

LEARNING TO FAIL SUCCESSFULLY

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I have blogged about what is called "The Lama of Appearances" many times, and written a whole book about it as well. Mother Nature displays what is called the "Lama of Appearances," being a true and complete reflection of the dharma. As I frequently note for myself, nature is a harsh mistress. And being asked where is the seat or heart of compassion in nature, there is one and only answer, one place alone that is the heart-compassion of nature visible for all to see and that is the love of a mother for her child -- nowhere else. There is no love like a mother's love, not in the entire world.

It is no accident that in Tibetan Buddhism the concept of mother love is dominant and viewed as the epitome of what love and compassion is. The Buddhists use this as the example we all should follow and point out that everyone has been our mother at one time or another.

As an astrologer for 50 years, the highest empowerment or initiation in astrology that I know of is the Kālachakra, the Wheel of Time. It usually takes about ten days. I was fortunate to receive it from his Eminence Jamgon Kongtrul Rinpoche in Toronto in 1990.

Kālachakra and his consort Kālichakra are most often represented in what is called the Yab-Yum position, in a sexual embrace, where Kālachakra represents time itself and Kālichakra (his consort) represents the timeless, the absorbing, undoing, or destroying of time – winding it back, returning.

Of course all of this is very symbolic and perhaps difficult to understand. In astrology, time is Saturn and, as I have written for 45 years now, time as we know it (and could know it) ends at thirty years of age, the limit of the orbit of Saturn. After that Saturn begins repeating itself. After having made a complete 360-degree orbit, Saturn starts to go over the zodiac for the 2nd time, so it is all Déjà vu from there on out.

After thirty, time loses its hold over us, begins to fade, and gradually becomes transparent. We see through it for the first time. After that many of us gradually wake up and become aware that time is no more. We have passed on. The Christians refer to this as "being born again," but it is available to all of us and does not require that we are theists. We just wake up beyond the grip of time. This is an example of esoteric knowledge.

After the age of thirty, time (Kālā) has finished building our body and begins to be unbound and Kāli takes over, the return out of which we came. Time and its entire revenue gradually dissolve around us, and an awareness dawns if we look. Socially we call this pivotal life-point the "prime of life," and the dissolution as aging. There is not much lip service to the concept of the end of time or what the Christians call the resurrection of each one of us, as being not at the end but right in the middle of life.

This may seem abstract and all of this symbolism tends to put me to sleep too, but it is the best shorthand I know for life-changing insights, spiritual equations that are more succinct than even mathematics can provide. Symbols contain; like a dam, they hold back insight from vanishing away long enough for us to absorb it or at least catch a glimpse.

Kāla (the male) means "time" and Kāli (female) means "beyond time." There is a period in our lives that is beyond time and if we are over thirty years old we are already in it. That fact means something.... something important, even crucial, so let's not ignore it.

Kāla and Kāli. The depictions of Kāli (the female deity) convey the all-consuming aspects of reality, death and destruction. And just as it was time (Kāla) that creates form, so it will be that Kāli will absorb form back from when it came. In other words, Kāli (eternity) is the one who devours Kāla (time) or into which Kāla dissolves. Eternity dwarfs the products of time.

In Tibetan Buddhism the principal protector deity of the Kagyu lineages is Māhakāla, which means something like "Great Absorber of Time," and is similar in function to the Hindu god Shiva, the destroyer.

Māhakāla is usually depicted as black, because the color black (which is the total absence of color) absorbs into itself all colors. When we think of a "destroyer," we might think of violent destruction, but I find it is more helpful to understand "destroy" here as "to take away" or remove -- absorb. So, Kāla or time creates and Kāli (Shiva) takes whatever was created away, helps it to pass. In this world of impermanence (and as the Bible notes) all things come to pass. In other words, we are discussing the great mystery of time, but here looking at both sides of the equation.

Modern society basically worships Kāla, time (and its creations), which peaks at the prime of life with the perfection of the physical body. Just looking at the TV ads shows that we are celebrating the body and the prime of life. Kāli, the other side of this equation (the destroyer of the body) is not so popular. In fact we ignore it as best we can.

Since we tend not to acknowledge our own impermanence, it remains for the world's religions and doctrines like Buddhism to remind us that what goes up, comes down, that what is born eventually dies, and so on. Of course, Mother Nature ignores nothing, presenting both Kāla and Kāli equally. As mentioned earlier, nature reflects the complete dharma, which is why it is called the Lama of Appearances.

Is it any surprise that images of Kāli and Māhakāla are often depicted as fierce and destroying. It is about the only thing that gets our attention. I write pieces like this not to invoke the fire & brimstone aspect of it all, but to initiate discussion and awareness of Kāli and the mother principle in general, and to ease the shock of impermanence. And I will end here with a story.

Back in the 1960s, like many in my generation, I experienced what can only be viewed as some kind of spiritual awakening. Society as I knew it was not willing to look at some of the questions that bothered me, so I eventually became emboldened to contravene its rules, what was then considered as politically correct.

I didn't feel I had time to thread myself through all of the conventions and extended education that was prevalent then. I would educate myself and call adults to account, especially professors who claimed to know something. One thing I did was to make appointments with or just show up at the offices of well-known educators.

I would dispense with the small-talk and, to the best of my ability, leap into discussions of life and philosophy. This was perhaps rude of me, but what I found out is that many of these professors had very little under the hood aside from their specialty. They were just as lost as I was.

And some were too proud or stiff to share, but that was not always the case. One morning I visited the office of the great economist, poet, and peace activist Kenneth Boulding. I just showed up at his office at the University of Michigan and asked to see him.

He received me and from the moment I hit the ground running he was right beside me. We laughed and cried together, read poems, and celebrated life. It meant so much to me to find an adult who could see beyond my age, eye-to-eye, and treat me as an equal.

And he left me with this thought, which I now will leave with you. He told me that we must, in this life, learn to fail successfully. Fail, at least physically, we all will, but we

need not consider it just a failure. We can learn to do it successfully.

The failure of time is what the last half of life is about. And just as in the Tibetan images (like the Kālachakra) where there are two deities in complete embrace, so in life there is more to us than just our body and the body of time. There is also our mind and its wisdom. Wisdom is that mother principle (Kāli) that gives birth to each of us and that will eventually receive us back.

That mother-principle has been ignored, held back, and unappreciated, but its patience will outlast us all. We can learn to fail successfully.

