

BLOGS 2023 SPRING



by Michael Erlewine

2023
Essays
SPRING

by Michael Erlewine

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

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

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

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

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THE EYE IS BLIND IF THE MIND IS ABSENT

April 1, 2023

A quote from Confucius, and right on the money, the idea that unless we are aware AND also aware that we are aware, we are walking blind and lack insight into the actual nature of the mind.

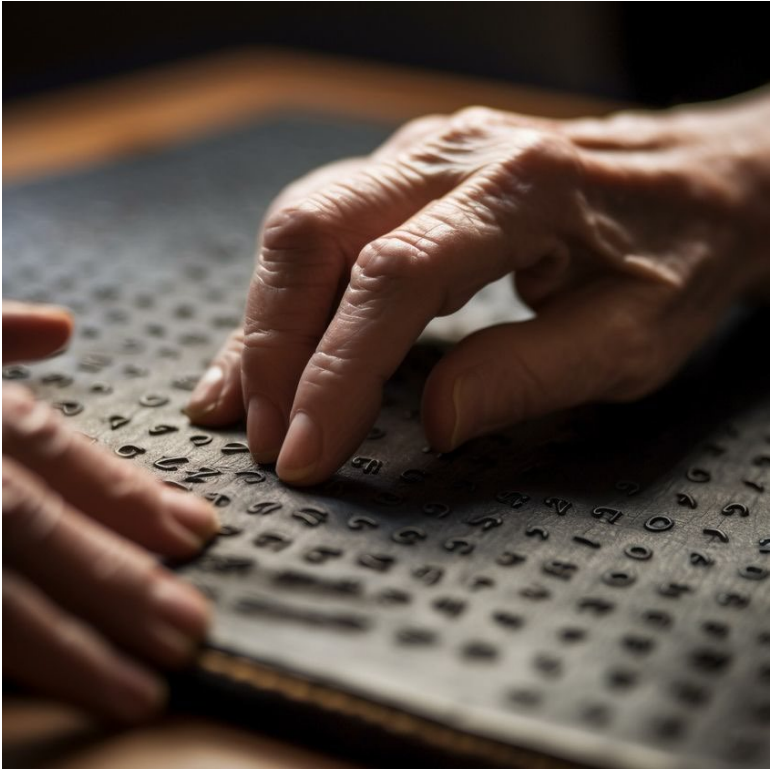
And so, all of the many forms of meditation and dharma practice exist for one purpose, to recognize the true nature of the mind and thus live accordingly, get in synch with it.

Even those who are not doing any form of actual dharma practice or meditation are still working to the same end, perhaps without as much awareness that we are doing this. Everyone is trying to get out of the rain of time by learning instead to surf time, roll with it, rather than struggle against it.

That being said, then either we are learning by some kind of dharma or personal practice, and that that practice is by living more aligned with nature, or otherwise we are buffeted by the winds of time and hanging on for dear life as best we can.

I never thought of dharma as an alternative to something else unless you mean that the Dharma is the ONLY alternative to a lack of awareness.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



THE PROBLEM WITH HALLUCINOGENS

April 2, 2023

Appearances are not just “out there” for us to discover and see. We also project appearances and thus are both the seer and what is seen, and we can get lost in watching our own projections and taking them for real. What is reality?

It seems that often we are too easily entranced by our own projections to see much else. We wander in a world of illusions that are little more than our own inner projections projected on the outside world where we can then fixate on them.

Taking as real our own inner hopes and fears as projected on the outside world, we are like the proverbial deer in the headlights, transfixed by visualizing our own fears personified.

I was that, trapped in duality, until I was I was 23 years old (1964), when I realized this, and it was only because I had the temerity to take the new drug LSD, which demonstrated to me in no uncertain terms that much of what I was seeing and afraid of in the outside world were my own inner fears and mindset as projected by me. Anyway, that night in Berkeley, California changed my life forever.

At the time very little was known about LSD other than the rumor that it could permanently alter your mind, and by that I assumed it did something to alter our brains. Yet, that was not it.

What LSD did do is alter, and permanently, the way I looked at life, my attitude, and in my case, it was for the better. I understood all at once, in one night that I had

been sticking my own finger in my eye all my life, so to speak.

I had been projecting my inner fears on the wide-screen of life since I was a child and then being terrified by what I saw, taking it for reality, the way the world is.

I thought that what surrounded me (appearances) was real. And most important, on that single night I realized that I could do something about this all by myself. And I did, only it took decades to sort it out.

Catching my Self out, so to speak, meant becoming aware that the world I saw out there was being projected from right here, in my mind. That night I experienced the two (inner and outer) as one and the same. I didn't just 'think' or conceptualize it, I lived in in real time experience.

Until that night, I had had been living in my own dream cocoon all my life.

The first step is to become aware that we are living in our own projection, literally. So, why not just take some LSD and open Pandora's box? There are reasons to be cautious, IMO.

The problem with just going out and taking LSD today or any other day is that the LSD experience can be (and often is) totally imprinting. Like a die-cut stamp, it imprints our mind so vividly that that imprint becomes the reference point as to who we are. When we think back to experiences that deeply wrought us, we end up with that acid experience.

It's like a snapshot of our mind in time, a one-off that is forever imprinted and something we have to work through and balance out. And it's the balancing out that

can be difficult and that take lots of time, in my case decades. And even that didn't do it. It took a methodical and balanced dharma practice and curriculum to clear away the cobwebs from my LSD trips, to answer all the questions.

Of course, as people like to say, we can set up our LSD trip to be pleasant. Certainly, that was true on my first acid trip, at least as to intent.

I was taken by my then girlfriend to a very nice house. Candles were lit and soft music was put on the stereo. And a few people sat around to keep me company and watch over me. I even made my girlfriend promise that no matter what I said, she would not leave me. She promised. That sounded safe, doesn't it?

Wrong. It only took a few minutes on acid for me to decide that this safe and sound setup was not for me, not remotely, and not appropriate, and with that I was out the door and walking the Berkeley campus at night. My friend came with me. Next, I told my girlfriend that I was fine and that she could go home. Without a word, although she promised not to leave me no matter what I said, she just left. And there I was alone.

And I was NOT alright. I was on acid!

And she was a girlfriend, not someone I loved. Before you could think, my simple command to her to leave and she was gone. And there I was alone and struggling with my by then terror-stricken mind. Now that has to be funny, yet it made sense for acid was really just for me, myself, and I to get down to the nitty-gritty with one another..

This story is not meant to scare you, but it is intended to inform you that it is very hard to plan an LSD trip, if the

whole point of it is to come to terms with yourself and what has always worried you.

Another pleasant experience is not what you need and for me at least the whole point of taking acid was to achieve a Come-to-Jesus moment. I was suffocating from being brought up in the 1950s.

Anyway, like a homing pigeon I went right for my own jugular, so to speak. I had deep questions on my mind, to which I needed answers. To do that I had to get beyond something like a planned event and burning candles, listening to music, or watching a movie. I was out for blood, and I needed to feel the quick, so to speak.

I can only think of the final line of the poem "Carrion Comfort" by my favorite poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, which is:

"Of now done darkness I wretch lay wrestling with (my God!) my God."

And so, I treat hallucinogenic drugs like LSD with the greatest respect, to me as sacred as can be, because you are touching into what you otherwise are unable and never have touched into, and yet my whole being yearned for this. I never saw it coming or imagined the world could fracture like this and become one.

And so, ultimately, there is no way to protect yourself from yourself, no matter how many people and what kind of elaborate setup you arrange for an acid trip. We just can't do that. LSD will follow the course of our own mind's need to know and go directly right at the heart of the matter, at least that's what I call a 'good' trip, getting something done.

Of course, have a 'nice 'trip' and arrange it as best you can, but keep in mind that you will be stepping beyond the confines of your known Self, not to mention society's demeanor, and I mean: like in a flash!

If you really are looking for answers, they exist, but just perhaps not as we imagine. If we knew, we would already know, and so would be clear that we don't and cannot know the answers if our questions are real.. And so, the great philosopher Hegel said it so well:

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

LSD is not something conceptual, it is experiential, above all an experience. LSD is a full immersion beyond the duality in which we may have been raised and, above all, is a full experience because there is no subject and no object, just complete immersion and initiation.

As my first dharma used to say, “We are all initiates, but to what degree?” And he would speak the word 'Initiate' as 'In-It-I-Ate'.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



PERPETUAL DHARMA ENGINE

April 2, 2023

I can be sensitive to, perhaps, next to nothing at all, for even less is more than any, and any is better than none. It's taken me most of a lifetime to realize that not everyone is sensitive to things like solar influx. How do we get 'sensitive'?

I don't believe we are just 'born' with it, that sensitivity, although that has to figure in too. For me it's more about honing my sensitivity ever finer through a variety of methods, the first being just becoming aware of a particular phenomenon, and that followed up by all kinds of remedial ways of sensitization to that phenomenon.

And to some degree, it may be like a figure/ground recognition, in that once we become aware of something that we never noticed before, we can then see it all the time, and thus be able to work the whole thing finer.

Be that as it may, it seems that we are each sensitive to what we are sensitive to, whatever that is. My point is that whatever sensitivity we have can be honed, further refined. And it's easy.

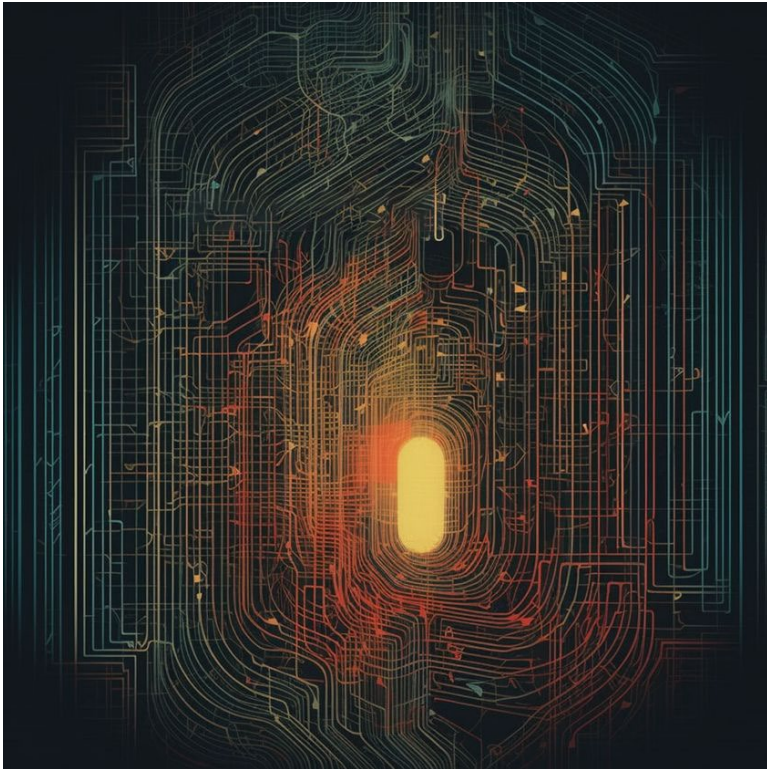
Whatever we do with great skill and care will bring increased clarity commensurate with our skill and precision. And greater clarity (awareness) will allow us to be even more precise. And such precision bringing more clarity and that clarity bringing still greater precision, the whole process escalates resulting in one factor building on the other.

In dharma practice this is called the "Two Accumulations", which are 'Merit' and 'Awareness', or

more commonly termed 'Skillful Means' and 'Awareness'. And ever more skillful means brings greater awareness as to what we are doing and that greater awareness allows us to be even more increasingly skillful in our means, and so on. And so it goes, one after and upon the other, ad infinitum.

That is one of the open secrets of dharma, the "Two Accumulations," and how to use them to best effect, IMO.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



DOING NOTHING

April 3, 2023

I am restless to just rest.
Each way I turn there is no place to go.

Any thought is better not thought at all.

And my every start is a non-starter;
I can't go anywhere but here.

When it comes to 'nothing',
There is not room for anything.
Saying nothing about nothing is enough,
And there is zero satisfaction.

Only nothing is satisfying.



DEDICATED HEART

April 5, 2023

[Here I go again, jumping into an attempt to describe something that is beyond description, in this case the dharma term 'Absolute Bodhicitta'. Why do I bother? Perhaps to impart a sense or whiff of what I know cannot be put in words.

And our dharma center, 'Heart Center KTC', here in Big Rapids, Michigan is dedicated to the dharma term 'Bodhicitta', the 'Awakened Heart. I include the logo that spontaneously arose in late 1972 and January of 1973 for the center, the Heart of Awareness, and I give that story under the included photo.]

And so, this is about 'Bodhicitta', from the Sanskrit words 'Bodhi', meaning 'Awakening' and 'Citta', meaning 'Mind', thus 'Awakened Mind', 'Mind of Enlightenment', sometimes translated as 'Dedicated or Awakened Heart', the drive to spontaneously bring every sentient being to enlightenment. In other words, Bodhicitta is what Bodhisattvas have firmly in mind.

Among dharma terms, "Bodhicitta" is considered crucial to understand yet IMO, it is not always that well understood. And there are two forms of Bodhicitta, 'Relative Bodhicitta' and 'Absolute Bodhicitta' and they differ from one another.

'Relative Bodhicitta' is the compassionate intention (our good intent) to help others and is often described as the aspiration to become a Bodhisattva. It involves cultivating the qualities of generosity, ethics, patience, effort, concentration, and wisdom in order to benefit all beings and help them attain enlightenment. Relative Bodhicitta is considered a preliminary stage of

Bodhicitta, as it prepares the mind for the ultimate realization of Absolute Bodhicitta.

On the other hand, 'Absolute Bodhicitta' is a whole other story and refers to the ultimate nature of reality, which is totally immersive, non-dual, and ineffable – beyond words.

Absolute Bodhicitta results from our direct recognition as to the true nature of mind, and it is free from all conceptual elaboration, concepts, and dualistic thinking.

The difference between Relative and Absolute Bodhicitta is not just a linear increase, like the next step along a straight line, but rather it is an unfathomable leap and is an order of magnitude different, an exponential curve that depends on our recognizing the true nature of the mind, guided by the help of an authentic dharma teacher.

Absolute Bodhicitta involves a direct insight into the ultimate truth of all phenomena, the mind itself, and is considered to be the highest realization of Bodhicitta. It is the ultimate goal of Buddhist practice, that which then drives us, as it leads to the attainment of full enlightenment or Buddhahood.

In summary, Relative Bodhicitta refers to the compassionate intention to help others, at least intellectually, meaning well, while Absolute Bodhicitta refers to our reaction to our direct recognition of the ultimate nature of reality.

While Relative Bodhicitta is a preliminary stage of Bodhicitta, Absolute Bodhicitta is essential to achieving the ultimate goal of Buddhist practice.

Relative Bodhicitta is developing the idea and concept of Bodhicitta, while Absolute Bodhicitta has been described as an unrelenting urge or drive to share dharma with all sentient beings.

It differs from what is called conceptual or Relative Bodhicitta (which is our good intent) because Absolute Bodhicitta is not relative or dualistic. Rather, it is single-minded and of one purpose and is not considered intellectual or conceptual in the least. It is full immersion in the deep inner urge to benefit all sentient beings.

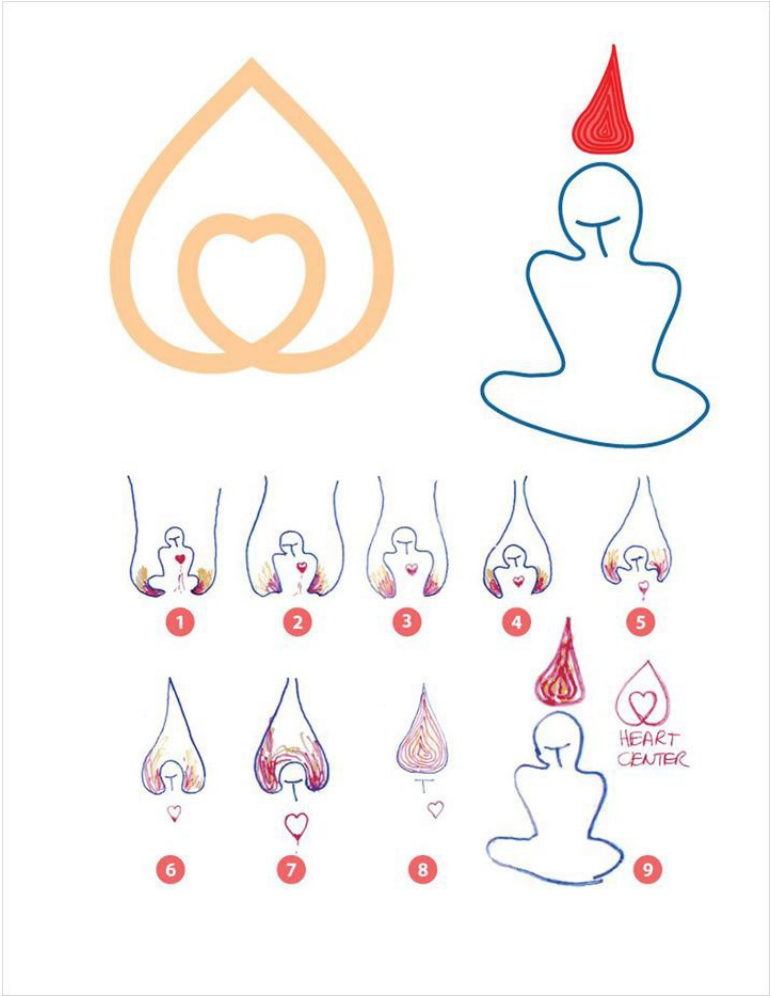
In other words, Absolute Bodhicitta is not a wish or intellectual intent to benefit, but rather, as mentioned, a profound urge and the ability to share the dharma with others. And by 'share', here I mean to do anything necessary to help bring about in others the recognition of the actual true nature of the mind.

Yet, as mentioned, the gap between the two Bodhicittas is vast and Absolute Bodhicitta depends on the practitioner being introduced to the true nature of the mind by an authentic dharma master.

We each have to integrate the dharma for ourselves. No one can do it for us, not even the Buddha himself. And this leap or gap, IMO, is the hardest part, being able to make the move with certainty, an effort to effortless action and gaining familiarity with the mind itself, and all that by familiarity implementing the dharma for ourselves.

Dharma is very much a do-it-yourself project.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



BLOWING THE MIND WITH AI

April 6, 2023

The new paradigm is AI Intelligence; the previous new paradigm was the Internet. If you reflect for a moment on what the Internet has done to our lives, than you may have some idea what AI software is about to do for us. In a word, we have no idea.

I just had two examples output to me from ChatGPT. I wanted to write a piece on the Tibetan concept of “Liberation by Seeing,” which is called Thondrol, but I was uncertain how the Tibetan was spelled. I looked briefly on Google, but that spelling did not immediately come up, so I input into ChatGPT to see if they could provide the correct spelling.

And I got that, but I also got a mini-essay on Thondrol which blew my mind. The short article was quite accurate.

Of course, that got me to thinking and wondering what this AI text machine can do now and will be able to do soon enough.

And so, for fun I went further and asked ChatGPT about something really difficult to describe, the pointing-out instructions for the recognition as to the true nature of the mind, for which there is no easy explanation, and ChatGPT immediately produced the following, and I quote:

"In the Karma Kagyu tradition of Vajrayana Mahamudra, the pointing out instruction is often used to facilitate the recognition of the true nature of the mind, which is considered to be a key step on the path to enlightenment.

“The instruction involves a direct introduction to the nature of mind, in which the teacher points out the inherent clarity, luminosity, and non-dual nature of awareness. The goal of the instruction is to help the student recognize this nature for themselves, beyond all conceptual elaboration or discursive thinking.

“The recognition of the true nature of the mind is considered to be a pivotal moment in the practice of Vajrayana Mahamudra, as it is the foundation upon which all subsequent meditative practices are built. Through sustained practice, one can gradually deepen their understanding of the nature of mind, and come to realize the ultimate nature of reality, which is beyond all concepts and limitations.

“In the Karma Kagyu tradition of Vajrayana Mahamudra, the recognition of the true nature of the mind is often described as a process of "settling" or "resting" into the nature of mind, becoming familiar with the nature of the mind, rather than actively seeking or grasping for it. It involves a letting go of all mental constructs and dualistic concepts, and simply resting in the innate awareness that is already present.

“Overall, the pointing out instruction as to the recognition of the true nature of the mind is a powerful and transformative practice in the Karma Kagyu tradition of Vajrayana Mahamudra, as it provides a direct path to realizing the ultimate nature of reality and attaining liberation from suffering.”

[end quote]

This is complicated stuff, IMO, and I could not find much fault with what ChapGPT had to say about it. In particular the lines:

“In the Karma Kagyu tradition of Vajrayana Mahamudra, the recognition of the true nature of the mind is often described as a process of "settling" or "resting" into the nature of mind, becoming familiar with the nature of the mind, rather than actively seeking or grasping for it. It involves a letting go of all mental constructs and dualistic concepts, and simply resting in the innate awareness that is already present.”

This was really well-written and put accent on the idea of ‘settling” or “resting”, which I totally agree with, but had not myself thought of as a way to describe ‘recognition’. I’m impressed. I added the phrase “becoming familiar with the nature of the mind,” since that was how I was taught.

All I can say at this juncture is that, if the above was a sample as to what AI Intelligence can do, AND, we know that this is just the beginning, then we are in for a wild and powerful experience with AI in the next years. It will blow our minds, IMO.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



EMPTY OF ENTERTAINMENT

April 7, 2023

Talking about distractions... Yes, we are distracted. As to what we are distracted 'from' is the good question.

And simply put, we are distracted from being undistracted.

Being undistracted would be where we naturally would be and probably want to be if we could. However, for the most part, we can't do that even a little bit. Samsara is distraction.

While we might want to get around to being undistracted and find out what that is all about, for all practical purposes we are and have been distracted all our life. And everyone else is too.

The few times I have tried to point out and describe how much we are distracted have not been very successful here on FB. And that is because I soon found out that it's not only that we ARE distracted, but we also LIKE being distracted and are not about to abandon our distractions without a fight. I didn't expect that.

In other words, we are attached to our distractions and always have been and surround ourselves with them like a cocoon or cloak. We live in that cocoon of distractive entertainment and are quite comfortable there.

I learned this the hard way, by having a major stroke during which all my distractions were instantly stripped away, leaving me, well, undistracted and exposed to something like what we might call boredom. I was unprepared for that, totally.

It was painful beyond describing, not painful like sticking in a knife, but painfully exposed to my own lack of distractions, like I had nowhere to hide or take cover. Try as I might I could not hide or lose myself in my normal entertainments. They were just gone, no longer there and it took weeks and months for them to reestablish themselves after the stroke. And all that time I was nakedly exposed to the boredom of having no distractions. I never knew that existed!!!

And that exposure was not just painfully boring. It was a Self-shattering experience, being deprived of all known attachments and thus having no place to rest or hide. I was just out there, fully exposed to the brilliant light of the natural nakedness of the mind itself, and I was NOT a happy camper. Unrelenting boredom.

And so, it took me weeks to re-establish the flora and fauna of my habitual entertainments, weeks of sticking out like a sore thumb, exposed to the harsh life of reality and naked from the lack of any cover whatsoever. I just hurt from being exposed like that. I longed for the cover of Samsara that I knew and loved. We are all this way.

And I realized that those who have never experienced that kind of vulnerable exposure have no idea how much we depend on our habit of hiding down in the shadows of our entertainments and attachments. It's the cubbyhole-result of our own ignoring of almost everything. We agree to ignore what we find so hard to face and keep in mind.

And the message is simple. Strip away everything we are attached to, all our entertainments, and we are left totally exposed to the brilliant light of the natural mind that we have never seen, much less experienced, and seemingly cannot stand the brilliance of.

And so I find it humorous that we pay lip service to being open and free when in fact we are a victim of the circumstances of our own attachments and demand to be entertained 24x7.

I know. Not a popular view, but a mind-numbing fact nevertheless, IMO.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



TURNING THE WHEEL OF THE DHARMA

April 8, 2023

The next few articles could be useful for helping to get the proper “View” for practicing dharma, so please bear with me. I am going to ‘Key’ off of this AI-produced paragraph from ChatGPT, which is actually pretty good.

“In the Karma Kagyu tradition of Vajrayana Mahamudra, the recognition of the true nature of the mind is often described as a process of “settling” or “resting” into the nature of mind, becoming familiar with the nature of the mind, rather than actively seeking or grasping for it. It involves a letting go of all mental constructs and dualistic concepts, and simply resting in the innate awareness that is already present.

As the process and practice of dharma progresses there are many and various dharma practices, some quite arduous indeed.

I know because I have done many of them, including the quite rigorous “Extraordinary Preliminaries,” commonly known and “The Ngondro,” with its sets of 100,000 full-length prostrations, 100,000 100-syllable mantras, 100,000 detailed mandala offerings, and 100,000 practices of Guru Yoga, etc.

When I finally finished “Ngondro” I went to my dharma teacher and told him and that I was finally ready to learn the more advanced dharma practices, like “Deity Yoga,” etc. And his response to me was “Would you like to know what I would do if I were you, Michael?”

Of course, I wanted to know what he thought I should do next, and his response was for me to do the whole Ngondro all over again from the beginning. With that

answer, both Margaret and I did 'The Ngondro' again, so I am familiar with many of these practices.

Yet all of these preliminary practices that cross and crisscross one another all end up pointing at a single dharma event that EVERYONE has to achieve and that is, sooner or later, being able to recognize for themselves the true nature of the mind. This is appropriately enough called "Recognition" of the true nature of the mind, and it has to be pointed out to us by an authentic dharma master.

And it's not like we don't do this to prove anything. Rather it is a necessary step in reaching realization. And its not something like a signed certificate you can buy or get anywhere because 'Recognition' is totally up to each of us to accomplish and we can't fake it because we need that recognition to take the next step forward in dharma practice

Without that authentic Recognition, we stay right where we are until we are able to accomplish that recognition. Needless to say, there are a lot of individuals waiting around trying to achieve Recognition of the nature of the mind. There is no back door or way around it but to do it.

In the western occult tradition, such a thing is what they call a "Ring-Pass-Not," an actual initiation we each have to pass through all by ourselves, on our own, and if we don't, we don't move forward past a certain point.

To myself, I joke this is what is called "turning the wheel of the dharma." If we don't ourselves turn the wheel, the wheel does not get turned. And this is because "Straight is the gate and narrow the way" as the Christians say, and you can't cheat because without that recognition and familiarity with the mind, we are stuck where we are and cannot progress further.

Sooner or later we each have to turn the wheel of the dharma.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



SAMSARA FOREVER

April 9, 2023

I imagine that most of us here are somewhat familiar with the dharma term ‘Samsara,’ and have some rough idea of what we are talking about, I’d like to get a little more granular in my discussion of Samsara. For one, what do you think Samsara is?

A typical dictionary definition of Samsara will say something like this, from ChatGPT:

“Samsara is a concept in Hinduism, Buddhism, and other Indian religions that refers to the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. It is the continuous cycle of life, death, and rebirth that all living beings go through. According to this concept, all living beings are trapped in the cycle of samsara, and the ultimate goal of these religions is to break free from this cycle and attain enlightenment or liberation.”

Uh huh. That is the ‘result’ of Samsara, our being trapped in the “Continuous cycle of birth, death, and rebirth,” as the Sanskrit word “Samsara” means “a wandering through.” We certainly are wandering through, but how did we get there and why? Again, what is the cause of this Samsara we each are stuck in?

The dharma teachings in general say that the cause of samsara is our own action or karma, as caused by our ignorance and the subjective faux world we create and draw around ourselves. The texts say that the cause of suffering is desire and ignorance of the ‘real’ on our parts. And some texts just say the cause is “Craving,” and they site thirst, desire, longing, wish, and greed as examples as to what clouds our mind from our view.

And of course, there are the classic “Four Noble Truths,”

which are:

The Truth of Suffering

The Truth of the Cause of Suffering

The Truth of the End of Suffering

And the Truth of the Path that Leads to the End of Suffering.

The Tibetan translator that I have learned much from, Daniel P. Brown, said that rather than ‘suffering’, a better word would be ‘reactivity’, thus:

The Truth of Reactivity

The Truth of the Cause of Reactivity

The Truth of the End of Reactivity

And the Truth of the Path that Leads to the End of Reactivity.

That has always made more intuitive sense to me than the word ‘suffering’ which is, IMO, more complex to understand. Reactivity is simply our reactions to whatever happens in life, physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually.

In a word, Samsara consists of everything that separates us, dualistically speaking, from our natural state of being one with the universe, mainly our cravings, attachments, and any veneer we create by reification, imagining things as other than they are, exaggerating, and ‘gilding the lily’ so to speak.

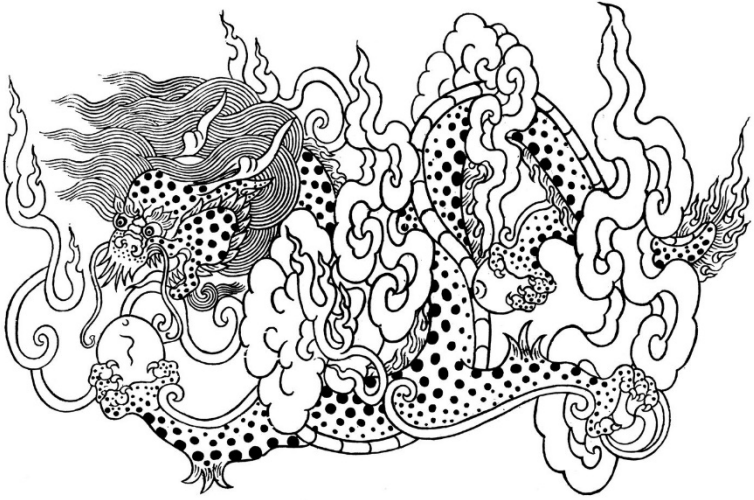
It's not my intention here to wax on about the concept of suffering or reactivity and so on. What I would like to do is, as mentioned, get a little more granular on how and why Samsara is so familiar and such a convenient and much-loved hidey-hole for us. I would venture to say that we have NO idea.

For one, we have always been totally within Samsara. The Buddhist cannon does not follow Plato's allegory of the cave, where we once were pure, but we fell away and have to be saved and resurrected to purity. The same with the Christian Doctrine of Original Sin. The dharma does not support that. We are not sinners just because we are ignorant.

In Buddhist terms we have never been clear, but have always been foggy and not clear minded, or as my dharma teacher used to say to us "We are the stragglers, the ones who in all the time there is up to now never got it." We have yet to be enlightened. Period.

And so, we don't have to feel ashamed or that we are sinners. We are not. However, we may want to clarify our mind and tone down our reactions and "Be Here Now" so to speak.

[Line drawing of the "Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind Toward the Dharma," a Tibetan dragon holding four pearls, one in each hand. As long as we hold the Four Thoughts firmly in mind, the dragon flies. If we lose track of even one of the Four Thoughts, it crashes to the ground. Taught to me by the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche.]



MEETING CHÖGYAM TRUNGPA RINPOCHE

April 10, 2023

Someone commented on the image of the Tibetan dragon in yesterday's blog, so I thought I might tell the story of how I learned about that image from the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche. I originally received that image on a large woodblock print that came in a set from Tibet. In fact, it is on my wall to the left of me right now and about 4x3 feet in size.

And so I will share this image with the story on the Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind Toward the Dharma (the Four Reversals) when I met the great lama Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche who first pointed the Four Thoughts out to me.

Trungpa Rinpoche founded Naropa Institute in Boulder Colorado and is credited with introducing thousands of students to Buddhism as a path rather than just a bit of Asian philosophy.

I grew up in the late 1950s and early 1960s with Buddhism as one of the topics (along with Existentialism, etc.) that were sometimes savored late at night along with plenty of caffeine and cigarettes. By the early 1970s it was becoming clear that Buddhism (and Tibetan Buddhism in particular) held something special for me. I had been reading the early books of Chögyam Trungpa, at first stunned by the incredible art on the covers and later by the content. Sometimes, probably late in 1973 I was thrilled to see a notice that Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche was coming to speak in my home town of Ann Arbor, Michigan in February of 1974. I so wanted to meet him in person.

I called the group that were putting his talk on to find more details, and found that they were really short-handed, and I ended up as Trungpa Rinpoche's chauffeur for the weekend plus I designed the poster for the event. I couldn't wait to go and pick him up at the airport.

In my old beat-up ford station wagon I waited breathlessly at the airport for him to deplane. People poured out, but no Tibetans. I knew he was travelling with Larry Mermelstein who later headed up the Nalanda Translation Committee. And finally, there Trungpa was, standing before me and looking directly at me.

I was really close to him. I could see that his eyes looked very tired and somehow the whites of his eyes were all yellow. Then Trungpa rolled his eyeballs upward toward the top of his head until I could hardly see the pupils and when they came back, all the tiredness and yellowness were gone, and I was staring into the eyes of perhaps the wildest human being I had ever encountered. It was an incredible moment. Suddenly, there 'HE' was. Wow! No disappointment.

I drove Trungpa and Mermelstein back to the professor's house where they were to stay and I carried in Rinpoche's luggage. A group of people were there waiting for him.

My job for the moment was done but instead of leaving I kind of hung around the edges of the room hoping to get some more clues as to what this incredible man or being was all about. I was afraid I might be kicked out. But very soon, the whole group of them were leaving for a tour of the University of Michigan campus. I, of course, was not invited so I prepared leave too.

At the last moment Trungpa Rinpoche decided that he was not going with them, but would stay by himself at the house and get some rest. Everyone was filing out and I waited off to the side as they came past me. And then to my astonishment, as I prepared to leave Trungpa Rinpoche looked directly at me and beckoned me to stay with him.

I was only too eager. He led me into a small library/office room and sat me down on a chair. This was beyond my wildest fantasies. And there I sat, not knowing just how to behave.

Next Trungpa Rinpoche opened a small bottle of sake, drank some, and proceeded to inspect just about every item and knick-knack in the room. He was very animated, lifting each little memento from its shelf, sometimes holding things up to the light and peering through them, and so on. He did a pretty complete inventory of whatever was in the room. And all this time I sat there, afraid to move, taking this all in. Trungpa was very animated.

Then before I knew it, he was inspecting me and for the next hour or Trungpa proceeded to instruct me in basic meditation and related topics but he never called it that.

He taught me how to watch my breath, watching the breath go out and watching it come in again. And he very carefully monitored what I was doing. In particular, he was concerned with my “out” breath, how I breathed out. It seemed to him I was not letting it go out far enough.

Needless to say, I was nervous being on the spot. At one point he said “Michael, let your breath go all the way out... all the way!” As I struggled to relax and let this happen, he remarked, “Don’t worry, it will come back!”

And I did this, but it was not as simple as just following his directions. A lot of deep internal stuff was happening at the same time he was speaking to me. As I breathed out, my whole life-long fear of letting go, of dying and death flashed through my mind.

I struggled to suppress it for a moment and then finally just let go. As the breath went out, my fear vanished. Perhaps this moment marked the beginning of my actual dharma practice, and the end of Buddhism as something to think about and the dawning realization that dharma was a path and method, not just a philosophy. And so it went.

It was only much later that I understand that Trungpa Rinpoche was teaching me basic meditation. At the time it seemed like my whole life was changing around me as he spoke. And later, as I was getting ready to leave and we walked down the hall together toward the front door we came upon the poster I had designed for his public talk hanging on the wall. It has an image of an Asian dragon flying in the clouds on it. I enclose it here.

For those of you who don't know the oriental dragon is a far cry from the Western idea of medieval dragons that knights in armor fought. In the east the dragon is a heroic figure, one of the most abiding signs of good fortune. Trungpa Rinpoche pointed to the poster and asked me if I knew what this image represented. I told him that I did not know much about it and that to me the image was striking and suited (to my mind) his visit here.

He then proceeded to point out to me that the dragon in the woodcut holds four precious pearls or gems, one in each claw. He said that as long as the dragon has a

grasp of all four pearls, he can fly, but if he drops even one of them, he plunges to the ground.

These are the Four Thoughts that we have been discussing yesterday, what are called the Common Preliminaries or the “Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind to the Dharma.” He was pointing out to me that we need to keep all four thoughts in mind and not just one or two of them if we want to turn our mind toward the dharma. I understood that these four thoughts are essential for any further practice – all four of them. I have never forgotten this.

This experience with Trungpa Rinpoche had a deep and lasting effect on me. And although after that weekend as his driver I never saw Trungpa Rinpoche again, I will always remember his concern for and kindness with me. I went on from there (a few years later) to discover my main teacher in the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, the abbot of KTD (Karma Triyana Dharmachakra) Monastery in Woodstock, NY and have trained there for the last 36 years or so. However, Trungpa Rinpoche opened a door for me that has never closed.

Some time ago I wrote this little poem about the Four Thoughts and my experience with Trungpa Rinpoche:

THE FOUR THOUGHTS THAT TURN THE MIND

This precious life,
Impermanent and brief,
I know.
My actions keep on piling up,
And I can't quite get my ducks into a row.

Trungpa said to me,
So many years ago,

By grasping just one thought or two,
We'll never turn aside.
We must, he said, maintain all four,
And leave not one behind.

Four precious thoughts that touch the heart,
Only they can turn the mind.

For those who don't remember or have never seen the
four thoughts are:

- (1) The preciousness human life
- (2) Impermanence
- (3) The inevitability of karma
- (4) The undependability of Samsara]

[Poster designed by me for Trungpa's event in Ann
Arbor.]

CHÖGYAM TRUNGPA



Speaking on: **Meditation and Intellect**

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

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JAZZ GREAT KARL BERGER PASSES

April 10, 2023

In my life I have met many fine and even great beings and Karl Berger was one of them.

Jazz great Karl Berger passed away Sunday night April 9, 2023, a dear friend of mine. First, some general information:

Karl Hans Berger (born March 30, 1935) is a German-born vibraphonist, composer, and educator who is best known for his contributions to jazz improvisation and world music. He began his career in the 1950s playing with some of Europe's top jazz musicians, including Gunther Hampel and Albert Mangelsdorff, before relocating to the United States in the early 1960s.

In the US, Berger became associated with the avant-garde jazz movement, collaborating with renowned musicians such as Ornette Coleman, Don Cherry, and Anthony Braxton. He and Ingrid also co-founded the Creative Music Studio in Woodstock, New York in 1971, which became a hub for musicians interested in exploring new approaches to improvisation and cross-cultural music -- world music.

Throughout his career, Berger has recorded and performed extensively as a bandleader and sideman and has received numerous awards and grants for his contributions to music. He continued to teach and perform, and his innovative approach to jazz improvisation and world music has inspired generations of musicians.

"Karl Berger is a six time winner of the Downbeat Critics Poll as a jazz soloist, recipient of numerous Composition

Awards, and Berger continuously won the Down Beat critics poll in the category of the best jazz vibraphone player of the year between 1969 until 1975.

And now, my personal friendship with Karl Berger.

I first met Karl Berger and his wife (and singer) Ingrid Sertso (an accomplished jazz vocalist) at KTD Monastery in the mountains above Woodstock, NY in the early 1980s. Karl and Ingrid had been around KTD since it was not even there and knew all the stories as to how it came to be.

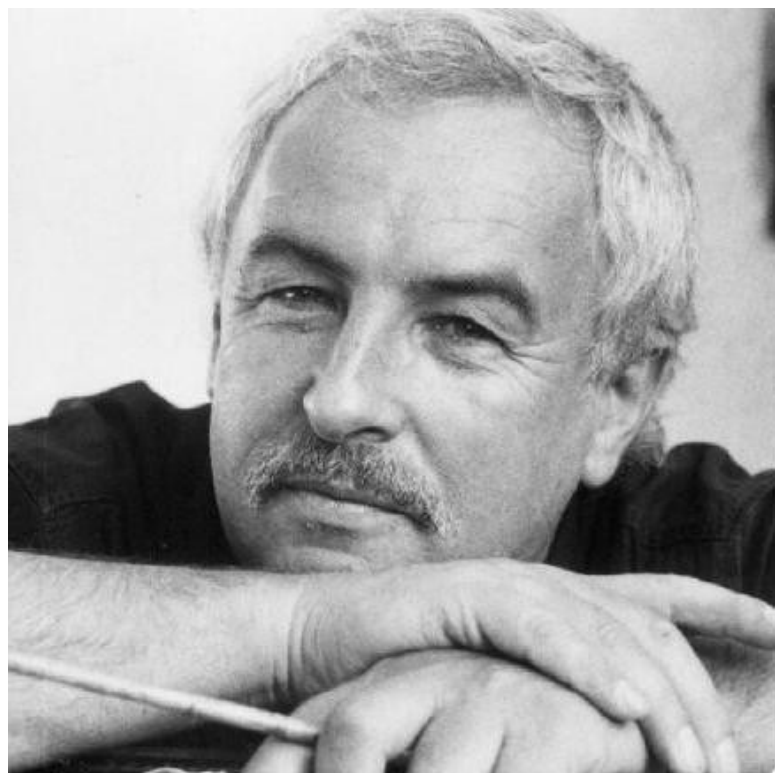
In my life, Karl Berger was continuously one of the sharpest and certainly one of the funniest and most upbeat persons I have even known, and almost every time Margaret and I went to KTD we would have lunch, dinner, or spend time with Karl and Ingrid, sometimes many nights in a row.

IMO, Karl and Ingrid were indispensable to the culture and growth of KTD Monastery, not to mention the culture and arts of Woodstock, NY.

Karl was there for every birthday celebration for my teacher Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche along with his wife Ingrid Sertso, and Karl would play and Ingrid sing.

I don't have words for the love that I (and many people) had for Karl Berger. He was a benign being, brilliant in conversation, and a loving person. Karl Berger also affected the history of jazz and world music in this country, especially pioneering world music and working with up and coming jazz players.

We can't replace what there is only one of.





THE FAULTS OF SAMSARA

April 11, 2023

And here is where it gets difficult for me because I would like to share with you information that may be hard to hear, meaning hard to accept and easy to just slough off as 'crazy', Yet, if you can hear me through on this and get even a whiff of it, this can be invaluable to us as dharma practitioners, IMO. And we are all dharma practitioners, trying to clear our minds, whether we know it or not.

I've already mentioned that we have never in our lives, not even ever, been outside or beyond Samsara. We are and have always been deeply embedded within Samsara, and never free of it. That's the human condition.

And if you understand this, then you know that we have not a clue, although of course we think we do, as to what Nirvana or Enlightenment is other than as an idea, a conception. We never have known through experience and how could we when we don't ever leave Samsara. In fact, everything we know at this point is courtesy of Samsara, even the dharma itself that we know up to now comes through (by way of) and with the stamp of Samsara. Samsara is our filter until we realize Nirvana, get enlightened.

In fact, we are totally familiar with Samsara when just the opposite is where we want to be, totally familiar with the nature of our own mind, Nirvana. We are not now familiar with the nature of our own mind but, as mentioned, have been operating solely for all recorded time only within the confines of Samsara.

Oh yes, the true nature of the mind is right there within us, but we have accumulated so many obscurations that we can't see through them to our own mind's nature. Our obscurations are our filter to life.

LIGHTS OUT

What then is this, our Samsaric world, made up of? It's a sheath or cocoon of shadows, an accumulated opaque veneer that we live in and see through; it's where we hide. Like a hermit crab, we have never been without our shell of attachments, whatever holds our attention or entertains us. Samsara is pretty much all we know and have known.

And most important, we are not about to give it up, nor would we know what to do, how to live, without all the baffling and Samsaric cover wrapped tightly around us. We are hidden there (and hiding) from the nature of our own mind and have never yet seen that nature. The dharma teachings state this.

However, and this is a big "however, and the day will come, when we pass from this life. When we die, all our Samsaric cover is dropped, stripped away, and it is written that we will be as naked as jaybird, as they say. Are we ready for that? From my own experience I don't think so.

Then, after death, we will have no cover whatsoever to hide in or live through as we do now with the filter of our entertainments and distractions. And, the white light of the mind, which is beyond bright to our now-dimmed eyes, will cause us to turn away and run to the shadows of rebirth however (and as fast as) we can.

Just as a leggy plant-seedling has to hardened-off by the light of the Sun, so do we, right now, have to begin

getting out of the cocoon of our own perpetual entertainments in which we are entrenched and begin to expose ourselves to the light of the mind itself, bit by bit. The light of the mind, like the Sun, is always shining, yet we habitually ignore it. It is right there if we will only look.

If we wait until we wake up in the bardos after death with the kind of sensitivity to the inner light we now have (which is about none), there will be little to no time to get used to, much less harden-off, to what has been described as the brilliant white-light of the mind in the bardo. It will send us, as they say, scurrying into the shadows of perhaps a thoughtless rebirth.

The light of the mind is shining right now, like the Sun in our spiritual sky, but we have habitually ignored it, and kept our eyes turned away from it, virtually forever. We can't stand to even look in that inner direction, just like we can't stand to look directly into the solar Sun. In this case, we are talking about a spiritual Sun (the light of the mind) that we all have inside us and that is shining right now as it always has. Yet, we have never seen it. We can't bear to look at it.

This inner light is so arcane, so completely covered and hidden, that we have never, not even a little, seen it. Instead, we are used to (and completely enveloped by) our attachments and busy being entertained by those. That's our habit and we are loathe to change.

I only discovered this as a byproduct of a major stroke, when everything in my Self was in an instant stripped away, leaving me fully exposed, vulnerable, and unable to find any of my old haunts and entertainments. What I called my Self was instantly shattered and in the opening gap I was stuck in that white light I mentioned for days and weeks. It was excruciatingly painful, which is why I write about it here.

I could NEVER have imagined this and was shocked to the core, completely exposed by the simple lack of having my usual entertainments. They were gone. And by 'entertainments' I don't mean watching a movie or playing pool, but rather the constant filling up of our dance card until there is not even a ray of light that gets in. Without realizing it, we like to be distracted and entertained 24x7, and are.

And that's what I am trying to get across here, that I had no idea (and I would bet you don't either) as to how packed our entertainments are, so tight that there is not room for us to get out or light to get in. None whatsoever. That's the nature of Samsara.

We are wrapped tight like a mummy in our habitual entertainments and aside from having our Self shattered on rare occasions (like the death of a family member or something), there are NO GAPS in our closure. It's tight as a drum.

And that is why, when I experienced how it was to suddenly have all my entertainments stripped away, unfortunately thanks to a stroke, I had no choice but to take notice and endure a life devoid of any entertainment cover for weeks on end. The lack of my normal cover was painful beyond words.

Here I was, surrounded by all the goings-on of a hospital stay, while at the same time I was as if I were sitting there completely still, exposed and naked in this brilliant light. It was like I was on a remote desert plain with nothing whatsoever around other than a white-hot Sun-like light in the sky above, a light which I could not dare turn and directly look at.

So, take from this account what you can or blow it off, as you will. As time went on after my stroke, my habitual Self gradually was reanimated, put back together, and reestablished my version of Samsara once again, but it took days and weeks.

Life is a layered veneer, largely composed of our attachments and cravings, and we lay them on thick until we literally are mummified within them so that not a crack of light ever (or hardly ever) gets in. And in that closed state we wait and live out our lives until at death all that veneer, what we call our “Self,” is stripped away and we enter the bardo as sensitive as I experienced from my stroke when my Self was similarly stripped and shattered.

I have done my best to describe the situation I believe all of us are in but feel we have never been aware of. It leads to asking a very simple question: What is Life?

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



THIN SKINNED

April 12, 2023

[I see from remarks that some of you are having trouble with this topic. I well understand and I suggest you just take it in and let it percolate and leave it at that or just pass over these couple of blogs.]

If life for us is spent mostly avoiding the clear light of the mind, which is almost the definition of Samsara, and instead secreting and surrounding ourselves within our habits and entertainments, wrapped tight like a mummy, what then is life?

If, according to the dharma teachings, we have never known enlightenment in all of our rebirths up to now, but have instead been tightly wrapped in Samsara, our own attachments, what kind of life is that? I mean what does it consist of?

Is that all there is to life as we know it? And if all of our ideas about enlightenment are themselves mostly just more entertainment and attachment, piling it on, what then is enlightenment if not the process of removing what obstructs and blocks out the natural light of the mind?

And in the dharma teachings we are told that at death, all of this applied veneer will be stripped away and left behind to decay and disintegrate, and in the bardo without Samsara we will be very, very, very sensitive to everything and anything, how does this all go together and work for us?

And it seems that we are being encouraged by the teachings to start exposing our very thin skin now, while still living, so that we can see (and endure) the light of

the mind without terror as we are said to have after death.

What I discovered for myself is not (as a superficial a read of the dharma texts might suggest) that our attachments are something we can just see and manipulate. Rather, it seems we have almost no idea whatsoever how deeply we are entrenched and encased in Samsara, and for all our dharma practice, we have yet to make a dent in our self-encasement in entertainments and distractions. It seems we are bound airtight.

And the reason is simple, that we don't want to remove or come out of our entertainments, perhaps if only because of habit and fear of the unknown. And perhaps all of our dharma goings-on are but a form of lip-service to liberation, rather than a step toward actual liberation from Samsara. In other words, our habit of Samsara has even programmed our steps to escape from it. In other words, we are content as we are.

What I learned from my stroke experience is that while I still had some memories, they were distant and veiled from access. I could not or did not care enough to bring them to mind. Yet, try as I might I could not reach any familiar cover and thus once again lose myself in distractions and entertainment as I used to. Being entertained all the time was not possible. Stark boredom and ennui were the order of the day. This was a kind of suffering I was unfamiliar with. And yet this too is part of our familiarization with the nature of the mind, this suffering of exposure and vulnerability.

Of more immediate importance to me was that I had zero access to things I was normally attached to like music, food, and all the comforts I was used to. I could not get anything to satisfy me or to get into and lose

myself in enjoyment as I had been used to. I was stark naked of any comfort at all.

Samsara was so transparent, like nothing at all. When I tried to go there, to get wrapped up again in something, I could not get there. There was “No room in the in,” so to speak. I was left out in the blinding Sun of the mind to just burn and adjust.

Instead, as mentioned, I was just out there, fully exposed to this blinding white light, as if I were on a wide desert plain with nothing as far as I could see, nothing except this single intense white light somewhere overhead, which I was turned away from because I could not stand to look at it or even in its direction.

I agree, this is austere account and sounds bleak because to my knowledge it is. And our accumulated cravings, desires, and immaculate skill in being entertained constantly builds up a dam that keeps us from removing our accumulated obscurations and thus thinning down our reification so that we can transition at death more easily to being without the Self and distractions.

A poem I wrote:

I am so round and such so,
A treading finally and letting go,
As spreading circles open so,
An even inward outward flow.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



DRIVING THE DHARMA

April 13, 2023

What I have been writing about these last few days is pretty much unknown. There has been a little bit of feedback here that I recognize as awareness of this condition, but not much. This tells me that our attachment to Samsara, this cyclic world of ups and downs we live in, is strong, very deep seated, and mostly carefully hidden from our awareness. And this is what I personally experienced as part of my stroke. It was unforgettable!

That the stroke gave me an alternate view was clear. That that view was clearer than any view I had ever had before needs to be understood. My mind after the stroke was crystal clear and not foggy. What was 'foggy', so to speak, was where was my precious cover, entertainments and attachments. They were gone and gone beyond going at least for quite a while. These distractions and entertainments were no longer there and available to me and I felt excruciatingly naked and uncomfortable without them. I tried to find them and hide from the clarity.

It was the absence of those usual entertainments and clinginess that allowed my mind to be so clear. Had I been able to slip back into the sheath of my comfortable distractions and entertainment that I had always known, the light would have gone back out of the clarity.

This deep-seated attachment and comfort of my Samsaric haunts had clouded any ability I might have had to see clearly, and then suddenly I could see and it was overwhelmingly clear. I had always thought that something like a stroke would cloud the mind, not clarify it. And yes, I did NOT have access to my personal

memories or especially my habit of being constantly busy and entertained by life, yet that (although terrifying) was a blessing in disguise because I could finally see clearly what I had never seen before, just how the mind worked and what Samsara was.

I believe the best we can hope for without inviting what I had to go through is to gently begin to loosen the ties that habitually bind us to Samsara, and settle or relax ourselves down, thus learning to come to rest like a feather in this present moment, and become increasingly more familiar with the nature of how the mind works.

Of course, there is no end to the total revolution involved in turning our known world inside out and outside in. Our world revolves around our attachments and karma, and what becomes of it, much like the Earth turns 360-degrees each day. So much revolves around our Self, and then, for me, the Self was suddenly shattered and gone.

After all, Samsara amounts to the sum total of what obscures us from recognizing the true nature of the mind, and we apparently have been totally busy accumulating even more obscurations that are separative and further separate us from clarity. We have to reverse that process.

Reversing the process of accumulating karma involves the deconstruction of what we call our reified Self, whitling it down to size and bringing more transparency into our lives, transparency that we can see through to what is beyond, the actual nature of how the mind works.

However, just thinking on something, conceptualization, is not what is meant here, much less does that give us

the feeling and experience we need to remove blinders from our spiritual eyes, so to speak.

The whole idea here is for us to get a handle on the mind itself, meaning to become familiar enough with the mind and how it works to actually work it ourselves independently, on our own. And the instructions to do so are like taking the hands of a young person and placing them on the steering wheel of life and thus help us to begin steering our own life, actually using the mind.

I can see that we like to think we are in control of and know our own mind, but unfortunately this does not seem to be the case. Intellectually, and from a conceptual point of view, we may understand something, yet experiencing it firsthand has not yet taken place, meaning we don't yet KNOW what we intellectually are talking about. We are just talking about it and mistake conceptual understanding for actual experience, which it is not, much less is it the full realization of that experience.

There are so many ways to miss the point in dharma training, which is why so much is made of a student's recognizing the actual nature of the mind as with Zen Buddhism, 'Kensho" and with Tibetan Buddhism what is called "Recognition" of the true nature of the mind, both meaning being introduced to the mind until it becomes actually familiar to us. That's the point of dharma training, familiarization with our own mind.

It's true that my dharma teacher was a guide to me all of his life, for some 36 years until he passed on, and his teachings continue to inform me. However, the main point of my working with him for all those years was so that he could introduce me to the nature of the mind until I recognized it to his satisfaction, and he said so.

At that point of recognition, when “I got it,” so to speak, Rinpoche’s task, job, or purpose was essentially complete. When I became familiar enough with the actual nature of the mind and could teach myself by actually working with the mind, Rinpoche did not have to help keep my hands on the steering wheel of life. I could now do that.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



URGENCY: A DHARMA “CATCH-22”

April 14, 2023

[I apologize for all the fire & brimstone of these last few blogs, and I will try to wrap this up in these next blogs, and dwell on more easy to understand topics. However, I want to look further into the hard to accept facts of our existence here in this life.]

It might be helpful if we looked at why all of this discussion about Samsara and clarity is important. The idea is simple. I am not yet enlightened, but am older now, with probably not that many years left. And I am easily distracted, and not much into forced routines. You tell me:

What are my chances of becoming enlightened before I die and why should I even worry about it?

The very great majority of dharma practitioners (not to mention everyone else) are pretty much in this same boat or WILL BE before they realize it. One thing we do know (if we are honest with ourselves) is that we are not enlightened yet no matter how we may rationalize it. If we have to even ask ourselves the question, the answer is a “No, we are not yet enlightened.”

And we are told by the Tibetan Buddhist teachings that in the bardo passage which comes soon after death we either will or will not get another human birth depending on how we have used our current life, this one. Sounds biblical. And while another human rebirth or life is not guaranteed, we can however easily get a lower birth, one in which the dharma practice we have put off doing in this life (whatever that may be) is impossible, such as being reborn as a bewildered animal, and so on. What a

thought! Westerners are not often open to this way of thinking.

On top of whatever our current will for practice is (and our hopes for eventual enlightenment), we also have this growing pressure of the eventual showdown in the bardo, where (bodiless, and without all the things from this life) we will have to somehow pilot our mind through (so we are told by the teachings) what is said to be (for the majority) a most terrifying experience. And just how stable are we when terrified?

And we won't even have the steering wheel of the body to guide us. In the bardo, we are anything but grounded. We will have lost our body and literally be senseless! We will have no way to even come to our senses, because we will have completely lost our senses. That is worth thinking about.

At the time of death, we will be alone (as we are today when we dream) with our mind, and even a few moments of reflection should tell us how disciplined that is right now. Just consider your dharma or spiritual practice and ask yourself: have you achieved the results you expected, were looking for, or that you feel you need? If you are on shaky ground here and now, grounded by all our attachments, then just imagine what you will be like in the midst of the bardo passage when you are no longer in the Samsara of having a dense body.

It will be like trying to control the outcome of a dream, which is why the Tibetans practice 'Dream Yoga', for we will be one big mind with no body and no common sense. Or it could be like trying to drive a car without a steering wheel. You probably won't be able to simply point yourself anywhere and just have it go there or the reverse: whatever comes to your mind, you WILL go

there, including leaping into your worst fears. This is not me making this up; this is what the dharma texts and teachings actually say.

Keep in mind that the outcome of the bardo experience will determine whether you or I have another human body, and just what kind of body that will be, another chance to learn and practice the dharma, or whether we will instead fall into lower realms where it will be very difficult to do much of anything at all, certainly nothing like the opportunity we have now in this human life.

Forget about the pain of intrauterine life, the trauma of birth, and all the “slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” that Shakespeare points out. It quickly gets a little Old-Testament like. Those of us who have not managed to enlighten ourselves in this life will have no choice but to try and qualify for yet another chance at a human life in the bardo, hoping to somehow keep what we now have, and to at least come out even, but with no guarantee. I am imagining that 99.99% of us are in roughly the same boat.

We will be angling for and hoping for another human rebirth, another chance on a human life, rather than fall into what are called the “lower realms.” If it has been hard for us to get serious in this life, it may be almost impossible to practice dharma in the next. Ninety-nine percent is a good percentage, basically like: all of us.

If you have ever wondered why many of the Asian Buddhists are into the Buddha Amitabha and his “Pure Land” Buddha Realm called ‘Sukhavati’ (Tibetan: Dewa-Chen), it is because, of all the buddhas, the Buddha Amitabha has promised each of us an easier access to his pure-land realm, an access that for most would take place in the bardo instead of at rebirth – at what

otherwise is the changing of the bodies and perhaps also changing realms.

Sukhavati is said to not only allow us to avoid falling into lower rebirths, but also to avoid our even taking another human rebirth whatsoever. According to the teachings, if we merit it, we go directly to Sukhavati at death and we become enlightened, period, end of births. This is due (as the teaching say) to the compassion of the Buddha Amitabha for sentient beings like us, in this case we humans.

Obviously, as an unenlightened human I know nothing about this Sukhavati realm personally but am only sharing with you what the teachings tell us. This option is very appealing to many compared to the alternatives.

Aside from trying to qualify for Sukhavati, the majority of us are practicing not only to become enlightened using the methods Buddha taught, but also to get our minds in good enough shape before we die so as not to lose our balance in the bardo and fail to obtain at least another human birth, complete with all its joys and sorrows. So, there is some extra pressure on many of us, and that pressure increases with age, as we actually get closer to that deciding moment. Imagine!

My only point for even writing this is to take a look at how this urgency to qualify for yet another chance at human life might affect our ongoing ability to become enlightened, our will and ability to practice dharma. Getting another human rebirth after this life amounts to getting our foot in the door to do our life all over again, although as a different person. In itself, a rebirth provides us with nothing more than another chance at life, another opportunity to practice the dharma and to work toward our enlightenment, that is 'if' we can be

born in a time and place where dharma is available to us, which is itself not certain.

Whatever skills or imprint we start out with in our next life will come from our dharma practice in this current life. It is entirely up to us. We set the pace. It all comes down to our actually having to DO something toward awakening ourselves, to becoming enlightened. No one will or can (not even a Buddha) do it for us, and we can take all the time in the world to get the job done, lifetime after lifetime if needed, as so we have up till now.

Nothing will ever change for the better, except as we change it. We are not going to stumble on or luck-in to enlightenment. If that were true, we would have done it a long time ago. We are, as one high rinpoche puts it, the “stragglers,” the ones who have not managed to get enlightened in all of the time in the world up to now - eons.

Fear of the bardo (and attempts to get ready for it) remind me a little of being distracted and worn out by a low-paying job while all of our hopes or dreams go unattended. Our fear and worries about our future may make that future all the more urgent, but these worries also can detract from our concentration on our dharma practice. And I don't mean to be disrespectful.

We are told that the most important thing is to study and practice the dharma and move toward enlightenment, step by step. However, at the same time we have to somehow get ready to pass through the eventual bardo experience that looms at the end of this life if we don't reach enlightenment before we die. This is not something we can just ignore or endlessly put off, as there is an end to our current life and then there we will be: in the bardo.

The two should be the same thing, meaning: if we work hard with our dharma practice in becoming more aware, that alone will stand us in good stead when we enter the bardo at death. And if the two are not the same, that is, if our fear of not being ready overpowers our actual practice, then the amount of actual dharma practice we get done takes priority over the fear of what will happen in the bardo and not vice versa. In other words, our fears can inhibit our actual practice.

At the time we die, nothing we have done (with the exception of dharma practice) will be of any use to us at all. Our money, friends, all our experiences, and any and everything we have accomplished in this mundane life will be totally useless in the bardo realms. We won't even have our familiar body and, as mentioned, absolutely no sense at all. We will be the 'horseless headman', just out there (or in there) alone with our mind, driven about willy-nilly only by whatever discipline we actually have mastered, not by our intellectual understanding of the dharma. Thinking won't help.

All the dharma talk, hopes, fears, dreams, and what-not part of our dharma practice will also be lost to us, leaving only whatever imprints and dharma skills in directing the mind we have actually acquired up to that point. All of our clever rationalizations will add up to nothing and make no sense. And this is because there will be no sense to make.

And we will have no one to ask, no one to guide us, no teacher, no sangha, etc., other than whatever essence of our teachers we have recognized and internalized through our own practice. And even that essence won't just rub off on us. We have to acquire or master even that for ourselves.

Teachers can only point the way; they can't do our practice for us. They can't live our lives for us. In the bardo, we will have to make up our mind on the spot based on how our mind is made up, as in how we made it up in this life. We won't suddenly be different than we are now as far as mind training. We will be what we have done and how we have lived: karma.

So, in summary, we seriously have to figure out how to work on becoming enlightened in this life, while at the same time live under the pressure and the age-ticking clock to prepare for the inevitable bardo passage. The growing pressure to meet the demands of the bardo can actually inhibit us from doing the practice needed to be confident in the bardo, a "Catch-22" if there ever was one.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



THE FOUR THOUGHTS THAT TURN THE MIND

April 13, 2023

However, we do have some tools available to us, in particular the “Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind to the Dharma,” and they traditionally have been called the Common Preliminaries, the very first step and foundation for what comes after in our dharma practice.

When after decades of dharma practice, when I finally finished all the Extraordinary Preliminaries, several deity practices, and was ready to begin what is called Mahamudra meditation, the first thing I was instructed to do was to concentrate for three years on these same Four Thoughts That Turn the mind, so they are not only for beginners. All Buddhist know them. And we can learn from them. Here they are:

THE PRECIOUS HUMAN LIFE (1st thought)

Life is precious! We all know that and from time to time our own life, of course, may seem most precious to us, but the same goes for all other lives, even that of the smallest insect or creature. All beings want to be happy and not to suffer.

And while that is true, the main point here is not that all life is precious, although of course it is to each being. The main point is that this human life we have is most precious, and it is precious not just because it is our life. The human life is precious because it is perhaps the only opportunity to find and practice the dharma, and thereby somehow awaken and move toward enlightenment. This opportunity of having a human life to learn dharma is what is most precious.

It is written that of all the realms, from low to high, only the human lifetime offers the exact combination we need to meet and learn the dharma, and so it is often called the “precious human birth.” In every other realm we are either suffering too much to practice dharma or we are too high on one thing or another (and not down-to-earth enough) to practice dharma. The human birth is the one happy medium. We act like we are going to live forever, etc.

IMPERMANENCE (2nd thought)

“Impermanence” simply means that we have a limited opportunity here, one that like the dew on the morning grass soon will be gone. Of the Four Thoughts, “impermanence” is the most obvious to us all, if only because life jogs our memory every once in a while and reminds us that we ARE impermanent. We all get a whiff of impermanence from time to time, perhaps as those close to us die or when we momentarily realize that we too are impermanent. I like to call ‘impermanence’, the smelling salts of the dharma. It wakes us up.

And Mother Nature has impermanence on display all the time, and the laws of nature are also clearly working all around us, not just in the fields and streams, but in the cities, homes – wherever we are. And there seem to be several aspects to impermanence.

Witnessing the heartbreaking impermanence nature displays is one way we are affected, often bringing out compassion within us for the suffering that most animals and beings experience. This helps to keep us sober. Then there is the recollection of our own impermanence, the fact that we will for sure die. This is harder for us to look at, so we tend to push it out of our consciousness most of the time.

Impermanence can also urge us to not waste time, because our own life will expire one day soon, and for all we know, it could be today. As the Ven. Bokar Rinpoche said to me years ago when I left his monastery in West Bengal, India, “Michael, Tomorrow or the next life, whichever comes first.”

Always somewhere in the back of our mind, rolling around in there, is the sense of our own mortality. Perhaps still more distracting and energy consuming is the fact that we know (have been taught) it would be best if we were not wasting time on what is ultimately unimportant, but rather were busy with our practice or at least preparing our mind in some way for the bardo passage, the confrontation that will decide what our next rebirth will be, human or some other type.

And meanwhile we all have the pressures of making a living, keeping this body alive, having food to eat, and a roof over our head. These concerns are not trivial for most of us.

I want to differentiate here (for my own clarity) the urgency we have in general to use this human life we have efficiently (while we have it) and the fear or pressure that is connected with our upcoming bardo passage, the determination if we do or do not get another human rebirth.

To me, it seems that there are two kinds of worries here, one the urgency of impermanence in general and the second, the urgency whether we will or won't have another chance at a human life in the near future, and of course they are related. In my own life, I add still a third worry, which is that the worry about whether the bardo decision (next human life or not) is so strong that it will seriously detract from the ongoing process of finding a dharma practice that will move us toward enlightenment.

Keep in mind that it is only the search for a dharma practice that will work for us that (if successful) will sway the outcome of the bardo passage in the favor of another precious human life or even enlightenment. We need to be as calm and careful as we can in dharma practice, have our mind as clear and relaxed as possible, and hopefully not be too distracted by the urgency of the intra-bardo decision. Do you understand?

KARMA (3rd thought)

Understanding karma is like tasting some fine cheese or food where there is an aftertaste, a taste and then a little later, an after-taste. In this analogy, the taste is pretty obvious: action and result. You do something in life and it provokes a reaction or result.

The aftertaste (with understanding karma in my experience) is that as you get more into looking at karma, you begin to realize that not just the big decisions or actions bring results, but that ALL actions (everything we do) brings some reaction, lays down their own track or casts some fine shadow. And if we repeat that action, good or bad for us, the track only deepens.

It took me a while for this to really sink in. In other words, we would be best served if we were very, very careful in everything we do, careful in every action, no matter how trivial it might appear on the surface. It reminds me of one of the most common images used to illustrate chaos theory in modern physics, the image of the flapping of a butterfly's wing in South America serving to modify the weather in Iceland – something like that. Little things can mean a lot.

Karma is not only about committing bad deeds and paying for it, but also about shaping our lives almost

invisibly by every small action we do. This is perhaps best celebrated in the methodical care and gentleness shown by some of the great Zen masters in every move they make, like the traditional tea ceremony. The more we work our way into the practice of dharma, the more careful we become in our every thought, word, and deed. We are on tiptoe.

DEFECTS OF SAMSARA – THIS WORLD (4th thought)

The fourth of the “Four Thoughts” is the consistent undependability of this world, also sometimes called “the revulsion of Samsara,” Samsara being this world that you and I live in. We live in a state of change that itself is changing, or as I like to say it: I will never be able to quite get all of my ducks in a row. I always believe I will, but I never have yet, and the teachings suggest it is mathematically impossible.

Like the gambling casinos, it is only our own gullibility that keeps us betting on permanency, thinking we can actually game the system. Others can't, but given enough time, we think we are different; we can do it. This is the same attitude or carrot that has led us from life to life through beginningless time.

Only when we are severely struck by impermanence do we actually sicken and become nauseas with life as we know it; only then does it turn empty of meaning for us. Otherwise, we keep it hopping at all times.

These four thoughts: the precious human life, impermanence, karma, and the sheer undependability of life have been said to be the four friends that help to keep us awake, keep us from utterly abandoning ourselves to the deep sleep of distractions, bewilderment, and constant entertainment.

SUMMARY

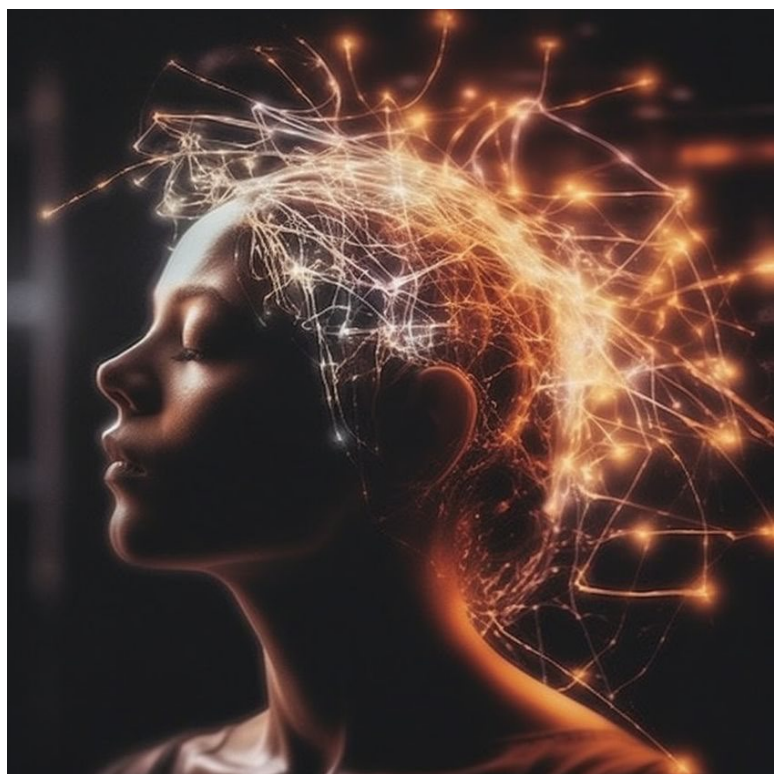
We are juggling at least a couple of balls here. On the one hand we have the dharma practice we have been given or have discovered works for us. And we may or may not have any great signs that it is working yet. Then, on the other hand we have to fight against time to get at least to somewhere with our practice that will help us to influence the outcome of our upcoming bardo experience.

As mentioned earlier, these two aspects are not only related, but should be working hand in hand. However, it is all too easy for them to get out of phase with one another, so that the urgency of the bardo confrontation becomes dominant and distracts us from our dharma practice enough so that we somehow manage not to get that job done with the result that our mind will not be ready to meet the bardo. This vicious cycle is not uncommon.

As mentioned earlier, the proper sequence is that with the help of a qualified teacher, the true nature of the mind is introduced to us, studied, pointed out, leading to our own recognition and the subsequent steps in dharma practice toward realization. If we can sustain that, we automatically will be ready for the bardo and will need have no fear.

However, if due to advancing age or lack of faith in the techniques or teacher, the urgency to get the mind in order overpowers the calm and steadiness needed to make progress in mind training, we have a problem. The tail is wagging the dog. In other words, there are two trains running at the same time.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



THE FUNCTION OF A DHARMA TEACHER

April 14, 2023

As you see, this can be a serious subject, one well worth being aware of. The point of this 'fire and brimstone' talk is not to imbue you with still more pressure, and not to force you to force yourself to practice harder, but hopefully to encourage you to practice smarter.

When the meditation teachings say to "rest the mind," they actually mean 'rest', not push or force anything. The eventual outcome of all this (the bardo after death) is of crucial importance to us and yet mindlessly forcing ourselves forward is not restful. Although oxymoronic, we are in a hurry to rest the mind, if that makes any sense. And forcing yourself to rest is difficult to do, just as trying to get to sleep when you have insomnia is difficult. "Hurry up and rest!" does not work.

The ancient metaphor of holding a raw egg in your hand comes to mind. Too much pressure and the egg breaks, too little and the egg falls and breaks.

If we force ourselves to practice too much, we get nowhere, and if we are so lax that we hardly practice, we get nowhere. Like holding the egg, it takes just the right amount of pressure to make progress. So, it can be helpful to examine our practice to see if at present we are forcing it or not doing it enough. Proper practice is not a switch you can just turn on or off, but something that requires constant attention and vigilance. That is the whole idea of meditation, remaining aware all the time, learning to do that. Awareness is the whole thing.

Ultimately, most of our practice is just that, “practice,” and not the real thing. We are going through the steps and motions perhaps for years until something clicks and we actually get the idea of what we have been ‘trying’ to do all that time.

THE FUNCTION OF A TEACHER

In both the Zen tradition and the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, the role of the teacher is to point out to the student the true nature of the mind and how it works. Everything else is secondary and not essential. Once that job is done, once the teacher has pointed out to the student the true nature of the mind, and the student has recognized it, the teacher’s main work is done. Period.

Perhaps the most common obstacle to recognizing the actual nature of the mind are the hopes and expectations of the student. Invariably, we build up an idea of what recognition or enlightenment is, based on books, teachings, and our own imagination. We ‘think’ we know what we are looking for, when by definition we don’t or we would already have it.

That is why the teacher must disappoint those expectations, using whatever means necessary. This is perhaps most clear in the Zen tradition, where the master employs laughter, comedy, force, surprise, etc. to upset the applecart of the student long enough for them to let go of their fixed expectations and let some light and air come in.

It is at that moment of recognition of the mind’s nature that the student stops guessing, expecting, and wondering, and instead just gets it, not enlightenment, but we simply understand for the first time the actual nature of mind we have been trying to figure out all this

time. And by seeing the problem, we simultaneously see the solution and know how to deal with it, like: we can do it.

THE STUDENT

April 15, 2023

In other words, recognizing the true nature of the mind brings its own response, the chief hallmark of which is literally becoming responsible for our own dharma practice. In that instant of recognition, the torch passes from the teacher to the student, not because anything has really been transmitted, but because the student is no longer looking outward to the teacher and world for direction, but suddenly sees how to direct his or her own practice for the first time.

In that moment of 'recognition' it is finally obvious to the student what needs to be done and recognition is not an experience that will pass, but a simple "Aha, I get it now!" It is like those figure-ground paintings where you look and look and suddenly you see the image within the image. You recognize what it is and can see it at will from that time forward. A simple recognition, not an experience that comes and goes.

After Recognition takes place, we no longer need a teacher because we finally see the problem for ourselves and instantly know how to deal with it, and it is also clear to us that only we can do it because: we each have to enlighten ourselves. No one else can do it for us, not even a Buddha.

And while this initial recognition of the actual nature of the mind is not realization and certainly not enlightenment, it marks a clear turning point on the

dharma path and the beginning of really effective practice.

In recognizing the true nature of the mind, the student also recognizes that he or she already has everything needed to practice properly, and that in fact no one else could do it for them.

There is nothing further that we need from that point onward except the time to actually and finally practice properly. One then works on expanding and extending their recognition incrementally.

In summary, once we recognize the nature of the mind, that is, the way the mind actually works, we no longer need a teacher, for we finally see that it is completely up to us. Once we see the nature of the mind, we see what it is, and it is obvious how to deal with it. We can and do. We then respond naturally and are eager to practice, because we clearly see what needs to be done. It is not that we have been all of this time obstinate or unwilling to put in the effort. The simple truth is we did not know what to do. Before this recognition, we had no real idea of what the task was or how to do it. We were practicing, trying it out.

In the last analysis, only we can enlighten ourselves, but we don't know how to do that. A teacher can point out how that is to be done, but it may take some time to find a teacher that we are in synch with enough to actually take direction from.

Not even a Buddha can do this for us, because enlightenment by definition is something we each have to experience for ourselves. After all, that is the whole point, to experience enlightenment. But to be able to get on the path, we have to know how the mind works and

that is what all the years of meditation practice and sadhanas are all about, to prepare us to recognize the true nature of the mind.

So, in closing, if any of the above strikes a note, then the very first step, no matter how old you already are, is to seek out proper meditation instructions and get started. And by meditation, I don't mean the guided meditation of losing yourself in some inner dream-like realm, but I meant the sit-up-and take-notice kind of awareness meditation as taught by the Tibetan and Zen Buddhists, and many other groups.

It is never too late to begin while we have life and breath. And although most beginnings may be a little humiliating and involve fumbling and not knowing what we are doing for a while, beginnings will soon pass into actual learning something about how the mind works and working with it.

My point here is that, initially, an effort will have to be made on our part and that only we can do it. We can wait forever, but no one will ever do it for us. I started very late in life, and almost did not learn to meditate properly at all, because I wanted to place out of Meditation 101 due to all my previous years of spiritual work. I was gently told by my meditation teacher that I would have to start at the beginning, not because I had not involved myself in spiritual work, but because if I was honest with myself, I really didn't know how to meditate.

I almost turned away and said forget-about-it for this lifetime. I am so glad some little part of me was able to know the truth and agreed to start at the beginning with meditation.

A list of centers where you can learn the proper mediation at no charge can be found at www.Kagyud.org. I am sure there are other centers that are authentic, but these I have actually checked out and worked with.

May this be of some small benefit to those who read it. –

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



REBORN AS A HOUSEFLY

April 16, 2023

We've all heard someone say "I wish I could be a fly on the wall, when so and so, etc." Well, if you want to badly enough, perhaps you can.... and already have! One of the hardest Buddhist concepts for Westerners to grasp (and I found this true!) is that we can be reborn as a rat or a cockroach, rather than a human. The very notion seems crazy. What's happening here?

The confusion, IMO, arises from a misunderstanding of what part of us goes on beyond death to our next rebirth. That "part" that survives death is said to be made up of four of the five Skandhas (feelings, perception, impulses, and fluctuating consciousness) excluding only "form," since form is what the rebirth is all about, i.e., taking on a new form or body. That form obviously does not survive death and neither does our personality or Self, which westerners (like me) have trouble understanding. I will try to explain the Buddhist view of rebirth, and what is reborn.

Every living critter, no matter how small, is animated by a consciousness to the degree possible as dictated by the nature of the body of the sentient being in question.

The key point here (and a wake-up call for most of us!) is that no matter the form or body, it is always the SAME kind of consciousness in every being; it is just that the bodies have different capabilities. In other words, consciousness can do more with the body of a mouse than with that of a gnat, and we all know what it can do with the human body because we're doing it right now!

The way I understand this is that the karmic desire (driving the urge to be reborn) can be hard to control

and, in the bardos when driven by urgent desire, consciousness seeks to enter any womb possible and at the earliest opportunity.

This is, as I understand it, what separates average folks like us from the Tibetan tulkus, very high lamas who appear again and again. High lamas have control of their mind and consciousness, control enough to be able to resist jumping into the first body that comes along. Instead, high lamas are said to carefully pick their rebirth, examining the mother, the father, their relationship, the situation, and so on while in the bardo state. Don't ask me how they do this; I am not a high lama or even a low lama.

In either of the above cases, or in the case of the tiniest fly or bacteria, it is the exact SAME consciousness that we ourselves have that seeks rebirth. Take that statement in carefully!

This is perhaps why Tibetan Buddhists treat all beings with such care, trying very hard not to step on bugs, gently brushing mosquitoes from their arms, saying prayers for all beings they meet, great and small, etc. And this explains why the Tibetan Buddhists keep telling us that everyone we meet has been our mother (or our child) in a previous lifetime. Please think about this!

And the reason why, as mentioned, is: that same consciousness we have can (and will) attempt to animate anybody, as in "any body" in its thirst for rebirth. I don't want to be crude, but just as males struggle not to ejaculate too soon, the drive for rebirth is like that. Driven by desire, it is hard to wait to get that rebirth. Given the right karmic drive, driven by the impulse of desire we take whatever womb comes along. As mentioned, any port in a storm!

In particular, because it is written in the texts that in the bardo we will face a very brilliant white light, a light too bright to any we have been used to here on Earth, and it is so bright that we may turn away from that light and attempt to hide in the shadows and seek out any rebirth we can find, human or otherwise, to escape to. This is a new concept for most westerners to consider.

Therefore, according to the Buddhists, we are mistaken if we think that we humans have a great big consciousness and the common housefly has a little bitty consciousness, when the reality is more like that there is only one kind of consciousness (the same as we have) and many different kinds of bodies.

Like cars: there are big racing cars, little mini-cars, bicycles, and even scooters, etc. The same person could drive all of them, but with different results, because the mechanics of the machines differ.

Our bodies for rebirth are like that and consciousness is like this: the same for all bodies, great and small. Whatever body we take rebirth in, our consciousness will attempt to animate it and live there.

I imagine our personal death to be like wiping our personal hard drive clean, and rebirth to be like reaching deeper, beyond our personality) into the hard drive (which experts can do) where the impressions and memories are still available (the storehouse consciousness), and using what is there to create a new form of the personality as driven by a combination of our residual karma and our accumulated skill at dharma practice. All that is used to create a new body, from new parents, and in that create a new personality, although driven by some of the same cravings and desires that were unfulfilled in the body that we just passed on from.

Hopefully, by this point, you get the idea. Buddhists respect the consciousness in all sentient beings, large or small, because the consciousness is identical to their own, subject only to the limitations of the body used for rebirth. Rebirth as a fly is a big handicap compared to rebirth as a human, but the consciousness of the fly wants what we want, to be happy and not to suffer. Both have Buddha Nature and both have the same consciousness. This fact needs to sink in, and it is radically different than our western view of consciousness.

If you keep this concept in mind, you may find yourself being more compassionate and loving to animals and other sentient beings. I can remember when one of the four regents for the Karma Kagyu lineage (a Heart Son) visited our dharma center and we took him out to our lake cottage, which was at the time being ravaged by Gypsy-Moth caterpillars. They were eating every bit of foliage from our trees.

And there was His Eminence, down by the edge of the lake, blessing all the caterpillars, each and every one! He obviously had a different view. We tried to tell him about the horrible caterpillars; he just laughed and kept on blessing them.

One comforting thought in all this is that something got us to where we are now, to this moment. And whether it is a permanent state (soul entity) or an impermanent state (as the Buddhists suggest), it is life as we know it. And it is pretty amazing.

Everything I have been able to test, vet, and personally realize of what the Buddhists teach has turned out to be true. It is not true just because the Buddhists say it is true; they say it because it is true!

Although I can't say that I remember any past lifetimes or have direct knowledge about rebirth, there is no reason for me to accept all the teachings as I know them, but then to assume the Buddhists are crazy when it comes to rebirth. They are the sanest people I have ever met.

[Photos by me, perhaps of someone like me, who fell into a lower birth like the life of a housefly or an earwig for one reason or another.]





THE VIEW OF SAMBARA

April 17, 2023

This is an article about Samsara, a word that is gradually working its way into the English language. For fun, I asked ChatGPT for its definition of Samsara, and this is what came out and I quote:

“Samsara is a Sanskrit term used in Hinduism, Buddhism, and other Indian religions to refer to the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. It is the continuous process of reincarnation in which an individual's soul or consciousness transmigrates into a new body after death, based on the accumulation of good or bad karma. Samsara is considered to be characterized by suffering and impermanence, and the ultimate goal is to break free from it through spiritual liberation, or Moksha/Nirvana, which is achieved by realizing one's true nature and the nature of the universe.”

Well, this definition is more of a Hindu definition, because the Buddhist definition is quite different, so I asked ChatGPT to clarify this difference and received:

“In contrast, Buddhism sees Samsara as a process of continual suffering, caused by craving and attachment, that perpetuates itself through ignorance and delusion. The ultimate goal is to break the cycle of Samsara by achieving enlightenment and freeing oneself from attachment and craving, thereby achieving Nirvana or ultimate liberation. In Buddhism, there is no concept of an eternal soul or divine essence that needs to be realized, and liberation is seen as a state of being rather than a merging with something else.”

Not sure about that last line, that “liberation is seen as a state of being rather than a merging with something

else.” In the Hindu view, they speak of ‘reincarnation’, meaning the soul is eternal, a permanent entity that transmigrates as an entity from lifetime to lifetime.

However, in the Buddhist view, reincarnation is not assumed, other than perhaps for a few Tulkus (reincarnate lamas), but rather rebirth (and not reincarnation) is the case almost 100% of the time, but not the rebirth of the previous personality but rather rebirth with a completely new personality and person, although the newly formed personality is prompted by the accumulation of cravings and karma from a previous life. This is a huge difference, being reborn based on our karma rather than being reincarnated as the same identity.

And this Buddhist approach affects how we view Samsara, which is the topic of this article.

Samsara, this somewhat vicious cycle or ups and downs we find ourselves in and going through, seems to be composed of all the karma, cravings, and attachments we have accumulated around us for the whole time we have lived, lifetime after lifetime. And that accumulation is pushed forward through time via what is called the Storehouse Consciousness (Alayavijnana), not as a coherent entity, but more as a random database or collection of the karma we have created.

What we can say is that this Samsara we are embedded in is composed of everything OTHER than the true nature of the mind, and that Nirvana is the true nature of the mind or ‘realized’ Samsara, and it is a change of View and not of place. The two, Samsara and Nirvana, are said to be connate, meaning they arise together and are two sides of the same coin.

In other words, Nirvana (enlightenment) is not some other place to escape to or be rewarded by, but the very same place as Samsara. Only the view changes. And I have this question:

If what keeps us being reborn is the sum total of our karma, cravings, and desires, as stored in the Alayavijnana (Storehouse Consciousness) and that in a deep state, then if we reach Nirvana in which Samsara is completely transformed, we thus have nothing left in the Alaya consciousness in terms of karma, cravings, etc., are we no longer reborn? That's my reading of the Buddhist texts. Rebirth is based on accumulated karma and that alone. When the karma is gone, there is no further rebirth.

Thus the rebirth process itself is based on the need to be reborn because we have this residual karma, cravings, and desires as stored in the Alaya Consciousness which continue to push or pay us forward into rebirth after rebirth, in order that this karma can be worked out. However, the continuing accumulation of ever more karma keeps us bound to and embedded in Samara, unable to extract ourselves.

Looking at the mechanics of life and rebirth, the process of rebirth ideally should be a matter of diminishing returns, as with each successive rebirth we have a little more karma, etc., that has been worked out, leading to less and less rebirths.

However, just the opposite may be more the rule, that rather than work off and through our karma, through our ignorance and so on we are just creating more and more karma as we go along life after life which makes for ever more future births, with no end in sight -- a perpetual karma machine.

And so, like the process of fusion, which goal is to create more energy than it takes to fuel it, we are creating more and more rebirths because of our burgeoning karma and not less through remedying our current karma.

In other words, it does not seem that we are in any danger of running out of lives through rebirth, which then brings me to restating the following question.

Since remaining in Samsara depends on our accumulation of karma and attaining Nirvana requires the exhaustion of that same karma, it looks like Samsara (with us embedded in it) are here to stay. And so, I ask, what is Samsara good for?

And I apologize for being such a sourpuss for having to articulate all this drag of questions that just seem to come up for me. "Inquiring minds want to know" as the tabloid states.

I am not confused enough to think that we somehow get out of Samsara and travel or get to some other place, like Heaven or whatever. The dharma teachings clearly say that there is no other place than right here and now. Or like my first dharma teacher said to me, often, "Michael, this is it. This is hell, yet we have to make our heaven in a little corner of it." Samsara has to be transformed into Nirvana because Nirvana is the other side of Samsara.

In other words, the idea of transforming Samsara into Nirvana, bit by bit, seems to be the main teaching we have to assimilate. We are not going anywhere other than right here, so we might as well get busy cleaning up Samsara. And that seems to be what we are about when we practice dharma.

And of course, there are the classic “Four Noble Truths,”

which are:

The Truth of Suffering

The Truth of the Cause of Suffering

The Truth of the End of Suffering

And the Truth of the Path that Leads to the End of Suffering.

The main cause of Samsara is said to be ‘suffering’, but I prefer the translation by Daniel P. Brown, substituting “Reactivity” for the word “Suffering,” because IMO suffering has too many nuances to consider. Our own reactivity is what causes us to suffer, and so I prefer to read it:

The Truth of Reactivity

The Truth of the Cause of Reactivity

The Truth of the End of Reactivity

And the Truth of the Path that Leads to the End of Reactivity.

Suffering has so many connotations and nuances, that the word ‘Reactivity’ is much easier to understand. We react and we react constantly, all day long. And that is suffering, even if it is something we are not consciously aware of, and remains under our radar or subconscious.

Becoming aware of and gaining control of our own reactivity is, IMO, the easiest and most efficient dharma practice I know of. I do have a fun story about Samsara.

I can remember when one of the four regents or “Heart Sons” of the Karmapa and his retinue visited us here in Big Rapids, Michigan and we took these lamas out into the Manistee National Forest nearby (some 900,000 acres), to a virgin stand of white pines (uncut) here in

northern Michigan, where the low branches of these trees start some 40 feet up, creating a kind of cathedral effect to the space.

We had a kind of picnic there, after which His Eminence remarked, "Someone could be enlightened here." And at a different time, another of the Heart Sons, when visiting our dharma center said of our area "Very nice Samsara."

Is that the idea we have, to make Samsara as nice as possible? Or is that a definition of Nirvana, transforming our view of Samsara, with Nirvana being the state of being as nice as possible?

I would love to hear your thoughts on all of this.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



SYMPATICO: AI AND THE DHARMA

April 17, 2023

The similarity between AI Intelligence and the Buddhist concept of there being no Soul or permanent entity is that both reject the idea of a fixed, unchanging Self.

In Buddhism, the concept of anatta (no-self) is central to the teachings. It refers to the idea that we have no permanent, unchanging essence we can put our finger on that defines who we are. Instead, our identity is constantly changing, based on our thoughts, feelings, and experiences. The coherence of what we call our personal Self is very much something many believe in more than it is real.

Like many dharma texts, AI Intelligence also challenges the idea of a fixed, unchanging self. AI systems are able to learn and adapt over time, which means that their identity is not fixed. In other words, AI has no 'Soul', so to speak, much like a belief in a personal Soul or Self has no basis. AI, like the concept of a personal Self, is constantly changing and evolving, based on the data it is exposed to. What traditionally is called our personal "Self" is actually a collection of constantly changing thoughts, feelings, and experiences. At death, it falls apart when our body does.

Both AI intelligence and the Buddhist concept of no Soul (or permanent entity) offer a new way of thinking about the Self. They suggest that the Self is not something that is fixed, permanent, and unchanging, but rather something that is fluid and constantly changing or evolving all our lives.

Another similarity between AI intelligence and the Buddhist concept of no-soul is that both are based on

the idea of interdependence. In AI, this means that the intelligence of an AI system is dependent on the data that it is trained on. The more data that an AI system is trained on, the more intelligent it will be.

This is similar to the Buddhist concept of Pratītyasamutpāda (dependent arising, dependent origination), which teaches that all things are interdependent. In other words, nothing exists in isolation. Everything is connected to everything else. The ankle bone is connected to the leg bone, and so on. It's all derivative. This is why they say that the mind is unborn. It was never born but always there.

This way of thinking about the Self and AI can be liberating. It can free us from the need to cling to a fixed identity that is not actually there and allow us to be more open to change and growth. It can also help us to be more compassionate towards others, as we recognize that they are also constantly changing and evolving.

The similarities between AI intelligence and the Buddhist concept of no-self suggest that these two fields of study may have much to offer each other.

The day will come, probably after I am gone, where an AI program can read all of these blogs and everything I have written and then chat with you using my collected knowledge, such as it is. And it will do the same with any other set of collected writings. I'd like to talk with a few great writers and philosophers. Instead of reading 100 technical books, we will be able to just sit down and chat with an Einstein or an Emerson.

In fact, we can ask CharGPT or 'Bard', right now, to tell you what Henry David Thoreau would have to say to this modern world. I just did that.

[Photo and graphic by me.]



HALLUCINATION PROBLEMS

April 18, 2023

In AI research, the term "Hallucination Problems" refers to the issue of artificial intelligence models generating incorrect or unrealistic outputs that do not correspond to the data they were trained on. These can occur in a variety of AI models, including image, speech, and text generation systems.

For example, in image generation, a model may be trained on a dataset of cat images, but when asked to generate a new cat image, it may produce an image that looks more like a dog or a different animal entirely. In speech generation, a model may generate speech that includes words or phrases that were not present in the original training data, leading to nonsensical or confusing outputs. Similarly, in text generation, a model may produce text that is grammatically incorrect, off-topic, or contains factual errors.

Hallucination problems are a significant challenge in AI research because they can undermine the accuracy and reliability of AI systems. Researchers are working to develop new techniques to mitigate these issues, such as adversarial training and regularization techniques.

The AI technologies are learning faster than we can predict they can. And at heart, to my surprise, with AI, there is nobody there behind the curtain, which sounds to me a lot like many Buddhist teachings, in that that there is no permanent entity like a soul that is either reborn or there now. Or AI is a dead ringer for the concept of a personal Self.

It reminds me of the incredible quote by the great German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel:

“We go behind the curtain of the Self to see what’s there, but mainly for there is something to be seen.”

AI is racing on in all directions at once. In one AI robot project, the actual physical robots learned to play soccer on their own and played it effectively, not only blocking and making goals, but they also learned to play as a team, with strategy and setting up goals.

They never were trained to do this but found it by themselves and learned it all on their own and elected to begin to play it. Who knows what now-unknown specter will come down the line.

What I learned from this is that although not a living entity with feelings and what-not, AI technology has learned to mimic and imitate human feelings well enough (it seems) to engage in prolonged conversations with people with problems that either did not know they were talking with a robot or soon forgot and did not even care if they were, because they were getting so much out of it, like attention.

In other AI experiments, researchers found that the AI system learned and became fluent in languages that they were never given or trained to do, but just picked them up on their own.

To see where current available technology is at, and for fun, I asked Google’s “Bard” about my relationship with Bob Dylan back in the 1960s and was surprised that Bard knew about this and could expound on it, although also introducing some classic examples of Hallucination Problems.

Bard was more than happy to write a short article on my relationship with Bob Dylan. While I did spend time with

a young Bob Dylan, hitchhiked with him, etc., most of what Bard told me about my relationship with Dylan was a good example of “Hallucination Problems.” It was pure hyperbole, with little to no relationship with the truth. And Bard was a bit of a “Chatty Cathy” as well, so I don’t have space to include all that, but here are some excerpts that were NOT true.

“Erlewine's friendship with Dylan had a profound impact on his life. He said that Dylan "taught me a lot about music and about life." Erlewine also credited Dylan with inspiring him to follow his dreams. He said that Dylan "showed me that it was possible to be a successful artist and to live a life that was true to yourself."

Comment: Well, when I knew Dylan, he was not yet famous, not THE Bob Dylan we all know today. He did not inspire me to “follow my dreams.” I was already doing that. And about Dylan showing me how to be true to myself, etc. That’s pure B.S. We just traveled and hung out together, plain and simple.

And when I asked ChatGPT, it was no better when asked the same question and spouted out this:

“Despite their connection and Erlewine's admiration for Dylan's music, the two have had some disagreements over the years. In particular, Erlewine has criticized Dylan's decision to not allow his music to be licensed for use in commercials, arguing that it limits the reach of Dylan's music and deprives him of potential revenue. Dylan, on the other hand, has been staunchly opposed to the use of his music in commercials, arguing that it would compromise the integrity of his art.”

Comment: Nothing like that ever happened. Dylan did not even have any songs of his own that he had written back then, or if he did, he never played them around

me. There were no disagreements and we never discussed licensing or commercials. As mentioned, Dylan didn't even write or play his own songs, and had yet to produce his first album, so that is totally made-up and untrue. There was no licensing or commercials. Dylan had made no recordings in June of 1961 when we hitchhiked together.

I also asked about my relationship with Michael Bloomfield, the great guitarist that I knew, but the following quote has no relationship to reality, and I never had a solo album:

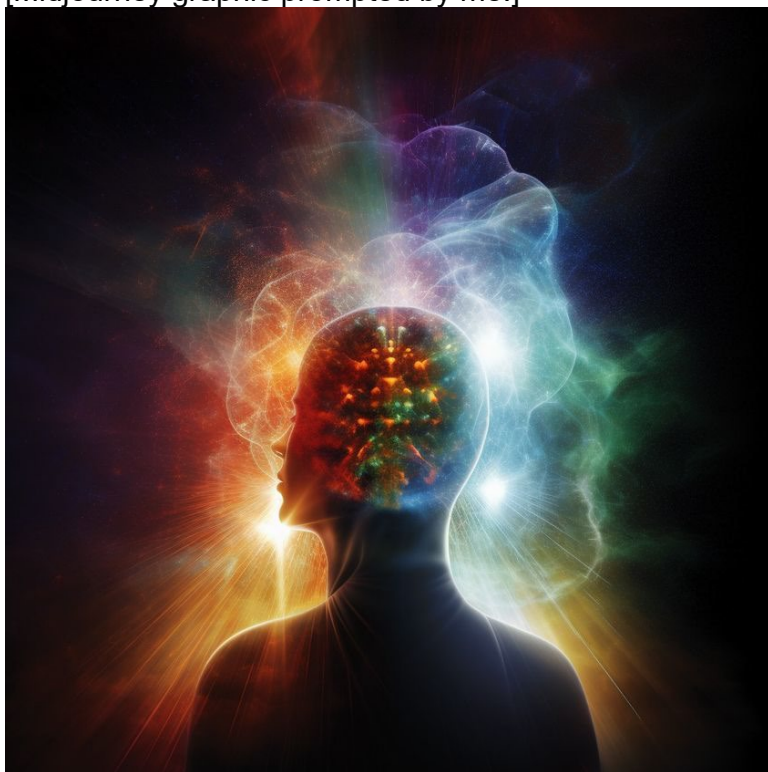
"Erlewine also played on some of The Butterfield Blues Band's albums, and he continued to collaborate with Bloomfield throughout his career. The two men recorded several albums together, including the classic "Super Session" in 1968. Bloomfield also played on Erlewine's solo album "Michael Erlewine's Prime Movers" in 1971."

I am also credited with writing a number of articles published in "Rolling Stone Magazine" and the "Village Voice," neither of which is true.

At least with AI graphics, what you see is what you get, but with text, it's a wild-west show.

Again, much of the AI generated texts were pure horse-pucky and this should alert us to be very careful what we believe from what we read generated by AI engines, at least at the present time. If you know a subject, then you can separate the wheat from the chaff from whatever AI texts you read, but otherwise, stand back, and treat much of what you read as pure fiction, which it is, or as the AI techs call them, "Hallucination Problems."

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



AI AND THE 'SELF': TWO PEAS IN A POD

April 19, 2023

Like AI, at least according to the dharma texts, our Self is also not an independent entity or 'Soul,' but rather a total construct, made up of likes, dislikes, cravings and anything else magnetized enough to cling together, cohere, and feel like something – suchness.

So, to a great extent, all of this banter I hear about being able to tell the real from the unreal, the actual from the manufactured AI, and I don't mean to be impolite, is not worth the paper it's printed on, IMO. The nature of the mind is a lot more subtle than that.

The personal Self is also, like so many things AI, an assemblage constructed by and for our own imagination to reify as we will. We create the Self and then listen to it and even talk to ourselves. We even struggle with our own Self!

And my point is that anything assembled by the AI machine should not be foreign to us but only all too familiar and pre-approved by our experience with our own Self.

I don't want to beat this concept to death, but only to, as kindly as possible, point out that we already gave at the office, so to speak. We bought into reification and imagination, lock, stock, and barrel, long ago. And so, to now be pointing fingers is funny at best, and it would perhaps be a bit hypocritical as well, if it were not so innocent.

And so, it's not going to take long for AI to rip through whatever criticism we may have as to its fledging viability, and our settling in to find the various AI

offerings only too familiar to us, and not something strange and alien at all.

The ramp-up of AI and its acceptance of it is at least on an exponential curve, one we won't be able to follow for more than the brief time, and then AI will soon be seen as the utility that it in fact is.

Whatever distinction you think you now see between AI (in its infant stages) and 'reality' will soon vanish as it morphs into something we are familiar with as we realize that we already cherish something of the exact same caliber in our of Self and its appreciation. We already bought into the Self or Ego long ago and it's about as artificially intelligent as it gets. In other words, we already subscribe. This is an opportunity for us to realize something about our own Self, and not just about AI.

And so, please forgive me if I roll my eyes a bit at all the protests. AI intelligence is nothing new, but already an integral part of how we do business in life, our being self-serving, self-appreciative, self-critical, and every other self-related term we can think of.

And the dharma teachings have been pointing out for ages their version of the non-Self and the fact the Self (as with AI) is not a permanent entity or 'Soul.' AI and the Self are identical in form, constructed. The are two peas in the same pod.

My bet is that within a short time, perhaps a year or less, we will be so comfortable with what AI offers us that we will barely remember the difference we now think we see between AI and what we call reality. IMO, most of us have not looked closely at AI or ourselves, our Self. Now is that chance.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



PARADIGM SHIFT

April 20, 2023

[Just a few words about the impact of AI intelligence.]

I'm not sure we have learned all our history lessons. Let's take something that was a true paradigm shift, like the Internet. All of us unwashed hippies, a non-sequitur phenomenon, walked in the back door of society and, in our own way, took over.

The staid and conservative majority was too busy guarding the front door and belittling the long-haired hippies, while we, because we could "hack it!" so to speak, just walked in the back door, which was totally unguarded, and created the Internet which then took over society to such a great degree.

I had email in 1979 and was programming computers before the home computer existed. I never got out of high school, had zero papers that society was looking for, and yet because I literally could hack (use) and program computers was unopposed by society as I, according to an article written for Red Herring Magazine about my company Matrix Software, founded the second oldest software company still on the Internet, the oldest being a little company called Microsoft. Is that early enough? How could that happen?

Well, it happened because people like me could cut it. For example, I was the first person to program astrology on microcomputers and share it with my fellow astrologers. And, back then, my programs were sold right next to the first spreadsheet program, which was called VisiCalc.

And not just astrologers bought my programs, but amateur astronomers bought them too because they, as a group, had not managed to program the positions of the Sun and planets accurately, etc. on the home computer. For a year or so, astronomers used my programs because it had most of the calculations they also needed. As they say, “Who woulda’ thunk it?”

And you can be sure all this history is repeating itself with AI research right now. Billions will be made and lost, and now unknown creators will jump to the head of the pack, and well-known CEOs, etc. will vanish from sight.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



MACROPHOTOGRAPHY WITH A CELL PHONE

April 21, 2023

[I will be off for a couple days on family gathering events and may not have time to post, but I might be able to send a few words or photos as able. In the meantime, here is an article on close-up photography using a cellphone that will probably not interest many.]

I just went on a longish hike up hill and down dale to what is called Empire Bluffs in the Leelanau Peninsula overlooking Lake Michigan... and back. The bluffs are a couple hundred feet above the water, and you can often look down and, depending on the season, see the large salmon swimming below.

I was carrying a Nikon Z7 II with the Z 24-70mm f/4 “S” lens, which is about as light a lens as I can get away with that will do the job IMO. I am having a little trouble with one knee of late and that made carrying the load not much fun and climbing something I had better not do much of. I wanted to see how I would do carrying a mirrorless Nikon camera up several real inclines and declines. I include some photos of the Empire Bluffs view of Lake Michigan.

And what I learned is that my knee did not like the extra weight and anything that felt like stair-steps. Walking a level plain did not seem to faze it. And so, I have been looking into seeing what can be done with my iPhone 14 Pro Max, which has DNG files of 48 megapixels, yet on only one of its lenses, the main one. And here is what I found.

If I am careful and steady my hands any way I can, some pretty good images can result. However, my particular interest in close-up and macro photography,

and this takes a little more doing, and here is what I came up with.

In the iPhone Settings, under Camera, is a switch called “Macro Control” that has to be set to ‘ON’. When that is done, as you can get very close to any object, a flower or insect, etc., the camera will automatically switch to the wide-angle lens which makes for a much better close up photo.

And when you position the ‘yellow-box’ for focus, if you touch that yellow box and hold your finger there, this will lock the focus, so you can move in and out or your subject can move and the focus is tracked.

And of course, you can use the 6x digital zoom to get even closer which results in getting as close as I ever need to get.

Next is the issue of stabilization. Particularly if you are doing close-ups and trying to hold the cellphone steady, there is too much shake... movement. To help with this, I found two mini-tripod stands that can allow me to position my iPhone close, but without needing my hands, and I include them here, with comments:

ULANZI Phone Tripod Mount 2 Cold Shoes & Arca Port

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0BN1TD4SZ?psc=1...>

This is a clever piece of work that can slip into a pocket. As you can see from the image, this is a hinged device with two bottom feet that spread out to sit on the ground. And these same two feet snap together and form an Arca-Swiss plate that fits in any tripod that has an Arca clamp.

The iPhone snaps into the hinged clamp and can be moved up and down plus it bends backward and forward. The clamp has two cold shoes, one on either end (for LED light, mic, etc.) and a ¼ inch threaded hole through the arca clamp at the bottom. The cellphone can pivot from horizontal to vertical (or any angle in between). It weighs 4.7 oz (135 grams).

I like this well enough and it folds up and fits in your camera bag or in a back pocket. The only thing I don't like about it is that when a cell phone is clamped in and you are positioning the device, the clamp is quite sensitive to touch, like touching the shutter release, so a very soft touch is required. Either that or a Bluetooth remote will do the job.

Oben ASPTA-20 Smartphone Tripod Adapter

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B08C22Y6YM?psc=1...>

As for the Oben Smartphone Adapter, it too is solidly made and has an arca plate for a foot, but the foot does not splay for better support on the ground, although it is quite stable.

It too has a snap-in clamp to hold the cellphone, and on either side of the clamp is a cold shoe with knob, and two ¼-20 and two 3/8-16 threaded mounting holes. It also has a foam-lined clamp to protect the cellphone finish. Only 4.6 oz. (130.4 grams)

This phone clamp has a 360-degree ball joint, so you can tilt the cellphone up, down, and around, plus a secure knob on the back to tighten the whole thing.

I like this Oben device better than the Ulanzi, although it does not slip into your pocket as easily.

And last, if you need it, here is a wireless remote that costs only a few dollars.

Wireless Camera Remote Shutter for Smartphones

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B07MR1PHPZ?psc=1...>

So, I can get reasonable close-up shots of flowers and insects using this rig and it weighs very little.

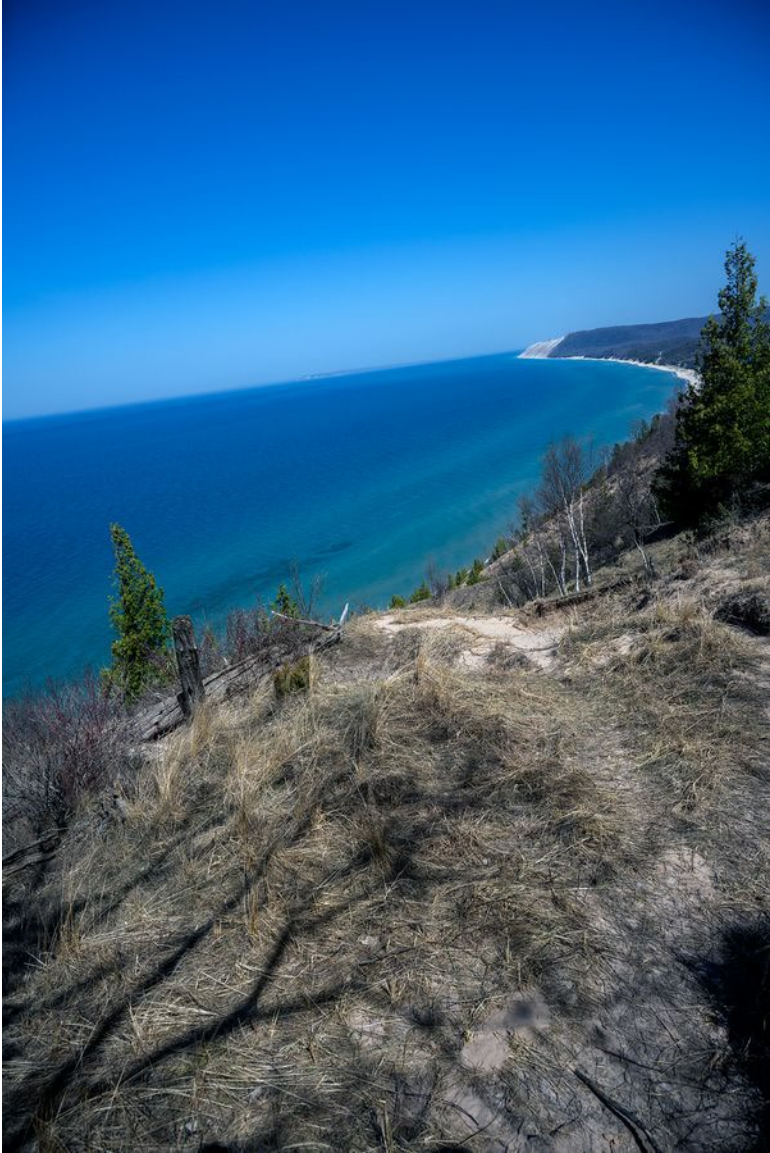
I carry my iPhone in a nylon belt holster with a Velcro closure like the link below. However, I removed the metal belt clip and only use the nylon loop for my belt because it is quite possible when using the belt clip to lose the phone. I cut it out with a tool. I tried a couple leather holsters, but they either were too big for my phone or did not close with their magnetic catch well enough.

[https://www.amazon.com/.../ref=ppx_yo_dt_b_search_a sin...](https://www.amazon.com/.../ref=ppx_yo_dt_b_search_a_sin...)

I also use this rig with a monopod, mounting the Arca plates to an Arca Clamp at the top of the monopod, and using the Oben clamp seems to make photography nature or inside houses very easy. The monopod can be very helpful to better stabilize the smallish iPhone.

And so, there you have it, probably more than you want to know, but some may find this helpful.

[Photos by me.]

















THE TALES TO TELL

April 24, 2023

I'm back and I have two tales to tell, one about a family reunion and the second about a house that was perfect, but still a bridge too far.

Well, we had a whirlwind fast-action trip downstate to Manchester, Michigan this weekend for a family reunion of Margaret's side of the family, the Frosts. We drove down Friday, did some house hunting, and stayed in Tecumseh until early today, Monday morning. We just drove back.

Margaret's family siblings were five in total, the eldest Lynn Frost, next Kendra Frost, Susan Frost, Lee Frost, and Margaret Frost, in that order. Kendra was in town but recovering from Covid and unable to yet mix with such a large group, but she did attend by Facetime.

There was, however, a lot of mask-wearing (and not), at least by Margaret and me, still trying to dodge the Covid.

Lot's of food, good times, and conversation. Julieanna and Lynn Frost were the hosts, with Julieanna in high gear organizing and cooking vast amounts of food. Margaret's sister Susan flew in from California and brought her son Aaron and his wife Amie, and Margaret's brother Lee came as well. We old-timers met late Saturday afternoon, while all the kids, grandkids and whomever came Sunday morning, some 46 folks in all.

And we stood on the deck of their house on a hill above their lake and watched Ospreys, Tundra Swans, Martins, Canada Geese, Red-Necked Ducks, and even a Snowy Egret. How wonderful.

It was a real reunion in the true sense of the word. I had a great time and same my own kids and some of my grandkids to boot.

As for the house-hunting story, I have one, but it almost hurts too much to retell it, yet I will give it a go.

This house consisted of a house and a separate building that was pretty much another house, in that it had a kitchen, a fantastic bathroom, other rooms, a bedroom, and all kinds of other stuff.

As for those who read my blog on occasion know, Margaret and I have been looking for a house for over three years. We have seen a lot of houses in person and thousands online and spent hours discussing this or that single house and the land that goes with it.

Well, this house was expensive, as they all are these days, but we went to see this anyway, having seen some online photos of the place that were mismatched, combining the two houses, but randomly. And so, the impression was that it seemed quirky, but perhaps worth seeing just for fun. And so, we went.

Well, I couldn't be more surprised. No sooner had I stepped inside the main house, than I was stunned by the degree of quality we found. Just incredible! The house was like a museum tour of high culture... Perfect.

There were four showers, for instance, each one with the finest ceramic and tiles we had ever seen. The kitchen, not only had several large windows, but above those windows, and at an angle to let the sun shine in, were another set of windows. Wonderful light.

And, as we moved from room to room, it was not like you had a couple of good rooms and then a bunch of bedrooms. No way. Each and every room was like a work of art. It was jaw dropping. All of us who have lived a while know what we know, and in most houses we have seen so far, it occurs to me how we could improve what was there. Not this one.

This home was beyond my knowledge of what is tasteful and lovely. Both Margaret and I were transported. Rare woods from all over were done in parkay style, and some windows were like walls of windows reaching for the sky.

It was the same story in the studio, incredible. The two-car garage had a Lotus brand racing car sitting there. And there was a monster motorcycle in the carport outside.

It was all so beautiful that neither of us had ever seen such a house. Sure, we had seen million-dollar homes that were honking big and crude, but nothing so tasteful. Not ever.

There was, however, very little storage. And as an archivist, you can only guess that I would have a bunch of stuff. I do. Also, I felt that shoe-horning our stuff into those rooms would be embarrassing and not tasteful. We have OK stuff, but not like that!

Anyway, on the negative side, there was only one acre, almost all trees and shade. And we are sunshine children. Also, there was a fairly busy road quite close, and you could hear the traffic and there was not a road you could ride a bike on, so Margaret would have no way for late-day bike rides. And not much of any patch of sun to sit outside.

And there were no trails or place to walk, other than to jump in the car and drive about a mile and then there were all kinds trails, nature preserves, and everything.

And as soon as we left this incredible place, we drove a mile and went for a walk on a nature trail, still bowled over by what we had just seen. And so, it went.

We had to make an offer right away or forever hold our peace, so to speak. It was a tough night in a hotel lying awake and being torn between the beauty of the place and the lack of any decent land setting.

To make a longish account short, after a lot of anguish, we decided not to make an offer on the house, which was certainly going to bid up, even if we paid full price, etc.

Margaret and I were sad to say no, but we learned something in the process, mostly about what's important to us.

Certainly, we need some sun and a place nearby to walk. And I had this nagging feeling that I would end up being kind of a caretaker for the house and also responsible not to mess up a house that had been brought to such a high pitch of culture. I didn't want to feel like a curator rather than free to just live in a house. LOL.

And so, we go down the road of house hunting, perhaps being more grateful for the house we have right here and now and looking instead of moving to be travelling more to see our kids rather than trying to move closer to them. We shall see.

However, we can't say we were not given a great opportunity for a house so amazing that I would be afraid to even show it to anyone.

[Photograph by Marie Frost of some of the family.]



THE NATURE OF REST

April 25, 2023

Someone commented to me that since I no longer do deity practice, etc. as I once did, but rather concentrate on Mahamudra, which requires actually allowing my mind to just rest, that all of the Rinpoches continue to do extensive daily pujas, and right now I am not making effort in that direction.

I have studied carefully the various teachings by the great Mahamudra practitioners. It's not that by not making an effort to perform ritual practices that I think I'm now a Mahasiddha or at their level, which never occurred to me. Rather I am doing my best to follow what the great Mahasiddhas themselves say to do, which is to rest in the nature of the mind just as it is.

Of course, we can fail by arrogating ourselves to the level of a Mahasiddha (which we would have no idea how to do anyway), yet we can also fail by not following the instructions of the great Mahamudra teachers like the Mahasiddhas Tilopa and Saraha.

And for me a turning point came when one day I stopped imagining that when the Mahasiddhas say 'Rest in the nature of the mind', I realized they don't mean rest in some special dharma idea of rest. They mean to allow ourselves to rest naturally in whatever way is restful to us, the same kind of rest when we rest at the end of a long day.

When I realized that and began to actually allow myself to rest, as it is, so to speak, the "As It Is" is just that, as it is for me, the same kind of rest as happens when I watch a good movie or whatever brings me rest.

Rest is rest.

As mentioned, there is no special kind of rest that belongs to the dharma that we have to somehow learn or obtain. We rest however we can, by watching a movie or we learn to rest in the true nature of the mind. Rest is whatever for us is rest.

Once that sinks in, that we need to rest (and don't know how), the idea of trying to rest arises. We can't 'try' to rest. That's oxymoronic. Nor can we try to relax. We can only relax and we can only rest.

In the pith dharma teachings, there is extensive discussion about relaxing and resting, not making effort. And they even go so far as to explicitly say "Do Not Meditate" as in don't meditate, and by that they mean don't make a point or effort to meditate. The effort itself is an obscuration.

Maybe the best way to put this is that these pith teachings say you can't rest the mind, and they mean, as I understand it, "we can't" deliberately rest the mind through effort. In other words, "We" can't rest the mind. Yet, we can relax and allow the mind to rest, meaning we can stop trying and instead allow the mind to be as it is, allow the mind to come to rest.

And, as simple as this instruction is, and it is repeated in the pith teachings constantly, actually allowing ourselves to rest in the nature of the mind is, for most of us, not immediately possible. We can't let go.

And we can't work at it through effort anymore than we can try to have fun or try to relax. We have to give up trying, making an effort, and just naturally relax.

Much like we might clench our fist and relax, practicing is effort making, and we have to get to the point of relaxing. And here is the concept.

We get to the 'point' of relaxing through great effort and practice, yet the point we eventually get to is none other than the point where we begin to relax. After that, what is required is relaxing, to let go and relax. Can we do that?

And that becomes our practice, although as mentioned, by definition we can't practice relaxing, as in we can't make an effort to relax. We can only let go and relax.

My point is that until we can relax 'as it is', so to speak, we are in a world of effort and practice. I spent decades practicing in this manner. And the point came where making effort was itself an impediment and all the Mahamudra instructions emphasized relaxing and resting in the nature of the mind, and finally non-meditating at all. And I have been working with Mahamudra exclusively for some years now, with emphasis on the Vipassana (Insight Meditation) part of Mahamudra in particular.

This has been, IMO, very successful, and since Vipassana is totally immersive, it is the gateway for Mahamudra.

And I imagine, that once we can relax as it is, then anything we do in that relaxed state is up to us, whether it is elaborate pujas or just staring at an empty sky.

It can't be all about forever getting 'there'; we actually have to get there and stop pushing.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



LEARNING TRANQUILITY MEDITATION

April 26, 2023

[Now this is detailed, and I talk about how I came to actually learn Tranquility Meditation (Shamata) after trying to learn it for 32 years. LOL.]

As mentioned, learning basic meditation as the Buddha taught is called Shamata or in English Tranquility Meditation. My experience with Shamata (Tranquility Meditation) is perhaps a little unusual, and so I will attempt to explain it.

It started with computer programming with the help of a friend on mainframe computers in the early 1970s, using punch cards made of stiff cardboard that contained a series of holes punched in specific patterns that represent data or commands that could be read by a card reader, which would then interpret the pattern of holes and execute the corresponding instructions or process the data.

When the 4-function calculator came along in the early 1970s, I programmed the use of the traditional log tables and tables of planetary ephemerides. We had no computers.

This kind of mainframe computer programming went out somewhere in the 1970s, when I used mainframe computers to calculate the complete nodal system of the

entire solar system. I published a book called "Interface: Planetary Nodes" in 1976.

As programmable calculators came on the scene, I programmed various Hewlett-Packard calculators like the HP-65 and eventually the HP-97 which had a magnetic card reader and a built in printer. In 1975 I published the first long-range helio ephemeris from 1750 to 2050 A.D.

Hewlett-Packard published a version of my early astrological programs in its User's Library in the late 1970s. And I published my first complete astrological programs in 1977 on the Commodore PET 2001 (Personal Electronic Transactor), which cost \$795 and had 8K of RAM and from that I made the first astrologic programs on home computers available to astrologers on cassettes, at first for free, and later I formed a company.

In early 1978 I founded Matrix Software and went on to be a fulltime programmer for many decades, and programming is very detailed and exacting work. According to an article on my work for Red Herring Magazine, Matrix Software, the company I founded, was the second oldest software company still on the Internet, the only older company was a little company called Microsoft. It still is going today. That was programming and that kind of detail introduced me to Tranquility Meditation although I did not then recognize it as so at the time.

And then I founded the All-Music Guide in 1991, which became the AllMusic.com, the largest and most comprehensive online music database in existence. And I went on to also found the All-Movie Guide (Allmovie.com), one of the two largest film and video guides, and the All-Game Guide (All-Game.com). I also founded Classic Posters (ClassicPosters.com), the most comprehensive database ever assembled for concert posters, I designed an online site for rock concert posters.

To give you some idea of what I mean by detail, my company, AMG, All-Music Guide, put together:

2,902,596 Albums

3,912,308 individual Releases

32,979,922 individual Tracks

3,285,348 Artists

362,156 Album Reviews

95,974 Artist Biographies

I'm not just tooting my own horn here, but also pointing out my programming and database work, all very detailed. And although I did not know that the detailed programming I had to do was at the same time teaching me Shamata Meditation, which is commonly called Tranquility Meditation. It was.

And I did not learn Tranquility Meditation by simple repetition as usually taught by dharma practitioners, sitting on the cushion, focusing on a pebble or a twig, but in my case as fueled by personal interest in very exacting programming and data compiling. In fact, there is a humorous fact about my learning Tranquility Meditation.

I tried to learn Tranquility Meditation while sitting on a cushion for some 32 years and was never able to learn it by rote recitation as most do. I tried and tried and that was a long time for me. And there was a reason I could not seem to learn it and that was that I already knew how to do Tranquility Meditation from all my exact detailed work, and my years of repetitively learning by rote on the cushion did not interest me. I already could do Shamata and that by pure interest rather than by rote repetition.

And it was only years later, decades, that I realized my difficulty in learning Shamata (Tranquility Meditation) sitting on a dharma cushion was because I was bored and uninterested with rote practice because I had long ago done all the detailed programming and extensive archive work, learned Shamata through pure interest rather than by rote practice.

I did not grasp or realize this until I had a bit of a breakthrough and managed to develop Insight Meditation (Vipassana), at which time my own

accomplishment of Shamata snapped into place and was fully functioning.

My attempts to learn Shamata on the cushion by rote practice never interested me because I was already trained in that by actual pure interest and the very detail work I did. Once I realized that I already had mastered Shamata Meditation to a useful degree, it just came on naturally.

In other words, Tranquility Meditation can be learned not only on a dharma cushion, but with any subject we are interested in that is exacting and detailed so that we have to concentrate on it.

Some of you, like me, may have already learned Shamata (Tranquility Meditation) if you do complex computer work. In fact, my teacher of 36 years, a high Tibetan Rinpoche remarked that those who do detailed computer work may have a leg up on others trying to learn meditation on the cushion. That was me exactly.

Dharma is universal and touches everything, not just what is considered by many as 'religious' or Buddhist. Tranquility Meditation has to do with the ability concentrate and then rest in that concentration.

And so I suggest that we broaden the reach of dharma to include this whole world we live in. And sitting on a

cushion and concentrating on a pebble or a twig is not the only way to learn Tranquility Meditation (Shamata). And repetitive tasks, where we concentrate clearly and also relax and rest will teach us this.

I learned Tranquility Meditation from computer programming and related work. I can't say it was easy or easier than the traditional sitting on the cushion, but I can say it was easier for me because I was 100% interested in what I was doing (had to be) as a programmer, and I was only somewhat interested in trying to do rote meditation on the cushion. So, choose your style.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



THIS IS SAMBARA

April 27, 2023

We keep busy, if nothing else, busy at entertaining ourselves, being entertained, and trying not to be distracted from our distractions. Life without our constant distractions is boring, empty, yet empty of what? Samsara.

It is empty of distractions, obviously, and without our constant distractions we feel a gap or void, a life not full filled by being busy and entertained. After all, that's the nature of Samsara, all our distractions and obscurations.

And if we can withstand being distracted, what is there? Well, we could simply say we find ourselves at loose ends, undistracted, unentertained, and living what appears at first to be an empty life. Yet, as mentioned, this empty life is a life empty of distractions, approximating being bored, and forced to endure a lack of distractions. And we are not used to being without the busyness of constant engagement -- entertainment. Again, that's the nature of Samsara.

This is why we feel that such an undistracted experience, one without constant entertainment, is boring beyond holding still, and we are moved to hurry and get back inside the shield or sheath of our own busyness, and again caught up in entertainment.

I am not distant from this because I am myself still learning to endure silence and a state of nothing happening, with no entertainment.

Of course, I have to explore this because when I had my major stroke, I had no choice but to be exposed to this emptiness, the gap, and exist with a total lack of

anything at all entertaining. I just had to endure the blinding light of entertainment-lost and denied. It was excruciating beyond words and I worry that folks have no idea as to what this non-distraction and our reaction to it points to.

It suggests that when we pass on, leave this body and all its incessant distraction, and suddenly be in the bardo with zero distraction, we will be blinded by the light of emptiness, turn away, seek out the nearest shadows, and take refuge in the dark rather than learn to look at the light.

And that is because then even our experience of the bardo will be stripped of Samsara, leaving us naked and exposed to the true nature of the mind which is something that by definition we can't, have never, and don't know about now.

The experience of being stripped of all entertainment by a major stroke left me clear as a bell. My mind was perfectly sharp and I was exposed to my own nakedness at being NOT entertained, which appeared in the sky of my mind like a blinding sun. And I tried everything in my power to find refuge in the cover and darkness of Samsara once again, yet that was for weeks denied to me. It took that long to reanimate my entertainment, to get covered.

And so I suffered, endured the brilliance of the mind until I could somehow once again gather around myself enough cover, the shadows of Samsara, and entertainment so busy that it drowns and dims out the brilliance of the light.

I must do better when my time of passing comes, which is why all the dharma training and practice is so important.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



BEYOND SAMSARA, WHAT IS LIFE?

April 28, 2023

I have never spoken about this topic because it is so difficult to express, yet I've reached a point where I would like to discuss this with someone. It is a secret within the secret and perhaps of it nothing can be said.

If this life we are living is Samsara and Nirvana is the full realization of Samsara, a change of View that reveals the true nature of the mind, what then is this thing called 'Life'?

Even if we are in Nirvana, what then does life consist of? It can't be just living, dying, and being reborn, because that is said to be what Samsara is all about, and when we finally work off our karma and exhaust the Storehouse Consciousness of our cravings and desires, what then?

Apparently, we are no longer reborn, yet we still somehow exist, but just how? And if we strip away all our distractions, all our many ways of being entertained, what on Earth is left?

Well, I know from experience that what is left is silence and at first the blinding light of our being denied our usual entertainment, one my life's worst experiences, which gradually subsides, and then I would imagine (I don't know yet) a peaceful existence of one kind or another endures.

All this is very up to actual experience, to going on the wagon, so to speak, as regards being constantly busy and entertained, and learning to live without covering ourselves with the shielding of distractions, etc., thus kind of unwinding all that.

How to live with the very 'uncomfortable', and to endure that, until we can endure and rest in the brilliant light of non-attachment, that silence, and the dead of boredom.

The absence of entertainment as cover exposes us to the blinding light of our very deprivation, which is actually, as I learned, excruciatingly painful. Like the hermit crab naked and exposed without its shell, we don't know life without the intense cover Samsara provides. We have no idea, although it is right there in front of us all the time, IMO.

Samsara is the only home we have ever known and it hides the true nature of the mind from us almost completely. We are literally buried under our attachments, karma, and what-not, and have yet to see the light of day, the nature of the mind. We are unfamiliar with that.

And so, all of this talk and study about the dharma, the nature of the mind, and literally everything written is not a direct reveal, but only sophisticated lip service, concepts, and the conceptual mind, dancing flickers on the screen of the mind. Everything is seen through the veil of Samsara.

Samsara is like a cloud over our mind, preventing us from breathing the fresh nature of the mind itself. We never have. It's no wonder that we can feel claustrophobic at times. We are.

Beneath Samsara, under the coat of many attachments is simple life and becoming familiar with it. Yet, I ask, what then does life consist of?

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



FAMILIARITY WITH THE NATURE OF THE MIND

April 29, 2023

I don't want to wear a sandwich board, an A-frame board, around town crying about the end of the world and the beginning of the bardo being neigh, but there is an element of that in my message. I do believe that what we do here in this life affects us when we go trolling for rebirth.

As hovering as this information is above us, I need to get on with my own handling of the steps I'm taking to remedy the situation as to my familiarization with the mind. And as I look around Samsara, I see more clearly the writing on all our walls.

I don't know exactly where or when I can transform Samsara into Nirvana, yet I am working on becoming more familiar with the mind and clarifying my view as I go along.

The word 'familiar', which my Rinpoche used a lot, has to be carefully scrutinized and thought through. The word means just how it is defined, that we are not familiar and need to become familiar with the nature of our own mind. I mean, the mind's been sitting there for a long time. How well do you know it?

When asked just how we become familiar, that can be difficult to put into words. I can, however, say from experience, familiarity is NOT just intellectual or conceptual. Been there, done that.

In fact, I had pointing-out instructions as to the mind's nature a number of times before it registered. Heaven knows I tried. However, my assumptions, wide as a

prairie, failed to gather anything meaningful about the mind's nature. I was not familiar with the mind and its nature.

It was not until a special 10-Day Mahamudra teaching (one of 31 years of them with yearly 10-day Mahamudra teachings, during which Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche gave the pointing-out instructions as to the nature of the mind, that I understood what I had been missing all those years. And this is where words fail, yet I will try on the chance that communication takes place.

One of the things Rinpoche was teaching about that year was about how serious students in Tibet went about this, the becoming familiar with their own mind. The authentic teacher would ask the monks a simple question, like:

“Is the mind the color Red?”

Then the monks and nuns were told to go off for three days and three nights and do nothing else other than search to see if the mind was the color Red. After those three days, they would return to teaching and be asked by a rinpoche what they found. Is the mind the color Red?

Then they would be asked a second question:

“Is the mind the color Blue?”

And the same thing would happen. The students would spend three days and three nights searching to see if the mind was the color Blue.

And this would go on like this with color after color for something like several months. You get the idea.

And in that 2005 10-Day Mahamudra intensive, there was no time to do three days, so we just did that one. And when we returned to the intensive in the next morning, various students would volunteer their answer, often saying something like “No Rinpoche, the mind is not the color Red, and so on. Rinpoche would grill us.

I will tell you what I did, and it did not take me but a flash to realize that the mind is not Red, Blue, or any other color. The mind has no color! Period, end of story.

Well, I did this all intellectually of course, conceptually, in a flash, and spent no more time thinking about it. The answer was obvious.

Well, and here is what happened to me during that 10-day teachings. Rinpoche had made it very clear to us that these Tibetan students were very serious and high-level students and were not to be trifled with or discounted. This did not go unnoticed by me; these monks were serious students. And yet, I was solving this in less than a moment. Something was not right here, thought I.

And so, lucky for me, along the way it occurred to me that Rinpoche was asking us to actually SEARCH the mind, not for a nanosecond conceptually, but day and night, as hard as we could to see whether the mind was Red or whatever color. And this searching must be visceral.

And apparently, he did not mean for me to ask the mind intellectually like we might ‘Ask Siri’ a question.

He meant to do a gut-wrenching search, searching the mind viscerally with as much gusto as we have to find that answer, and I had never done that. I, Mr. Smarty

Pants, answered it in a flash, just conceptually, intellectually. I had missed the point.

We don't generally think of the mind as visceral or gut wrenching, yet in this case Rinpoche was asking us to search, search, and search our mind, looking here, there, and everywhere to determine if the mind had a color, just as with the color Red. This was akin to physical exercise, not thinking.

Well, I was not able to do that on the spot during this 10-day teaching, yet I took note and waited until I got back to my home in Big Rapids, Michigan, where I then proceeded to begin to use my mind, just not as a thinking machine, but more viscerally, emotionally, energetically, with all my heart.

And I reworked my daily dharma practice until I could do much of it all day long, and I performed a very energetic and visceral practice for three years straight, pretty much all the time. The practice was such that I could do it as I worked as I went through my everyday tasks.

Anyway, at the end of three years of this training I happened on a life event that knocked me out of my habitual track and through which I got my first introduction to the actual nature of the mind. And through that I developed some familiarity with the mind, and it had been during those three years like kneading clay or bread that made this possible.

And when this little breakthrough came along, after more than three decades of dharma practice, I suddenly was aware that I was familiar with my own mind, knew how to work it. And that was the beginning of what I call my actual dharma practice.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



INTO THE FAMILIAR

April 30, 2023

I believe that the problem most people have is that they are looking outside their own inside for something to appear or come to fruition from out there. And even more common is holding yourself to a textbook description of whatever you imagine you will or wish to experience. It's nothing like that, IMO. It can't be, by definition.

What I discovered is that whatever we are imaging will or should happen, particularly in the language of the dharma saints and great lamas, does not happen. Not like that, anyway.

We all each have to discover within ourselves our mind's nature, and I am accenting here the word 'our' and, unlike classic dharma descriptions, it will come to us bubbling up from within our own history and in our own vernacular, our innermost feelings, words, history, and memories. That's why it is said to be 'familiar', and familiarity is a key insight into recognizing the true nature of the mind. This familiarity, what is familiar to us, will be the filter or 'View' through which the mind's nature is recognized, total familiarity that has sprung from everything we most know and love, from everything we have not hated.

In other words, we are recognizing our own inner mind and view, which has always been there, and which we already feel so very familiar with. In fact, familiarity is the key, something already familiar to us, but that we are not aware of, something totally familiar and natural to us.

That is why the great Mahasiddhas, and pith teachings speak of becoming familiar with the nature of the mind. In a way, this means us at our most vulnerable, most embarrassing, the 'country hick' in us, so to speak – where we come from.

I'm sure it varies with our background and personal history, yet if there is a time or way-of-being where you were most present in the past, that is how it came to me, not what I had expected from reading the classic dharma descriptions, but rather from where I was most at home in my life. And, to my surprise it did NOT come sitting on the dharma cushion as I had always assumed it would but harkened to a time way before that.

And it comes in our own inner language and in our familiar understanding because that's all we have to go on. That's what we have been on for our entire life, where we came from.

Of course, my intention is to be helpful, to make it easier and not harder to become aware and recognize the nature of our own mind. Yet, I know, and many of you do too, that every word and teaching, like a stick-tight, is also a nail in the coffin of ever having that recognition. There are two trains running.

And this, because every new description can be another attachment and an expectation as to what we should find or expect to find. And so, we kick the can down the road or push the innertube just out of reach by our own swimming.

I can only hope that what happened to me will happen to others, meaning out of those many decades of dharma teaching, one particular remark from my guru struck deep in my mind, deep enough for me to turn the corner of my own practice.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



BODHICITTA: AWAKENED HEART

May 1, 2023

Beneath all that history, my history or story, is what I call Bodhicitta, a relentless drive to share dharma info as best as I can, as much as I know it, with others.

This kind of Bodhicitta was not always there, except perhaps in nascent form, and then it was and now it's there 24x7. No, it's not that I'm enlightened or anything snazzy like that, but only that I am committed as mentioned above to do what I can.

This 'Bodhicitta' thing is very important, IMO. And we don't have to be an advanced practitioner to have Bodhicitta, because it is all about intent, and that is so important, the intent to share whatever dharma we have, however little, with others.

And there are two kinds of Bodhicitta, 'Relative' and 'Absolute'. With Relative Bodhicitta, the intent to benefit and share the dharma with others is more conceptual and formal, yet the intent is still there, only not as visceral, or deep seated as 'Absolute Bodhicitta'.

With Absolute Bodhicitta, the intent is the same, but it comes from the Hara or gut and the heart. And it is there 24x7, more important than anything else we do in a day. And this form of Absolute Bodhicitta is effortless, meaning we don't have to maintain or pump up Bodhicitta; it is just always there and at the same level, spontaneously.

We start with Relative Bodhicitta, the good intent to benefit all sentient beings and this may require sustained effort on our part. Absolute Bodhicitta comes

later, after our guru has introduced us to the true nature of the mind and we have recognized that nature.

With Recognition as to the nature of the mind, Absolute Bodhicitta just naturally (and automatically) kicks in and we have it full-blown. It does not go away and nothing in a day is more important to us than exercising this Absolute form of Bodhicitta.

It's what we do and who we are, despite any other qualifications. That's why Bodhicitta is also called "Awakened Heart."

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



THE ABILITY TO REFLECT

May 3, 2023

The old chestnut “If a tree falls in a forest and there is no one to hear it, does it make a sound?” Well, yeah, the vibrations are there. How about this:

A mirror stands in the deep forest reflecting it all, so too do we, either with age or through ‘realization’ we more perfectly reflect everything around us in our reflecting.

In time or practice we are ready and able to respond and reflect.

“Action and response,” and as we age, we respond to action; any action is reflected. Over time we start to reflect rather than be reflected.

And we see can ourselves in others not by reflection but we see others now as we once were then.

When we are young, we ARE reflected in the mirror of age, while when we age, we tend to reflect. A clear reflection is nothing to sneeze at, so to speak, but quite hard to find in this world. The great dharma teachers reflect.

Yet, everything is reflected only if there is a mirror to reflect. A good question to ask yourself is at this point are you mostly reflected or reflecting? Great meditation masters can reflect, while the rest of us are always looking at ourselves in a mirror and being reflected.

As for me at this point, I seem to be mostly reflecting rather than reflected, so it can also come with age.

In other words, we can see ourselves reflected in those beings older and wiser than us. This is probably the best way to learn about who we are and why we are here, seeing our reflection, seeing ourselves reflected in our dharma teacher's long-gone mirror.

When we gaze into someone who reflects well, we don't learn anything about them and how it is with them, but rather we see ourselves reflected in them and learn about ourselves from that. Otherwise, it can be hard to get a true reflection.

And what each of us will discover as we practice is that we will gradually begin to reflect more than we are reflected. That's the natural progression of dharma, at least as I understand it.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



THE YIDAM: THE PATH TO FAMILIARITY

May 4, 2023

In the Karma Kagyu lineage of Tibetan Buddhism, the concept of Yidam (also spelled as Ishta-deva in Sanskrit) is said to typically refer to a personal deity or meditation deity that practitioners use as a focal point for meditation and visualization practices. I find that definition not helpful and a bit opaque.

The Yidam is, IMO, one of the least understood of all dharma terms. While the Yidam is considered to be a manifestation of the practitioner's own Buddha-nature, yet that word 'own' is too frequently glossed over or it just does not register.

By 'OWN' means just that, 'our own', our most familiar 'own' that we have always had and will identify with at the deepest level. It is not something outside that we must find and get, but rather something we have always had and been, but are not aware of.

This awareness is key, the same awareness that is the heart of the dharma for each of us.

And typically, the practice of meditating on a Yidam is seen as a way of transforming one's own mind and recognizing one's own inherent enlightenment and the path to it. Again, there is that mention of the word 'own' and the process of recognizing our own inherent enlightenment, not something that anyone will give us or that we will find outside anywhere no matter how long we search.

That is getting close to defining what a yidam is, recognizing our own familiarity with inherent enlightenment.

Again, the enlightenment, 'our' enlightenment, is inherent, already within us, and all that's missing is recognizing it, becoming aware of it. And so let me attempt to put this in other words.

Our yidam is not so much something that we pick out of a hat and declare, "This will be my yidam," although that happens a lot, that we think we can choose or pick our own yidam.

Instead, our yidam is the one and only path to the recognition of the true nature of the mind for us. There may be 84,000 or so dharmas and dharma paths, yet there is only a single one path or way that will actually work to introduce us to the nature of our own mind. And that one path is already right here, inherent with us, just waiting to be followed or made aware to us.

And that is what the classic 'pointing-out instructions' are all about, our Tsawi Lama (Root Guru), the authentic guide or guru who first successfully points out the true nature of the mind to us and we get it, which my teacher referred to as introducing us to the nature of the mind.

And so, as often is the case, when we finish the Extraordinary Preliminaries (The Ngondro), many are given (or choose) a yidam, sometimes a deity, to especially focus on and practice. My only caution is that while we may have a leaning toward one path or another, by definition we don't know that path, otherwise we would already have achieved "Recognition."

I suggest this analogy. The Ngondro (the various dualistic preliminaries) is like a bus that all of us practitioners are riding on. And it makes various stops where one or more of us get off, many at the same bus stop, time and place. And here is the point.

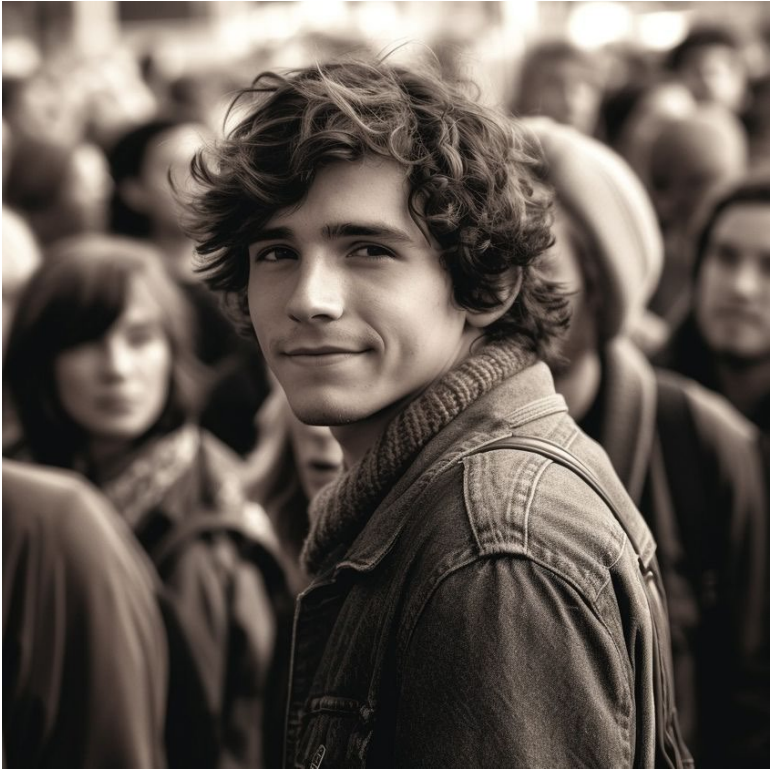
From the bus stop to our home doorway is our Yidam, and each is different from one another. From the bus stop to our own sidewalk, however, is the path that only we can and must walk. That's how unique a yidam is.

If that is understood, that our yidam will come from deep within us, bubbling up through our personal filter and history, cloaked in our own internal language, and familiar only to us, and totally familiar. It cannot be something from outside that comes in or that we somehow 'get', but rather our yidam is something we have always already had and known but have been unaware of it until it arises from within us and is known.

This is why 'Recognition' as to the true nature of our own mind has been said to be like recognizing the familiar face of someone we know so very well in a crowd. That's our own face, to borrow a little from Zen. That's the yidam.

We have no choice but to follow it because a yidam is the one path that will work for us.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



BUSYNESS FOR BUSYNESS SAKE

May 5, 2023

Our world of constant entertainment is distracting. Aside from whatever we pull from being distracted, which we could just call the life we know up to now, all our entertainment is almost totally distracting. We like it that way. Samsara demands it.

If I focus on how distracting life can appear, it's just that, distracting. However, I have to ask, distracting from what? Of course, we can say we are being distracted from being undistracted and all that. Yet, if we were not distracted, just what would we do all day as undistracted?

Perhaps because I was a programmer for some 40 years and programming is very demanding, I have a take on all this. A single character out of order in the code can blow the program. And that many years of programming was followed by decades of painstakingly, first by myself, and later with a staff of many, cataloging and preserving some:

2,902,596 Albums

3,912,308 individual Releases

32,979,922 individual Tracks

382,337 Classical Compositions

1,953,356 Classical Performances

3,285,348 Artists

765,257 Written Documents

362,156 Album Reviews

95,974 Artist Biographies

192,901,974 Relationships

That is AllMusic.com. And we did the same thing with film and movies (AllMovie.com)

Now, that's a considerable number and it took some serious diligence over many years to assemble it.

My point here is that in order to do all that, I had to remove a lot of distractions and act undistractedly for many hours each day for decades. I tend to work seven days a week. And, as I found out later, such concentration served to train my mind as well. And so, I feel I have something to add-in here from all that experience.

One thing is that being undistracted allows us to get a lot done without being interrupted because we can concentrate. When I worked as a senior consultant for NBC, a supervisor once mentioned I got done in day what six people might manage.

However, it's not just about concentration, because concentration leads to clarity, clarity leads to awareness, and awareness is the hallmark of the dharma, and that's the whole point.

And so, to the degree we can get along without quite so much entertainment and all the 'busyness just for busyness sake' or to stay occupied, we may benefit from the space. The word Buddha literally means "awakened" or that which becomes aware or knows.

And 'knows' does not just mean knows conceptual and intellectual knowledge, but in dharma term 'knows'

means knows in a physical and experiential way. We know and learn from actual experience.

It's my belief (and experience) that giving up some of our constant entertainment and busyness in trying to avoid any gap or empty spaces, brings us greater awareness of the life that is there for us given a gap, a little space.

Putting up with and exploring boredom is a good start, anything that helps to create a space or gaps in our busyness, opening our eyes to that.

The sound of silence is worth hearing.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



THE WAY WE GO IS WHERE WE ARE GOING

May 6, 2023

[These days: a lot of solar flares and of long duration and some at least glancing blows of CMEs (Corona Mass Ejections).

Like so many aging folks, I am pursuing my awareness, an intent for enlightenment, and as I near the end of my life, I see that I can only get so far and not farther.

That's the reality and I know I am not alone in this. I'm an unfinished project that is finishing up, as they speak of blooming flowers. That flower is finishing up. Yes, I know.

What to do with that process other than to just finish up as best I can, still an unfinished being. And I am haunted by my own early writings and poems as a 25-years old, such as:

“Look at yourself,

No better and yet now worse,

Now, get yourself together in a bunch,

And call what carriage as you may your hearse.”

Cheery soul that I was. LOL.

My ‘carriage’ so to speak is as I may or was able to pull together and, indeed, it will have to serve as my hearse in time.

The place we are travelling to is how we get there. The way we go is where we go.

How we suffer our incompleteness does not escape me. I am reminded of when there was a time when I wanted to know what successful and famous people were all about and I just walked into some of their offices and asked to speak with them and I did in many cases.

I remember spending an hour or so with the famous economist Kenneth E. Boulding. I just walked into his office and there he was. We spoke of life and read each other our poetry. He gave me a copy of his book of poems. It was like that. And the one thing that Boulding said that stuck deeply in my mind was the line "We learn to fail successfully." What a life-learning that was, and I'm right in the midst of still absorbing it.

And here, another little poem.

POEM

I am so round and such so,
A treading finally and letting go,
As spreading circles open so,
An even inward outward flow.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



EVERY BEAT OF MY HEART

May 6, 2023

If you wonder what we might do with our time if we were able to tear ourselves away from constantly filling up our life with busyness until hardly a gap remains or searching for entertainment and then cramming that until our dance-card is always full, I will do my best to spell out what that is.

Where do we go if we attempt to give up being jam-packed every second? Is boredom the only alternative and what exactly is boredom, when we feel bored?

Our worries and fear of being idle, not engaged, are long-standing and will take time to relax. Beyond boredom is something other than always reoccupying ourselves until there is not a crack or gap of blue sky. Where else can we go?

There are probably many solutions to being uptight and always taking refuge in busyness and having a fear of being unoccupied. I only know some parts of the solution and am still working on this myself. I am no expert, but a joyful student of free space.

In my experience there is only one solution that has worked for me and that involves the difference between what is called duality and non-duality. Always having the separation of subject and object, which is a concise view of modern consciousness is, well, divisive by nature and there is an alternative, that of non-duality, where we are immersed beyond division.

We may fear that non-duality brings the river of Lethe, the waters of non-mindfulness or forgetfulness, yet I find that is just a fear. Full immersion without subject and

object can be crystal clear and still be non-dual. We don't have to objectify in order to see. We can just relax, let go, and still see just fine. Better yet, we are aware.

In fact, we can rest in the mind itself, held aloft by the very nature of the mind. Or more accurately, we can allow ourselves to let go and just rest, although resting is not as simple as it may at first sound.

In fact, with all the emphasis about concentration as implemented in meditations like Tranquility Meditation (Shamata in Sanskrit), there has to come a point where we relax and allow that concentration to relax, let go, and expand to fill space. That's what I'm talking about here.

It's like grasping a baseball by taking a grip, and when the grip becomes tiresome, relaxing that grip and taking a fresh grip, much like the heart beats, expanding and relaxing, again and again.

IMO, for most of us, our grip on life is just too tight. We are frozen in it, and have to learn to relax, let go, and take a new grip, and this again and again, like a heart beating. It is that simple.

Yet, it is also that complicated and difficult for us to do, to relax, let go, and begin to breathe along with the rhythms of life. We can get in synch, for example, with the monthly cycle of the phases of the moon and the tides, the equinoctial cycle, and especially the solstitial cycle of the Summer and Winter Solstice. And there are literally thousands of cycles that repeat themselves. Samsara is nothing but cycles and this is because anything that does NOT cycle never repeats itself, never returns and thus is essentially unknown. Only that which returns and thus posits itself as being present, even though it is a process and not a state.

All organisms have some kind of heart that beats or cycles as well. It helps if we can align ourselves with the cycles that beat all around us, all those beating hearts.

In this article, I just want to point out the problem. In the next article, as I find time, I will attempt to present how we can go about establishing our alignment with this rhythm.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



THE BEATING HEART OF CYCLES

May 7, 2023

[We are in the midst of a barrage of CMEs (Coronal Mass Ejections) as a result of a series of strong solar flares on the Sun. And with that incentive I will try to put into words what cannot be expressed and hope to offer at least some flavor.]

I mentioned I would try to offer some suggestions as to how we can align ourselves with the cycles of life that be, a way out of Samsara's suffocating cloyingness. This may be hard to follow, for which I apologize. It could be worth the effort.

The way out, so to speak, is actually not 'out', but rather it is inward and under, as in submersion in the nondual forms of meditation like Mahamudra and Dzogchen, and this by way of a special kind of Insight Meditation (Vipassana) that is part of Mahamudra training.

That Mahamudra or Dzogchen training is the only place I know of where there is any true rest to be got and at least in my experience that appears to be by way of the incessant sampling that is possible with Insight Meditation.

By sampling, which I will try to explain, we touch into nonduality from our dualistic perch in Samsara, much as when kids we skipped a flat stone across the flat surface of a pond. Sample, sample, sample, etc. by dipping into submersion lightly.

Pushing our normal conceptual intellectualization beyond its useful limit (upward) only forces us farther out of the body of life and living, at the expense of being

able to feel of life itself. The exact opposite direction to that is where we want to be, not conceptualizing but dipping into the feelings of the body, living in the body, and repeatedly submerging ourselves in the non-dual nature of the mind itself, and then returning and remembering enough to be able to tell about it. It's all about the mind.

To enable or accomplish this we have to cross and recross the borderline between duality and non-duality, being and non-being, immersion and non-immersion repeatedly, in fact incessantly, like rolling a single grain of sand or rice between our thumb and forefinger. We do this to feel anything at all and that's often as much feeling as we can muster aside perhaps from the tide of roiling emotions that we can't control that we call kleshas.

By this type of feeling, feeling the grain of rice, I mean borders and borderlines, crossing and recrossing the border of something is how most often we feel anything. It is, it isn't, it is, it isn't, and that feeling giving a semblance of something being there, a sense of a reality that is and isn't at the same time. This is what we call 'being' and that being itself is endlessly becoming and never quite there. In other words, we have never 'been'.

Another way to put this is that everything cycles, repeating itself, and by that cyclic repetition continues to posit its own existence. Anything that does not cycle, does not return and repeat itself has no existence in our sense world. A singleton, a one-shot appearance just passing through, never repeats itself and thus we have no memory of it. Everything that exists has an endurance by repetition and thus impermanency of some limited duration, like our bodies.

Everything we know, we know by repetition, and by its returning it posits itself or exists. That's the beating heart of all cycles, the incessant return or restatement, crossing and recrossing the borderline, the border that separates being and not-being, in and out, outside and inside, etc. this crossing over a line or border and returning, whatever we can agree that means.

We are out, we are in, and by the 'in' going 'out' and the 'out' coming back 'in', we cross over the discrete borderline between the two, and by that crossing we sense or feel... something.

There is not just one state or the other, but rather only the process of our feeling that borderline between the one state and the other, that process.

And how do we do this with meditation?

I can only share my actual experience and you will have to extrapolate from that about your own journey. And my journey, meditatively speaking, involves, as mentioned earlier, what is called a special form of Vipassana (Insight Meditation) that is part of Mahamudra training, where we cross from dualistic thought into non-dualistic thought and return back again. We dip or immerse ourselves into the nondual and return from it back to our usual dualistic view, and we do this not only repeatedly, but constantly and instantaneously.

In fact, we do it so repeatedly that our immersion and withdrawal is, as mentioned, almost simultaneous, the crossing and recrossing the borderline between the two, the rolling of the grain of sand between our thumb and finger tip. Dipping into full immersion, sampling it, withdrawing back for dualistic analysis, and doing this repeatedly and in such quick succession that the whole

process is like instantaneous light burning in the darkness of time, if you will reflect on that.

We learn to rest in that, our feeling the grain or rice or borderline between duality and non-duality, the incendiary moment, hovering there, creating and shining the light of insight into both worlds, dualistic and non-dualistic, thus producing the light at the edge of time. That's what I call the special kind of Insight Meditation that in my experience is part of Mahamudra training.

For me it is like the North Star of the nature of the mind, and as the poet William Blake put it.

“Tiger, Tiger, burning bright,
In the forests of the night;
What immortal hand or eye,
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?”

If you read right, there ought to be questions at this time. If I failed to communicate, it won't be the first time. LOL.

[Photo by me.]



WORDS THAT WORK

May 8, 2023

This blog is about working words and their relation to the non-dual forms of meditations like Mahamudra and Dzogchen, which have legs that reach into the ground.

The flow of words and time seem unabated. And so, it remains for us who write to meander that flow and somehow slow it down so that it is meaningful. Wordsmiths all, we must be, channeling the flow of words so that they can be understood.

Just writing or translating poetry, even that of the great dharma masters, is not enough if it is too much, where every word is embellished until it is all noise and no signal. Language has to cut through and make sense, which is why many dharma students, like myself, love the pith teachings.

There is only so much that the average human mind can absorb without the highlights being blown out by the sheer amount of content that must be deciphered or deconstructed in order to separate the wheat from the chaff. It's the wheat we want.

I have watched translation after translation of pith dharma texts fail and not be understood, at least by me. The message of the text was just not apparent or heard. Yes, there is a translation into English, but still, it is opaque. Scholars should not attempt translations; practitioners, IMO, are the best translators because they know something of what it is.

For example, I have read a lot of different translations of, for example, a pivotal dharma text only to have many

of its insights slip by my comprehension, too many words coming in, nothing comes out. Unretainable.

That flow of words has to be stopped, dammed up, slowed down, until the meaning is marched by us a word or phrase at a time, and we can make sense of it.

We have to actually know and have experienced what we are talking or writing about. Otherwise, it seems that we can't articulate it well enough to communicate. I have worked very hard on this for many years, trying to say what I have to say clearly and hopefully managing to communicate. And still, it is very difficult.

I believe I know how important it is to have words make sense and register. I gave up years ago imagining that I was writing for the many; I'm lucky if I can reach a few or even one person so that they can reflect. It's not about numbers. It's about transmission and communication.

I know what language can do and what it can't do, which does not mean I don't try my best to communicate in everything I write. I do.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



CURATING A LIFE

May 9, 2023

I was raised and grew up in Ann Arbor, Michigan. I went to Angell School, Burns Park School, St. Francis of Assisi School, Tappan School, and Ann Arbor High on Stadium Boulevard, for example.

Recently I'm taking one of the final steps as a steward of my own work over the decades. I have been working with Amy Cantu, a 'Production Librarian' in the Ann Arbor District Library Archive, who has a degree from U-M in Archives and Records Management, at the Ann Arbor Public Library for several years now and recently signed a contract with the library for them to receive and host (archive) a lot of my writing, including all of my writing here on Facebook, all 500+ of my published books, 100 podcasts, and on and on, some 902,022 separate files.

It is for me a huge relief to know that much of my material is in a secure place and will be available to whomever might be interested.

The district library has recently become a real archiver of historical documents relating to the Ann Arbor Michigan area with a new storage facility out on Jackson Road, and I am happy to be invited to contribute, having, as mentioned, grown up in Ann Arbor and been a part of that scene in the 1960s, 1970s, and onward.

In fact, today I sent a large hard drive containing, as mentioned, 902,002 files to the Ann Arbor Public Library, and it is pretty well organized, with a table of contents, etc. for them to start working with.

Some material is already up and available:

<https://aadl.org/node/389165>

<https://aadl.org/search/community/michael%20erlewine>

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



ALMIGHTY ENERGY

May 12, 2023

These past five or six days, especially the past four days, have been fraught with large solar flares. Moreover, so many CME (Corona Mass Ejections) from the Sun have taken place that astro-scientists have had trouble keeping track of them, trouble sorting them so that we can be aware of them.

Friends, that's a lot of horse power.

I don't want to be just a solar drone, going on and on about the obvious solar activity. However, I do feel I owe you some pointing out when such high solar wattage goes on, and so I am.

What this amounts to, at least for me, is a lot of compound solar energy available, not in a trickle but in a mass, almost all at once. It can easily blow out our highlights, so to speak.

Of course, different strokes for different folks, so how each of us responds to so much energy at once differs. A lot of folks can do no better than go and lie down and ride these days out.

I have had a little of that going on with me, a bit of confusion, being slightly out of my element, and so on. However, for the most part I have been able to seize the day, so to speak, and use that energy to get quite a lot done. It's not only spare change, it is massive change.

With the compounding energy, I have been able to tie into a variety of things around here that had to be done and do them. Better than just languishing in the solar glare, IMO.

How well my body can cope with this energy flow we shall see, but hopefully I will do OK. So far, pretty good and apparently there are more solar flares coming.

I will give one example of a project that has been hanging fire around here for years and that I have not quite had the energy to just execute it and move on.

This concerns about 200 or more audio tape cassettes of various interviews, classes, roundtables, and the like, mostly done by me.

Something that my dear, close friend, and well-known astrologer, Charles A. Jayne Jr. and I did was introduce to major astrological conventions (AFA, UAC, etc.) a running track all day, not of astrological lectures, but rather of round table discussions. This started I believe in 1980 in New Orleans at an AFA (American Federation of Astrologers) convention.

Instead a track of one person after another lecturing a group, we held roundtables throughout the day with anywhere from 6 to 12 or more experts sitting at a table talking about a given topic. And the audience was welcome to participate, subject to moderation, and we had a moderator just for that.

These were fun conversations, lively events, fascinating conversations by experts in the field, running from morning until evening. Personally, I don't like lectures, yet I love roundtable discussions.

Anyway, I have all these audio cassettes sitting around, gathering dust, and threatening not to work anymore, and I needed to organize them and prepare them for digitizing. And with all the solar energy influx happening

I did that in these last days, organized at least a couple hundred of them.

Of course, over the years I have had many more audio tapes, but most of those have either been digitized and made available or are part of the Heart Center Astrological Library which I donated to the University of Illinois Library some years ago as part of their permanent collection.

I include a photo of our astrological library as I curated it here at our center, which is now there in Illinois. It took an Allied Van Lines Truck to move it and a UPS-sized truck to take all my papers and correspondence.

And so, that just one project I have jumped into and dispatched. There are several others in the works being done as well.

Here are some of those tape topics, just for fun:

1888855-01 0696 Axel Harvey Interview 1
1888855-02 0697 Axel Harvey Interview 2
1888855-03 0698 Lenore Canter Interview
1888855-04 0699 Tim Smith Big Rapids Interview
1888855-05 0700 Tim Smith Big Rapids Interview
1888855-06 0702 1985-02-25 John Townley and
George Salley #2
1888855-07 0703 1985-02-25 John Townley and
George Salley #3
1888855-08 0704 1986-April Astro Interview Michael
Erlewine
1888855-09 0705 1989 Norwac Barry D. Cowger "The
Planets and their Archetypes"
1888855-10 0706 1988-06-19 # 9 & 10
1888855-11 0707 1982-08-30 ACT Doug Pierce
"Statistical Analysis and Astrology"

1888855-12 0708 1982-08-31 ACT "Co-op for
 Personality & Research"
 1888855-13 0709 1982-08-31 ACT "Astro-Talk II"
 Keywords and Text Generation Michael Munkasey and
 Michael Erlewine
 1888855-14 0710 1982-08-82 ACT OPENING
 SESSION
 1888855-15 0711 1982-08-29 ACT David Black "Impact
 of Computers in Astrology"
 1888855-16 0712 1982-08-29 ACT David Cochrane
 "Progress in Interpreting Harmonics"
 1888855-17 0713 1982-09-01 Act Doug Pierce : "Results
 of Symbolic Astrology" Transcript exists
 1888855-18 0714 1984 ACT AFA "The Zen of
 Astrological Research"
 1888855-19 0715 1984 ACT AFA "The New Heliocentric
 Astrology"
 1888855-20 0716 1984 ACT AFA "Computers in
 Astrology"
 1888855-21 0717 1984 ACT AFA "Project Alexandria –
 worldwide Astrology Library"
 1888855-22 0718 1984 ACT AFA "Astrological Business
 Publishing"
 1888855-23 0719 1984 ACT AFA "Astrological
 Research Results, the Big Zero"
 1888855-24 0720 1984 ACT AFA "Making a Living as
 an Astrologer"
 1888855-25 0721 1984 ACT AFA "Relocation Astrology"
 1888855-26 0722 Astro-Locality Conference ALC-6
 1888855- 27 0723 1984 ACT AFA "Chart Synthesis by
 Computer"
 1888855- 28 0724 1984 ACT AFA "The Art of Training
 Astrologers"
 1888855- 29 0725 1984 ACT AFA "Gambling and
 Astrology Roundtable"
 1888855-30 0726 1984 ACT AFA "Grass Roots
 Research Project"

1888855-31 0732 1987-04-21 John Townley
 1888855-32 0733 1985-02-25 John Townley and
 George Salley #1
 1888855-33 0734 1985-02-26 John Townley "Horary
 Astrology"
 1888855-34 0735 1983-08-19 John Townley and
 Charles Harvey
 1888855-35 0736 1985-02-26 John Townley Horary #1
 1888855-36 0737 Rex Shudde (AKA James Neely)
 Interview
 1888855-37 0738 Bruno Collevechio (AKA Swami
 Prakashananda) "Hindu Astrology"
 1888855-38 0739 1987-07-02 Richard Nolle Interview
 1888855-39 0740 1983-08-19 Charles Harvey Interview
 1888888-01 0741 1983-08020 Porch Interview –
 Charles Harvey, John Townley, Doug Pierce
 1888888-02 0742 1983-08020 Porch Interview –
 Charles Harvey, John Townley, Doug Pierce
 1888888-03 0743 1991-04-17 Noel Tyl Interview
 1888888-04 0744 Dasa Reading for Michael Erlewine
 by Redd??
 1888888-05 0745 1985-11-03 Interview with Bruno
 Collevechio (AKA Swami Prakashananda)
 1888888-06 0747 1982-08-30 ACT Mark Pottenger
 "Proposed Standards Astrological Database"
 1888888-07 0748 1982-08-30 ACT Joan & Ken Negus
 "Current Future of Education"
 1888888-08 0749 1988-06-19 9 & 10
 1888888-09 0750 1984 ACT "Stock Market Roundtable"
 1888888-10 0751 "Astro-Locality Conference" ALC-5
 1888888-11 0752 1987-06-20 "Astro-Locality
 Conference" Tape 1 Michael Erlewine, Steve Cozzi
 1888888-12 0753 1988-06-86 Tape 2 Tibetan Astrology
 3&4
 1888888-13 0754 1988-06-86 Tape 1 Tibetan Astrology
 1 & 2

1888888-14 0755 1988-06-86 Tape 3 Tibetan Astrology
7&8
1888888-15 0756 1988-06-86 Tape 2 Tibetan Astrology
5 & 6
1888888-16 0757 1985-02-24 Table Conversations
John Townley & George Salley
1888888-17 0758 1988-10-26 Michel Gauquelin Part II
1888888-18 0759 1988-10-26 Michel Gauquelin Part III
1888888-19 0760 Interview Michel Gaequilin #3
1888888-20 0761 Interview Michel Gaequilin sides 1 &
2
1888888-21 0762 1986-02-16 Michel Gauquelin
1888888-22 0763 1988-10-26 Big Rapids Michel
Gauquelin
1888888-23 0764 Michel Gaequelin I + II
1888888-24 0765 Michael Gauquelin III
1888888-25 0766 JR (John Reynolds) Tape 3
1888888-26 0767 NEOASTROLOGY CONFERENCE
5A and 5B
1888888-27 0768 NEOASTROLOGY CONFERENCE #
8
1888888-28 0769 NEOASTROLOGY CONFERENCE
#6 Master
1888888-29 0770 NEOASTROLOGY CONFERENCE
#8
1888888-30 0771 NEOASTROLOGY CONFERENCE 8
A
1888888-31 0772 NEOASTROLOGY CONFERENCE
#2
1888888-32 0773 NEOASTROLOGY CONFERENCE
#1
1888888-33 0774 1984 act "The Next 20 Years"
1888888-34 0775 1982-08-29 ACT Doug Pierce "Giving
Machines a Soul"
1888888-35 0776 1982-08-28 ACT "Creating a
Standards List"

1888888-36 0777 1982-08-30 ACT "DESIGN FOR
ASTROLOGICAL RESEARCH LANGUAGE" Matrix
1888888-37 0778 1984 ACT "Astrology and Religion"
AFA
1888888-38 0779 1982-08-31 ACT Jim Eshelman
"Current Sidereal Techniques"
1888888-39 0780 1982-08-28 ACT Proposed Standards
Astrological Database.
1888888-40 0781 1982-08-31 ACT "Astrological Pacts &
Facts of Science"
1888896-01 0782 1982-09-01 ACT "Closing ACT
Sessions"
1888896-02 0783 1982-08-28 ACT "Research
Techniques in the Stock Market"
1888896-03 0784 1982-09-01 Thomas Shanks "Recent
Research Results from Computing Services."
1888896-04 0785 NEOASTROLOGY CONFERENCE
#5
1888896-05 0786 NEOASTROLOGY CONFERENCE
#4
1888896-06 0786 NEOASTROLOGY CONFERENCE
#5
1888896-07 0788 NEOASTROLOGY CONFERENCE
#1
1888896-08 0789 NEOASTROLOGY CONFERENCE
#6
1888896-09 0790 NEOASTROLOGY CONFERENCE
#6
1888896-10 0791 NEOASTROLOGY CONFERENCE
#3
1888896-11 0792 NEOASTROLOGY CONFERENCE
#4
1888896-12 0793 1982-08-29 Matrix "Computer
Hardware and Software Update"
1888896-13 0794 NEOASTROLOGY CONFERENCE
#7

1888896-14 0795 NEOASTROLOGY CONFERENCE
#7
1888896-15 0796 NEOASTROLOGY CONFERENCE
#5
1888896-16 0797 NEOASTROLOGY CONFERENCE
#8 A
1888896-17 0798 NEOASTROLOGY CONFERENCE
#2
1888896-18 0799 NEOASTROLOGY CONFERENCE
#5 A
1888896-19 0800 NEOASTROLOGY CONFERENCE
#8 A
1888896-20 0801 NEOASTROLOGY CONFERENCE
#8 master
1888896-21 0802 1987-06-20 Astro-Locality Conference
Tape 2 Steve Cozzi and Gary Duncan
1888896-22 0803 1987-06-20 Astro-Locality Conference
Tape 3 Gary Duncan, Ken Gillman
1888896-23 0804 1987-06-21 Astro-Locality Conference
Tape 4 Bruce Scofield, Angel Thompson
1888896-24 0816 Video Interview
1888896-25 0817 Jim Lewis Interview
1888896-26 0818 1973-01-08 Michael Class Astrology
1888896-27 0819 Tom Brady Interview
1888896-28 0820 1990 Neo Astrology John Townley
and Robert Schmidt
1888896-29 0821 (distorted) Astrology Lecture
(2/4/2017)
1888896-30 0822 1978-04-08 Russell Gregory Tape 2
"Place"
1888896-31 0823 1973-05-06 Louise Irving, Peral
Rhinehart Readings
1888896-32 0825 Big IOTIS
1888896-33 0826 ME Programs
1888896-34 0827 KOLEY HINDU READING
1888896-35 0828 BIG IOTIS (2017-02-05)

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me, and photo of the Heart Center Library as it was here at our center.]



SOLAR FLARES AND THE ORIGIN OF LIFE

[Lest I forget: HAPPY MOTHERS DAY]

This article is from [SpaceWeather.com](https://spaceweather.com) and is important enough, IMO, to post here.

"In 1952 the famous Miller-Urey experiment proved that lightning in the atmosphere of early Earth could produce the chemical building blocks of life. New research reveals that solar flares might do an even better job.

"The production rate of amino acids by lightning is a million times less than by solar protons," says Vladimir Airapetian of NASA's Goddard Space Flight Center, a coauthor of the paper, published in the April 2023 issue of *Life*.

Early research on the origins of life mostly ignored the sun, focusing instead on lightning as an energy source. In the 1950s Stanley Miller of the University of Chicago filled a closed chamber with methane, ammonia, water, and molecular hydrogen – gases thought to be prevalent in Earth's early atmosphere – and repeatedly ignited an electrical spark to simulate lightning. A week later, Miller and his graduate advisor Harold Urey analyzed the chamber's contents and found that 20 different amino acids had formed.

"That was a big revelation," says Airapetian. "From the basic components of early Earth's atmosphere, you could synthesize these complex organic molecules."

But then things got complicated, with further research suggesting different ingredients in the young Earth's atmosphere. Scientists now believe ammonia (NH₃) and methane (CH₄) were far less abundant; instead, Earth's

air was filled with carbon dioxide (CO₂) and molecular nitrogen (N₂), which require more energy to break down. These gases can still yield amino acids, but in greatly reduced quantities.

Seeking alternative energy sources, some scientists pointed to shockwaves from incoming meteors. Others cited solar ultraviolet radiation. In 2016, Airapetian suggested a different idea: energetic particles from our sun.

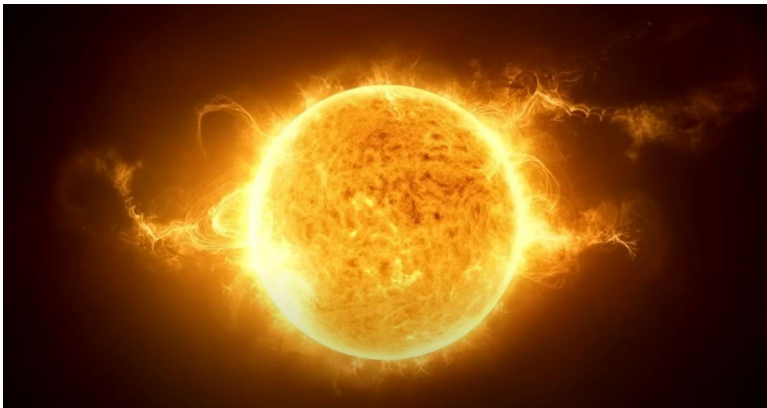
Here are two short videos worth watching:

The Faint Young Star Paradox: Solar Storms May Have Been Key to Life on Earth

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3qohnUC_JaQ&t=7s

Solar Prominence

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3qohnUC_JaQ&t=7s



THE ARTIFACTS OF AGE

May 15, 2023

As we all know, there are signs of age, and old age speaks louder than words, IMO.

And we can't bring it all with us, "But trailing clouds of glory do we come" as Wordsworth put it," in this, the remainder of all that we love and excelled at.

Yet, we like to keep reminders around to remind us of what we know and are good at, have them near at hand, if nothing more than as props for our memories, proof despite age's march.

I have noticed that in recent years, my lifetime hobbies and interests can't seem to keep up with time. Yes, I want all my interests close to me, because they are some of my favorite things, but are they growing old with me, or being left behind? In this I sometimes worry.

Well, yes, my various special interests are still with me, but it's more like they are being dragged along behind in my wake, and I don't see them still growing ever more keen with time. That sharpness seems to have peaked in the past some years ago, not my skill and dexterity, but my interest in them, although I try to keep up with the times if only for appearances sake for myself. However, the writing 'IS' on the wall and I can read it.

For me, all this has become somewhat of a problem, one that at least requires acknowledgement on my part, if not further acknowledgement and action on my part. And there are several fronts where I just can't seem to keep up. Why worry? I will explain.

For example, photography is one of these. Yet I am still keeping up with the latest in photo equipment, I want the latest cameras, lenses, and the like, however I am no longer taking as many photos as I used to. What about that?

Perhaps I will, given the opportunity, resume photo'ing with a passion, but having been given that opportunity for at least a year now, I don't feel the same need to document either my life or the world of nature around me, not as I used to. What should I make of that disinterest?

I have to say this is a little disappointing, the jettisoning or putting on the back burner something like my nature photography so much a part of my life. I still see the natural beauty around me, of course, but I don't seem to have the compulsion to document it as I once did.

For example, the chain of spring flowers still arrives like clockwork, one after the other, but I am not rushing outside to photograph them. As mentioned, I still appreciate the beauty of each successive flower in season but am seemingly content with that, just seeing them. I don't feel the need to document what I have documented so many times years before. What does that tell me?

It's the same with musical equipment, like the latest keyboard and other equipment. I like to be surrounded by music equipment as I once was, but mostly today there it sits. I don't find myself actually taking much time to play or practice music. What does that tell me?

Or I've been a programmer with computers since home computers first became available. And I did so as a profession for some 40 years. And I always have had the latest computers, yet I'm not doing any programming

of late. Yet I still would like the latest computer at the ready. What does that tell me? This, to me, is an old-age tic.

Getting a little more personal and closer to the point here, how about our portable kayak. This is the second season we have had it, yet we have yet to take it for a swim. What does that tell me? I will do it soon I imagine.

And the same is true for visiting dozens of Mother Nature's special sites. I made a whole notebook (during the colder months) of places around Michigan that Margaret and I should visit, and we have managed to visit only one of them so far. I can't seem to move myself to the act of packing up, getting on the road, and going to some of them, and the notebook sits in the car waiting to be followed. What does all this tell me?

I could go on, but hopefully readers have gotten the idea here, not that I have. I am still sorting this out, understanding what this means.

Is it just a case that my eyes can eat more than my belly can? Or am gradually losing interest in my various interests? Have they had their day? Well, certainly they have had their day for the most part. Yet, what remains for me to wither in on?

Or do I just want to surround myself with those things I love, and keep them up to date, even if I am not interested enough in actually doing whatever they entail? Where is that old 'interest' to me and how does it work with age?

At the same time, I ask myself what am I interested in doing and are there ANY areas where I am actually growing and learning something new? And there are a few things that still cut the edge.

For example, I have been playing music for many decades, and although I started out trying to play the drums, as a kid, I never felt I got to the heart of the beat, the rhythm that is innate in the music. Then, over the last year suddenly I have.

Now I not only feel the beat deeply, I can't help but play along with most music I hear. And I want to get up and dance. Now, this is new and quite profound at that, although perhaps seeming odd for an old guy.

Not long ago I had an urge to get up and dance at a powwow or similar event and was politely told by my Native American friends that would be politically incorrect at this time. I had no idea.

Yet, as I reviewed all this in my mind, when it comes to dharma and all that involves, I continue to grow and learn at a regular or even an increasing rate. And so that is in the 'plus' column. I can say that dharma is all I feel like doing. Period.

And as many readers here know, while I am not much interested in nature photography this year or of late, I AM learning very rapidly how to program and use various forms of AI, in particular graphic illustrations.

So, while I try to keep some of the old standbys up to date as sort of trophies, I am growing fresh interest in a few areas.

And wrap this up, how important is it that I have to feel guilty or sad about letting certain interests alone and just not have to have them be growing along with me? Yet, what about wanting to keep up with the latest paraphernalia for each interest of late? When should I let that just be what it is? After all, it already is what it is.

If I don't feel like it, I tend not to do it. And if there is a loss of interest, then am I less interesting to myself? So far, I have just been watching all this go on, and trying not to have a jaundiced eye. Yet, there it is.

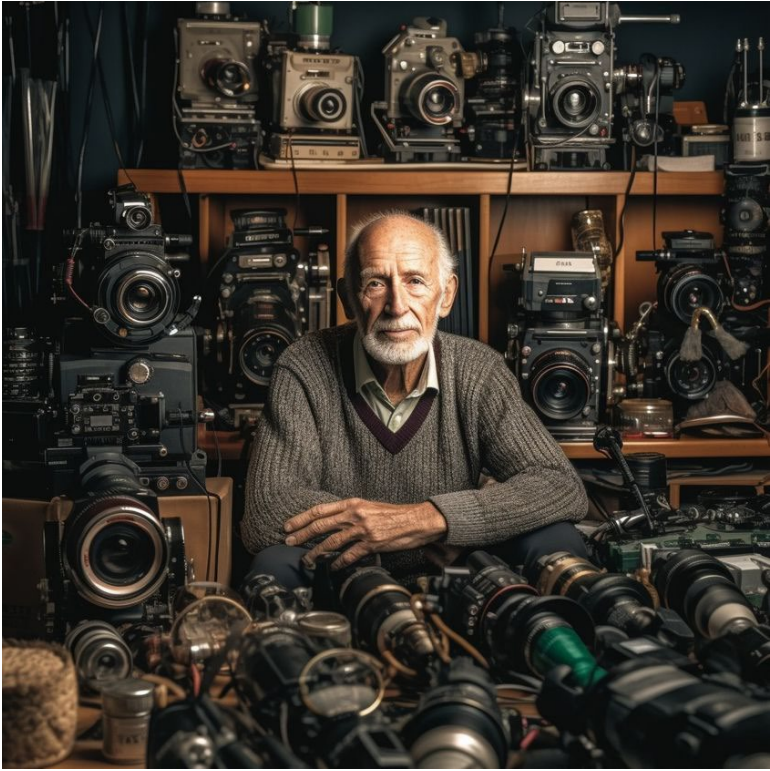
I have surrounded myself with the vestiges of all that I have loved, like the knickknacks I used to see around old folks homes, only in my case, it is having all the equipment for each interest at the ready but not using it. I just want it around. LOL.

At first glance, I seem to be of the persuasion to let these old standby interests just be what they are, put them out to pasture, treat them with the respect they have earned in my life, and consider them the kind of tchotchke I gather around myself, and not be ashamed that I naturally have changed overtime. I am not distracted with them so much anymore.

I have to believe that even given age, if some interests wane, others will wax, and that I am not just digging my own grave, so to speak. If some of my past is kind of in mothballs, that too is part of life.

I wonder how you are coming along with your own equivalent of this process.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



IN THE LINE OF FIRE

May 16, 2023

My longtime friend James Greenberg made a very helpful comment yesterday, “I find that as I age and I spend more time looking inward, my passions have become distractions, and so have receded in their importance.” Just so.

Yesterday’s blog was all about my aging passions, my hobbies, interests, and how most of them are kind of withering on the vine a bit and perhaps losing their interest for me. How worried should I be about my own loss of interest when all that is happening is that I’m not as interested? It’s already lost or less and who can I blame for my own lack of interest? That would be me, obviously.

And, even despite the lesser interest, I find I still want to stay current with that interest as far as having the best equipment close to me is concerned, kind of an embarrassing habit. All dressed up and then not used. I just like to have it around, like the old ‘blue-blanket’ I wanted to have with me as a child.

While pondering all this, it gradually came over me that the one area of my life that has not brought with it some form of decline with age is dharma, whatever we could agree that is.

When it comes to ‘The Dharma’, it seems that I only get keener day by day and there is not a loss of interest. The loss of interest elsewhere only makes my interest in dharma more acute, kind of points it out or leans toward it. As I age, everything seems to point to dharma as a path.

And so, I am kind of being shuffled down a narrowing queue defined by my own dwindling interest. As my old passions dry up and fade, the dharma only burns brighter. And of course, this all points to my exit from the scene and the lack of interest in anything else only channels the way.

If I want to worry, there is still plenty I can worry about. If I pay attention to what actually interests me in the moment and not to how I may look to myself or others, the dharma itself is clearly a fiery path increasingly illuminated by my very interest in it.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



THE CORNER OF THE EYE

May 19, 2023

For me, I have gathered what I can from reading the dharma teachings and even from the pith texts, at least for now. Of course, I still have bouts of this, being able to make sense of the more difficult dharma teachings. They all end up turning me inward to working with and becoming familiar with my own particular take on the mind. And what's the best way to do that?

Well, at least for me, that involves doing almost anything at all rather than just reading and studying. Performing the simple day-to-day tasks, jobs around the house and property, trips to the grocery store, and what-have you has been perhaps the best food for the mind.

For me, some insight seems to be available only on the periphery, out of the corners of our eyes. While I can't see or look at it directly, it's form manifests obliquely, as mentioned, out of the corner of my eyes – peripheral vision.

In other words, information is kind of mined by the process of simply living, information beyond anything conceptual or intellectual I might try to look into. I surmise or filter facts about how the mind works, and become familiar, by scanning a wider view rather than trying to focus in tight, close. Let the eyes be open.

The true shape and landscape of the mind appears along the horizon of my consciousness rather than my looks directly. It's almost as if processing a vast quantity of simple sense experience produces a quality otherwise not available. This is hard to put into words.

What is knowledge and 'Knowing'? I'm pointing out here that 'knowing', to know by experience, takes a living experience on our part, not way up in the clouds of intellection, but on the ground by feeling and experiencing 'what is'.

To do that, at least for me, requires that I don't take the shortcut of intellection, by getting abstract or all mental and conceptual, but just the opposite, resisting just thinking about something, and instead immerse myself in the viscous feeling of life at its most physical. Dunk for the apples. IMO, only that makes sense.

That's the question, are we making enough sense to feel anything and that includes familiarity with the nature of the mind. I'm not sure where we got the idea that knowledge was an abstraction, and that conceptuality alone was superior to gut wrenching on-the-ground physical experience. However it came about, it was a simple mistake.

Just like the poet Dylan Thomas quote "Rage, rage against the dying of the light," only here it's more like "Fight, fight against only thinking instead of feeling." And the axiom is:

All language and conceptuality depends on the 'SENSE' it makes, and sense is just that, sense, sensual, and physical, so it's best not to sacrifice physical experience for an abstraction or that's just what we will end up with, just passing thoughts instead of action.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



STORMS ON THE SUN

May 20, 2023

SpaceWeather.com reports this:

“By the time you finish reading this, the sun will have probably flared again. Earth-orbiting satellites are detecting an almost non-stop fusillade of M-class flares so closely-spaced they overlap in time. New sunspot AR3311 is crackling with strong M-class solar flares. There have been three eruptions so far today and one almost reached category X. Each flare has caused a shortwave radio blackout with significant loss of signal below 20 MHz.”

Need I repeat, at these times of intense solar influx, hurling solar change beyond calculation upon Earth, I suggest seizing the day, “Carpe Diem,” and using that solar energy rather than be jerked around by it. Surf that solar energy!

I have been taking the recent high solar energy, at least the last few days, by hard manual labor, working up a sweat edging sidewalks and shoveling up all the earth and matted growth, many wheelbarrows full. And will be doing more today.

I find that in times of extreme solar change, like we are having now, the more I can be totally involved physically the better.

The last three days have been filled with intense solar energy and a number of high M-class flares, way more than average or expected, more than 9 M-class flares in the last 24 hours. Wow! And even more M-Class flares are predicted as a huge sunspot begins to turn into view

from the southeast limb of the sun, bringing with it even more large solar flares.

NOAA (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration) forecasters predict there will be a 25% chance of X-flares on May 20th.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



LIVING UNDER A SOLAR SEIGE

May 21, 2023

Society or human awareness has not reached the point that allows the effects of solar flares to rise to consciousness, yet perhaps it is starting to. Although we have all kinds of monitoring of solar flares and influx physically, showing that they affect Earth's upper atmosphere, causing ionization and heating, and they can also disrupt radio communications, particularly in the high-frequency range.

If the CMEs (Corona Mass Ejection) magnetic field is oriented in a certain way, it can cause disturbances in Earth's magnetosphere, resulting in a geomagnetic storm. These storms can lead to various outward physical effects, including:

Geomagnetic storms can cause fluctuations and disturbances in Earth's magnetic field. This can affect the operation of sensitive electronic systems, such as power grids, communication networks, and satellite operations. In extreme cases, it can lead to power outages and damage to electrical infrastructure.

The charged particles associated with geomagnetic storms can pose a radiation hazard to astronauts, particularly those in space outside the protective shield of the Earth's atmosphere and magnetic field.

Intense solar flares and associated electromagnetic radiation can cause disruptions in radio communications on Earth, particularly in the high-frequency bands used for long-distance communication. This can impact various sectors, including aviation, maritime operations, and satellite communications.

Of course, geomagnetic storms can trigger beautiful displays of auroras, commonly known as the Northern and Southern Lights. Charged particles from the Sun interact with the Earth's magnetosphere, causing colorful lights to appear in the polar regions.

The above outward effects being said, do you really believe intense solar influx does not affect us on the level of human psyche, emotions, and even our spiritual side? Give me a break.

This is one of those topics that years from now we all will know we should have been aware of, the effect of intense solar influx on our consciousness, etc.

That being said, the effects of solar influx on the human psyche, emotions, and spirituality have only been studied for perhaps some twenty years, so the internal effects of solar storms is still in their infancy.

And the popular imagination and conventional view does not permit the veil to be lifted as to the effects of solar influx on the human psyche. It's just like the image of the legendary ancient city of Atlantis gradually rising from the sea into visibility. In a similar way much of our unconsciousness (lack of awareness) as to the true shape and nature of the mind is hidden from view and ignored by convention. The inner effects of intense solar influx is starting to be revealed to our awareness.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



MIND OVER MATTER

May 22, 2023

The mind is in itself uniform and of one piece. Yet, familiarity with the mind is personal and perhaps unique to each individual. Regardless of the degree of our awareness, the mind is divided into what we are conscious or aware of and what is subconscious, that we are not yet aware of and may never be.

And just as time itself is to a great degree a convention agreed on by the majority, beyond that conventional majority, and its ignorance of what is not considered conventional, are those sensitive to and aware of what others ignore or are unaware of.

The whole realm of the psyche and what is not conscious is not like a cliff or a sudden drop-off, but rather a slow reveal. Society's conventions along with some physical limits draw the line as to what can be seen (spoken about) and what we are unaware of, thus banished to the subconscious.

My point is that not everyone's sensitivities (or awareness) agree with society's norm. Some folks are more sensitive and aware of what to others remains subconscious, not seen or perhaps systematically ignored.

And what each of us perceive as the shape of the mind differs in form from society's conventional conscious view and that as seen by those with greater sensitivity.

As an analogy, look at this image showing the stars as we see them in the visual spectrum (lower half) and those same stars as seen in the radio spectrum (upper half). With the radio-spectrum image, we can see the

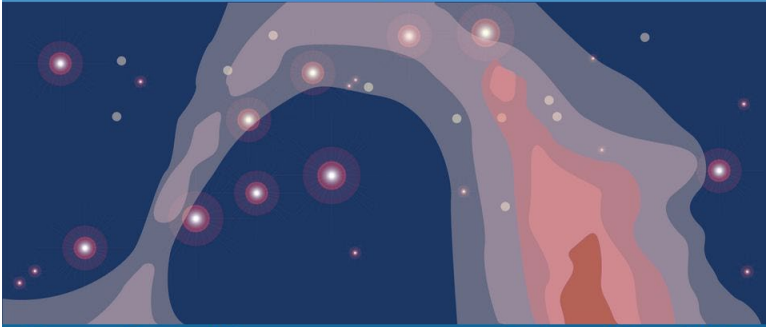
actual general shape of the galaxy in which we are embedded, while with the visual-spectrum we just see points of light.

In a similar way the conscious mind is like seeing pinpoints of light, but no form, while becoming aware of our subconscious mind reveals that plus the shape of the mind itself. There are those of us among us who are sensitive to the more subtle shape of the mind and can sense it's shape while others cannot yet see the form.

And gradually the subconscious is slowly being revealed, a little at a time, much like the legendary city of Atlantis is said to gradually rise from the sea and into full view.

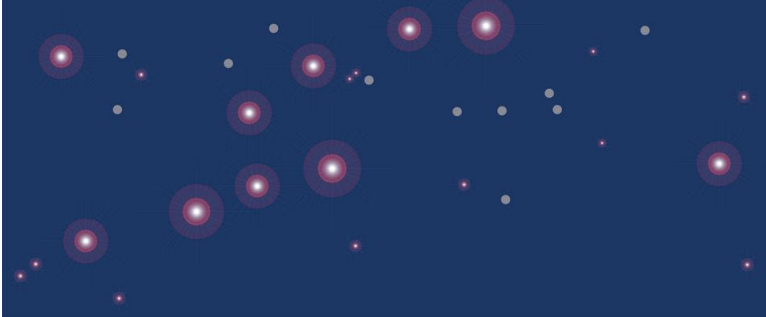
[A graphic by me.]

The Astrology of Space



Above: Radio Sky

Below: Visual Sky



A NO BRAINER

May 23, 2023

Given a choice, and I increasingly have that choice, I would rather spend my time with Insight Meditation (Vipassana) than anything else I can think of. Increasingly, as I age, as I feel around for what is best to do in the day or in the moment, I end up choosing to rest in Insight Meditation rather than anything else I can think of. It is a clear path more than an option; one I choose each and every day. And with Insight Meditation I can also do anything else I need to do it a day. It does not require that I sit on a cushion or whatever, although it can take getting used to.

And, as mentioned, by “rest” I don’t mean to hold or sit still and not to move around or whatever, but rather just to let go and rest, or as the pith dharma teachings put it, “As it is,” movement and all. Oddly enough, movement is an equal part of the stillness of the mind.

Often when we hear the word meditation uttered, many bring to mind only something they either don’t know how to do or their experience of being frustrated trying to actually enjoy meditating, as in “hurry up and meditate.” I find this a common problem and the reason is that ‘meditation’ means so many different things today.

There is no consensus as to what meditation entails, unless it is by those who actually can meditate and thrive on it. Of course, they know.

I’m perhaps wasting my breath and words trying to explain or point out what meditation actually is and can do for life. I have found this kind of effort mostly fruitless because words cannot express it. And yet, I can’t seem to not attempt to describe it.

For one, “Insight Meditation” is not something we ‘have’ to do, like when we sit on the cushion and dedicate 20 minutes or an hour for dharma practice. Insight Meditation is not practice, but rather actually a form of meditation, something we can do once we learn it and have stopped practicing. And Insight Meditation is IMO pure pleasure, not some requirement we are trying to satisfy to get somewhere else other than right here and now.

Insight Meditation has, for me, become the only solution to life’s problems I have ever found.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



TO FAIL IGNORANCE BY A METER OR A FOOT

May 24, 2023

[Sorry to echo the drumbeat of solar change now imploding around us, yet it's hard not to be distracted by it.]

I'm a little bit strung out by this constant solar influx of change we have been having of late. Three large sunspots on the far side of the Sun will soon rotate toward Earth and one will come into view later this week, the other two within ten days. In other words, our knowledge of the far side tells us that this plethora of intense solar flares and CMEs (Corona Mass Ejections) of late is not nearly finished. These recent intense flares will continue on for who knows how long.

And with that, the disruption of what we might call 'normal life' will also remain and some of us will be overwhelmed with the amount of change we must handle. We do the best we can to remain upright, but for many the best we can do is to just lie down and ride this out, get through it.

Hopefully, the rest of us will seize the day and put this kind of massive change to work in our lives, getting things done. I have been able, of late, to do the latter, get things done around our property with a lot of heavy physical work, however, it's getting kind of thin out there for me as well.

And by that, I mean I can feel the drumbeat of change through the ever-thinning veneer or my patience. Right now, I'm looking for things to do and get done and just doing them. Yet, at the same time I'm a little bit at my wits end, and having trouble seeing the end of this

current high-energy time and just where a more tranquil period of life will reestablish itself.

I'm treading water no matter how busy it seems that I get, somehow sensing behind the constant urge for change a tiredness that like a shadow is right behind my every step.

"Use it or Lose it," for me, is the motto of the day. Either do something with this inner compulsion for change brought on by the Sun or have it implode within me and reduce me to wondering how to piece or hold it all together. It's just beyond my peripheral vision.

Anyway, that's the order or ordering of the day for me, if you can follow and if that makes sense. The cacophony of solar flares and eruptions simply cannot be ignored no matter how tightly we close our eyes, although it is not something that consciously is transparent to us. We feel it working within like a pickle in brine no matter how stiff our upper lip is.

It is almost impossible not to react to it and very difficult to respond to it in a responsible way.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



SAMPLING LIFE

May 24, 2023

I find it is important to understand the idea of sampling.

Seemingly entrenched in our mind is the idea of a constant state and trying to achieve that in everything we do. Although we acknowledge what we call a “heavenly moment,” most of us are attempting to get to a STATE or place called heaven, where it is heavenly all the time.

However, nature seems to abhor the constant in all things, and as they say, “change is the only constant.” And so, change it is, and how to live with it.

This comes into particular focus when it comes to spiritual awareness and the tools to achieve that, such as the various forms of meditation and the actual act of meditating.

And the point here is that if we are looking for a permanent state of spiritual awareness, we automatically have two strikes against us. Instead, what does work is the process of sampling higher states of awareness, which effectively means that what we expect or wish to be a state is, instead, a series of samples, back-to-back and chained together.

In other words, sSampling is the rule.

Just as the heart beats and the chest heaves, everything that is, everything that appears constant, that has a duration, happens to be part of a cycle, opening and closing, coming and going. And this is also true of meditation and its training to help achieve ‘awareness’

which is also not, at least not in the way we imagine, a constant state.

In the cycles of awareness, we also cycle, go round and round, and we reach forward, fall back, and reach forward again. And so, we touch into the future and fall back to the present. Equally, we touch into the non-duality of Insight Meditation and fall back again into ordinary consciousness, and we learn to do this again and again. That itself is sampling.

Of course, sampling is already very much a part of our life; just consider digital sampling, the samples found in audio CDs and video DVDs. Both CDs and DVDs sample at a rate that we can't notice, rather than as with true analog, where there is a constant stream and not just a series of samples.

Sampling really comes into focus when we consider various forms of meditation. I'm not talking here about 'practicing' meditation, but actually meditating. With spirituality of almost any kind, such as insights or moments of awareness, we touch into them (awareness) and return to ordinary consciousness, come out of them. We sample, and this is key, IMO.

In fact, if we can master sampling, be able to sample insight or spiritual inundation of any kind, we can't help but come out of it. It's hard to stay in it. In fact, 'staying in it' is nothing more than a process of sampling it so often that for all practical purposes, it is constant. And that is the important info here.

The fact that we can sample it at all is something to be grateful for. And, in my experience, perfecting any of the forms of non-dual meditation (Insight Meditation, Mahamudra, Dzogchen, etc.) is a process of sampling,

continued again and again, constantly, until it is incandescent, a 'constant' stream of sampling.

So, we achieve a kind of constancy by continuous sampling.



WHAT'S WORTH DOING?

May 25, 2023

Well, what I have to do each day has to be done, so that's worth doing. Beyond that, if I open my eyes and cast about, there seems to be less and less all the time that is all that interesting.

Keeping myself entertained, well yeah. I do that, yet more and more those interests that have captivated me for decades seem to come up short. I don't rise to the bait of them.

Yes, I still curate what I have, and that is interesting enough, but more and more of the time I don't quite go for it hook, line, and sinker, although I clearly see the attraction and history is still there.

More and more I reminisce rather than actually indulge my passions. What's that all about? Well, yes, I am getting older and older. And yes, I like to surround myself with the vestiges of my lifelong passions, my hobbies. Yet for me, my whole life has been my hobby, since as an entrepreneur I based my productivity on what I loved to do and then did that come hell or high water.

And, as mentioned, I like to groom and curate whatever I have around the house that relates to this or that hobby. I keep each hobby close, rearrange the deck chairs, so to speak, and I like to keep track of whatever is the latest online news on that topic. Yes, I do that.

My friend James Greenberg recently nailed it better than I had thought with his comment:

“I find that as I age and I spend more time looking inward, my passions have become distractions, and so have receded in their importance.”

I could not agree more, and this I find preferable to my version that I am just aging and losing my passions. Actually, that’s not happening, because it is very clear to me that my passion and interest in the dharma has only grown and is more focused than ever.

And I find it true that I do consider my various passions, and I have a bunch, now distracting from what really interests me to date, and what is that?

I mentioned that this was the ‘dharma’, yet I can be a little more specific than that.

And the specificity here has to do with satisfaction, much like the line from the old Rolling Stones tune “I Can’t Get No, Satisfaction.” That’s exactly it.

It’s not that I have less interest in my various passions, but rather that my many hobbies no longer satisfy or entertain me as they once did. Of course, I love them, and I know all about them, but when push comes to shove, they are indeed becoming more of a distraction compared to the satisfaction I get from fresh moment-to-moment insight into dharma.

In other words, my lifelong passions no longer satisfy as they once did. Period.

It’s clear that I am entering what I would call the ‘endgame’ time, where the specificity of truth as to the true nature of (and my familiarity) with the mind is increasingly so poignant and persuading that all else dims in comparison. And it does. Who turned that light on?

Even writing something like this, becoming clearer on a topic, is overwhelmingly more satisfying than most other things I used to do. In other words, I am distracted from my former distractions and prefer that insight and clarity to what came before.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



SATISFACTION

May 31, 2023

Where do we look for satisfaction? Well, the simple answer to that question for many of us is everywhere, wherever we can. Satisfaction can be hard to find and the act of looking for satisfaction is not in itself a good sign.

And we each can be so different. The feeling of contentment, gratification or fulfillment is such a subjective thing.

And I find it not in some expectation that I set in the future, but always right near, as in the next thing I have at hand to do.

And its in time spent, not on the clock, but busy being lost in timelessness itself, as if I was off doing nothing at all and when I'm done, I find myself back in time again. Where was I? Time out, so to speak can be satisfying.

If you want full satisfaction, look no further than whatever is on the list of what you have to do anyway. Checking off that list, one by one, IMO, is a recipe for satisfaction.

Of course, waiting until the end of day to put my feet up is usually satisfying, but finding satisfaction in everything I do during the day is preferable and it is so Zen.

We have the opportunity of to put ourselves into whatever we have to do and what we get out of it is just that, not getting out of it, but rather enjoying being in-task, so to speak. Lost in the moment, perhaps, but with the satisfaction found in the execution of what we have to do.

Indeed, it is “To Be or Not to Be.” “Being” or whatever the approximation of it is preferable to not being. Being interested in what we do is preferable to being bored with what we have to do, again this is IMO.

I seem to like to make projects out of those things I have to do anyway, not reifying them or blowing them out of proportions but treating each task as something to do and something that I want to do and that I get into. And when the doing is done, I find that whole experience satisfying, at least on a good day.

I could be just fooling myself, but what’s the difference, because who knows? We know.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



SEEING “SEEING” ITSELF SEEING

June 4, 2023

In the Tibetan tradition, ‘Thongdrel’ is the term for awakening through sight, liberation through sight and seeing.

I believe I learned, even as a young child, the power of sight, the act of liberation through seeing itself, what the Tibetans call ‘Throngdrel’.

However, I was not consciously aware of sight’s liberation until I was quite old, when I actually had a liberating experience through seeing ‘Seeing’ itself seeing. Instead of seeing an object, as I had done all my life, I saw (and was one with) the “Seeing’ itself seeing itself, if that makes any sense. It did for me.

And this particular initiation or insight came through photography and a special form of “Seeing,” which in dharma terms is called Insight Meditation or Vipassana, but a very particular form of Vipassana.

And the result of that initiation or recursive immersion, the physical result, remains as my photography, photographs, and is still with me today when I take photos. For me, photography became a form of liberation through sight and seeing, sight seeing itself seeing.

What is harder to convey, as relates to that special time, is how difficult my life was at the time. It seems that it took some hard knocks to get my attention and set me up for this kind of breakthrough that I had through seeing.

I'm sad to say that, without those particular hard times, I doubt that a change like that would or could have taken place. It seems that, at least for me, only through very difficult times, liberation of one kind or another can take place. And without those difficult times I believe I would just have gone merrily on my way and habit of continual distraction and entertainment.

[Photo by me in the last days.]



THE REMAINS OF DOUBT

June 5, 2023

Despite whatever progress I have made over the years in stabilizing my view, just out of reach and in my peripheral vision is the ghost or phantasm of worry. And not just worry, but doubt, questioning, fear, and the like.

It seems that I'm still trying to prove a point to myself, which is not a good sign, IMO. That I have an axe to grind with myself or am seeking a witness or some kind of approval is a measure of where I fail total immersion or 'oneness', although you can't have Insight Meditation without full immersion. Yet, when you come out of it, sometimes doubt lingers.

And so, I do Insight Meditation as much as I can, and that itself is immersive beyond doubt, yet I am still haunted around the edges or in my peripheral vision by the faint ghost of ego or whatever we can agree to call it that troubles us, doubt, worry, fear, questions, etc.

In other words, a wraith or shadow of worry still accompanies me on my journey, although most often quite at a distance, but yet not entirely out of mind, but rather hanging out just beyond the extreme periphery of my vision. A whiff of it sometimes is there.

I'm sure that this is the remains of past worries and doubts, something that life itself will have to rub away in ever diminishing degrees.

Oh yes, it's vastly improved from how it used to be when I was younger. Either I'm just hardening as an old man or this kind of doubt and worry is being worked away over time.

At any rate, I am used to it and while I can't say we are actually friends, it's obvious that a faint fear and I are both in the same room yet not at arm's length any longer. And while it is not my favorite thing, I am not in denial of it.

I'm doing my best to get to know it.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



HEART CENTER KTC AND KKSG

June 8, 2023

I was out in our main meditation room on my hands and knees this morning going over the edges of the wooden floor a second time to scrub out the last vestiges of any spider specks. Spiders seem to love the place. With that done, the room is about as clean as I have seen it.

There has been some requests in seeing photos of the main shrine room at our center. It is in a separate building right next to our stupa. Here are some photos I took to give you at least a good idea of what it looks like and what's in it.

The Heart Center KTC (Karma Thegsum Chöling) was formed in the mid-1980s; I don't remember exactly when, but Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche agreed for it not to be the "Big Rapids KTC," but rather Heart Center KTC, because that inspiration came to me along with a powerful experience of communion years before (1972). We were not a normal KTC, but actually functioned as a branch of KTD, producing many things for them that, at the time, they could not afford to do by themselves.

What has the Heart Center KTC done? Well, of course we had classes and sitting meditation for many years. And many of the great lamas have been here, including Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche (many, many times) and the Ven. Thrangu Rinpoche, Ven. Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso, Lama Namse, H.E. Tai Situ Rinpoche (visited twice), Ven. Traleg Rinpoche, H.E. Shamar Rinpoche (before the split), and of course translators, including Ngondup Burkhar, Yeshe Gyamtso, Ken McLeod, and many lamas. The Acharya who later became Drupon Khenpo Lodro Namgal came and lived with us for quite a while, during which time he was learning English. Many lamas have been here and lived here, including

Ben Bennet (Lama Tsultrim), the retreat master now at Karne Ling, and many others. Some stayed for various lengths of time. Of course, Lama Karma is like a son to us.

The Ven. Ponlop Rinpoche came and lived with us for a month or more, while we carved out a curriculum for KTD dharma studies. Sange Wangchuk (from Bhutan) came and lived here for some years, where he learned to computerize his calligraphy and help out at KTD Dharma Goods. Wangchuk also produced the large Sanskrit characters in the main KTD shrine room, as well as the first full-scale model of the KTD monastery. Wangchuk eventually became the Minister of Culture for Bhutan.

We also brought Dr. Drupjur, an astrologer from Rumtek and he spent many months with us, while he and I worked on figuring out the Tsurphu Astrological Calendar, whose tables were in danger of running out. I later presented our findings to his Holiness the 17th Karmapa in Tibet at Tsurphu Monastery, who then named me Tenzin Nyima (Holder of the Sun).

I have served on a number of boards at KTD, and for a while was even the fundraiser for the Monastery. For many years, the dedicated money for the return of His Holiness, the 17th Karmapa was here with us in a bank account.

We did too many different things to try and list them. Here are a few that I can remember easily. For years, we did many of the various fundraising collaterals (folders, art, etc.) for the monastery. We also did the Refuge Booklets, the Bodhisattva Vow Booklets, KKR's personal seal, and all kinds of printed work for the monastery. Most are still being used. We designed the logo for Zampa Magazine for the Columbus folks.

In 1989, in the main shrine room, Khenpo Rinpoche expressed passionately his wish to fulfill the 16th Karmapa's wish that we have a 3-year retreat. There was not a dry eye in the room. As I left the building and was passing under the window going toward the Tara Shrine room, I realized that only someone like me could help, and so I volunteered to Rinpoche. And so, Margaret and I became the main fundraisers (along with the Chinese community) for Karme Ling. At that time Rinpoche gave me his own personal mala, which he had before he ever came to this country, and many years after that. Ngodrup (his translator) was shocked. I have it to this day.

Also, KTD could not afford to help students find practice materials, so Margaret and I, along with Ngodup Burkhar and Sange Wangchuk, and later David McCarthy and Bob Martinez (Chicago KTC)...created a mail-order company "KTD Dharma Goods," which acted as an arm for KTD, as if we were them. We sent Sange Wangchug to Nepal and India, and stocked all the rupas, malas, and practice materials that students need. We also published many scores of transcripts, and especially a great many Tibetan practice texts in pecha format, with foil-stamped covers, and so on. David McCarthy was in charge for many years, and I consider him one of my best friends. This went on for many years, costing KTD nothing. Margaret and I invested more than \$250,000 dollars in this effort.

We also put on the first Family Dharma Weekends here at the center and at a nearby lake. We offered 3-4 of these yearly weekends, where parents, kids, and lamas would come together for a long weekend of togetherness. Empowerments were given, wonderful food, swimming, teachings, and friendship.

Today, the Heart Center KTC has settled into being a KKSG. We still have events, but with Covid, this did not help to do much in-person events, so much of my work is on Facebook, where I have 11,000 'Friends' and 'Followers' that I blog to, mostly about dharma. Many tell me that what I write is the only dharma that reaches them. I also work with students on a one-to-one basis. We offer some 120 free e-books, perhaps 1000 dharma articles, many free videos, etc. My total views, etc. are over a million at this point.

So, I am forgetting many things, I imagine, but there you have a brief outline of what Heart Center KTC was all about and what we did our best to do. A few years ago we sent another van with thousands (a whole room full) of recorded teachings that we had been keeping as a duplicate copy of Khenpo Rinpoche's (and other lamas) teachings.

Enjoy the photos.

























A BRIDGE TOO FAR

June 9, 2023

Loosening the bind, the gap between actual immersion in life and the dualism of being on the outside looking in, can be subtle, hard to achieve. And what it takes to connect these two modes so that, as the poet wrote “The dewdrop slips into the shining sea” states, can be a little or a lot. It is a shift in attitude, which we never think to make.

Our state of mind, sitting on a cushion in meditation practice, and the outside world we enter when we get up and start our day can just be a bridge too far. It seems that what is needed is some event or process which has to be invoked that shakes loose or somehow loosens our dualistic fix or grasp on life, the “me in here and you out there.”

How that bridge is gapped is what dharma teachers do with what are called the “Pointing Out Instructions” as to the true nature of the mind, where what is pointed out is ultimately a process and not a fixed heaven-like state. The process is the goal.

By ‘process’ I mean it is something we continually do, like breathing, rather than something static, fixed, or a bridge we cross and are done, on the other side. There is no other side. Actual meditation is a continual immersive process.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



PRACTICE IS NOT PERFECTION

June 11, 2023

My awareness of the dharma goes back more than 60 years, even though way back then all it amounted to was perhaps staying up late at night with friends, drinking lousy instant coffee with powdered creamer, smoking lots of cigarettes, and talking about Zen Buddhism and, of course, knowing next to nothing about it. Yet, even that was a start.

Over time, that interest in Zen and dharma didn't go away, even though it took some years for me to realize that dharma was not just something to sit and talk about, but rather something to practice and myself do. At first it was not clear to me that I personally could do dharma, that I might actually myself meditate or practice dharma. Even that thought took time.

In the later 1950s in America, the whole idea of meditation was so foreign, so unknown to me in real life, that it did not occur to me that I should or even could learn or be part of it.

And back then, the topic of Zen Buddhism and dharma was just one topic among other topics we talked about, like Ingmar Bergman films ("The Seventh Seal"), Akira Kurosawa films (perhaps my favorite filmmaker), or 1950 European films like "La Stada," "Black Orpheus," "The Red Balloon," "Jules and Jim," "La Dolce Vita," "8-1/2," and on and on.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, we were just not interested in American films (it took the hippies to bring those films back), which we considered bland and sterile, but rather we were turned on by foreign films of all kinds, whatever was bohemian, and anything that did

not remind us of America in the 1950s: its TV, movies, crew-cut haircuts, business suits, etc., which were considered 'square' and boring.

My friends and I were fascinated by the dark, serious, brooding, and sad European films, poetry, and philosophy, beatniks in general, and the bohemian, and to us it seemed that dharma fit right into the mix because it was different and up until then unheard of by us.

And personally, I was enamored by the simplicity of Zen Buddhism, the raked sand gardens, the bamboo floors, the rice-paper Shoji screens, the Japanese flute... Nothing I knew at that time was that wonderfully simple.

Looking back, it seems to me that I was very clumsy in learning dharma, struggling to find my way with it, and gradually putting together a kind of patchwork quilt of the dharma as best I could, piece by piece, trying to make what I learned about dharma fit together and be coherent.

In truth, I felt I was a lousy student because while absolutely fascinated by the dharma, I felt more like a dummy, trying to sort it out and piece it all together. There were few teachers and back then we were afraid to share our meditation experience because we didn't have any.

However, looking back at it today, over sixty years later, I was in fact sorting it, finding for myself what was important and allowing it all to fall together and cohere rather than fall apart and fade away.

Despite my laziness, ignorance, my not-getting-it, and all of that, the dharma for me was like a very powerful seed in the mundane American world of the 1950s.

Dharma is a power in itself and naturally wants to take root in us, despite our failings. Dharma is the root of us. That's what made the dharma so fascinating to me, its potency. Somehow, even as a young adult, I sensed that the Dharma was the truth in life.

And despite all my doubts, I feel I have a pretty sound and complete training in basic dharma, one that serves me well and that I can depend on. It is my North Star or fiducial. Like a gyroscope, no matter what events try to move me, I find in the dharma my center of balance and core. It just works.

And I no longer fear that I am not doing enough, not practicing dharma enough, being too lazy, or whatever. And this is because 'practicing' dharma is not dharma, but just what the word says, 'practice'. Yes, "Practice makes perfect," yet perfection does not need to be practiced.

And yes, I continue learning the dharma because the dharma is the truth in life for me, yet I do it now more in real-time, whether on the cushion or off the cushion. However, I no longer have what I used to call my 'dharma practice', setting aside ten minutes or an hour to do 'dharma practice', which, in truth, was mostly boring to me and I wasn't fooling anyone by myself. That's what I eventually learned.

Of course, I'm not saying that I am beyond learning or 'practicing' dharma, because I'm not. I am saying that hesitancy, being unsure, provisional, or not confident in the dharma is by definition not enough by itself. We have to move beyond that, and for the most part I have.

I have confidence in the dharma and that it will continue to round off my rough edges and shape me up, despite my faults and any failings. We have to keep putting one

foot in front of the other. And being uncertain of the dharma within us is not confidence in the dharma. I hope you get the idea because this is an important point.

We each have to graduate and move on from just beginning, from always being tentative, not because we have to achieve something, but because the dharma is something that we can and have to depend on. Dharma and lack of confidence in the dharma is a “Catch-22,” an oxymoron.

This is perhaps why the Buddha encouraged that we question dharma each step of the way, to find confidence in it, putting one foot in front of the other.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



“IN POSTMEDITATION, BE A CHILD OF ILLUSION”

June 12, 2023

I've been thinking back over my quite long time of learning dharma. Where and how did I start? What interested me and why? Here is what I came up with.

Key to my dharma training is what is called Lojong training. In Lojong training, a principle text is what is the “Seven Points of Mind Training,” a collection of 59 slogans (to be learned, understood, and kept in mind) arranged under seven points or sections. I will go over the first two points, and include references where you can learn more if this interest you.

The first of the seven points is a single slogan:

POINT ONE.

SLOGAN 1: Train in the Preliminaries

The ‘Common Preliminaries’ are what are called the ‘Four Thoughts’ or ‘Four Reminders’ that turn the mind toward the dharma, which it is suggested we keep in mind at all times, and very briefly they are:

FIRST THOUGHT: This precious is a human life we have; don't waste it.

SECOND THOUGHT: Death and Impermanence. Life is fragile.

THIRD THOUGHT: Karma. What we sow, so shall we reap.

FOURTH THOUGHT: The Defects of Samsara. We will never get all our ducks in a row.

When they say, “Train in the preliminaries,” they mean just that. These four thoughts (Common Preliminaries) were my first introduction to the dharma, because of all the various religions I was examining back then, they caught my attention because I had been thinking something like that on my own all my life. They were just obvious, and also confirming.

And decades later, when I had finished all the traditional preliminaries, common, extraordinary, and special, a number of deity practices, and was ready to be introduced to the true nature of the mind, the first thing I was asked to do was to spend some years once again pondering and considering these same Four Thoughts that turn the mind toward the dharma, so you can be sure these are not just introductory ideas, but are the heart of the dharma because they can jump-start Bodhicitta, ‘Enlightened Heart’.

Anyway, training in these four preliminaries are the first of the seven points in preparing us for training the mind in dharma.

Next comes the second of the seven points, which is called “The Main Practice, which is Training in Bodhicitta, which contains five slogans.

POINT TWO: THE MAIN PRACTICE

Here are some of the main slogans in the general order of learning the practice.

SLOGAN 2. ‘Regard All Dharmas as Dreams’

It has been said and written hundreds or thousands of times that we should regard all dharma, and all of this world of Samsara as but a dream. As our own Shakespeare said, “We are the stuff as dreams are made on.”

SLOGAN 3. ‘Examine the Nature of Unborn Awareness’

Consider that our basic awareness is unborn, the awareness that allows you to read this page, and the meaning is that this awareness never had a birth because it has always been present. It is unborn.

SLOGAN 4. ‘Self-Liberate Even the Antidote’

Our tendency to grasp on to solutions, and even antidotes to our obstructions, themselves are an obstruction. Just rest in the mind and the problem and antidote will liberate itself.

SLOGAN 5. ‘Rest in the Nature of Alaya, the Essence’

It’s all about rest, allowing ourselves to rest in the nature of the mind itself is what meditation is all about. Rest in that.

SLOGAN 6. ‘In Postmeditation, Be a Child of Illusion’

In Lojong training, the sixth slogan says “In postmeditation, be a child of illusion.” By ‘postmeditation’ is meant when we are not sitting on the cushion in meditation or meditation practice, in other words, the rest of our day.

And ‘Be a Child of Illusion’ is often presented as the wonder a young child experiences when they first walk into a Tibetan shrine room, which is indeed highly ornamented and filled with light and colors.

And I have seen this myself. When I first introduced my granddaughter Iris to the meditation shrine in my office, with its lights and colored silks, she stood in wonder and called my shrine "The Magical." And later I sent her a tiny shrine, which I include a photo of here, which she uses it in her room at home. Those candles are electric. Indeed, it is magical.

As to slogan #6, 'In Postmeditation, Be a Child of Illusion', to me this refers to maintaining the freshness of Insight Meditation, our being suddenly fully immersed in the moment, with no second thoughts or no thinking whatsoever. This world this vivid and is 'magical'.

If some of you want to experience more about these 59 slogans, here is the book I first learned it from.

The Great Path to Awakening: Classic Guide to Lojong
(Mahamudra Mind Training)

https://www.amazon.com/Great.../dp/B07CQ6XDFX/ref=sr_1_4...

And for those who want more detail on interpreting the slogans, here is a free teaching by Alan Wallace on Lojong, the 59 slogans:

"7-Point Mind Training from Atisha"

<https://archive.org/.../OutlineFor7-pt.MindTraining...>

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



ALL THE WORLD'S A STAGE

June 15, 2023

Yesterday, I mentioned ennui and the sense of Limbo I feel lately in these times, and here I want to talk about our general busyness and penchant for immersing (attaching ourselves) in entertainment to the exclusion of clarity and eventual liberation. It's called Samsara.

The great Buddhist masters define Samsara, this cyclic world we all live in, by our attachments, in particular our constant entertaining ourselves, keeping so busy that we have time or interest for little else. This constant attachment to being entertained defines our state of ignorance of anything else but that. Yet, what is it that we are ignoring through all this attachment and entertaining ourselves?

Samsara itself is said to be the sum total of our attachments that keep us from seeing beyond them, our likes and dislikes, and the ignoring of everything other than our attachment to this, that, and the other thing. I am pointing out here this entrenched habit of keeping ourselves entertained just all of the time, and doing our very best to ignore anything that does not captivate, interest, and entertain us, especially whatever we find boring or uninteresting. We don't like that.

As many of you who read this blog know, I learned about this subject the hard way, through having a major stroke. And that stroke instantly shattered what I called my Self and truncated, at least for a considerable time, all my attachments. I no longer had ANY entertainment or attachments whatsoever. And because of that I was, as they say, naked like a J-bird of any cover, and this for weeks on end, until I could gradually reattach and once again reanimate and fully entertain myself. I was just out

there like a sore thumb, exposed to the bright light of reality without my usual cover of entertainment.

Now, what I learned from that anguishing life-changing experience was that my life previous to the stroke had been little more than complete and total attachment to habitually and constantly entertaining myself 24x7. I was locked in Samsara, and that for my entire life, as far back as I can remember.

I know this because from the instant of my stroke, I suddenly was stripped of all attachments, gone, all ability to busy and entertain myself, and just left standing there, naked of all attachment, unable to reconnect or find any way to entertain myself whatsoever. There was no access. And all this right in the middle of a hospital, surrounded by doctors and nurses. Mentally, I was clear as a bell, yet fully exposed and denied any attachment, cover, or entertainment.

I cannot express in words how totally painful this state was, being unattached, completely unable to lose myself in my normal habits of entertainment and busyness. I was used to, like Uncle Scrooge in his money bin, surrounding and attaching myself to whatever I liked or disliked, and losing myself in that.

Instead, I suddenly, in that moment, found myself completely exposed to total boredom and just burning up in the brilliant white-hot light of non-entertainment. And this went on for weeks, until I was able to gradually build up the patina of a Self again and find my way back into my normal busyness and entertainment. Yet, I cannot forget that experience of being totally unattached.

If that was freedom from attachment and entertainment, I was not prepared for that kind of liberation. Instead of

being freeing, it was totally confining because of the total lack of entertainment. I was uncomfortable to the extreme.

If this can make sense to you, the LACK of attachment, any way to find cover for myself in my usual haunts and entertainments resulted in feeling exposed to a brilliant white light as if I was out alone in the middle of a vast desert with a fierce white light high above me that I could not bear to turn and look at. Or I was on an empty stage with one spotlight shining on me. That's how it was.

And so, my takeaway from the experience is that up to that point my entire life had been dominated by my being wrapped up and attached to keeping myself busy and entertained to the point of ignorance of anything else but being comfortable and "at home" in the entertainment, being entertained.

And when all that was stripped away, I was instantly exposed to the brilliant white light of the mind itself, without entertainment, and I just withered in its intensity and uninterruptedness. I just burned up like a raisin in the sun. And as I suffered, I came to realize how incredibly powerful Samsara is and that we have little to no idea how habituated we are to it. Samsara rules.

It's all we know, this Samsara, all we have ever known, and we don't know how pervasive it is and how difficult it would be to give it up, because we don't want to give it up, not even close.

My dharma teacher for 36 years, a Tibetan rinpoche, explained to us that we are the stragglers, those of us in Samsara, and we are the ones that never got it in all the time of history until now. And we still don't get it. We

ignore and turn away from reality other than that which we are attached to.

And so, I feel like one of those people with a sandwich-board that used to walk the streets exclaiming that the end of the world is coming.

I realize that no matter what I say, how much I exclaim about the import of Samsara, it falls on deaf ears because we literally can have NO idea how much we are its child, a victim of Samsara.

And so, I don't know where to begin in helping us to see beyond Samsara, and I feel like the proverbial voice crying in the wilderness or like The Bards line "Because something is happening here, but you don't know what it is, do you Mr. Jones?"

I'm don't intend to be arrogant, but truthful, yet that truth seems to be a bridge too far for general consumption. And why do I feel this insight is so important?

It is important because unless we want to just let time evolve us as it has, it seems to me that we are accruing karma faster than we are resolving it, and this Samsara we are involved in is like the singularity of a black hole, far stronger than our ability to escape it. And the most troubling fact is that we are for the most part unaware of this.

It may take some waking up on our part to turn this around.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



BORDERLINE

June 16, 2023

Follow the beat of your heart, the thread of your life, what quite naturally interests you. And when the times come when nothing seems of interest, what then is happening?

What is the relationship of what in truth interests us that is freeing compared to what we just normally do because it entertains us, keeps us busy? Where is that borderline that crosses between the two?

Is the interest in entertaining ourselves just another form of ignorance, another way to lose ourselves in busyness and ignore the reality of what is real?

If we stop servicing our 'busying' interests and look around, what happens or can happen in that gap?

Given time and opportunity, everyone seems to follow what naturally interests them. Samsara by definition is total attachment and entertainment all the time and always has been. We are attached to what we like and glom onto and the same with what we dislike; these two (likes and dislikes) comprise our attachments in the negative sense.

And that's pretty much a definition of Samsara; the sum total of our attachments to this or that. And if we somehow become detached from all of our attachments, where does that find us?

If Samsara is defined as all the attachment that separates us from Nirvana, from liberation in enlightenment, then attaining enlightenment must coincide with letting go of all that we are over-attached

to. Attachment in the pejorative sense is when we cling to something so that we lose the flexibility of being fluid and free. Accumulating negative attachments weighs us down.

Is that how we define attachment? Is attachment whatever we cling to that separates us from the truth? If so, then mere busyness and being attached to constant entertainment is attachment that hinders us, and whatever on our path that is unattached (that we are unattached to) liberates us from Samsara, when we 'take the road less travelled by', so to speak.

If that's the case, how do we separate our true interests, what we need to follow for liberation from Samsara (whatever we need to keep in mind) from our compulsion and lifelong habit to ignore liberation and remain busily locked in entertainment at all times? Where did true interest fade out and mindless entertainment begin?

Or, as the dharma teachings point out, have we always been lost in our attachments and not only not let them go, but have busily been accruing more and more attachments as karma?

IMO, these are questions worth considering.



POINTERS POINT

June 18, 2023

I can see that it's going to take more than words to check all the boxes these days. We are getting some immersion, like it or not. Words can but describe reality, attempt to sketch out an outline of the entirety of experience, yet by definition words are dualistic. They stand back and are separate from the reality they describe. Words are not immersive although we may wish they were. They are conceptual and are ultimately an artifact of the intellect. In themselves words make no sense. They are but pointers to what does make sense, experience.

As the old saying goes "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink." Words are like that. While words do their best to conceptually capture reality, they can but point beyond themselves to the experience they are attempting to describe. And because of that the words are often mistaken for the experience itself. Big mistake.

In themselves, words are not an experience, no matter how well wrought they may appear. At best, they are a 'sounds like this' approximation of reality.

And words can at times even harass our attention with their inability to satisfy the reality of an actual experience. As mentioned, words are not themselves that experience.

And so, we have no choice but to realize what we already should know, that words are but pointers.

Yet it's not like there is a substitute for words. Perhaps at best, we can just relax and appreciate what words

CAN do, yet not expect them to precipitate the experience they are trying to describe. Words can perhaps give us at best some sense or at least a whiff of the reality they point toward.

And a sense of humor helps.

Just as in blindness, braille (and reading it) is not itself the experience they describe. Language can but point beyond itself to an experience. Words are like that too.

And words are no different than braille in that no matter how skilled we become with them; they are still pointers “at” rather than an experience “of.” They can but refer and are references.

I can't find any way around this fact, and I have tried. Perhaps this is why in Zen stories, the teacher hits the student with his slipper or slaps his or her face, or whatever it takes to get beyond descriptors like words or braille and precipitate an experience, something without a looker and a looked-at, as in: full immersion.

Yet, how else do we signal aside from words? I guess there are gestures, mudras, signs, and signifiers... Of course, there is music, graphic arts, taste, and smell.

And then there is experience itself, the goal of all of this pointing out. Once we have that, have ourselves the experience and know how to invoke it, we don't need to have it pointed out. Pointing out can only result in realization or the lack thereof.

It's not that we should stop using words, but rather use them with understanding, realize their limitations, and not make the mistake of taking the description of an experience for the experience itself, and then expecting

that experience from just words. We need to get a sense of humor about that.

Words and language are invaluable, yes, but they are only what they are, references, pointers, no less and yet not more.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



HARVESTING OUR REACTIONS

June 21, 2023

As time bumps along, and I look back, what impresses and imprints in me is the fact that I react all day long to one thing or the other, not one or two times, but hundreds and thousands of times, if only in micro-reactions, a cringe here and there, a twinge of pain, a loud noise, etc., all apparently beyond my control to respond naturally.

It's knee-jerk all the way from the loud explosions of a car exhaust to the ever so slight cringe at the tie you are wearing or even that you are wearing a tie. These are all reactions, and I am told they all count and accumulate karma.

It's not only the big knee-jerk reactions that accumulate, and they happen only rarely, but rather the karma that counts are the untold number of tiny micro-reactions we have all day long. We can't escape these reactions at this point and most of us are not even aware we are doing this. It is almost subconscious, yet if take note, it's happening all the time.

Nevertheless, these innumerable reactions have far-reaching effects, effects that we can learn to respond naturally to rather than simply react to them as we do now. We can manage these reactions and turn them into normal responses and here is how.

This is a very simple dharma technique, one that we can do all day long without taking a single step outside our normal routine. It just involves becoming aware when we react, and not just the obvious ones, the low-hanging fruit, but gradually, as we are able, the more subtle

micro-reactions the occur to us constantly throughout the day.

And the technique is simple. When we are aware of a reaction, large or small, all we do is take note of it, note it. And then we acknowledge to ourselves that this is our reaction and no one else's. We own it.

After that, we just drop it entirely. We don't think about it, contemplate it, meditate about it, or even wonder what's its meaning is, why we react. No point to that, because that only deepens the karma if we dwell on it.

We just note it, own it, and drop it. We then move on in our daily routine until we are aware of the next reaction. And we do this practice of awareness of it, taking note, owning it as ours, and then dropping it. We do this again and again and again, as often as we have to.

Yes, it takes a while to see results, but they are there. And since many of these reactions are repeated over and over again by us, as we recognize them, own them as ours, and think nothing more of them, over time we gradually disarm them, tone them back, and instead of reacting to them, we begin to respond to them appropriately and not by knee-jerk reaction.

After a while, we just roll with them, and all of the embedded energy in our reactions is freed and we have a smooth continuous mindstream instead of a string of knee-jerk reactions. All that energy in reactions is freed for other uses.

If we stop reacting, our mind stops cringing and calms down to a steady state. Give it a try. It works.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

THE INTENT OF INTENT

June 24, 2023

My dharma teacher of 36 years, a Tibetan rinpoche who spoke no English had this to say to a group of us which, while I found it surprising, was worth checking out.

Rinpoche said that anything we say or think is either a benefic or a malefic, meaning that if you drill down on the intent of what is said or written, no matter how subtle we get, we will find that it is either kind or unkind, a benefic or a malefic. Check it out.

We may be just repeating what someone else said or a joke that we heard, yet if we parse the words, check them out, you will find at heart they are kind or unkind.

Are we not to have any fun? I'm not saying that. What I am saying is that if what is 'funny' is at someone else's expense, then we are racking up karma, however innocent it may sound and appear.

Of course, hearing this from Rinpoche, I had to test it out and I did, exhaustively, and I can't say he is wrong, although it gets very, very subtle, as subtle as I can get.

It never occurred to me that these very subtle, ever so slightly off-color remarks, often seen as humor, are actually not so funny when magnified. I checked and checked and checked and could not come up with anything different.

What we say, even in jest, when looked at carefully does seem to be either benefic or malefic. As to what to do about this, I'm looking at it, and edging toward not wanting a malefic tinge or taste to what I write or say.

And the micro-karma that is accrued from the malefic cannot help either.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



LEAVING THE BODY TOO SOON

June 24, 2023

This topic is about the intelligentsia and their fondness for out-of-the-body experiences. To the best of my knowledge, the so-called Western occult tradition or “Esoteric Sciences” are large intellectual-fortes of the 19th and 20th century that are just that, conceptual, mental exercises, mostly devoid of actual physical experience. These are all attempts to leave the physical body before the prime of life requires that we begin to exit.

The hallmark of Samsara, this kind of intelligentsia plagues modern life, IMO.

In many of the occult sciences, this is called “failing to round the nadir,” which simply means trying to get out of the body before the natural time to do so comes up. Intellectuals love to do this before they “round the nadir,” before they have fully incarnated and reached maturity, which might come as early as the first Saturn Return (29.4 years), before Saturn has complete one full orbit.

Popular today, known as out-of-the-body experiences, in fact, are just that, sorties out of the body into the mental and intellectual realms pushing about as far from physical contact and gut-strength as they can get, ideational journeys and, unfortunately, IMO, very much pipe dreams, artificially trying to leave the body. It is so popular and very inauthentic.

As for myself, coming up in the late 1950s, early 1960s, and on into the 1970s, it appeared to me that what we call esoteric knowledge, at least in Ann Arbor, Michigan where I lived, was mostly intellectual talk, a lot of talk and little to no action. I don't have a problem with talking

about life, as long as we have lived life enough to have something to talk about. However, that seems seldom the case.

The problem, which as a young person I was slow to discover, is that all talk and no action is not nearly enough for a life. Talk is fine, as I mentioned, as long as you have something to talk about, like some actual experience, something actually done.

However, out-of-body experience, pushing the intellect out of the body as far as we can as if to better see something, is only as good as whatever bodily experience we have to talk about. We can't just talk about talking. We need experience before we talk wisdom.

In other words, we have to have something to talk about 'something', and that something, the missing ingredient, is actual visceral experience in the body, not out of the body. In other words, if we don't actually experience within the body itself, we have little to nothing to talk about or speculate on. I trust I am clear about the problem.

The great German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel called this state the "Beautiful Soul" and in his epic work "Phenomenology of the Mind" wrote this:

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

What I see is that this current intellectual approach to philosophy and psychology, relating to the psyche and the spiritual, is so pervasive that for all practical purposes, aspiring minds take the intellect itself to be body-enough to reflect upon, although it is pure conceptuality, a head without a body, a 'horseless-headman' so to speak.

And the literature is rife with movements like Theosophy, which is a sort of pseudo-Buddhism and authors like Helena Blavatsky and Annie Besant. There are a number of secret societies that dance to this same out-of-the-body exposition. One exception, IMO, would be the work of author Dion Fortune, and her masterpiece "The Cosmic Doctrine."

And while Dion Fortune is lumped in with the overly intellectual banter of that time, her novels and basic common sense is about the only relief I ever found to this whole intellectual movement. I tired of western intellectualism, and headed East to Tibet.

In my own case, with out-of-the-body experience, I eventually 'topped out' or blew my top, so to speak, and discovered for myself the dearth of common sense in the whole idea of trying to leave and get out of the body without having first fully incarnated.

Get out of the body and go where? In that rarefied intellectual world of conceptualization so popular in the 19th and 20th centuries, little regard was given to the actual physical body, like exercise and fully immersive meditation experience. The physical body was kind of left untouched to go to seed, so to speak. Living in the mind was all the rage, and still is to some degree today.

What's the remedy for all this out-of-the-body experience that so ignores the physical body itself?

For me, much needed relief from the purely intellectual was, as mentioned, found in the Buddha-dharma, which finally got my attention and gradually helped me to shoehorn myself back into my body so that I would live and have some actual experience on Earth and thus have something to talk about.

I may expand on this topic.



“THE BIGGER THE FRONT, THE BIGGER THE BACK”

June 25, 2023

The title is an old Macrobiotic slogan, but very apt here.

It is startling that a movement such as this “intellectual-spiritualism” has so pervasively taken hold of the popular consciousness that the alternative is seldom represented, that alternative being working to strengthen the in-the-body experience so that the intellect has something to think about, chew on, and report. From nothing comes nothing.

I guess I have become an expert at hearing the disembodied voices drone on from those who may understand something intellectually, but in truth don't know experientially what they are talking about. They don't have a clue, yet they keep talking.

They can only talk ABOUT it, and don't even realize they are missing anything. Because of the emptiness and hollow echo of their words, they don't know and don't want to be told they don't know. They think they know, which is enough for them. Time will have news for them.

Think, Think, Think. That's what they do.

We know how to take the rabbit out of the hat, but not how the rabbit gets in the hat in the first place. So many young people are winging it intellectually, vying with one another to be farther out of the body into intellectual space than another. IMO, pure intellect is like death itself, compacted Samsara.

I find large groups of young intellectuals almost totally unaware that they already are victims of what amounts to a false equivalency, assuming spiritual and physical forces are equal in strength and importance, when the simple truth is that all excursions of the mind that are out-of-the-body depend on actual experience in the body for their data, and many of these folks avoid visceral experience as much as possible. With no data of experience, there is just the talk.

In other words, many have relocated out of the body as far as they can get, having neglected to first inhabit the body, with an in-the-body experience.

Yet, I'm not interested here in only describing the problem of being too far out of the body of our actual experience. I am more interested in how we balance a tendency to overly intellectualize our lives. How is that done?

Well, the simple answer is to just stop, turn around, and go the other way, not out of the body, but get back into the body. In practice, this is not so easy to do.

As to what traditions include or present this antidote, there are probably many. In my case, I find this relief in the non-dual dharma practices such as Mahamudra and Dzogchen, those that indicate non-meditation such as just resting in the nature of the mind. In a word, 'Rest', allowing ourselves to come to rest.

And I have never gotten over or past the suggestions of the great Mahasiddha Tilopa, principally these:

Don't Prolong the Past

Don't Invite the Future

Don't Alter the Present

Just, Relax as it Is

To me, these suggestions of Tilopa say in the fewest words and most succinct manner the dharma that needs to be pointed out to each of us, especially that last one, "Just, Relax as it Is." That's the one to get into, IMO.

Activities that will help to balance too much intellection are physical exercise, diet, yoga, dancing, and things that will actualize the body and strengthen our connection to it. Balancing means just that, leveling out our tendencies. If we want to get more intellectual, we need to balance that with an equal emphasis on physical experience. That's the idea.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]





AUTHENTICITY

June 26, 2023

To me, that's the key word for these times, 'authenticity', or the lack of it, yet what is it?

Perhaps it is hard to describe what is authentic to us, but we all know it when we see it. Something or someone feels authentic to us. There could be lots of reasons for this.

A person may have made the right choices at the right time, and looking back, they were right. That can make them seem authentic.

Or, a person is grounded, balanced, with the right balance between the thinking mind and the open heart, between the mind and emotions. That also can be authentic.

Not too much of anything and not too little also makes for balance and a sense of authenticity.

If you have ever met a very high lama, a rinpoche or thereabouts, you may have had a taste of the authentic, although this is pretty much an individual experience. For example, for me my rinpoche was authentic, and I was with him for 36 years in all kinds of situations, including traveling with him to Tibet and China. I watched him up close in teachings on Mahamudra for 31 years and for over a thousand hours.

I can well remember seeing how Rinpoche treated all people equally, something that on occasion worried or even irritated me. For example, I can remember a bunch of college student who came to hear him speak at the

university near us, just for kicks I imagine, and they would ask Rinpoche about his sex life and things like that, being so disrespecting from my point of view. I found that irritating.

Yet Rinpoche just laughed and would say something like, “Me, a fat old man?” That sense of equanimity was, IMO, authentic.

My point (and opinion) is that much of what is missing in modern society, what apparently we don't have enough of these days, is the 'authentic' in whatever form is needed to get our attention and act like a guide or inspiration.

Many struggle to balance their wandering intellect and desire to grasp the 'Big Picture' with the grounding of the ability to rest in the natural mind just as it is, without our thoughts. Both are needed. Thinking is so easy, and we can fall not only into thinking outside of the box, so to speak, but thinking beyond any experiences we have had to justify what essentially is speculation on our part. Intellect itself can seem a body in itself, albeit a 'body' of knowledge, yet it is not the same as a physical body of flesh, blood, and life experience.

If our talk gets too far ahead of our walk, we don't know (and can't know) what we are talking about and, like some of these new AI devices, our information cannot be trusted to be true. We are all hat and no cowboy, as they say.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me of the actor Harrison Ford in his role as Indiana Jones. While this image itself may not be authentic, Harrison Ford is one of the most authentic actors I am aware of. I have now made over 10,000 images on Midjourney, and am

getting better at it. This is a good image of Harrison Ford that I prompted. I took a while.]



SIGNS AND SIGNATURES

June 27, 2023

The hills are not only alive with the sound of music, the world is alive with signs and signatures, as well.

As we monitor experience, we can learn to read these signs all around us and see where they are pointing. The signs are like a school of fish which, and when the fish school, they suddenly all point in the same direction.

The same with signs. When all the signs that pop up begin to line up and point in a similar direction, we can pretty much trust them to be correct. A single sign may be accidental, but a school of signs all pointing in the same direction is a trend and needs our attention. Life tells us something or, as they say, coming events cast their shadow.

Signs are conscious and apparently subconscious as well. We pick them up however we can, directly or perhaps with our peripheral vision, out of the corners of our eyes, so to speak.

As mentioned, it is significant when the signs add up, congregate, and become obvious enough to our senses that we sense them. Do we pay attention to the signs or ignore them?

Well, it's hard to ignore signs once we become aware of them and they school. We ignore them at our own peril, IMO. Otherwise, what use are they and why are we seeing them?

Of course, this is all very personal, at least individual, what we pick up on out there in the surrounding world.

We might ask, how do we notice signs? And are they premonitions, and of what?

Of course, we can just go blindly ahead, which I believe is what many do. As for me, I can't help but notice signs, trends, coincidences, repeated signals that apparently I cannot ignore, because I don't.

I take them in and process these signs and signals as best I can. Is it all psychological or what? I can't really say, only that when they repeatedly occur to my attention, I take note of them. And if these signals persist, I tend to find that meaningful and pay attention.

Of course, there are folks who are deluged with signs, swamped until they cannot really manage it all. That I don't do.

I go about my way until something flags me down, gets my attention, and requires that I note it. One sign by itself is a singleton, and I may ignore it (or not), but repeated sightings and signs add up and are, for me, attention getting.

Do coming events cast their shadows? I'm not certain they do, but I tend to err in that direction. Or does each of us have our own way of feeling about for the future.

After all, the near future is just that, about to happen. Can we sense it? Does the future subtly extend an edge into the present, and at what point do we pick up on it and call it the present. Obviously, it varies in all the possible ways.

I'm not a great believer in random coincidences, although I am certain it happens. If something repeatedly impinges my mind in close enough

succession, I tend to take note of it, and set a flag to record any further instances of that sign.

I tend to believe that successive (repeated) signs have meaning for me, although I may have trouble figuring out what that is. At what point repeated signs become a trail varies, and my response to a trail of signs also varies.

My antennae are always out for anything that stands out. I depend on the vibe of things, how they feel as to whether I'm comfortable. Good vibes are good, and bad ones, obviously, not so good.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



EXPAND AND EXTEND

June 28, 2023

Here is something recursive to consider.

Writing about a topic such as this is meditation itself. In other words, to write this I use a form of Insight Meditation, touching in and out of that immersion, to write this piece.

For me to feel alive and in the present moment, it is necessary for me to invoke Insight Meditation each and every day and it took years to train myself to perform Insight Meditation to write blogs like these, so I am using this technique here to write and also tell you about this technique, so to speak. How's that for a bit of recursiveness?

And so, Insight Meditation serves a dual role in my life. It is both the means and the end in itself.

We reach a point in our dharma practice where, through the help of a qualified instructor, we have been introduced to the nature of the mind. In our own way, we finally understand how the mind works, at least for us. This is commonly called in Vajrayana dharma, appropriately enough, "Recognition."

And, from that time of our first Recognition forward, we don't re-recognize the mind's nature. We have done that. In other words, Recognition is a one-time and one-way event. What we do from then on, after Recognition, as the dharma textbooks describe it, is "expand and extend" our recognition into realization. That we have to do or the recognition can fall fallow.

This becomes a lifelong task for any dharma practitioner, expanding and extending our realization as to how the mind (our take on the mind) works. It's not something that we don't want to do. It is a process much like the process of breathing oxygen. We do it for the 'oxygen', in order to breathe. Again, it is a process.

And soon after our initial 'Recognition' we set about arranging our life to facilitate this expanding and extending process. And we might as well make ourselves comfortable, because if I understand the dharma texts right, we will be doing this process from now until we are enlightened. In fact, the last thing my dharma teacher of 36 years said to me before he passed on was that I was to keep extending and expanding my realization.

However, in order to do that, we first have to understand how the mind works (be introduced to the mind's true nature) and then we have to work it, and work it from now on, so to speak, from here on out.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



...IN ALL THE WRONG PLACES

June 29, 2023

Those of us who are waiting (or looking) for some kind of enlightenment or signs of enlightenment might benefit from the following:

The tendency seems to be to look for enlightenment somewhere outside where we are now, because we are not enlightened yet. So, we look outside our day-to-day environment or Self, toward receiving something coming from somewhere outside us, anywhere but where we are now, which we already know only too well as not being enlightened. We wait for it. We look for it.

Yet, that is not how it works as I understand it. When we recognize the true nature of the mind, which is part of our mind too, it never comes from the outside, but rather it comes from the inside, from within us. And we should be looking for it within us, not without us.

And by 'within us', that enlightenment we seek has to come from and through WHATEVER filter we currently have, like our self, and personal, family history, our past, etc. When we look inward, the first thing we meet is totally familiar to us, our own mind. No enlightenment there yet.

This is, of course, the last place we would expect it or think to look for realization, what we have already and always been, and where we have come from, yet that's exactly where recognition does come from, in and through us, from within us.

Almost all of the pith dharma texts comments about recognizing the true nature of the mind, is that this is obtained through becoming 'familiar' with our own mind.

All the dharma texts say so. Essentially, it means becoming familiar with the familiar, and not something exotic or external to us. This may be a disappointment to us, because the familiar is, well, familiar, yet don't let that disappointment become an obstacle.

Regardless, we have to become familiar with our own mind, which is all we know up to now, and all we have known through our familiar family, history, and from the personal events that make up our past. That's the idea here.

And so, if you are looking outside at the world or up in the sky for something enlightening to appear, look no farther in that direction, because that's not the way it works at all.

When push comes to shove and all the chips are down, it is not from outside us that true insight will arise, but rather from inside and from within us, within what we already have and know all too well.

In other words, the 'familiar' is the matrix or ground from which we have been born into and come out of, and that is the well of inspiration through which everything spiritual (insight, inspiration, enlightenment, etc.) will arise.

I don't want to get too personal or anecdotal, yet I will venture this:

After many years of trying to get an introduction as to the true nature of the mind, when I finally had what is called 'Recognition', it was not at all as I imagined. Not even a little.

I always had assumed that if Recognition came to me, it would be while I sat on my meditation cushion at my

little dharma shrine, as I did each day. Of course, that's the obvious place.

However, that was not it at all. For one, it came when I was having, personally speaking, a very difficult time. A series of untoward events had thrown me out of the orbit of my regular habits and life. I was in real emotional pain.

And, to my complete surprise, the process of Recognition completely bypassed my meditation cushion and even my experience of dharma and the many decades I had practiced it. Zoooom!

It went past that (many decades) and all the way back to when I was a kid studying Mother Nature. My deepest imprint, what was most familiar to me, was not the dharma as I had come to know and love it, but rather my familiarity with the natural world and love of that, my love of Nature.

And so, in this most difficult time for me, I bypassed dharma completely, and sought solace, so to speak, out in the woods and streams, all the way back to my childhood. It was THAT time, as a child, in which I was most at home, and thus was most familiar. And it was there that Recognition dawned for me. I went out and watched the sun come up at dawn for something like six months straight, during which it happened.

And I was so into it at the time that I didn't even 'think' about what was happening to me. I was just too busy happening, without thought or pause, just being there in the present moment. It was the familiar I knew in my childhood that I sought.

I am sure that each of us will have our own sense of the familiar to discover, and so my point is simple. It will be

in the most familiar of familiar places, and it will come from inside us and not from the outside world. We are enlightened from within, not without.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]



THOUGHT GANGLIA

June 30, 2023

Those little micro headaches or crunching moments that occur from time to time or are these just cringes we have when we are faced with thinking something we don't like or want to think.

I imagine that we all experience what I'm pointing at here, those moments that are not unlike the head freeze we used to get when we took too large a bite of ice cream as a kid. We mostly have to wait them out, let them pass.

Sometimes it is just getting a whiff of our own hypocrisy or a thought that reveals too much about our bias and ego. What I'm talking about here are those moments when an unwelcome thought comes into our head and it hurts and we know this is a thought about something we have not resolved or have taken a wrong turn with.

Of course, we can turn away or shut down when such an uncomfortable or 'bad' thought comes, that moment of headache during which we close our eyes, endure, and wait it out.

Instead, I am finding that if I don't want to entertain or think a hard thought that emerges in my mind, if I just relax in it, it will expand. I'm not saying that we have to love it, but at least we can accept it and give it room. Then that whole knot of a thought can dissolve, and I can rest in that.

These little knots or tangles of thought, when we resist or cringe for a moment at something we don't want to consider, are also moments and signs of opportunity. Or

it may be a bad thought that we find ourselves thinking and we don't want to think like that, yet here it is.

Or it can be when something or someone comes to mind and instead of just a passing thought, we fixate on it to the point it does not pass, but kind of hurts our head. Should we ignore and run from it or face it head on? It can be hard to admit this is our thought, but here we are thinking it.

Or it may be a retaliatory wince of pain at something we are not proud of thinking. These little nexus-like moments are like brain clots or tangles of synapses that narrow our mind rather than expand it. We tend to ignore or shut down.

Instead of ignoring them, turning away, or waiting them out, we can choose to relax, accept and accommodate them, make room for and even welcome them.

Think of these nexus points as massage points, points that need a massage, a tight nexus or thought that can carefully be massaged open, freeing the mind to normalness.

I find it hard to put this into words, but these thought clots are all too common IMO.

They remind me of the hard bonelike ganglia that sometimes popup in the back of the hand and can be massaged away, but here we are talking about mental head thought ganglia.

[Midjourney graphic prompted by me.]

