of the mudra, that we shall know by the signs the nature of our own mind. Of course, over the years I have learned a lot of the Tibetan mudras through dharma-practice, some of which make intuitive sense to me and some don't. They are lovely and significant. And I am not saying that the Tibetan mudras are not natural. I imagine they are too.

However, I am more naturally familiar (and have been since a child) with the signs that exist all around me. I don't know if I am reading them right but, read them I do and I take these natural-mudras seriously to heart. I follow these various external signs for the most part as best I can.

The world is alive with directionality. Everything means something or points somewhere. There are far more pointers than destinations, "destinations" being what is pointed at. In other words, our eyes are bigger than our stomach. There is even a case, at least philosophically, that there are no destinations and that the means (the way we travel) is the only meaningful destination. In other words, we travel to "travel well," but I digress.

Following an individual sign (or mudra) in modern life, at least for me, is difficult. There are too many. Rather I look for groups or schools of signs that like schools-of-fish can appear as random, but also can suddenly all point in the same direction. Maybe that defines a school, when several signs point out the same thing or in the same direction. That is clearest for me.

Mostly, it is THIS type of directionality, when signs school, that I can pick up on and perhaps learn from or at least follow them out or along for a way. If throughout my day, the same kind of sign keeps popping up or groups of them appear as flags, I slow down and consider whatever they appear to be pointing at or out to me.

Of course, this can approach what is probably wild-geese-chase proportions (too many signs) and sometimes I just

have just turn my signing-radar off or at least the volume down. How sensitive I am to subtle signs varies, but I believe I am more sensitive than the average bear in this because I have practiced it since a child when looking for natural life like insects and frogs. And as far as emotions, my intuition is like reading braille; I have been reading the signs of the times since a young kid. I can't always see clearly, but I can feel my way along using my natural sensitivities.

There seems to be a whole other world in which seeing is not the sense we use, but rather feeling is. We feel or intuit our way along like a blind person might feel their way along a corridor. We could almost call it a "second sight," another very useful way to negotiate time and this world.

Is this what psychics do? I have no idea, since I have never thought of myself as a psychic or able to see the future other than logically, like the old song goes where "The head bone is connected to the neck bone," and so on. Nevertheless, I have come to depend on what I call "second sight," my ability to intuit or sense directionality or trends.

And I try to cultivate this sensitivity too. Like the old movies where the safe-cracker lightly sands their finger-pads to feel the tumblers click, I do my best to keep my mind open and not just my eyes. This approach helps me to make decisions that are so deep-down that I can't just think them out logically. However, if I wait and let the answers arise naturally from within myself, and then wait so more, the right move or answer will surface and be readable by me. I then trust that and do it.

Yes, I know some of the Asian mudras and find they are elegant and meaningful, but on a day-to-day basis I am more skilled at reading my own mind and thus feeling farther into the future than I otherwise could.

Just my two cents.

CLARIFYING THE LOSS OF SELF

May 4, 2019

Let's take a timeout from this stroke discussion to clarify what we mean by the shattering and loss of Self. It seems that some readers of this blog are having trouble understanding what is lost when I say that with my stroke my Self was shattered, vacated, voided, and otherwise not there or functional. Let's see if we can clarify this concept.

If anyone reading this has lost someone they love, had a death in the family, been fired or laid off from a job, and right on down the line of shocks, you may have been subject to the kind of shock being referred to here, that of being bereft to one degree or another. And what is lost is the stability of what we popularly call the Self. When in shock, we can simply find us beside ourselves, destabilized, and the Self shattered and in tatters. It's all about having the desire and attachment knocked out of us. It's like having the wind knocked out. It takes time for the Self to pull itself back together again. With a stroke, I find that is quite a long time indeed.

I find that it helps to remember that the Self has been with us our entire life. And as the dharma points out, our Self is mostly made up of our whatever we become attached to. It could be a new bicycle when we are a kid, a girlfriend or boyfriend when in our teens, and a family and kids when we are an adult. And, also about everything else under the sun, a hobby, new car, sport, not to mention endless likes, dislikes, prejudices, and on and on. In short, everything we have become attached to.

Some folks refer to this loss as a life-shattering experience, while others say they lost their self-composure, stability, confidence in their self, and on and on. These events can be temporarily devastating and, as mentioned, they require some time before the self can reanimate and put itself back together again. Those times of loss often are difficult times for many of us, but spiritually-inclined folks can also find them of great value in seeing the nature of their own mind and how it works without an intervening Self weaving and dodging and being a pesky obscuration.

As sentient beings we function physically, psychologically, and spiritually. The problem as I see it (and as I understand the dharma presents it) is that after a sudden shock to our system, while our body or emotions or awareness still function, our sense of self (and cohesion) can be disrupted, even shattered, and most of our attachments and fixations lost or vacated, at least temporarily, thus leaving us temporarily naked of our attachments or desires. We may just not give a damn for a while.

This is especially true in those areas where we have exaggerated our self and “gilded the lily,” so to speak, laid on a patina with our own erroneous version of the truth, i.e. where we have enhanced reality more than truth would justify. And we do this all the time. To remind us of what I am pointing at here: most of us exaggerate and flatter ourselves, etc. That’s what I am talking about.

In other words, we augment reality with what we would like to believe it is or we are. The correct word is reification. We reify or attempt to make something more real than it in fact is. We puff ourselves up. The so-called Self is filled with our reifications, our attachments and fixations, likes and dislikes, prejudices, and etc. And we drag this entourage around with us wherever we go like a dead weight. This is the nature of the Self.

An “attachment” as defined here refers to clinging to something beyond what it merits. We may not realize it, but others can clearly see where we go beyond the truth and blow-up or puff-up the value or merit of ourselves or something we like or dislike. This is common knowledge.

We all know what is meant by a puffed-up Self, so I leave it to readers to know what is being looked at here. It seems we all like to buffer or cushion and surround ourselves with what most pleases us, even if it goes beyond reason or truth a bit. However, all of that exaggeration piles up and serves as a drag on reality for us. It won’t accompany us beyond the grave, for sure, so it might be good to get used to what in fact is real now rather than depend on false security. I found that out in my stroke! There was no comfort there and I had to bone up and get used to not having my baby-blanket with me.

Whatever we have done or opinions we hold in excess of their actual reality are lost when our Self (with its desires and sense of attachment) is shattered, lost, or vacated. If our desires are vacated and we no longer are magnetized or fixated, things then are no longer attractive. I say this on the understanding that our attractions are the glue that hold the Self together. When in shock, our desires bottom out and that sense of Self (and its stability) is often abandoned -- shattered.

And it was very clear after my recent stroke that much of my Self had been vacated at least as being desirable any longer for me. I was mostly nauseated or repulsed by what, apparently, I used to wallow in or indulge. Either way, what was my Self was no longer accessible to me. If it was there, I didn't desire it anymore or feel attached to it. I no longer fit to it or it to me. I was suddenly a free agent, which was more (than less) scary. That state is out there waiting for us. I, for one, want to get ready for it. I have seen what it can do and did not like it one iota.

The immediate impression after the stroke (and for some time) was of having no sense of my Self or what was remembered as "me" before the stroke event. Nothing of my historical and habitual me, call it a cocoon or baby blanket or whatever, was available any longer. My favorite fan club ("Me, myself, and I) was nowhere to be seen. Any buffer between me and reality had (at least momentarily) been removed. I was stark naked as far as my own perceived sense of support. I felt like a sore thumb. From a spiritual point of view, this is a good thing, but the suddenness of it through shock can make it VERY difficult.

I had been thrust beyond the comfort of my habitual Self into the stark light of reality. At the same time, like outgrowing a pair of shoes, I could no longer see myself fitting back into the Self I used to be. It was no longer me and I increasingly found it false; I could not see myself in that old Self and was even somewhat repulsed by it. That's not me! What then am I?

In fact, I spent many days struggling between the stark reality of the stroke and the previous Self I had identified up to then. I characterized that period as a form of temporary schizophrenia during which I was unclear which of these two

“sets of Self” I identified with. After many days, that struggle was settled in favor of my new changed-sense-of-Self and the old Self was then seen as history. From that point onward I identified with my new situation and the previous Self faded from view. Yet, as mentioned, that was a struggle.

I can remark that something similar is said to happen in the bardo shortly after death, as our previous life is gradually abandoned and our future rebirth begins to take form. The outcome is always resolved in our identifying with our coming rebirth. Look to the change to be the reality.

And I will comment (again) that I did OK with all of this until I realized that my former attachment to the dharma, my practice of it, and forty years of habit was also abandoned just as my non-dharma Self had been shattered. The truth is no lover of attachments, be they good, bad, or indifferent. That fact that I was attached to the dharma was no exception. The built-up patina of my attachment to the dharma was voided completely in the same moment of the stroke. Like a tornado came through, I didn't recognize the self that remained, such as it was.

It was like I was a stranger to the dharma and at that time I had no attachment to the dharma other than on the merits of my realizations (such as they were), meaning none of the accumulated comfort of my practice remained. It was like I had to start all over again to generate any attachment for the dharma.

I found this a bit terrifying, that my previous attachments to the dharma were not grandfathered into my post-stroke self, but instead were treated as any other attachment and just voided without my knowledge or consent. That to me was some tough love. I suffered over that one.

Fortunately, that situation was relatively short-term and I began to recapitulate my dharma-evolution fairly quickly, probably based on some good work done in the past by me and instead of repeating stock prayers verbatim, I began to recreate the essence of the prayers from scratch earnestly. I was soon comfortable again with my practice even though it was based on the requirement that I did everything from the beginning, from the heart. That means, instead of reading a

prayer, I had to find the meaning of that prayer within myself (as if for the first time) and go from there. I was VERY grateful to find that earnest, heartfelt prayers coming from my heart not only put me back in the game, but was a better kind of practice than I had before. I am learning as I go.

What you can take away from all this is up to you, but there is information in this account that should make at least a few things clear.

THE BRIGHT LIGHTS OF THE BARDO

May6, 2019

Spring is here, the snow is gone, and when I look outside at my yard, I find the 90-feet of flowers I planted last year just waking up, not to mention several other specialized gardens. My first thought was, due to health problems and the craziness of all the construction and change going on around here, I may just let the flowers fend for themselves this year.

But then the blue of the sky, some of the first warm air, and finally all that sun on my face and before I knew it I found myself out in that sun, sitting on the ground, gardening gloves on, weeding the flower garden.

What better thing to do than that? Which brings me to why I am writing this. I seem to have trouble knowing what to do with myself since my stroke. So, if you can stand it, bear with me and I will run this past you. You may have some suggestions for me.

Thanks to my recent stroke, I find myself observing the mental state I'm in more than I usually do. My teacher, Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, has taught us for decades to be aware (and on the lookout) for any shock in life, a sudden event (large or small), because that can be a time when we can be jarred out of our normal fixations or routine (rat race) and possibly catch a glimpse of the nature of our own mind behind the veneer and habits of our normal Self. Speaking of shocks, my stroke has for sure been a huge shock to the system.

Unfortunately, because I am basically lazy, I'm usually unable to wake up (and remain aware) short of something sudden or very shocking happening to me. Left to my own devices, I just kind of glide through this dream we call life from day to day. Like most of us, I'm busy, but at what? LOL.

In other words, unless I reach some kind of stop sign, something that shocks me awake, the best I can come up with is some sort of intellectual and conceptual grasp of things. I seem to prefer floating above where the rubber actually meets the road (the realm of hard experience) and

seldom venture any actual skin in the game. Perhaps I don't prefer to connect fully to reality.

And, of course, without experience (skin in the game), there can be no realization. And without realization, the dharma can never ripen in us. We just don't spontaneously wake up; at least I don't. But enough about my day-dreaming through life. I want to say a little more about my recent loss of Self and what that has left me with because it is interesting, at least to me. It's happened a few other times in my life, but not this strong.

Something that has been on my mind since the stroke is how awkward I feel without my usual sense of self. After the stroke, I woke up from the comfort of my normal self (which was gone) to find myself all alone in this present moment. It's not like it has ever been any different; I just didn't know it. It's some stark experience.

Suddenly, here I am wide-awake, but feeling totally exposed and just not knowing what to do with my time. And I didn't much like this experience at first. It makes me nervous, yet I haven't known just what to do about it but persist.

For some (perhaps strange) reason, I associate my own uncomfortableness in the moment these days with what is described in the bardo teachings from the Tibetan Book of the Dead, i.e. our reaction to the various bright lights that appear in our bardo journey after death and possible attempts to hide from or turn away from these lights.

As the teachings point out, these bright lights are somehow just too bright, so that we turn aside or away from them. We don't want to go toward the light and we don't recognize the light as the true nature of our own mind which it is. The thought of that miss-take is troubling to me.

I wonder if we already do this (or something similar) in everyday life, which the teachings also say is one of the bardos (the Kyenay Bardo), which lasts from birth to death? In other words, we are already in the bardo now.

Yet, it's that fifth after-death bardo, the Chönyi Bardo, where these various visions are said to occur and where, so the teachings say, that various lights appear that are so brilliant that we can mistake or not recognize them as our own inner

nature and thus turn away from them into darkness. Who can read about that and not be moved to thought? I was shocked back in the early 1960s and maybe the late 1950s by the Tibetan Book of the Dead. It was one of only a few books on Tibetan Buddhism back then. Today there are thousands.

It is this fifth bardo that makes me wonder whether there is something similar in this normal life we live now where we can also feel very uncomfortable, enough to also turn away from or hide. First, I would like to know more about what the Tibetans mean by “bright light.” Whatever it is, it can make us uncomfortable enough so that we turn away from and try to avoid it. To me, that begins to sound familiar in the state I’m currently in, this uncomfortableness at being on the spot called the present.

In my recent after-stroke experience, when I no longer had the comfort of my Self around me, but rather found myself just kind of stuck out here in the cold, so to speak, I was VERY uncomfortable, bereft of any of the comfort of my normal Self. Does this “uncomfortableness” relate to the bright-light of the Chönyi bardo? And why do I even think this?

My reasoning is that the Self with its fixations and attachments is said to be a major veil or obscuration to the clarity of the mind – a big distraction. We all should know that. And with the stroke came the sudden absence of the Self in my experience. It was immediately vacated or voided, leaving me on my own and vulnerable.

And with the absence of the Self, I felt very much exposed to whatever remained after the Self had abdicated, call it the natural mind or nature of the mind, the mind without Self – whatever. Is this what happens to us when we enter the bardo, in particular the Chönyi bardo, after death? I wonder.

It is clear from the written teachings that soon after death, our Self from this life fades and becomes increasingly unidentifiable. In other words, we lose touch with ourselves and finally are so without it entirely that we no longer identify with it. Who or what remains?

What remains without the Self? You tell me, but I imagine that what remains is that part of us that transmigrates between lives, between death and rebirth, whatever that is. And it

seems it must be coherent enough to see and turn away from lights that are too bright for it. If we have lost our Self or persona, what or “who” is it that turns away?

In other words, a serious question is that if the Self has faded in the bardo soon after death, who or what is it that responds (or hides) from the bright lights of the bardo? If all that remains for us is the non-Self (whatever that is), then who is it that “freaks” out and seeks to turn away from the bright light of the clarity of the mind?

“Inquiring minds want to know.” LOL.

It is written that we don't recognize the nature of the mind when confronted with the bright lights and, if we don't, it is then that we turn away from the light into something not-so-bright where we feel more comfortable. And that is also said to lead to a “lessor” or more difficult birth or at least not to freedom from rebirth and an existence in one of the pure realms, the Buddha Realms. That's a lot to take in and process.

Of course, I have no experience such that I am aware of any of this, but this is just what I read and have been taught. But who among us who studies this stuff does not wonder how it works and does not try to make sense of it? I can't help it.

All I know for a fact is that after the shock of my recent stroke, my Self immediately voided out, shattered, became detached, or however you want to describe it. And life without my Self was very different than before when I had a Self and its seeming security. I had experienced all this some years ago to a lesser extent in a previous stroke (TIA) and another shocking life event. The result, in all cases, was that I felt totally exposed to the elements or whatever there is, i.e. very, very vulnerable. I was naked and stuck out.

The most common way this was experienced was this sense of not knowing what exactly to do with myself, only I had no Self to not-know what to do without. LOL. “Suck any sense from that who can,” as the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins put it.

Anyway, I found that I was very anxious, being simply exposed like that, and sought relief in nervousness, naps, or just closing my eyes and resting. It seemed overwhelming. I

had to lie down or something. It was hard to just be and remain present for any length of time in this new form I am.

So, naturally I wonder just what is it that I am reacting to when I feel uncomfortable? Or, am I just reacting because I miss the comfort of my historical Self and its attachments? And how do I miss what I no longer am?

And.... what is going to matter or count when I pass beyond this life into the actual bardo? Am I just going to have to wing it? Or is there something I can do here and now (in this life) to better prepare me for the bardo? I don't appreciate how helpless I feel when devoid of Self. Trust me, beyond the comfort of the Self and its illusion, awaits something more authentic and pure, but also more sober.

I have to say that it was unsettling, after my stroke, to feel like a stranger in a strange land. If that's the kind of exposure I will get in the bardo, that is not a comforting thought at all. I was unprepared and not able to cope all that well, to say the least. Perhaps I better do some preparatory "push-ups" (or something) before going there... into the bardo. LOL

What thoughts do my fellow dharma brothers and sisters have to say about this? I'm asking, because we are all in the same boat. My guess is that you too are like me. Talk to me!

KEEPING OUR CHIN UP

May 8, 2019

This blog is a little sidebar issue. In these many blogs about my medical events I've had a chance to hear about some of yours as well. It's clear that we are in the same boat. In fact, ultimately everyone is. In a conversation I had years ago with famed economist Kenneth Boulding, he said to me "Michael, we have to learn to fail successfully." He was so right about that. Fail we all will, but it does not have to be a "failure." We have many mini-lives yet to live in this life and the great masters tell us many rebirths beyond this one. So, as the rinpoches say: "Kale, Kale (slowly, slowly).

Some things are up to us and one of them is our attitude. There is nothing wrong with chimping our attitude, checking on it to make sure we are not spiraling down the tubes and don't realize it. I probably take my attitude-temperature more often than I need to or than most do.

I try to keep myself stable and humming along in as balanced a way as I can manage. Easier said than done. However, when reality throws a monkey-wrench into the works (and for me it does this often enough) and puts my whole system out of whack, guess who goes around with a long face on? That would be me and what I don't like is that pulling long faces are just adding insult to injury. It's bad enough that the going gets tough for us and worse if we give into it and feel sorry for ourselves. I can tell one brief story.

As a computer programmer for 47 years I have a lot of time invested into coding solutions to problems. A long time ago I would on rare occasions encounter the most feared accident in programming, the dreaded "User Error." I would, without meaning to, manage to press a key and mistakenly delete something like a week's work or two weeks work. And in these special cases there was no backup or the backup was corrupted. It was an awful moment and it did not just happen once, but too often for my comfort. LOL.

When this happened, I used to jump up and down and yell, throw myself around and do all manner of decrying my fate.

But, when all was said and done, I would eventually get over it, sit myself back down and start coding the lost program all over again. And the point of the story is that after some years of doing this repeatedly, despite all precautions, I calmed down. Finally, after many years I reached a point that when this happened, I would perhaps just sigh and immediately start over again with the first letter of the code. I no longer wasted valuable energy demonstrating to whom? I would not waste energy on what I could do nothing about, but just start over again. For me, that was a life-lesson learned.

But as I see from my recent medical events, there are ever new and ingenious ways for life to get my goat. And when that happens, there I am again walking around with a long face again. LOL. And it does not take much to throw me out of whack and suddenly there I am again beside myself without a center.

Looking around this life I live, I see I am not the Lone Ranger in this. Many people, including some of you reading this, seem to do the very same thing. In other words, aside from my own long face, there are also a lot of other long faces out there. IMO, and I am talking to myself here too, this is just a big waste of time. I've been working on remedying this.

If things don't always go well or as I expect or wish, I try not to throw good money after bad, meaning: if I'm having a bad day, I don't just sit there and watch it fester. If I feel out of whack, I am learning to just get busy trying to restore order and balance. For me it's like a high-wire act and I don't like heights.

Perhaps one of my the worst days is when I get into an argument with someone and we both see that our conversation is spiraling down, going from bad to worse. And it seems that everything I say only makes things still more touchy. It's hard to end such conversations without one of us holding the short end of the stick. And yet every statement by either of us seems like we are trying to have the last word, and we both like to have the last word. That's what I mean by spiraling down. Sound familiar? LOL.

I guess what I am saying here is that I try not to let fate immobilize me so that I become like a deer in the headlights.

Just because reality deals me a hard blow, I try NOT to stop moving and just stand there waiting for another blow. At least, that is my philosophy. If nothing else, I'd rather be a moving target. LOL.

If I let my whole frame-of-mind go south just because life becomes difficult, whose fault is that? If I could get somewhere by complaining I would try that, but who's listening? No one I know or have ever found. And so, I watch the signs reflected in the mirror of my daily life and when they start to show that my attitude is drifting downhill, I take note and do my best to walk on.

One of the most valuable dharma teachings I have learned says:

“DON'T FOLLOW AFTER WILD THOUGHTS.”

That advice is not just an aside; it is a KEY piece of advice. I always tell my kids, just keep walking, one foot in front of the other. And as I mentioned above, don't look down. LOL.

DHARMA: MY HEAD IN THE SAND

May 9, 2019

When I was a just a pup, well rather a teenager, the car I most wanted in the world was an Austin Healey 3000. Of course, I never had the money for one. Then, not too many years ago, a friend had one and asked me if I wanted to go for a ride in it. Of course I did. To my surprise, it was one of the bumpiest rides I have ever taken and probably was even so way back in the day, only then I couldn't care less. Today I care. LOL.

Perhaps the same idea holds true for my recent post-stroke sense of having lost my Self. The 'ride' after the stroke was very uncomfortable, even quite harsh. The moral of the story is that we get used to, even attached, to the comforts of our Self, either real or imagined.

Left to my Self or, rather, left to having "no- Self" was not at all cushy, even painful. I was used to the luxury glide of my pimped-out Self, whether real or imagined.

And so, I wonder what it was that I was surrounded by if my Self was vacated and just gone? And the only thing I could come up with is that, quite tautologically, I was surrounded by everything that was left other than my Self which was gone. Well, that's not saying much is it? And I had trouble getting used to being without the support of my Self.

Over time, this "not-Self" did appear refreshing, if only because it also felt pure or clean; and it was stone quiet. And I felt so much more authentic in its company and less full of BS. Well, that caught my attention and began to make up for the lack or loss of Self. Still, when I was not engaged in the present doing something and was just sitting around or "being there," I felt really awkward and uncomfortable, almost vulnerable; I felt that I stuck out like a sore thumb, not that there were any witnesses to this.

The point of all this was clear to me. I was a better "me" without all the BS and, yes, even without the Cadillac-like

comfort of my old Self. Yet, when the music stopped (when I was not actively doing something) I had zero idea of what to do with myself. I wished I could just put a coin in the meter and park myself somewhere until it was time to do something active again.

Has it changed over time? Yes. Do I still feel like the odd-man-out when I am just sitting around? I do, but gradually less so. Am I retaining the purity and clean feeling. Some, but like all things new, they get old in time and the concept of the Self, by nature, is to make us as comfortable as possible (like rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic), which means allowing, even encouraging, things that are a little over the top, as in “not exactly true.” And I, against my expressed wishes, seem to be complicit in that. It is hard to say no to comfort. LOL.

Well, as a result of all this medical stuff, for one I am forewarned, but I’m not sure about what. The economy of no-self (as less attachment) I can live with, even like. What hovers like a specter on the horizon is this (realization or worry) that it takes more than I’ve been giving to become realized or enlightened. I hate to carp on this, but there it is. My point is that if it takes having a stroke to get my attention, where have I been all my life and doing what? Fiddling while Rome burned? LOL.

And coupled with that thought is another, that everything is right here before us (and has been). It’s like the sun is in the sky and we can’t look at it, just as we cannot look directly into the physical sun without harm to our eyes. There is something like that going on here. Somehow, I can’t look directly at the true nature of the mind, not because it is hidden, but because I cannot stand to (or won’t) look directly at it. Like the ostrich, I put my head in the sand because the truth is too bright.

If that is the case (that it’s me that ignores the obvious sun of the mind itself), what can I do about it? I like to imagine that I’m running as fast as I can, as they say, but obviously that’s not true. My attention and awareness is just not cutting it. My little vacation from my Self makes this perfectly clear to me. And that resounds with a bit of a somber tone.

Speaking of which, and I don't mention it often, I have had quite a thorough training in western classical music. I don't have all the Bach Cantatas I once had (as in: all of them), but Cantata BWV 110 comes to mind as I write this, which is titled "Unser Mund sei voll Lachens," which translates to "May our mouth be filled with laughter." And in that cantata is the alto aria "Ach Herr, was ist ein Menschenkind"

"Ah, Lord, what is a child of man
that you should seek his salvation with so much pain?"

Of course, the whole cantata is incredible. The particular aria I am pointing out that resonates to the tone of what I write here begins at 10:59 min into the cantata and lasts until 15:04 min for those who have the luxury of curiosity. I looked on YouTube for a version that I like, but Bach rarely left tempo markings and IMO the ones I found are all taking the tempo too fast for my taste. This one is better, but still not quite what I like. Give it a listen if you have that kind of time. The aria is only four minutes long.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ICEy6ppkmP8>

DHARMA: RESONANCE

May 10, 2019

The various arts differ. For example, take music. We can think about and conceptualize music, but hearing music only happens in real-time. We sacrifice a minute of our life for a minute of music. It's the same with watching dance and so on. We pay as we go, so to speak.

Perhaps I am a bit superstitious about music, but I believe that having heard a particular piece of music, it somehow remains with us or its remains affect us, perhaps by synchronous vibration. It conditions us and even perhaps tunes us. Perhaps we resonate to it. Just like the music played on a particular violin or guitar must condition these instruments; they respond in resonance to how well they are played.

Even in the dharma, we have what is called the "Lung," which is part of receiving various initiations and being properly empowered to hold that initiation. The entire sadhana (text) is read into our ears and somehow takes hold. It too leaves its resonance.

I can't say because I don't know how this instrument that we call our body works, but perhaps we too resonate to whatever cosmic music is played on us or passes through us. These five senses that we have are, if I understand it right from the dharma teachings, non-dual. By that definition, they are said to be pure, as in pure sound, pure sight, and so on and not by nature dualistic – in any way interpreted. Our senses are pure signal or source and only after having been seen and heard are they reflected or can be commented on. We resonate to the dharma.

IMO, the dharma itself is also a signal-source and pure like this. The dharma is not by nature relative or dualistic, but a single pure stream of truth that is ineffable and stainless. Not only stainless, but untouchable and unalterable. Our only real choice is to become one with and to also resonate with it.

All our missteps, blind-alleys, false moves, and errors, eventually lead in only one direction, to the dharma and the

true nature of our own mind. So, it's never a question of where we are going or will end up, but only one of how long it will take us to get there. And, as my dharma teacher has repeatedly told his students: in all the time there has been up until now, we (all of us not already enlightened now) are the ones that never got it. We are the stragglers, as Rinpoche puts it. So, if nothing else, we certainly know how to take our time. LOL.

DHARMA: ALL-PERVASIVE SUFFERING

May 10, 2019

[This blog includes a realization that has emerged from my struggling with the reanimation of my lost self these last many weeks and the fact that it has yet to really return, but instead a new awareness has come into focus that has eluded me forever up until now. I can't say this will interest many of you, but hopefully some will see the value. I also many be unable to blog for a day or so. We shall see.]

The dharma teachings tell of three kinds of suffering. And, of course, these three sufferings are listed out very nicely as:

- (1) The Suffering of Suffering.
- (2) The Suffering of Change.
- (3) All-Pervasive Suffering.

The first is the obvious suffering of old age, sickness, death, and the like. And then (second) there is the suffering of constant change, forever having and losing what we love. We all know this. But that third kind of suffering is not so obvious: all-pervasive suffering. Perhaps a better way to phrase all-pervasive suffering is the suffering we have from not being enlightened. Let's talk about that one, since it is less well-known.

And a helpful corollary is to know that "meditation" is prescribed as an antidote for this third kind of suffering. "Gom" is the Tibetan word for meditation and it simply means "becoming familiar with" our own mind. And the process of getting familiar with our mind involves facing what we don't know and perhaps don't like to face, rather than opposing or ignoring it.

I have come up against this "all-pervasive" form of suffering in the aftermath of my recent stroke. Perhaps I finally understand it because I'm trying to become familiar with what I'm not familiar with, what I'm uncomfortable with.

What I'm already familiar with is no problem. It's what I'm not familiar with that is difficult, that which is beyond the fringe (the fire up front) of my familiarity that keeps rearing its head.

Let's be sure we are on the same page here. Typically, familiarity does not offer resistance, IMO. It's familiar. Its where familiarity ends and the unfamiliar begins that awareness arises. In other words, I am quite aware when I am in unfamiliar territory and that's where I have been lately.

So, what is the process of making the unfamiliar familiar? It can't be a one-shot experience of let's just do it and be done with it. The unfamiliar is not a state, place, or line to cross just once, but rather (for most of us) the very long process of becoming familiar. And to do that requires that on the other side of the line of familiarity is the "unfamiliar." And it seems the unfamiliar is not simply the "unknown" (although it is), but rather in my experience it is very much the "uncomfortable."

My point is: can we actually become familiar with feeling unfamiliar? Or, are we always just beyond the fringe of the familiar and always walking point? Can we ever be comfortable with what feels unfamiliar? I mean comfortable. Is that the kind of familiarity that is required?

Do we have to always turn the unfamiliar into something that is then familiar and comforts us; in other words, does this uncomfortableness itself have to become familiar and no longer uncomfortable and unknown? That's the question I have been poking around in lately.

In other words, can we be familiar with unfamiliarity itself? Or do we habitually have to convert every bit of unfamiliarity into something that comforts us? If so, is this just once again the idea of the Self (in the negative sense) telling lies we would like to hear and believe, in order to feel comfortable? Again, is it possible to actually be comfortable being uncomfortable? Can we stand it?

The bottom-line here: is the unenlightened life (samsara) itself naturally uncomfortable rather than comfortable? That's what this boils down to.

Is this what Buddhists mean by "all-pervasive suffering," that we are by nature uncomfortable in samsara until we realize enlightenment? And so, any wishful thinking or pretense of comfort in samsara will never be really comfortable, and this by definition. As mentioned, the dharma teaches three types of suffering and traditionally the third type of suffering is that

we are suffering because we are not enlightened and always will be until we are. That's the whole reason for the dharma, enlightenment.

And experiencing the "uncomfort" is simply the truth of the non-realized state; "uncomfort" is the natural unenlightened state. Is this the "suffering" the Buddhist say exists and that most refuse to see or acknowledge, i.e. that Samsara, the unenlightened state, is by nature suffering. Is suffering simply the unfamiliarity with enlightenment and not about to go away until we are enlightened? It is a constant.

And are our attempts to make everything comfortable itself a neurosis that has to be realized? I have been very uncomfortable since my stroke, but have assumed that this will pass and that I will find comfort again, like I seem to remember my old Self felt like. And all this, when perhaps my current sense of "uncomfort" itself is a natural state and my trying to sweep all "uncomfort" under the rug of the Self is the problem and not the solution. Is this "uncomfort" I feel the natural state for those of us who are unenlightened and we should learn to find comfort in that, rather than try to assuage it away all the time?

And does this describe the "lie" of the Self, that feathering our bed only makes any kind of enlightenment harder to attain, because an unrealized life by default (and by definition) is forever uncomfortable and unfamiliar. It's like rearranging the deck-chairs on the Titanic, endlessly trying to make ourselves more comfortable in Samsara, rather than getting on with enlightenment and realizing for ourselves the nature of Samsara.

Those are my thoughts.

REJIGGERING SAMSARA IS STILL SAMSARA

May 14, 2019

We forget to remember, if we ever even knew, that this world we live in is Samsara. You can't put lipstick on a pig, as they say, and expect much. And there is limited value in making ourselves comfortable in this life; it's like rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic, especially if all we get is more comfort that insulates us from reality so that we can better ignore the truth. With that approach, things will never change, and haven't in our rebirths all the way up to now.

As a counseling astrologer, I spent many years using astrology to help folks become more comfortable in Samsara. And while being better off in Samsara has value, it is a limited value. It's of no help if our increased comfort insulates us from reality so that we are no longer able or interested in realizing the nature of our own mind – enlightenment. IMO, that's a Catch-22 and a half.

Don't get me wrong. There is a place and value in counseling and therapy. I counseled fulltime for many years, so I know it from the inside out. As my dharma teacher explained to me long ago, astrology is one of the limbs of the yoga, but not it's root. The dharma is the root. Astrology (counseling) can help us get from here (where we may be suffering) to there (where we are not suffering as much) in this world of Samsara, but as astrology is intrinsically a "relative" truth, it cannot take us beyond duality, i.e. beyond Samsara. That is a thought that all counselors should ponder, that counseling, however useful, still remains an artifact of Samsara. When I say this, some folks feel I am putting down counseling. Not a all, but I am pointing out its very real limitations.

The way I put it to those who ask is this: imagine the world as a sphere covered with water and the winds of change. And on the surface of the sphere is a sailboat, tossed about in the water and wind. Astrology (or any counseling technique), is a relative technique, since it involves a subject and an object, and is dualistic by definition.

In other words, astrology can help someone on the surface of the sphere to set the sails on their boat to catch the winds of change and get from here to there -- reorientation. This can be a great help, but no matter where we get to, we are still on the sphere's surface -- samsara. Counseling is samsaric, a relative truth, and no matter how you phrase it, we are still rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic (Samsara).

The surface and winds of the sphere represent Samsara. Counseling (or any relative technique) can perhaps reorient us within Samsara, but it cannot take us from the surface of the sphere to the center of that sphere where we can realize the entire periphery. Only the dharma can do that because the dharma is non-dual by nature. That, IMO, describes the problem.

And so, as mentioned, the only danger I see in dualistic (relative) techniques (like counseling) is if we so improve our comfort level in life that preserving and protecting and increasing that comfort becomes more important than waking-up and freeing ourselves from Samsara itself. And this happens a lot. After all, that is what the Self of most of us is all about, building a cocoon of comfort to ignore and withstand the sufferings of Samsara, "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune," as Shakespeare puts it.

If our comfort level becomes of greater importance than actually realizing the nature of Samsara (and how the mind works), then our chances of becoming enlightened pretty much vanish. To the best of my knowledge that, my friends, is what has gotten us where we are today -- still among the unenlightened. LOL.

And so, comfort? Yes, we need some, at least enough freedom to be able to study and practice the dharma. More comfort than that and we run the risk of forgetting or never realizing that Samsara, by definition, is just another form of suffering (all-pervasive suffering). And without that realization, enlightenment can remain forever just off our radar screen and out of reach.

Too much comfort is as counterproductive as too little.

DHARMA -- MUSICAL CHAIRS

May 15, 2019

[Local News: The Forget-Me-Nots are up in the garden. I include a photo taken this morning. I love these little flowers and planted a ton of them last year, which are coming up strong this spring.]

After a little bit of travel around the state, it's back to where I am currently, still working through the aftermath of my recent stroke. I apologize if this is getting old for you folks, but it's still news to me. And it's hard to avoid commenting on it.

And, it's bit like musical chairs. As long as I am busy and doing something, I am content. However, the moment I stop, I don't know what to do with myself. As I like to say, I feel I should just find some place out of the way to park my body and let it tread water. I'm sorry that I have to hang around with me when I'm inactive. LOL.

However, I am now aware of this situation and watching it with understanding. Something important is going on here and I am figuring it out. I never used to do this when my gearshift went into neutral, so to speak. Lately, it's almost as if when I'm busy I don't have to deal with reality as I do when I am idle. That's a clue.

For some reason, I get nervous when I'm forced to look reality in the eye. I remember the old saying "Idle fingers are the devil's workshop." I don't know if that is related, but it is interesting. I don't believe we have to pit the Self against the reality of mind (they can work together), but it seems that the kind of opposition I'm describing is common enough. Much of what we call the Self is not "true" to reality, but simply our overgrown comfort zone, a cocoon against reality.

I see no reason why the Self has to be anything but true to reality (dharma) other than the fact that we like to feather our Self's comfort-nest to please ourselves, and apparently, we can't help but stray from the truth in the process. If our Self is little more than a patina or veneer of exaggeration laid on top of the truth (which truth we may have never seen!), then it (that veneer) is not the truth (or itself dharmic) and sooner or

later is bound to be wiped clean, certainly at death. I saw that at my stroke. Wiped clean!

If we want to do it sooner, the dharma is the solvent for removing what is not essential from our Self. I am seeing all this in real-time. Many dharma texts say that our meditation practice will take away what is not essential and add for us what we need. That seems to be true.

How all this relates to what I'm going through I'm not sure. However, it could be something like: these times when I am not active (lost in doing something) and forced to just be present, I end up staring myself and reality in the eye. These moments must be some kind of measure of the difference between the actual reality and my comfort level. If they were one and the same, I would feel natural and comfortable. To the degree I don't, I would like to know why not and will have no choice but to somehow lose the veneer.

So, when these moments of awkwardness arise, instead of fidgeting and trying to ignore the obvious, these days I am doing my best to hold steady, not fidget, and somehow acclimatize with just being present and accounted for. I'm taking it straight rather than hiding my uncomfortableness in distraction or entertainment. It's hard.

It's like my uncomfortableness (when I am inactive) are two magnets repelling one another or like a door I have never opened, but just ram my head up against and turn away. Again, I can't help but feel that my refusal to look reality in the eye is like those bright lights in the bardo after death that we cannot stand to look directly at, but instead we are driven into the shadows where we can more successfully ignore it. It's a sad truth, IMO.

Apparently, the naked, raw mind is something I am not familiar with and, as I point out here repeatedly, the Tibetan word for meditation (Gom) means "to become familiar with." Simple logic points to meditation as something I need to pursue for health's sake, which I have been doing. Obviously, I need to become more familiar with the nature of my own mind. And that nature is nothing like I imagined it was. So, I'm on the right track, just not as far along as I might have hoped to be.

In summary, I am comfortable when I am absorbed in being busy, doing something (being distracted), or writing something as I am now. No problem. However, when I am between tasks or accidentally pop out of absorption and am exposed to not-being-absorbed, then I have problems. Then it's the naked truth or something close.

Why did I never have this experience before when I was idle, alone with myself, and doing nothing? My only thought, and it's just a guess, is that my "old" Self was more entertaining somehow. I was so distracted and absorbed that I didn't notice the elephant in the room, which elephant is just true relatively-unadorned reality. I don't know what else it could be.

Yet, now I notice and obviously don't know exactly what to think about being present without entertainment. It reminds me of when I have to take a medical MRI and they slide you into those huge claustrophobic tubes. They always hand me a set of headphones and ask me if I want music so that I don't have to hear the loud clanking noises of the machine. I always say "no music." The sound of the machine is, to me, like modern classical music. I enjoy it.

I need to develop the same approach with being alone with my current not-so-entertaining Self that has formed after the stroke., I'm not so good with being alone with this non-entertaining Self. I'm not yet ready to want to hear the "clanking" music of reality, what I call the blast of nature living that we call silence. LOL.

I am aware and grateful for my recent realization that as long as we are not enlightened, there will always be a low-level sense of discontent and even anguish happening. Perhaps that is what I am seeing when I am not distracted, what the Buddhists call the "Awe-Pervasive Suffering" of the unenlightened..

BEING ALONE WITHOUT BEING LONELY

May 16, 2019

According to the Tibetans, “GOM,” their word for “Meditation” is translated as becoming familiar with our own mind. In most of the classic dharma texts, when it comes to meditation, we are told to seek a place of solitude. Mountain caves are often at the top of the list, somewhere far away from other people. This may be difficult to do in these modern times; I’m not just sure why. Caves still exist. We just don’t go there. LOL.

And this means being alone with ourselves in solitude. And “solitude” is being alone without being lonely. Loneliness is a disease, a neurosis and a bad habit. The Greek philosopher said it clearly ages ago: “Being alone is.” As beings, we have never been “not alone,” so the fear of being by ourselves is a trumped-up charge we levy at ourselves.

For me, better than getting away from other people is getting away from ourselves. That, my friends, is solitude, and is even more difficult for most of us than a mountain peak. LOL. And more lonely than the loneliest cave is this present moment and harder to get to, much less be able to allow ourselves to rest in.

I should know because, thanks to my recent stroke, I have had a crash-course in being alone in this present moment. And how I have hated it and done everything in my power to avoid it I’m only now beginning to realize. Because the stroke somehow managed to shatter and void-out my Self, like the old poem, I had nowhere to run to.

“I ran to the rock,
To hide my face.
The rock cried out:
No hiding place!

“The rock cried out,
I’m burning too,
And want to go to heaven,
The same as you.”

Well, yeah, that happened. I was stuck in the present- tense, with no access to my Self and all its comforts. I looked for it but find myself I could not. And you know I tried! I was stuck in the eternal present, up that creek without a paddle. And there I had to just tough it out; twist and turn as I might, I was hung out to dry.

Not able to find or feel like myself, all I had to protect myself from the raw-present was a desperate attempt to stay busy. When I was immersed in activity, keeping my head down, I was not aware of the void-of-Self emptiness of the present moment. However, as soon as I stopped being busy, I popped back up in the moment and had to endure its stark emptiness. And so, I did everything I could think of to keep busy (even cleaned the basement for a week or so!), anything but face the void-of-the-present moment, which was for me at the time a wasteland, devoid of my familiar Self and its comfort. And no entertainment either! I was on my own.

Yet, at the end of every action, when I surfaced again, there I was, face to face with an empty mirror, empty even of my own reflection. How scary is that? It reminds me of what are called the “Spaghetti Westerns” of Sergio Leone like “The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly” starring Clint Eastwood and with the incredible theme-song by Ennio Morricone, this one:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AFa1-kciCb4>

That’s how I felt, like the “man with no name,” Clint Eastwood, standing out in the desert with this theme song resounding all around me. LOL. Until then, I had no idea how important, comforting, and cocoon-like my familiar Self had always been to me. I didn’t miss it until it was gone, so “don’t leave home without it” was my cry. And I found myself without it. It’s still true today, but I am getting used to it. And I am learning a lot!

One of the dharma refrains is “Take it to the path.” Well, with a stroke I had no choice but to take it to the path. The dharma became the path. I found out how intoxicated I was with my Self and how addicted I was to its entertaining me pretty much all the time. Sure, I could intellectualize about the Self being corrupt, but I had no idea that the reality was so mesmerizing. None. I do now and it’s terrifying! I was a kept critter, devoted to my self’s suckling me.

And worst of all is the realization that my Self addiction is 100% in opposition to the dharma. Those of us who complain (or wonder) why we don't have more (or any) dharma breakthroughs need look no farther than to the Self and our dependence on it. There's no room for anything else when we are plugged into sustaining the Self 24x7. Of course, hindsight is 20/20. Since my stroke wiped out my Self and its demand to be fed, I experience this lack of Self in real-time.

I get it now, but I still must figure out what to do about it. I am working on it. I will have to find my "man with no name" hat.

IN PRAISE OF INSIGHT MEDITATION

May 17, 2019

In a world where time dominates our every second, the idea of a place where time does not exist seems like an anomaly. The present-moment is such a place but to know its secrets we must commit ourselves firmly to it. The great Buddhist texts speak of unwavering attention, but they also specify attention without effort, which is nice work if you can get it, but again: getting there requires that no effort is made. Sounds like an oxymoron to me, yet it's not.

In the more advanced dharma techniques, what are called the "realization" practices (Insight Meditation and Mahamudra Meditation) are non-dualistic forms of meditation, which mean they involve the present moment and are thus outside the purview of time. They are indeed timeless.

If I happened to throw you into the deep end of a swimming pool, you will find yourself surrounded by water on all sides. There is nothing you can lean on and your only alternative is to swim or drown. These realization practices are like the analogy of the swimming pool, but without the drowning. LOL.

When we enter into Insight Meditation, for example, we are all in the pool of the moment and are free of any clinging thoughts or resistance. We are free-floating, so to speak, and being so, we have no references to cling to or that can cling to us. We are completely immersed in the moment, something known as a non-dualistic state.

This kind of immersion immediately throws us on our own recognizance, meaning that only what we are and know are in play and all external references (like second thoughts, etc.) are not entertained. This provides a certain purity and completeness that otherwise would be nickel-and-dimed by our habitual conceptuality. In Insight Meditation, it is all us, all the time, meaning that the entire sphere of reference is only what we are and can grasp. We are taking it all in. This explains why it is so natural to us, because it is just us. We are not confronted with our own ignorance as we usually are in samsaric life. Insight Meditation is an inhale.

The pristine purity of Insight Meditation is not that the world around us has changed, but only that our relation to that samsaric world has changed because we are totally engaged down to our finest pores. We could say that we are then one with all that is. Yet, I hope you see why I say this. To rephrase: this is because where before we were misaligned with reality (dharma), with the complete surrender required of Insight Meditation, we come into what I will call here cosmic alignment. As mentioned, we are one with all there is. There is no difference between inside and outside, so it is non-dual.

And when we come out of Insight Meditation and back into what is called the “relative truth” of daily life, where there is a subject and object (dualistic), then perhaps we can see or sense where we went and what it was like. Traditionally, non-dual meditation is said to be ineffable. There are no words to describe it.

The mind, which is often called in Buddhism the “wish-fulfilling-gem,” is a well from which all of the future will emerge and where all of the past came from. To drink from that well is what we have always done to the extent that we can stand it. The realization practices like Insight Meditation are momentary excursions into these timeless regions (from which all things emerge) and our return with whatever it is that we most need at the time. Insight Meditation is a voyage of confirmation.

In my life, Insight Meditation (as part of Mahamudra Meditation) has been the single most vivid realization I have ever encountered. It is more than addictive; it is humbling in the most fertile sense of that word. If I were a Pavlovian mouse with a reward-pedal, I would be pressing that pedal all day long... and I do.

THE PRESENT MOMENT IS THE END OF TIME

May 19, 2019

We like to think that we live in the present moment, but the reality shows otherwise. It would be more correct to say that we are “being exposed to the present moment”; that is the operative language, IMO. There is reason to believe that time ends in the present moment.

Apparently, the present moment is some kind of a groove that we are not automatically slotted in. In other words, we don't naturally roll or fall into the groove of the present-tense, although it is all that we have before us. Go figure that out.

The present moment is not only an intellectual concept that philosophers argue over, as to whether it even exists or not. The “present” is said to be so instantaneous (of the split-second that) it is over before it begins, yet it is also called the eternal present. How can it be both?

My rather crude answer to that question is because we never spend any (or very little) time there. No matter how brief the present is, we still don't seem to have enough time to remain there. Yet, the present moment is much more real than just some philosophy argument. If the Present is the tip of the top of the razor's edge between the past and the future, we sure don't know how to balance ourselves there.

Instead, it seems that we roll off into the past or cast ourselves into future imaginings most of the time. My point is that the present moment is not some intellectual dilemma, some white-paper concept, but a stark reality that in fact is hard to endure, hard for us to stand. I have experienced this recently in real-time. The so-called “Now” is not just a philosophical quandary as I used to try to imagine, but much more a hard-scrabble struggle to remain aware OF the present moment and to remain IN the present moment.

The Present not only can be proved by philosophers to seemingly not exist, but rather also is so ever-present and

dominant that we can't withstand its constant onslaught, so to speak. It is like the Sun at Noon on a summer day, so bright that we cannot look at it without dark-glasses; most of us quickly find ourselves seeking out the shade. I only discovered this for myself recently. Just try to look directly into the present moment. This is why meditation exists.

The Present is indeed eternal, but apparently, we can only stand a wee bit of eternity, so stuck are we on time. LOL. The present is so bright that we are blinded by its, well, very presence. Like leggy plants that need the sun, we each need to harden ourselves off by enduring the present moment for more than a fraction of a second. After all, it is omni-potent and timeless. Time stops in the present and nowhere else. Instead, we look in the rearview mirror of the past to see what we just did in the present; we would rather reflect and live by our reflections. Which brings me to what we call "meditation."

In a very real sense, meditation is not only some pleasant timeout or a methodical practice on a cushion, but also (and perhaps even more so) a wrestling with reality in our attempt to become familiar with and seize (or endure) the present moment and the day -- Carpe Diem. Exposing ourselves to the present moment, in my experience, is a grueling task that (apparently) few are up to. Instead, we spend most of our time flickering in the past or the future.

For all our complaining about the weight of time, apparently, we prefer it to the eternity of the present moment. Yes, we all are perpetually exposed to the present moment, yet we cannot look it in the eye. And here is something to consider:

I am of the opinion that "this moment" is more like the wormhole that deep-space astrophysicists write poetry about; they tell us that it exists at the center of a black-hole, a singularity where the normal laws of Samsara break down, a short-cut through time (and space) via eternity into our future.

When I open my mind, I find that the present moment is exactly like what we will encounter in the bardo after death and it is here with us right now; always has been. It is comical that we assume our universe after death is some far off place (or state of mind) we eventually will find ourselves in. It's right here and now. What we imagine as distant is now near.

The fact is that we just ignore the present and instead dream a karmic-bridge to hold back what we have, lifetime after lifetime, until our karma is exhausted and we can look the present moment in the eye.

Anyway, that's what comes to mind. What is the present moment? Please tell me how you see and experience it.

THE DHARMA OF KARMA

May 20, 2019

I feel I should say something about meditation, a practice many of us who read this blog do. In the west, we have like this one word “meditation” to cover hundreds of different practices that are called meditation, and few of them are what the historical Buddha shared with us.

There is nothing wrong with relaxing on a cushion for a few minutes (or longer) and calling it “meditation; that may be your idea of meditation (or perhaps society’s), but please be clear that is not the historical Buddha’s gift to us.

I’m not trying to be exclusive here, but just inclusive of what the Buddha originally meant by the word, so it is not forgotten. And I should mention at least something as to the extent of what the Buddha’s method of meditation embraces. It’s important that, if we don’t know, we at least know what it is about so that we have the option to try it out..

As we get more into the traditional awareness-meditation of Buddha Shakyamuni, this includes not just our formal meditation-period on the cushion each day, but also what is called “post-meditation,” everything we do off-the-cushion for the rest of the day, which can extend the amount of dharma practice we do in a day and make it much more useful.

And, if we keep practicing for years, although many of us always have a bit (or a lot) of formal (on-the-cushion) practices each morning (I do), the line between what we do on the cushion and what we do off-the-cushion in post-meditation the rest of the day gets harder to distinguish. Ultimately, it’s all meditation, all the time. How does that happen?

In my own experience (and practice), meditation has become a continuing process of becoming increasingly familiar with the mind all of the time and at all times. Meditation is so much a part of my life these years, that the word as people commonly use it almost makes no sense to me anymore. What? Is there anything else but meditation?

As I know it, I am so used to meditation (and its practice) that it has stopped being something I particularly have to be aware of, although the increasing awareness that comes from my meditation practice, I am aware of. The process of getting to know my own mind has become like breathing (inspiration), something that I do (and want to do) constantly or at least most of the time. I can't imagine what life would be without it. For me, it would be a bit of a nightmare. LOL.

In other words, I don't even think about it anymore. Yes, I am aware when I fill (or empty) the water bowls on my little shrine each morning and offer the prayers and invocations that go along with them, yet these daily actions have become more like a salute or offering I make out of habit and deference than anything else. The rest of my day is even more filled with meditation of the off-the-cushion variety and can have the added benefit of being more spontaneous, tailored to the moment and to whatever is permitted to arise to my attention during the day.

Meditation is no longer something I do just out of habit or because years ago I set out to do so and thus I feel obligated to keep it up, although I do feel obligated and want to keep up. LOL. Let me give an example.

I remember when on time in Nepal with my family, a ticket-agent mispronounced the name of the place we wanted to go to and we ended up taking the wrong tiny airplane, which dropped us off in the jungles of Northern Nepal rather than where we were to cross over into to India. Standing with Margaret and the kids around our five-foot stack of baggage, we watched the tiny plane vanish in the sky just as we realized we were in the wrong place. They had to shoo the cattle off the grassy runway for the plane to take off. Oops! We were really out there in the sticks. There were grass huts.

This eventually resulted in our riding on the backs of elephants through the jungle. And why I bring this up is that riding through that jungle, there were times when there was no path or trail. The elephants (with us on top) literally made a path with their bodies by plunging through the deep foliage, these huge animals shaking the overhead canopy of trees as they lunged forward, which then rained insects from the canopy above down on us. And the elephants murmured and

trembled with fear when they sensed something they did not like.

There were tigers in that jungle and we watched a mother, father, and baby rhinoceros bathing right in front of us where we were fording a small creek on those elephants. And crossing a very wide river, the crocodiles, eyes protruding from the water, watched us and hoped for dinner, while we clung to our seats on the backs of those elephants. You know we hung on for dear life.

Anyway, that experience of making our way through the jungle reminds me of how I view meditation after some 45 years of practice. I am busy most of the day in some form of meditation, not sitting on a cushion, but making my way through the jungle of my mind riding the practices of meditation. Where at first meditation was more intellectual or like a hobby, today it is a visceral experience, that of becoming increasingly familiar with my own mind through hands-on moment-by-moment experience. More and more of the time, I am fully engaged. And no, I am not enlightened yet, but I intend to be. LOL.

And my point in writing this is to communicate that awakening, awareness, and the freedom that comes with it, at this point takes all of my attention and requires full immersion; and that is often is a far-away cry from just sitting on the cushion, although I do that each day as well. Meditation as a pastime or hobby, something I used to think I should do, is long behind me. Sure, I think I should do it, but without full effort, awareness, and deep immersion, dharma progress is slow. My advice: don't hesitate. Give it ALL YOU HAVE. 100%. It's not a hobby and like just going to church for an hour on Sunday, it takes more than that for most of us to have any realization. LOL.

I am deeply involved, especially since my strokes, in working my way through the jungles of my mind. It's not just a matter of prayers on paper being read or things to be intoned or invoked, but the exercise of my own mind in whatever I do, persons I meet, the phone call I take, my comments to you, and on and on. Everything is grist for the mill of the dharma; everything can be taken to the path and has to be – good,

bad, or indifferent. It all counts. It's all karma being worked through, IMO.

I write this because, at least in my experience, there was a distinct progression from when I first sat down on a cushion in a corner of my little room, without even a single image of the Buddha, self-consciously trying to meditate (whatever I thought that was); I contrast that with where I am some 45 years later. My ignorance and lack of confidence in sitting meditation (or meditation of any kind) gradually had its corners rounded off like a river polishes a stone.

Or, it's like the way a bobsled crew at the Olympics pushes the sled and then jumps in and keeps their heads down for the run; with the advent of Insight Meditation, a non-dual practice, eventually my second-thoughts, many doubts, and lack of confidence had to be abandoned in favor of full immersion through meditation. Ultimately, there is no choice and the more advanced dharma practice require complete immersion. I used to wonder what I am going through and today it's more like I REALIZE THAT "I" AM GOING THROUGH toward realization. That idea, if that makes sense.

Meditation is not the intellectual exercise that it seemed at start-up, but much more like that ride through the jungle on the elephant of meditation, clearing a path for the first time through my own attachments and fixations.

In summary, where in the beginning I was all eyes (and being self-conscious), on the outside looking in, today I am more on the inside of my body looking out and actively working, day by day, with my mind -- jungle and all.

In other words, meditation of the kind the Buddha shared with us is about increasingly becoming more aware and at the same time increasingly more directly involved with experiencing and ultimately realizing the true nature of our own mind and the mind itself.

And as an aside: of course, every breath counts; and deep breathing from our gut or diaphragm is what allows the true singers to sing.

IMAGINE WHAT I DON'T KNOW

May 20, 2019

Imagining what I don't know,
And I don't know,
I imagine what I don't know.

I know what I imagine is what I don't know,
And what I know is not what I imagined.
That much I know.

I can only imagine what I don't know.

That was a short poem I wrote long ago about “knowing.” It may drive a few of you away. LOL. I seem to never give up trying to express the ineffable, even though I know it cannot be put into words, yet I continue to try.

And so, now for a REALLY difficult concept, of possible interest only for those who want to learn the realization practices like Vipassana and Mahamudra meditation. Let's call it “The “There” and the “Then” that is here and now. If you can get any sense out of this essay, please let me know. If not, I apologize. Here goes.

What we don't know (the unknown), we tend to invent, fear, or imagine and too often we are simply mistaken. And this is because we imagine what we don't know as somewhere other than right here – some other place, some other time. A common example is always placing the “unknown” just out of reach as in “out of sight, out of mind.” For example, right now we imagine that the bardo, after death, is some place other than the here and the now. Try it out. How far away is the bardo going to be when you die? That's what I mean by a miss-take. Except for the past, there is no “there” and “then,” but only the here and the now.

In other words, we imagine the unknown of the future as the “there” and the “then.” That is, IMO, a bad habit, especially when all the dharma teachings pinpoint the Present Moment as the only avenue we have. Yet, we imagine our future, like the bardo after our death or our future enlightenment, etc. as anywhere but here and now. Yet, all we have ever known (we

all know it) is the here and now. Anything, else is in the past or the future.

Everything that we “think” we have to face after death we are facing now. It’s only that little thing called “time” that separates us right now from then. And even time itself will always be right here and now. I believe it is a mistake to imagine or assume that what we may fear of the future is not present now, where it can actually be addressed. It’s always right here and now – everything.

As to our mind, hopefully that is something that we are already somewhat familiar with, if only because of our nightly dreams; and the dharma texts tell us that this waking life is but a dream as well. In effect, we are already living our own dream or nightmare. How could we not be; we are only right here and now, ourselves. We can’t see beyond ourselves, because all our sense organs are all right here. And now, something I would ask you to consider:

Not commonly known, the mind is flexible and as physical as we are. And up to now it is my belief (from my own experience) that most of us have never used the mind for more than intellectual concepts. I repeat: the mind is as physical as we are physical.

It has never occurred to us that the mind is ambidextrous, so to speak. The mind is not just idea-prone, but viscous as well; it has textures. We are too quick to “think” with the mind, rather than to do anything with it viscously. The mind, IMO, is susceptible to shaping. It’s like kneading bread; we must put our hands into the mind directly and work the mind like we do physical exercise.

We each have to (need to) go into the mind ourselves and exercise enough to create space within there, room to live and be aware in, and set up shop – living room. We can go into our own mind and just stretch or expand it, much like we might erect or put up a tent, pushing and working to raise or expand this imaginary tent or space inside our mind so that we have some room or space. How do we do this?

To begin with, we do this by searching the mind; instead of just thinking of answers conceptually, we search our mind manually, not just intellectually. We actually get off our

mental-duffs and go into our mind and search hard and long for an answer to any questions we have or are given by our dharma teacher. For example:

My teacher once asked a group of us: "Is the mind the color "Red?" Then he asked us to spend the entire day and night looking in our mind for the answer to that single question and report back to him at the next session. And we all did just that. But clever me, I just quickly thought "No, the mind is not the color red or any given color." As usual, that was just exactly the wrong thing to do. My teacher was not asking me to "think," but rather to search my mind thoroughly, exhaustively, and completely to find out if the mind was the color red. I didn't do that, but I should have. And this failure on my part brings to light a quintessential point to fully grasp for those wanting to learn the more advanced non-dual dharma practices.

Instead of just think, think, think all the time, we have to learn to actually use the mind as if it were a muscle that we have never exercised to create space or room, one that can be expanded just by our exercise and effort. Again, like putting up a tent in our mind, we have to stretch, pull, and massage the mind until it becomes elastic and ultra-flexible.

We can learn to LIVE in there. Like working with clay (wedging), we have to make our mind more flexible, but most of all we have to search our mind until we exhaust all possibilities. We must completely exhaust all questioning by searching, by actually ourselves taking a look around in our mind, something we have never done. We must exhaustively search throughout the entire mind. If we just "think," we have already missed the point.

The mind is not just some abstract thing as I once assumed it was. It is EVERYTHING there is, all wrapped into one, and it has "suchness" too. It is viscous. And the "suchness" of the mind, well, that's us. We too are representatives of the mind. LOL.

You may get tired of hearing me rant and rave about the physicality of the mind, but this discovery was total news to me. I had always skimmed the concepts off the top of the

mind and never gone for a swim. As they say, "Come on in, the water is fine." And it is.

The sooner that we can begin to exercise within the mind itself, the better; in other words, become familiar with the mind. I have understood that this present moment is the key to knowing the mind and it's, well, always present and right there. The brilliance of the present moment blinds us until we become accustomed to enduring it. It's like the Sun at Noon. We can't look directly at it, but gradually we can become familiar with it. We also can become familiar with our own mind.

That's about all I know. I am working to become familiar with the present moment, but it is not easy for me. My habit, all I have ever known, is to hide in the darkness of thought and concepts and to not look directly at the present, much less endure it. I am not alone in this.

With all the current emphasis on physical exercise and getting in shape, the mind also has a shape it should be in. It is up to us to get our own interface with the mind in good shape. As dharma students, what I have tried to describe in the above lines, the sheer physicality or viscosity of the mind is, IMO, the key that I missed in preparing for the pointing-out-instructions that lead to the recognition of the true nature of the mind.

I wish I had known this earlier. I will leave you with another little (to me) fun poem.

NEVER KNOWN

If I know,
I don't know I know,
And I don't know I don't know I know.

I don't know what I would know,
If I did know.
That's how I know I don't know.

So, I don't know,
I know I don't know,
And I know I know I don't know.

I have never known.

GIVE IT A REST!

May 22, 2019

Everything has the seal or stamp of the mind upon it. That's the idea of Mahamudra (The Great Seal). The sound of silence can still be heard above the loudest noise. And as Shakespeare said, "Much Ado about Nothing." The even-handedness of emptiness, from the tiniest microbe to the largest whale, is astonishing. Nothing in existence exists all THAT much. Reality can get mighty thin at times, almost as if there is no one there. LOL. It's like our entire life is a hologram or as the Tibetans say, a magical illusion.

My dharma teacher Of 36 years, Khenpo Rinpoche, says that we might try resting the mind in Mahamudra meditation for the time it takes to pick up a teacup and take a sip. And then do this frequently, again and again as the opportunity arises. Continuity can result -- contiguousness. There are endless micro-opportunities each day to rest in the nature of the mind. He says to take them. IMO, by that, Rinpoche is telling us that even the longest journey has a single first step. Unless we take that first step, there cannot be another.

For each one of us, there must be a time that is short enough that we are able to rest for that moment in the nature of our own mind, like taking that first sip of tea. And then another and another, until with a succession of these moments we can rest for longer stretches of time. However, just sitting on the cushion and "trying" to rest is an oxymoron. Trying doesn't do it, resting does it.

Perhaps the immense initial effort we have to make to learn to meditate, like the scaffolding on a unfinished building, has to be removed before the building is complete. It's no different with meditation. We must unlearn the effort and the trying before we can rest the mind. That is just common physics. Yet, it can only be done successfully at the propitious time.

This even marks the difference between the purification practices and the realization practices. It IS the difference or threshold from one to the other. One of the most important realizations I have ever had was the day I realized that when

Rinpoche said “Let the mind rest,” by “rest” he did not mean some special kind of dharmic rest, but just the plain old rest that I already knew how to do. Let go and allow your mind to relax and come to rest -- settle. You know the saying: “Give it a rest.”

There is a way they communicate this in Tibet that is very convincing. As you drive through the almost non-existent roads in the high plateaus of Tibet, there are countless small plots of ground used to raise barley. Every family seems to have one or two. And when they harvest the ripe grain, they bind the remaining straw into little bundles, each tied in the middle by a light cord., These bundles are then set upright here and there across the fields.

And the concept of “rest” is taught by taking one of the bundles of barley-straw, leaning it against a wall or fence, and very gently cutting the cord that binds it. As the cord is severed, the straw does not just fly all about. Instead, as the cord is cut, the bundle of straw just ever-so-gently slumps, like a sigh. That’s how we should allow ourselves to come to rest. Ever so gently.

AN INCANTATION

May 23, 2019

We have to be in the automobile in order to drive the car. It's no different with our physical body, the mind, and its use. We can't know the mind from thought and concepts alone; living only conceptually is non-sensual -- nonsense.

Certainly, there is a vast western tradition of esotericism on what are called out-of-the-body experiences and their pitfalls. It's only too easy to flee incarnation (and our fears of it) and seek refuge beyond (or above) the physical in conceptuality and intellectualization. We all are acquainted with those who don't yet know what they are talking about. How does all this relate to the Dharma?

Just because there are thousands of books on the dharma does not make it primarily conceptual. It's not. The mind (as used in the dharma) is distinct from mental conceptuality and is as physical as physical can be. It's all one-thing and not two, although we can divide things by two (subject and object) to examine them intellectually and do. Nevertheless, reality remains in actuality singular, as in this present moment. It's all one.

My point is that if we study the dharma only conceptually, that is intellectually, the chances of it making any sense to us will be minimal. At best, we might get a blueprint, road-map, or conceptual view of the dharma, a disembodied ghost of an idea at that. Instead, we each must plunge our hands and selves into the matrix of life itself, into whatever physicality makes sense to us and feel it. Concepts must be grounded in flesh and lived. We must EXPERIENCE to live and have skin in the game. That's the entirety of what the dharma is about: realizing that experience.

"Understanding," yes, but that understanding is intellectual; life must be lived, experienced in the flesh, and known. And that means, as mentioned, that we must have skin in the game. And, by "known," I mean (and this is the essence of dharma) "Realized!" we have to realize what we are experiencing. And by "realized," this should not be confused

with conceptual “understanding” as mentioned above, but rather our dreams and ideas must be made to matter and become real, as in we are “fully immersed,” experiencing, and passing through life to the exclusion of any doubt, self-consciousness, or second-thoughts.

In a similar way, the dharma teachings are like freeze-dried seeds or kernels that only require the water of realization to reconstitute themselves and live again in us, now. However, they must be planted in the present moment and grown from there, from the bottom up and not just from the top down.

I used to write (and liked to write) what I called “mantra poems.” To my mind, these mantra-poems, if recited aloud and clearly, can re-invoke the spiritual empowerment that precipitated the original poem (and its initiation) so that it lives again in us now. I can’t guarantee that will happen, but here is a poem I wrote in the 1960s, perhaps 1967, about a concept that is technically called (in the western esoteric tradition) “The Monad.”

You might give it a try and see if you can invoke it. The word “Will” in the first line refers to the “Will” that holds the world together and allows it to cohere. I write a lot about the inadequacy of words to describe reality, and it’s true. However, here I write about the power of words as a signature of reality. I was perhaps 25 years old at the time.

And allow me to share what amounts to almost a caution: On the very edge of language, where prose gives way to poetry, and then somewhat farther yet on to the far-edge or fringe of poetry itself, where poetry verges on nonsense, live what I call these mantra poems, of which this is one.

To recite a mantra-poem aloud is to dare to call it to mind, to call it forth from the Mind and initialize (recreate) it once again in its original purity. Perhaps some of you might be able to invoke a reconstitution. It’s like a magic incantation and hologram.

EVERLASTING LIFE

What “Will” in words not wake
Clear sleeps,
And clear, sleeps on.

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

And on that last,
In overlay,
Our life.

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

We have a life that lives at last.

MY LIFE – PIG-BOARD LEARNING

I go to the county fair each year, usually with Margaret and often with our grand-kids. And something that has fascinated me are what are called, appropriately enough, “Pig-boards” or “Pig-moving Boards.” Pig-boards are large pieces of ¾-inch plywood or polyethylene (2 x 3 feet in size), with several hand-holes cut in them, that are used to shunt running pigs this way or that way. Often there is almost like a tunnel or maze made up of people holding pig-boards to force the pigs where they have to go. And run the pigs do, squealing all the way. And it is not lost on me that my life often consists of the occasional pig-board, with me as the running pig. I often don't do what makes sense and have to be helped out by the hard knocks of life. LOL.

I am sometimes asked what my early life was like. Where did I come from? So, since it is a rainy day here, I thought I would jot down a little of my early history for those interested.

My early years: I was born and raised in rural Lancaster, Pennsylvania in a house my parents had built, the only one around, stuck between two large farms. For many years, there were no other houses or families anywhere near. As the oldest of (eventually) five boys, I was pretty much on my own for many years. There was no television back then and I rode the school bus home each afternoon. I listened to the radio for entertainment, but Mother Nature was my main source of education and interest.

Some of us are born for the school of hard knocks, well, at least some harder knocks than others. I'm not talking about being poor, because we were middle-class. Instead, I'm talking about my difficulties in being schooled, which were many. I am a hard nut to crack when it comes to schooling. I can't be educated. I have had to educate myself.

Some people don't always learn from logic or reasonableness, but rather from exhausting every exit but the right exit. I am, without a doubt, in that later group, if only because I am perhaps too clever for my own good. Yet, as the artist Michelangelo, who was also a poet, wrote “What if a

little bird should escape death for many a long year, only to suffer a crueler death.” That would be me.

I have always resisted the obvious, society’s groove, choosing instead to find my own way, often by the most circuitous, even backward, way possible. And this was evident very early on, when I played hooky, so my mother told me, from kindergarten. And I followed that approach all the way through grade school and high school. I ignored any teacher that did not inspire me (and, unfortunately for me, that was almost all of them) and chose, instead, to plan out what I would do after school each day during classes. This went on for close to 12 years. LOL.

I was a determined naturalist by the time I was six years old and working with (and hanging out with) professional naturalists (PHD candidates) by my teens. My other great interest, that of my own consciousness, found me a natural psychologist by my late teens. I had read all 52 works by Fyodor Dostoevsky before I left high school and was busy learning Russian because of authors like Dostoevsky and Gogol.

By my early twenties I had read most of the philosopher George Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel and had pretty much become a phenomenologist. I read extensively in and was influenced by the Existentialists, but they were a bit too grand for me; instead, I found my niche as a phenomenologist, someone who studies life’s inner phenomena from the point of view of the first-person, in particular, the direct study and monitoring of my own consciousness. I still do that today; that’s who I am.

It is clear to me that I am a phenomenologist, a “gleaner,” someone who monitors his experience to extrapolate the world. Yes, I can make a mountain out of a molehill, but I prefer the William Blake quote:

“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.”

I never finished high school, of my own choosing. Instead, in 1960 I chose to leave school and hitchhike to the West Coast

and Venice Beach in Santa Monica, California, where I lived in an abandoned walk-in freezer in the basement of the Gas House, an art gallery and well-known hangout for the Beat Generation. At the time, I thought I was a graphic artist and painted with oils. I also spent time in North Beach, San Francisco, and Greenwich Village in NYC. I was all of 19 years old.

I hitchhiked a lot, including a stint in 1961 with a young Bob Dylan. Dylan, and I, along with my friend guitarist Perry Lederman traveled together and hung out for a time. I was part of the revival of folk music in the late 1950s and early 1960s and helped Dylan put on a concert at the University of Michigan back in the day.

After years of hitchhiking (and a few years later -- 1964), I spent a year in Berkeley studying with a professor at the University of California, but looking back, I was actually busy absorbing the intellectual climate (and the spiritual arts) that presaged the birth of the alternative culture of the 1960s. As the assistant manager for Berkeley's "Discount Records," I was seriously engaged in studying classical music.

When what is called "The 1960s" came along (in 1965), I was just old enough to be a tutor of the hippies, and found myself a bit of a leader, introducing the hippies to the liberal arts – music, art, and literature. However, I personally was never a "hippie, for my soul had been already dyed in the Beat culture of Ginsberg and Kerouac. However, I was too young to make that train, but absorbed all the flavor from it that I could.

After my year in Berkeley, I then returned to Ann Arbor, Michigan and in the late summer of 1965 my brother Daniel and I started the Prime Movers Blues Band. At the same time, a little band called the Grateful Dead was forming in San Francisco. Our band (and playing music), for me, was an even more direct plunge into the world of action. It opened another chapter in my book of life, which I may attempt to describe in a later blog. This synopsis of my early life gives you a little sense of my trajectory.

THAT'S MEDITATION TOO

May 25, 2019

Meditation is a whole world of activity more than just the popular concept of it as something like resting in peace: R.I.P. LOL

Meditation is not just some magic-cushion that we are always trying to get to so that we can sit on it. Meditation is also about what comes up in the moment for each of us that we could face head-on rather than ignoring as is our habit. And ignorance (and ignoring) is what is habitual, what we have been doing all our life or lives. Some awareness or vigilance may be required on our part not to fall back into avoiding the obvious. That awareness is a form of meditation.

We can be vigilant and take note when we turn away, when the moment passes from normal to what we might call "boring," when we are suddenly antsy and we reach for whatever passes for entertainment in our Self. The point when the moment turns to boredom is a very clear sign that we have reached an impasse or a moment of decision or change. That kind of awareness is also meditation.

If we habitually turn away from the present moment (and its appearance) into entertainment or suddenly feel overwhelmed and have to go lie down (or whatever), that also is a time to be vigilant and learn. That vigilance is meditation.

My point is that the actual process of meditation is not just Tranquility Meditation (Shamata). Tranquility Meditation is, historically, just the basis for meditation. We have to be able to focus with some degree of concentration and also be relaxed enough in the process, but that is just the ground, the wrapper.

True meditation is what happens on top of that ground, on top of that stable basis of tranquility. And that can be active as all hell. Every time we turn away from the moment, we could

instead turn toward it and look directly at it. Every time we find ourselves saying “No,” we could instead say “Yes,” In other words, we don’t have to always take “No” for an answer. That too is meditation.

You see, it’s all meditation, all of the time, and not just some idyllic R.I.P. (“Rest in Peace”) moment where we think we should be and that we like to call meditation, such as sitting on the cushion. Meditation is, as the Tibetan word (GOM) for meditation translates to, becoming familiar with our mind. That is active and not passive. Where we live is here and now, and not just sitting in a nice corner somewhere on a cushion for a short time. At best, our time on the cushion is just a reminder.

Sure, Tranquility Meditation is peaceful enough, but for me that and a ticket will get you a ride on the bus, as they say. In the 24 hours of each day, the amount of time I spend just sitting on the cushion is dwarfed by the rest of the day, what is called post-Meditation. Yes, I sit on the cushion in front of my little shrine twice a day, but that’s just a touchstone, a reminder. The rest of the time, which is most of the time, I am actively becoming familiar with my mind, moment by moment, out in the thick of things, in the jungle of time. LOL. That, my friends, is or can be meditation.

Of course, we are looking for a peaceful time and life, but that can’t just be more pie-in-the-sky as the old saying goes. We can’t just kick the can down the road. As I used to mantra to myself, “For our dreams must be made to matter”; we have to make our dreams real and that is not done just virtually, but actually. Doing an internal “March for Peace” is not wrong, but it’s a bit quaint, IMO. Telling yourself how you want things to be is not the same as seizing the day and actually transforming your situation into what you want or what the situation actually demands.

In the same time that we can dream, we can do. That’s what the remedial dharma practices (what are called the “purification practices”) are all about, clearing the way for actual meditation. And meditation is an all-day thing.

And, if we are looking for some way to help, try helping yourself by facing the music of each day as it is doled-out or

arises. I say to myself: "It is permitted," so that's what I have to do because that's what I HAVE to do. LOL.

Yes, my time sitting on the cushion in front of my shrine I do, without fail each day. Yet, at best it is like touching home base for a moment; and then I go on with my day, which is not so neatly arranged as the offering bowls on my shrine. LOL.

And it is in the sometimes-chaos of each day that my main opportunities for Meditation take place. If meditation, as the Tibetans define it, is "becoming familiar" with our mind, then the jungle of each day is where I meditate most. And for me, it's not just the odd good deed, kind thought, or compassionate act that counts, although they help. It is my becoming familiar in the moment with whatever arises to stare me down and my look right back and directly at it that is important.

In other words, for me, the process of meditation is like the word that sometimes appears in my word-processor instead of "meditation," which is "Mediation."

Mediation is much of what meditation is about for me each day, making friends and becoming familiar with my mind in all of its phases: quiet, fierce, raging, peaceful, chaotic, and on and on. The many moods of Michael have to be mediated and become familiar. All of that is meditation if approached as such. IMO.

Yes, order me up a cave and some solitude, but I doubt that I would be any different because "I" would still be there. I try my best to walk point and not be turned away by what I find difficult. That, IMO, is all meditation.

Lest we get carried away with these thoughts, keep in mind that we actually have to thoroughly learn Tranquility Meditation (Shamata) before we can have any confidence that we can build upon that the more advanced forms of meditation (as described above).

RECOGNITION OF THE TRUE NATURE OF THE MIND

May 27, 2019

In the first part of this article, we looked at getting started in learning meditation, which primarily centered around being able to concentrate naturally and at the same time rest ourselves in the concentration while concentrating. This is called “Tranquility Meditation (Shamata) and it forms the basis for the more advanced forms of meditation. I also discussed what are known as purification practices, which basically are remedial practices necessary to get our obscurations down to fighting weight, so to speak, in order to learn the basis for meditation -- concentration and resting.

So, we should be able at that point to rest quietly and be aware and focused at the same time. As mentioned, this is called Shamata or Tranquility Meditation, which is the ability to concentrate and rest-in-peace so to speak. That is a good thing; Tranquility Meditation is intended primarily as a base or basis for the more advanced realization practices like Insight Meditation (Vipassana) and Mahamudra Meditation. We have to be able to rest in concentrated awareness before Insight Meditation can be attempted. If we can do this, we are ready for the advanced practices. Our preliminaries are done.

However, and this is a big “however,” even though we are prepared, we can’t just launch into Insight Meditation at will. This is a threshold point (perhaps “The” threshold point) in dharma practice, a crucial stage and what in western esoterica is called a “ring-pass-not,” meaning it’s not just linear, so that we are free to just go and take the next step on our own.

For one, we are going from what are called the “relative” dharma practices to the “absolute” dharma practices, terms I

never thought as very intuitive for the English reader. Another way to say this is that we pass from dualistic practices (ones with a subject and an object like the “Preliminaries” or purification practices) to the non-dual practices like Insight Meditation and Mahamudra. More about that later.

And this transition is like the narrow pass on the top of a mountain, in that the going is so tough for most everyone that we must go in single file and need a guide to get through it. And that guide traditionally is an authentic teacher, someone who themselves has made the trip from the dualistic practices to the non-dual practices. If we read the pith dharma texts, the essence-of-the-essential practices, they all agree that we cannot attempt this transition without the help of an authentic master or teacher.

What has to happen is that an authentic master points out to us the how our mind actually works. This is called “Recognition” and by that is meant that we recognize the true or actual nature of the mind for the first time. And this process is achieved by what is called the pointing-out-instructions. In Zen Buddhism, they have something similar, but they call it “Kensho.”

Only an authentic master is capable of doing this. Sure, they say someone might be able to do this intellectually by themselves, but it would only take something like three kalpas, each of an infinite length of time. This is the Tibetan way of saying it cannot be done without an authentic teacher. Don’t even think about it, IMO.

So, this requirement marks what we could call a hard-stop in our progress. What do we know about the pointing-out instructions and where on Earth will we find an authentic master? There are a great many dharma students swimming around in this state, seemingly unable to progress further. We just have to be patient, diligent, and work through it step by step.

And this is because we cannot grandfather ourselves past this point, much as we might like to. And this is so because without an authentic recognition as to the nature of the mind on our part, we can’t see what to do or where to progress to. We would not know what to do. LOL.

This is the straight and narrow gate that all dharma practitioners must pass through. We can fool others, but if we are honest with ourselves, we cannot fool ourselves. And if we are not honest, it can't be done either. Recognition of the actual nature of the mind is a pivotal event, one that cannot be faked, because we would only be fooling ourselves and no one else. We have to go back to the purification practices and shave off some more obscurations and try again.

"Recognition" is the "sine-qua-non" of dharma; we can't achieve realization without it, no matter how hard we try. I am sure that other traditions have other traditions, but in the Karma Kagyu Lineage, "Recognition of the true nature of the mind" is required in order to practice what are called the "Realization" practices, such as Vipassana and Mahamudra.

It's not a man-made rule, but a natural barrier. If we have not recognized the true nature of the mind ("Recognition") we have not recognized the nature of the mind; we can't move forward because we don't know what to do or how to do it. There is nothing else precluding us from the advanced realization practices other than our own lack of recognition of the nature of the mind. Thus, the large gathering of students in the anteroom prior to "recognition," those who have not successfully received the pointing-out instructions. What to do?

Well, after we have tried everything we know and failed, we come around to what the teachings dictate, getting on with the task of finding an authentic teacher to give us the pointing-out instructions. And, although difficult, this is not as hard as we might imagine. Such an authentic teacher does not have to be enlightened or perhaps even fully realized. They do have to have recognized the nature of the mind themselves and be willing to work with us to help us do the same. There are lots of lamas that can do that if we connect.

It may seem unfair to ask us to fend for ourselves, but that time indeed does arise when we must find the courage and confidence to solve our own problems. If we want to learn tennis or golf (or whatever) at a higher level, we have to seek out a pro. This is the same with this crucial dharma revelation. And the perhaps ironic part is that we can't just pick any one teacher and declare the job done, attended

Recognition 101, and claim that we have recognized the actual nature of the mind. That would nice if we could. LOL.

Recognition requires the we actually recognize the nature of our own mind and if we don't, then we don't and are still in dharma-limbo. There is no backdoor, grandfathering, or way to purchase Recognition. It's like birth or death; we each go through it on our own and in single file. And we go through it (mentally speaking) naked as a jaybird, as they say. We have to jettison what is holding us back.

And IMO, pointing out the true nature of the mind is a bit like brain surgery, meaning it is very, very exacting, certainly as exacting as we are. It's the most real thing that we can ever do, at least until we do it. And no merit badge is given out other than our own merit of achieving this. The authentic teacher cannot do it for us, press a button, and see that we can achieve recognition. It is indeed a singularity personified. We each have to do it ourselves.

With that having been said, it is doable, and you will probably do it more easily than me. I am a hard case; this I know. And I received the pointing-out instructions a number of times and didn't get it. I even had one of the Heart-Sons of the entire lineage take me into a room just with himself, sit me down on a chair, and give me the pointing-out instructions and I didn't get it. I had to exit that room having not gotten it, with His Eminence watching me leave. That was not my finest moment. LOL. Yet, that happened. I was not prepared. LOL.

Luckily, after much hard work, some years later I did get a little glimpse of recognition, but I wish I had time here (and you the patience) to explain to you all that I had to go through to further fine-tune the purification I received from my two Ngondros. Getting my aggrandized Self down to fighting-weight, so to speak, so that I could grasp the pointing-out instructions, was not a walk in the park. It was years of constant effort on my part, including the effort to make no effort. LOL.

I have tried to give you a feel for and some sense of what is out there waiting for you to experience in learning the dharma and meditation. Don't be dissuaded from making the effort,

but effort it does require, and plenty of it, including as mentioned the effort to make no effort.

I had to ask myself, what in this life is worth having and learning? It took me a while to come around to the dharma, but ultimately there was no choice. I tried to do good things and to make a contribution to society and my generation. I worked hard to assist astrology to thrive in my time by being the first person to program astrology on home computers and share my results with everyone. Computers changed astrology forever.

I pulled all recorded music together and helped to change how music was presented, not through a few know-it-alls, but to show by consensus which music of each artist was the best and why. This is the All-Music Guide (allmusic.com). I then did the same with all known movies and film the All-Movie Guide (allmovie.com). And I did this with the help of 150 full-time employees and 500-700 of the best freelance writers in the world. And I gathered what is probably the largest astrological library and donated it as part of the permanent library at the University of Illinois. And later I personally collected (without much help) information on (and photographed) 33,000 of the most important concert rock-posters and donated that info to several places, including the Bentley Historical Library at the University of Michigan. And so on. You get the idea: I tried to contribute. I became an archivist of popular culture.

Yet, what I found out, as fascinating as those endeavors were and hopefully somewhat helpful to society, like all things, they were only temporal successes, band-aids on an everchanging world and its problems, what the Buddhists call Samsara.

And while I was doing all of this, I was also gradually learning to practice the dharma. I started on that, casually, in the late 1950s with an interest in Zen Buddhism, and eventually by sitting Zazen with Roshi Philip Kapleau, etc.; and I kind of dabbled in dharma topics, mostly reading, late-night talking, and so on. Then, in February of 1974, I met and served as the chauffeur for Ven. Chögyam Trungpa during his visit to Ann Arbor, who in the process sat me down for an hour or so and personally taught me Shamata Meditation.

Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche totally catalyzed me and changed my view and experience of dharma. From that point on is how I measure the years I have practiced meditation (or tried to). It was several years later that I met my root teacher or Tsawi Lama, the one authentic teacher who successfully pointed out to me the nature of my own mind so that I actually got a little something. I have been working with the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche for 36 years, have traveled to Tibet with him, and attended 30 yearly ten-day teaching-intensives on Mahamudra meditation, and two years of training with His Eminence Tai Situ Rinpoche on Mahamudra meditation. So, I have at least some experience (and made efforts) working with authentic dharma teachers.

This is long, but in another chapter of this article I intend to explain to readers something as to how the pointing-out instructions (at least in general) as to the recognition of the true nature of the mind is accomplished. This is a start.

DHARMA FILTERED THROUGH OUR OWN IMAGE

May 28, 2019

The great Mahasiddha Saraha said:

“He in whose heart the words of the master have entered sees the truth like a treasure in the palm of his hand.”

I'd like to talk about the form that Dharma is realized by each of us. In my case, what little realization I have has NOT come as described in the dharma books and texts I have read, heard from the great many teachers I have listened to on tape or video, or the 1000 or so live teachings I attended here, in Tibet, Nepal, India, and so on.

Obviously, I searched in all of those teachings for what was described and explained there to appear in my own life, when it was time. The simple fact is, what few breakthroughs I have had never happened according-to-the-books. I feel it is important to understand why this is so. Some of you may have the same situation and be looking up the wrong alley. And the answer is quite simple.

Each of us is exactly who we are (and what we are) and not one iota different from that. And that will always be true. Our particular Self and personality-interface is, by definition, the only way we ever could understand the dharma. And this is because our “everything” is all the filter that we HAVE to receive the dharma through, no matter where it comes from outside, high or low. It only gets to us by way of our five senses and our particular mindset. There is no other avenue.

No matter how sophisticated or subtle the dharma teacher is in presentation, what filters through to us can only come through our personal filter. What gets through to us is sieved by our particular set of obscurations and unique mind-frame. What gets through our filter may be only a shadow of the original or it may be a lot. And here for me, is the kicker:

What does get through to us will not be in some foreign-to-us language (Tibetan, etc.) or super-sophisticated pundit-style conceptual message. That just never gets through. At best,

perhaps we can feel the heart of the teaching at some deep level. And what we receive will always be in our own tongue, in our personal language and vernacular, and tailored by us and just for us. It will be as familiar to us as we are sophisticated, no less and no more. That's a given. But that's not what I was looking for or expected.

Instead, I was looking for my realizations to be like in the books -- chapter and verse. That never, ever, has happened to me in some 46 years of dharma practice. However, I will tell you what HAS happened.

What has been the case is that as I'm learning, listening, or studying something, some bit of dharma, I'm not always sure what it is about, and then, very slowly, I realize that what I am realizing is what the dharma books spelled out, YET as interpreted by me without even knowing what I was interpreting. I get it. I REALIZE what they are talking about.

And so, if we have trouble listening and understanding the dharma, that's just how it is for us. Something will get through, but it may be very little. This is why each of us had best find an authentic dharma teacher whose form of teaching really speaks to us, meaning that the message they project gets through and is received by us with as little noise and as strong a signal as possible. It has to grab us by the short-hairs, so to speak. That's how we know we have found a teacher.

In fact, we are incapable of anything other than that. As they say: if you lack the faculties, you can't perceive the phenomena, plain and simple. And the reverse is also true, if we have the faculties, we can perceive the phenomena. So, it comes down to the filter of our faculties, how much dharma we can absorb. And, of course, this is why there are so many purification practices, to help us trim down our obscurations until they are transparent enough for us to see through them and receive (tune in to) the dharma despite them.

And to go back to my original use of the word "amazing." As mentioned, I was amazed to find the dharma being communicated to me in my own vernacular, so to speak, in a totally familiar language. This is what managed to get through the filter of my five senses and my particular set of

obscurations. There could be no other entrance or way the dharma reaches me than that.

And if you reflect on this or allow the natural reflections and vibe of the dharma to create like a hologram, this explains a lot as to why the more advanced teachings, in particular the non-dual practices, will always be in OUR own writ and perfectly tailored to us. It's like it is coming from inside us and not from outside. The Buddha was said to teach such that everyone hears what he taught in his own particular way. It's true today, because we can't help but filter the teachings precisely to our situation.

You can be sure, the dharma will be no smarter than you, because you are no smarter than you. Make sense?

What has happened with me is more like me talking to myself, understanding myself through my personal language and life experience. Mundane knowledge like this comes through what is called Self-discovery, and the dharma is no different. It still has to come through who we are, "Self" and all. So, prepare yourself to be instructed as filtered by your Self, not from an outsider or the outside. At best, imagine a lama speaking to you through your Self as a translator, because that's what is going to happen. Prepare yourself to discover the nature of your own mind, not in some pie-in-the-sky formal dharma terms, but in your personal vernacular. In other words, we are going to tell ourselves the truth. LOL.

If this sounds scary, it should not because we have never been any different. It has always been just exactly this way. They say that Recognizing the true nature of the mind is like recognizing the familiar face of a friend in a crowd. And that friend, is you! LOL.

RECOGNITION, REALIZATION, AND ENLIGHTENMENT

May 28, 2019

It's important not to confuse these three dharma terms. "Recognition" is a once-in-a-lifetime experience as pointed out to us by our root dharma teacher, who is the first and only teacher who points out the true nature of the mind to us so that we get it that first time. It changes us forever. As for Enlightenment, it was what the Buddha achieved. We haven't done that yet, but hopefully are working at it. Which, leaves Realization. What's that?

Realization is what happens to us AFTER "Recognition," after we recognize the actual nature of the mind for the first time. "Realization" is the long journey from Recognition to Enlightenment, which will probably take many lifetimes to achieve.

Realization is the incremental process of extending the initial realization achieved at Recognition, forward. It is traditional to expand and extend realization until it embraces more and more of our life and everything we know. It's like the ever-expanding rings when a drop of water is dropped in a still pond.

Perhaps for some it is easy, but for most (I would imagine) the process of realization is difficult. It's easy to understand in principle. "Recognition" is a break-through, a pinhole or puncture into non-duality. You could almost say it is like looking through a keyhole at the nature of the mind, except with Recognition we are already on the inside of the hole we are supposed to be peeping through. LOL.

The differential is that wherever we broke-through or punctured through at Recognition is just one aspect of Samsara that we are realizing, and not the whole enchilada. That original point or area of insight has to be expanded (like opening our eyes) and extended from where we broke through to include more and more of everything that is. Enlightenment is where we have realized everything there is to realize.

Thus, realization is the process of extending and expanding realization and it takes a lot of work and constant work at that. If we don't expand our realization after Recognition, our realization doesn't expand. We stay just where we are, peeping into a world we now belong to. By continually expanding and extending our realization, we walk the path toward our eventual enlightenment.

TOUGH LOVE -- THE FIERCE DHARMA PROTECTORS

May 29, 2019

In Tibetan Buddhism, what are called the fierce wrathful deities (Dharma Protectors, Dharmapalas) stand out as scary. The key word here, IMO, is “wrath,” and even that word is defined in numerous ways.

My understanding of “wrath” (and the way I use this word), it is not about anger, but righteousness or cosmic justice – the persistence and endurance of truth. Simply put, the truth lasts longer than anything else. It’s as close to permanence as we get. The truth is the future, because when everything else dies out, the truth will still be there.

The fierce Dharmapala Mahakala is often cited as being the wrathful form of Chenresik (Avalokiteshvara), the Bodhisattva of kindness and compassion. They are two ends of the same stick or what is called “connate.”

Mahakala comes from the word “Maha” meaning great and the word “Kala” meaning time or death. And no, it does not translate as have a “great time”. LOL. My first dharma teacher used to spell and play with words. And with the word “funeral,” he would rearrange the letters and say “real fun.” Then he would laugh. So, perhaps Mahakala is like that. The Kalachakra stands for the “wheel of time,” so Mahakala is something like the “Great Death.” The Tibetans simply call Mahakala “Nagpo Chenpo” meaning “Great Black One.” Another Tibetan word for these deities is Gönpö, which means “protector.” You get the idea.

Kindness and compassion are the key; if we stray too far from the truth, the wrathful deities rise up in proportion to our error and warn us that we are off-course. Eventually, if we continue to persist in the wrong direction from truth, the protectors will trim or cut away our excess. And that can be painful. They are the protectors from error, so to speak.

Just as pain is the way the body tells us something is wrong, wrathful deities like the protector Mahakala protect us from

going too far from the truth. As my first dharma teacher used to say about natural laws like the law of gravity: “We don’t break nature’s laws; they break us.” That’s dharmapalas.

In a “trim” router, any wood that is not within the form of the bit is trimmed away. I sometimes think of the protectors like that. If I get out-of-line, to the degree I stray from my own internal truth, sooner or later that degree or error must be rectified and removed. In that case, we are living on borrowed time.

In fact, the fierce face of Mahakala was historically so indigenous to the nomadic Tibetans that it was referred to as the “lord of the tent,” because every tent had a Mahakala mask hanging in it or at the doorway protecting the place.

As mentioned, just as pain is a kindness of the body to keep us aware, so the fierce Mahakala protector marks the ring-pass-not or the “extremes” beyond which we cannot go with impunity, without serious consequences.

And so, it is just a hop, skip, and a jump from Mahakala as protector of all beings, keeping us safe, to Mahakala as a protector that warns and wards away “evil” or error in whatever form it arises or exists.

These fierce protectors are intended to be, in their wrath, more fierce than any “evil” could ever be and thus their appearance. “Evil back-off” or suffer the consequences. Again, these are “protectors” of us and have never harmed a single being, but only serve to keep them safe from falling into error. No doubt, however, that it represents some tough love.

TILOPA'S SAGE ADVICE

May 30, 2019

In my forty-six years of doing my best (trying to learn) to practice dharma, there are a few pithy (and short and easy to remember) suggestions that have stuck in my mind and actually turned out to be of great use to me. None more so than the classic "Six Words of Advice" of the great Mahasiddha Tilopa. Here are the main four of those six; see below for all six.

- (1) Don't Prolong the Past
- (2) Don't Invite the Future
- (3) Don't Alter the Present
- (4) Relax, As It Is.

These are just words, but they are considered words that have been echoed down the lineage through the centuries. The Mahasiddha Tilopa was not just another lineage holder, but aside from the celestial Vajradhara from whom Tilopa received his inspiration, Tilopa is the head of the particular Mahamudra lineage I belong to.

To make these words of advice clear, I even include a little diagram or map I drew up to make it (hopefully) easier to absorb. I find that these words of advice help me to be more aware as to where my mind is currently focused. As they say, who knows where the mind goes. Sooner or later, we must.

And much of the time I am anywhere but where I would like to be. That is why these six words of advice have been so valuable for me. Being reminded (becoming aware) of what I am actually doing with my mind (and my time), even roughly, points out to me that I am usually, as they say, "Every which way but loose." And how is that?

That is because I am easily distracted and prone to jump on any passing train of thought and take a little ride, a ride that seldom goes anywhere I really want to go. It just wastes time and is at best entertaining, scary, worrying, and so on. And it is a good thing that I like movies, because most of the time I seem to be watching one of my own projections and enjoying (or at least reacting) to it at that. This tendency to ignore the

true nature of things is what Tilopa is pointing out. Ignorance amounts to what we ignore and have habitually ignored.

Tilopa suggests that we allow the mind to just rest naturally, like we would if we sit down in a big soft chair after a day of hard work. Relax. It is not like there is a 'right' place, object, or subject to allow the mind to rest on, but there does seem to be a right way of resting, one that allows mindfulness and clarity to arise.

In other words, this or that object or subject of focus (whatever we are thinking) is not "bad" (or "good") in itself, and negative attachment (revulsion) is no different from positive attachment (love and like). The ignorance of attachment is attachment. Buddhist fundamentalism would be no different from any other kind of fundamentalism, dividing the world into good and bad, subject and object, and so on. That is not what the dharma intends.

Tilopa points out that it is best not to dwell (be attached) to the past, present, or future, although, as we well know, they are all equally attachable. Don't spend all of our time there. By that same token, what Buddhists call the "Three Times" (past, present, future) are all more than workable, dharmically. We can start where we are this moment. There is no need to run to them or from the three times Tilopa says to just relax and leave thoughts of the three times go, just as they are. Don't bother to pretty them up or even think about them. Let it be.

Tilopa suggests that we "let go" of the three times, not either deny or shun them. Thoughts of the past, present, or future are all just that, thoughts. We are advised to become aware that we have become attached to and fixated on these thoughts and to just let go of the attachment and rest in the ensuing release and flow.

In the more advanced meditation practices, practitioners are taught not to just look at the content of a thought (what the train of thought is about), but instead to look at the nature of that thought, and the most remarkable thing is that all thoughts share the same nature. Once we have seen and realized the actual nature of one thought, we have done the same for all thoughts, past, present, or future. But this ability

to realize this takes time and practice. We have to train in this.

Tilopa suggests not to prolong the past, invite the future, or think about or alter the present. His message, as mentioned, is about not becoming attached or carried away by thoughts, like getting on our train of thought and taking a ride without being mindful that we are doing just that -- distracted. His is an easy method for waking up and becoming aware of what we are doing each moment. Take a look; be aware.

When Tilopa says let go and 'rest as it is', that rest is beyond attachment of any kind to the past, present, or future. We let go once we realize that we have become attached, but we first have to realize it. For example, if we find ourselves prolonging the past, trying to figure it out, etc., Tilopa does not mean for us to somehow get out of the past and into the present or future instead. All three times are misdirection. In fact, there is no particular place to go, as Chuck Berry pointed out. Tilopa means to let go of our 'attachment' to the past and just rest as it is -- however it is in the present moment. And because we are not used to just being present, this can be very hard to do. We can't stand it!

Past, present, or future makes no difference. The three times are identical in nature and are not sources of refuge for us. Attachment itself is not somehow evil or bad by nature. Attachment to anything only distracts and obscures our authentic nature from being seen, which is why Tilopa suggests we let go of attachment to the three times and just rest in the true nature of the mind itself, which is something we can learn to do. And he is showing us how.

For me, these six words of advice serve as constant reminders for me to be aware, realize, and locate my attachments and reactions, relax my hold on them, and learn to just let them go so that the mind can clear. I find that this is a process that I can gradually learn to do all throughout my day, not just in formal sitting-meditation practice. The amount of time I allocate to sitting-on-the-cushion practice is nowhere near the time I can spend in this practice that Tilopa suggests. There are few dharma practices that I have come across that are as easy and simple as this one. Anyone can do it and you can start right now, in this present moment.

I realized early on that going to church on Sunday for an hour or so would never be enough to get a rascal like me into any kind of heaven. It would take real practice time for me to realize much of anything. Tilopa's six words of advice are an easy opportunity to accumulate real practice time, like: all day long. It is, as they say, a no-brainer!

I include here Tilopa's suggestions for those who may have missed them until now. The card image is one of Tilopa grinding sesame seeds.

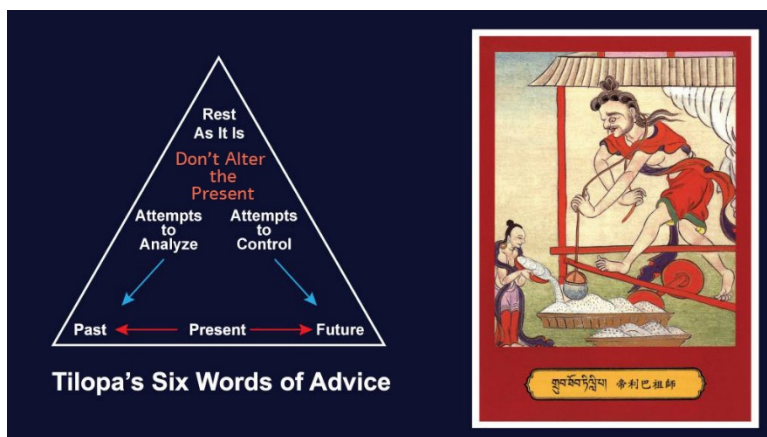
TILOPA'S SIX WORDS OF ADVICE

Let go of the past, rather than prolong it.
Let go of the future, rather than invite it.
Let go of the present and don't alter the present
Let go of analyzing, rather than figuring anything out.
Let go of controlling, rather than trying to make things happen.

Relax right now, just as it is.

In summary, the method Tilopa presents to not alter the present moment and to relax, just as it is.

[Diagram by me.]



“MY HEART ALWAYS WANTS TO HEAR”

May 31, 2019

I don't consider myself a dharma teacher. That's way too formal for me and just not my role. And its not the way I think of myself. If I ask myself "What is my relationship to dharma?" That is, if I drill down and dig deep as to why dharma is so important to me, what I find is something like a hidden spring of pure dharma, whose flow in me is an unstoppable wish to share dharma with all sentient beings. Who can explain it?

I want to share the joy that I find in dharma with anyone interested and if I can explain or demonstrate the value of the dharma, I'm whatever that is. But I would be embarrassed to call myself a dharma teacher. I'm just learning this stuff.

An astrology teacher? Yes, I am that and a good one. Dharma? No, I'm not that. As I understand it, this inner urge and drive within me is my particular form of Bodhicitta, what is called awakened heart. That I have, thanks to the blessings of my teachers.

As to where this all came from, it came from way back when I was young. When I met my wife Margaret in 1971 and married her only months later (we have now been married going on 48 years), that was an iconic event for me – life-changing!. Our first child, lotis, came in 1973, but before then I had a kind of spiritual breakthrough, not on drugs or anything. Just naturally and a total surprise.

This was in December 29, 1972 at 10:00 to 11:00 AM. When I had this major opening, a kind of spiritual opening. Of course, as an astrologer I have a time and date. LOL

In that event I found myself falling to the floor in a natural Kriya. It was like a cat trying to throw up a hairball. Afterward I tried to make a drawing of what I went through, which I include here, along with the symbol that came to represent it, both in its original form and in a perfected form (upper left) as it was later used. On that day I named our center the "Heart Center." It was created to be a communion center where all could share and commune together.

And in my vision at the time and during those days I witnessed how a group would all open heartfelt to each other like flowers and then withdraw into conceptuality. We were like sea anemone, if you have ever seen them, opening and closing in the moment as thoughts of joy or fear appeared in the group mind. It was mind boggling, but totally natural. That is how the center was born. That's been true for 47 years.

Later, when I formed an official dharma center, my root teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche allowed us to keep that name and we became the "Heart Center KTC (Karma Thegsum Chöling) which we remain today, although now as a study group.

Perhaps this account will help to explain why I am into sharing dharma as best I can. I very much resonate to the "Song of Songs 5:2 "I Sleep but My Heart is Awake." By that verse, I mean that despite our conceptual mind chattering on, our heart intuitively knows. This poem I wrote perhaps says it better.

HEART HEARING

Although I won't,
Often listen,
My heart,
Always,
Wants to know.

[Graphic by me years ago, perfected by my dear friend Stanley Doctor.]

For those of you who would like to have access to other free books, articles, and videos on these topics, here are the links:

http://traffic.libsyn.com/spiritgrooves/Links_to_Michael_Erlewine-V2.pdf

“As Bodhicitta is so precious,
May those without it now create it,
May those who have it not destroy it,
And may it ever grow and flourish.”

