



2014

*Blogs
and
Stories*

Dharma
Music
Astrology
Initiation
Esoterica

by
Michael
Erlewine

2014 Blogs And Stories

By
Michael Erlewine

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From the Author:

I give up trying to arrange and sort these articles. This book contains a variety of blogs on different topics and in different categories. You know what you feel like reading, so please suit yourself.

As for me, time is nearing the summer solstice, my favorite time of year, but also the beginning of the decline toward winter -- bittersweet.

I will be seventy-three in a month and am in reasonably good health. Both my family and dharma practice are doing well. What more could I ask?

Michael Erlewine

June 18, 2014
Big Rapids, Michigan

[Some articles may have had photos, which may be found by searching for the title on the web. Most of them are there somewhere.]

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ASTROLOGY: THE REFLECTION OF A DREAM

I want to relate to you a dream I had many years ago, back in the early 1970s, but before I do let me share a few experiences and thoughts that led up to this very special dream. They concern the structure of space beyond our solar system and the familiar zodiac, and how it might be of value astrologically for learning more about whom we are and what on Earth we might be here for.

I first became interested in deep-space astrology through exploring heliocentric astrology, the astrology of our entire solar system. Early on, I was amazed at the difference between my standard geocentric natal chart and some of the other astrological coordinate systems such as the heliocentric and Local Space charts. At that time my interest in the space beyond and surrounding our solar system was minimal. I was put off by the billions of stellar objects out there and, on a more basic level, by the ideas of coldness and blackness I had been programmed to associate with outer space. I sure didn't want to go out there.

Distant space somehow represented the epitome of "otherness" and "foreign" to me. I was embarrassed (in terms of astrological usage) by all of the books I had read on the fixed stars, with the possible exception of L. E. Johndro's book, "The Stars." How was I to determine the significance of these billions of

stars and use them in my practice when I had enough difficulty just using the nine planets?

And then the unexpected happened. I had a dream, a very special dream. It was not an ordinary dream, but one of those dreams that are more real than waking consciousness and that take months to understand and absorb. It was placed deep in my consciousness. In fact, it was a kind of vision.

In my dream the astrologer L. E. Johndro appeared to me and his eyes were filled with light. There were rays or stalks of light coming out of his eyes and extending into space. This strange being said but one word, "LOOK!," and with his arm, he turned and pointed up to the night sky. I looked up and out there.

As I opened my eyes, the sky was filled with brilliant points of light. The stars and all of this starry material were clustered together to form the great glowing arch of the Milky Way, our galactic plane. It was wondrous beyond description and in that instant my heart went out from me and filled this bright hall of space. Never again have I had the feeling of being here on Earth, warm, but trembling before the cold and black of space. I somehow became the space and light I saw and reversed my polarity -- changed my attitude.

I understood in that instant that I was a living representative of this mother galaxy, in fact, its child. I was myself the being from outer space I had always wondered about and that scientists search for. Furthermore, I had always been so. So are you!

From that night forward, I began to venture beyond the zodiac in an inquiry as to the nature and structure

of this universe that I was a part of. Here, in brief form, is what I found:

Most important is the fact that WE are an integral and equal part of the cosmos, not just some lonely outpost. In fact, each of us is a node or information aggregate and the universe is in intimate contact with itself only through us – through our eyes and minds. We are part of the cosmic information conduit, literally the eyes and identity of the universe. The cosmos sees through our eyes, itself. That mind is our mind.

The manifold nature of distant cosmic events like black holes and supernova happening out there in space is represented through our very self, so it also lives down here on Earth. It reaches in, through us, and beyond. There is not only a correlation between these seeming remote cosmic events and our person, but an identity as well. Information coming from the Galactic Center (and farther out), carried by electromagnetic and gravitational radiation from every last star and cosmic plane or event, passes through us at all times, day and night. We are in some way a node or information complex embedded in the matrix or web of manifestation. And through all of this we look at our self!

While all that may sound pretty heady, the overpowering idea that occurred when I made some acquaintance with the universe and its structure is that there is no difference between out there and in here. We are already out there! We ARE in deep space right now and have been there from beginning less time onward.

Our world, our self and relationships, is an exact reflection of what IS, including what is happening out there – a perfect reflection. Not an analogy, but an identity. Black holes, supernovae, quasars, and the like are not just remote cosmic events, but their identical story is represented, reflected, lived, and acted out each day in our lives by those of us living here on Earth.

In order for any body, including a body the size of the galaxy, to exist information must circulate. This is basic cybernetics. It seems that information does circulate through the universe, and our identity or sense of our self is this very process of circulation. What we call "identity" or knowing our self is not only a personal experience, but a relationship, in fact a circulation, and a process of communion or communication – identification! Not only is there a connection between our life and that of our galaxy and universe, but WE are that connection. Our bodies may be ordinary and disposable, but our mind is cosmic.

A study of the structure of the universe, at any level (large or small) is a study of our self, and the guidelines of cosmic structure help to illustrate the specific structure of our mind and self. In summary, the idea that I am unfolding here is: astrology is not only a symbolic system for psychological discussion. The symbol also is, in fact, real. If we say it is an analogy, then the analogy is complete down to the limits of any specific example we might chose. We are all time and space travelers.

A process of self-discovery awaits those who would inquire into the nature and structure of the universe. We may read and study the history and record of astrology through all of the books we have. We may return again and again to our favorite passages to make sure of what we have found there. But, sooner or later, each of us must turn away from the book and just LIVE our life. That is why we study astrology in the first place. As my dharma teacher once said to me: "Michael, someday you must become the book!"

We each must become the book and only that lives which we have known for ourselves to have life, which we have personally lived. As Shakespeare said in one of his early sonnets: "You are no more yourself than you now here live." The philosopher Hegel said the same thing in another way: "We go behind the curtain of the Self to see what is there, but mainly for there to be something to be seen."

There is great value in a reading of the ancient wisdom and documents. What the ancients saw or discovered about themselves, that truth, is still true today. All of the laws of the universe still exist to be known today. We are always free to leave off at reading about our life and cast off into an inquiry, our inquiry, and to live that life we read about. We can learn to know or experience what we are talking or reading about.

Here is a 512 page book with the details, images, and zodiac positions of these deep-space objects so that you can check them out in your own natal chart.

<http://dharmagrooves.com/pdf/e-books/The-Astrology-of-Space.pdf>

And here are three videos introducing you to the Astrology of Space:

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

ASTROLOGY: LOCAL SPACE: RELOCATION ASTROLOGY

At the end of this blog I will post links to some new videos that I just put together on Local Space, a form of relocation astrology I developed in the early 1970s, which is now an integral part of most astrological software, but here I just want to offer a taste of what this powerful relocation is all about.

There is at least one aspect of relocation astrology that is perhaps not so well understood, and that is that we can achieve instantly by relocation what otherwise might only be achieved over a long period of time by transits and progressions. Let me explain.

Those of us who have studied astrology know that there are events waiting out there in our future that will affect us for better or for worse. Professional astrologers use astrological techniques like transits and progressions to pinpoint future events that will impact each of us personally. An example of this might perhaps be a major Saturn transit or bringing the progressed Sun to a conjunction with our natal Venus. These are coming events that are astrologically significant and that even now cast their shadows on our present life. They are out there waiting until their time. Let's take a hypothetical example:

Suppose we are looking forward to a Venus event, something that will activate our sense of love, compassion, or our ability to feel and appraise things. Perhaps these qualities are absent in our life or of such minor magnitude that we know we need more of

whatever they represent. Astrologically, we can look at our transits and/or progressions, scanning the future with astrological techniques for Venus events that in time will impact us.

However, using relocation techniques, we can see that by moving to a particular city we can bring about a Venus experience at once, just by relocating to that location. And if we aren't able to relocate, we can at least travel there on vacation and bathe in whatever experience that location may provide.

In other words, we can achieve by a relocation in space what otherwise we might have to wait in time for to have the same experience. It is this ability to more-or-less instantly gratify a deep inner need that makes relocation astrology so popular today. We don't have to wait five or fifty years for an auspicious transit or progressed aspect. Instead, we can examine our relocation possibilities and act on them whenever we like.

Perhaps best of all we can take a one-day trip or a longer vacation at various auspicious locations and get some sense of whether we like it there. We can see what happens to us in that locale, whether it is fun and an enhancement or no-fun, disappointing.

Another way of putting this (and this is, to me, the beauty of local space astrology), is that Heaven and Earth are interchangeable – or are in the last analysis, one living entity, a single whole. As my teacher would say,

“This is it!”

With the local space chart, this is made ever so clear, a chart where every object in the universe, celestial and mundane, has an equal and valid position. Not only the planets and the stars, but on an equal basis cities, countries, and even the local water tower or friends' houses can be represented. All that concerns us is the direction in space, the orientation, not the distance. In local space the Heavens and Earth, the celestial and mundane (or geographic) spheres, exist side by side and are interchangeable. A star is a city is a neighbor. We can walk towards, write letters to, or get up and travel into, for instance, our seventh house: and what is perhaps more important, we do all the time!

More startling yet, we can travel into our natal planets since they also represent a direction on the globe in the chart of local space. Here, in a hopeless intermingling of the various planes of reference and of objects, a strange and, I must confess, somewhat magical view of our world begins to unfold and emerge: one in which every city and friend becomes a radiating center of influence.

In this sphere, the long tradition of witchcraft and magic begins to become understandable; here local deities and preferred directions become the rule and the world seems a tangle of significance. The psychedelic character in local space charts is unmistakable and appears to be intrinsic to the system. The world appears as kind of a grand talisman or vast ritual ground, and the closest popular image of a similar nature in modern consciousness is

the remarkable world of Don Juan as generated by the author Carlos Castaneda.

Here is no "subtle plane" but a personal landscape painted in bold and clear strokes and tailor made to fit the psyche of each individual. Here is a world where the modern man is learning to move across the face of this earth in an endless dance of adjustment and tuning of his radix – of his self. Individuals driven in particular directions on a checkerboard world, unable to resist travelling toward a goal that is no particular place on earth so much as it is a direction imprinted within them, the direction of a force or planet, "There! Where Power hovers," to use Don Juan's expression. In a word, here is perhaps the most vulgar astrological system, where the obvious is enthroned and the subtle unnecessary.

Videos on Local Space here:

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

Free e-book on Local Space here:

<http://dharmagrooves.com/e-Books.aspx>

ASTROLOGY: IDENTIFICATION IS CIRCULATION

I have been working with the structure of deep-space astrophysics for nearly 44 years. Astrologer Charles A. Jayne (my close friend) and I were about the only people I am aware of who were interested in the subject back in the early 1970s. Of course, there was German Supreme Court Justice (and astrologer) Theodor Landscheidt, whose every word on the subject is worth reading. Theodore and I became friends later in the 1970s. I sent him one of the first home computers back then, all the way to Germany, on which he did some of his ground-breaking research.

Many astrologers have asked me what is the meaning of points like the galactic and supergalactic centers. Of course, I could rattle off their coordinates and a few other particulars. But if you are actually interested in understanding the nature of cosmic structure from an astrological point of view, see if you can get through the following. Take it slow and think it through.

A central idea for understanding recent cosmic research is the use and value of various astrological coordinate systems (geo, helio, galactic, etc) as best representing the different levels of our experience. Each system has a center and the word CENTER can mean both the same and yet something different to individuals. Take your own center, for example.

The center about which our life appears to revolve is sacred to us in its ability to reveal or communicate to us the essence or identity of ourselves. The center for

each of us always refers inward to our essence, and yet the center or lifeline of one individual may be a new car at one point in his life, a new wife/husband, or a child at another point. At each point, the meaning of center is inviolate, although the outward form of what we take for our lifeline to the center constantly is changing.

The different kinds of center may be conveniently expressed in the various coordinate systems of astrology. The origin or center chosen should most correspond to the center of gravity, the "kind" of question or inquiry or level being considered. Thus for a study of the personal differences and circumstances and the specific terms of our life, we traditionally use the horizon coordinate system in relation to the zodiac with its familiar M.C., ascendant, houses etc.

Studies of the general terms of mankind (mundane astrology) involve consideration from the center of the earth or geocentric astrology. This is traditional. For a study of the motion and relation of the bodies in our Solar System considered as a functioning whole, the heliocentric ecliptic system with the origin at the sun center would be appropriate. In this coordinate system we could examine the archetypes of life and consciousness, and in general questions traditionally referred to religion, perhaps more recently also considered by some as psychological or spiritual. I call the heliocentric chart the "dharma" chart.

In like manner, galactocentric and super galactocentric coordinates are appropriate for dynamical studies of the larger or more cosmic structure of our reality. For each of us, there are

moments and even days when our awareness is truly of or in synch with cosmic dimensions.

There are different levels of truth or reality. What is essential as the kernel of truth to one may appear to another as one example among many of a larger ordering or structure. When we each refer to our center, around which we revolve, we share in the idea of centers and yet different ones among us revolve around or consider what is central or essential differently. We can agree on that.

All reference to different centers points out simply the lack of Identity or that these seemingly different levels or centers (in fact) form a continuum -- a continuing experience or identification. The following may help clarify this:

All of these larger systems such as the solar system, galaxy, and so forth include us within their reaches like a mother holds a child within her womb. We are the children and particular representatives of the earth, and the solar system, but ALSO of the galaxy and beyond. Their nature, identity, and self is Identical with our own. In fact, we have come through this "outer space" through all the time there is and has been to BE HERE NOW ourselves.

Our day-to-day consciousness continually circulates from more particular awareness to more "cosmic" awareness and back again. We do this all the time. From an astrological perspective, the exercise of various astrological coordinate systems, like exercising our muscles, can serve to remind us that all reference to centers (all referral in fact) indicates an attempt to achieve circulation (circle or cycle) of

identity -- to RE-MEMBER, put back together, or remind ourselves of who we already are and have always been.

In other words: all discovery is self discovery and what we call identification is in fact circulation! Cosmic events and structure are a very consistent and most stable reference frame through which to come to know ourselves. The use of these inclusive meta-coordinate systems is not the symbolic process some suggest, but the symbol in fact is real. We are not working with analogies or, if we are, the analogy is complete down to the specific example through which we discover the virtual process itself -- our Life.

Life or "God" is no beggar, creating a symbolically true but specifically disappointing creation, such that we should have to "touch up" the creation or somehow make the ends meet. The ends already meet! It is we who will change first our attitude and then gradually our approach to this creation.

And these changes in attitude, this reorientation in approach to what is unchanging or everlasting in life, represent the specific areas where the exercise and use of various coordinate systems of understanding our life become important to present day astrologers. To discover our own orientation and inclination -- that we are already perfect representatives of all space and all time, acting out in detail through our persons events of a so called "cosmic" nature that occur in space at remote distance and times.

Supernovae and black holes are not simply some ever-distant cataclysmic events, but are (rather) part of our own everyday experience acted out in fact by

persons within the galaxy of our own experience. The goal of our study and our inquiry into astrology is to re-present and reveal the nature of ourselves and our intimate circulation and connection and identity in the heart of the earth, heart of the sun, heart of the galaxy, heart of the supergalaxy, etc.

In a word ALL IDENTIFICATION IS CIRCULATION (a continuing or circle) and all Inquiry, questioning, and search can but end in the discovery of our self whether "writ small" in the corners of our personal struggle or "writ large" across the very heavens. Again: all self-discovery, all identification, is re-discovery and simple CIRCULATION -- continuity. The process of identification that each of us goes through all the time is how the cosmos circulates information and continues to cohere -- simple cybernetics.

This blog is also part of a video here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Tlilxycr40>

ASTROLOGY: LOCAL ATTRACTION

This is the second of a short series of blogs that (hopefully) point out why cosmic or deep-space astrology offers opportunities for some deep thinking aside from being fascinating. Let's start with sun-sign astrology.

As we look into the sun during the course of a year and describe the qualities of those who are born in the various signs, we succeed in defining NOT the position of the sun, but that of the earth in relation to the sun. As astrologers, this should be second nature to us and it illustrates an important axiom: All inquiry into greater centers does not reveal the nature of that center (in itself), but rather reveals our relationship to that center.

In other words: centers serve to mirror or reflect. Their nature is to reveal to us not THEIR intrinsic nature, but our own. REVELATION of any kind is the sign of communication with greater centers or planes -- revelation, not of some far off distant entity or "God," but always revelation of ourselves and the spirit within us. In a discussion as to the qualities of the centers of the galaxy and super galaxy, we can understand that inquiry into the direction of the sun will reveal the nature of the earth, inquiry into the nature of the galaxy will serve to reveal the nature of our own sun, and inquiry into the Super galaxy will serve to reveal the nature of our galaxy. The idea presented here is that it is the very nature of higher centers to reflect and respond to more particular or local centers.

At this point another very significant axiom emerges: The experience of physical attraction (traction = to draw across or towards) or gravity is primarily a local phenomenon. For instance, we directly respond to the attraction we call gravity of the center of the earth. Our earth responds to the center of the sun, the sun to the galaxy, and so forth. Yet as individuals we are not aware of the pull of the sun on the entire earth, or again: attraction or gravity is a sign of a local phenomenon. Think about it. It pays dividends.

This perhaps will make more sense in our practical affairs if we put it this way: a sign of our communication with higher or "vaster" centers (Spirit or "God") is not physical gravity (graveness) or attraction, but always an ENLIGHTENMENT, the releasing and accepting of the nature of the particular terms (terminals) of our existence. Knowledge of so-called inner planes exhibits itself to us through a process of reflection or mirroring of our self rather than through the presentation to us of something new or somehow "other." Mirroring means we see OUR essential nature, the traditional word is "reflection." In the beginning of meeting a higher source (or teacher) is a reflection not of them, but of us. Of course, when we ourselves begin to reflect others, that is another thing entirely.

In other words, higher centers mirror or reveal to us (reflect) our own self and do not exhibit in themselves a greater intrinsic attractiveness or gravity than we already have. To make this more obvious, we each meet in life individuals who have a great impact on us. Following the above rule, those whom we feel a great

attraction toward and who hold great power over us are only a local phenomenon; they are not really teachers for us. True teachers affect us with their presence by making us realize our own attractiveness and essential nature, not theirs. They enlighten us, not scare us. Of course, each of us is responsible for overcoming our own fears of "otherness," feeling competitive. That is a question of attitude, which is always our problem.

Inquiry into real centers reveal to us our own essential sense of attractiveness. In fact, it is the nature of centers to be non-material or non-physical, by definition. Our inquiry into this realm is limited only by our fear or reluctance to see our self in this mirror, and seeing through the back of the mirror has always been a sign of Initiation. To sum this up: greater centers mirror or reflect our own self and nature, revealing to us our essential identity as already a part of a larger whole, and enlightening us of (or from) our "grave-ness" and the burden of an apparent loneliness or separation from that whole.

With this idea in mind, let us resume our investigation as to the nature of the galactic (26 degrees Sagittarius) and supergalactic (1 degrees Libra) centers. We can expect the galactic center to exercise considerably greater physical attraction than that of the local Super galactic center. In fact, one of the identifying features of the galactic center (GC) at work as revealed in chart analysis (in research by Charles Harvey, Reinhold Ebertin, and many others) is a certain "macho" like quality, a sense of strength and power perhaps typified in the zeal and self-

righteousness of certain extreme religious factions. Or more simply: the tendency in the qualities of Sagittarius and Capricorn of sternness and physical action or "power." That's where these two zodiac signs got that definition even if at the time we had no idea of the galactic center or where it was in the heavens..

Another way to put this is the great ability and power of the GC as represented (when strongly aspected in the natal chart) to move and attract others. We find this feature in the charts of great political and religious leaders who possess the power to move nations to action. The GC figures in these charts in the traditional astrological ways -- by conjunctions and other aspects to the galactic center. We may contrast this "macho-like" quality found in the GC to the qualities that indicate the presence of Super galactic center (SGC) in natal charts. With the SGC we look to the traditional qualities of Virgo and Libra -- that of care, service, reflection, and love. Perhaps the best representative of the supergalactic nature occurs in Buddhism in the idea of compassion and especially in the beloved figure of the Bodhisattva, a being who is literally devoted to the service of all life until ignorance vanishes in every one in complete realization.

We do not find the SGC as physically powerful and moving as we do the GC, at least outwardly. In the west, the traditional god figures are more fierce and full of the "fire and brimstone" approach than of the endless care and service as typified in some of the eastern traditions.

In fact, only in these times we are now living are the "servile" qualities associated with Virgo sun sign coming to be appreciated as a power in themselves. In other words, the SGC represents a non-material or essentially a passive power rather than the more active kind of power as seen in the galactic center Idea. In the Bible it repeatedly says "this came to pass; that came to pass," emphasizing the passive genius, not active in the "doing of things," but rather active in the "undoing of things" that is: helping things to pass from this world. The GC giveth and the SGC taketh away, so to speak.

The SGC is a non-material or spiritual task and genius equally to be valued along with the more active one-who-does-things or brings-things-to-be in this world. We can see these two great archetypes at work in the world, and they may be conveniently studied in their local representatives: the galactic and Super galactic centers and planes.

This blog is also part of a video here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Tlilxycr40>

ASTROLOGY: SO INCLINED

This is the last in this series of blogs relating the different coordinate systems available in astrology to real life. I know, this is abstract stuff folks, and I apologize, but there are a few of you out there who may find this useful. After this I will give you a rest and allow the Christmas holiday to kind of wash over us. Thanks for your patience! Margaret is making pies and the traditional pasty from the Upper Peninsula of Michigan is on the menu thanks to my daughter Anne.

"As Above, So Below ... but after another Manner"

The above familiar occult maxim might be the perfect description of what is involved in the various astrological coordinate systems and their transformations. There are two parts to the maxim. It is easy to communicate the first part, the concept of "wheels within wheels" (larger systems containing within them smaller systems like those Russian Matryoshka dolls), and this has resulted in the popular idea of the chakras or planes (planets) of our experience and self as an ascending hierarchy of levels, each inclusive of the preceding level. It is not quite that simple.

What is not generally appreciated, but becomes increasingly clear when we examine the actual structure of the various cosmic systems, is not only the idea of larger systems embracing the small systems within them (levels), but that each larger system is also differently INCLINED to the preceding one. It should be understood that aside from the often-tedious mathematics involved in coordinate

transformations, there is an accompanying philosophical or psychological adjustment to be made, a shift in viewpoint, a change in the approach or attitude to the subject. This empowerment merits our attention.

So, there is not only an expansion in perspective when we move to a larger coordinate system, but also a reordering of our sense of direction. And it is this reordering that makes it so difficult for us to see beyond our present dimension and get a feel for what is absolutely our inevitable future. There exists what are termed "event horizons," beyond which we cannot understand how life can go on. An example of some event horizons: puberty, marriage, child birth, and death, to name a few of the classics.

We cannot see beyond our present sphere into what our future might be like in these other dimensions because we cannot help but conceive of these events in terms of our present linear line of thought – extending it. However, to pass through these event horizons is not a simple linear extension of what came before. Instead, these changes involve a change in inclination or perspective – a shift. We do not watch our own change, for we are what is in fact in transition or change. We are what is changing. Try watching that.

The idea presented here should be obvious: the crossing of an event horizon involves more than just some expansion or embracing of what we were before. It also involves, and this is the key, a reorientation of perspective on our part, call it a change of approach or attitude -- inclination. The new

dimension or sphere we enter turns out (after our adjustment or change) to reveal our previous or past life in new light – from a different perspective. We see our old behavior and opinions differently in our new approach to life.

It is very difficult to communicate the difference to one who has not yet had that experience. As mentioned, what has changed perhaps most is our **INCLINATION**. We do not want the same things we did want, or want them in a different manner. We are no longer inclined such that we feel the way we used to. We have a new angle on life, one we did not anticipate and in some cases our life may even revolve around a different center than before -- a wife or child, for instance, instead of a new car, etc.

Many of these principles are graphically revealed through the study and exercise of the various astrological coordinate systems. We can map them. To repeat: it is the change in inclination in different coordinate systems that is hard to imagine, not just their inclusivity of one another.

For instance, what may appear in one coordinate system as isolated and independent entities (or anomalies) that are apparently unconnected, when viewed through the lens or perspective of another system may define the basic shape of the system itself. How often in our lives does some singularity appear as if an "other" and foreign entity, but later, when we have experienced several of this type, they become just one of a class, representatives of a similar kind, although at first so unfamiliar. This same event becomes recognizable to us and loses its

threatening quality when seen from another perspective. So "inclination" is key.

I cannot apparently recommend strongly enough the exercise of these various ways or systems for understanding our universe to astrologers practicing today. Here is a list of some of the systems. When you study a coordinate system like the heliocentric coordinate system or the equatorial coordinate system, keep in mind that these systems are more than just numbers and math. They offer an insight into different areas of life and each can be charted or mapped astrologically and interpreted.

COSMIC SYSTEMS AND THEIR CENTERS – A List

1. EARTH/MOON SYSTEM – Geocentric, of course, and includes the Zodiac (ecliptic) Coordinates, the Equatorial Coordinates of Right Ascension and Declination, which are inclined by about 23.4 degrees to the zodiac, and the Horizon Coordinates, which can be inclined at almost any angle to the others. Also the orbit of the Moon is inclined by 5.145-degrees to the zodiac.

2. SOLAR SYSTEM -- center: sun

3. LOCAL SYSTEM (Gould's Belt) -- This is a group of some 10.8 stars of which the sun is a member. The Local System, originally thought to be a minute galaxy embedded with the Milky Way, is considered to be an ellipsoid of 700x200 parsecs with the long axis parallel to the New galactic Longitudes 160 degrees/340 and located in Orion-Cygnus spiral arm. The centroid of the Local System is in Virgo at about 15-degrees Virgo 25' in the zodiac, with nodes to the

Ecliptic at 10 degrees 22' of Sagittarius (North node) and Gemini. The system is inclined to the ecliptic by about 66-degrees. Note – positions are of the Epoch 1950.0.

4. LOCAL GALAXY -- The Milky Way. Estimated to contain 10 to the 11th stars, The galaxy is a disc-like structure with a diameter of some 30,000 parsecs, a central ellipsoidal nucleus of about 4000 parsecs, and an average disc thickness of several hundred parsecs. The nodes and center (about 27-degrees of Sagittarius) in relation to the ecliptic are given elsewhere. The sun is located some 10,000 from the galactic center.

5. LOCAL GROUP OF GALAXIES -- The local group includes about a score of member galaxies...the largest of which is the Andromeda galaxy (M-31), our galaxy, and M-31 revolve around a common center of mass roughly in the direction of 27-degree of the zodiac sign Aries.

6. LOCAL SUPERGALAXY -- Our galaxy is part of a vast flattened super system of galaxies some 40 megaparsecs in diameter, with the center (1-degrees of Libra) in the great Virgo Cluster some 12-16 megaparsecs from our sun.

MUSIC: MAKING BLUES TIME: CAN YOU MAKE TIME?

[If you like or are interested in time, then you might want to read this. Better than read it, take TIME to actually listen to me tell this story. It says more to hear it. For those who don't have time for this or can't make time, well, you don't have time.]

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bb4AMXihroA>

This little blog is one of my convoluted, thinking out loud, ramblings, so you have been warned. Probably not for everyone.

Clock time may be static, but real time, the kind you and I live, is dynamic. It not only varies in perceived speed and quality, but it varies individually. We can both look at our watches and share the same clock time, but beyond that, time for me may be condensed and for you expanded, or vice versa. Just as you can't tell a book by its cover, we can't know what kind of time other folks are having internally, but we can sometimes get a sense of it. I found this out through listening to blues music, generally, and hearing the great blues artists performing live in particular. You may be moved by some other kind of music, but for me I like the blues. Substitute your favorite music here please. The truth of hearing remains the same.

In the great blues players I can feel something coming from inside of them, something not in my experience, yet something I can recognize and still respond to.

Blues strikes a chord in my mind. At the very least I know that somewhere deep within me there is some kind of 'receiver' that knows authentic music when I hear it. It is a little like the old story of the Pied Piper of Hamelin. Part of me can't help but respond and move to the authentic blues. And then there is "blues time," which is the reason for this blog.

I have been writing about this for years, but like so many things in life, it is hard to get a witness. Music is not just something to listen to. It is also about time, and the great blues artists can't help but structure their songs around their own internal sense of time.

We have all heard of "quality time," but there also are qualities of musical time.

Consider the old idea of marching to a different drummer. Other than looking at your watch, time is not a constant, but variable. I learned about this many years ago while reading the journals of the writer Franz Kafka. Kafka let fall a sentence, which went something like this: "Each sentence I write, it already has perfection." It took me some years to fully appreciate what he was saying, which put simply I believe is:

We can try and learn to write poems or play music, imitate the great artists (copy their style or whatever) in an attempt at a close approximation to what we read or listen to. We want to do it too. Of course, we all have to learn the basics of writing or playing an instrument, but there is another way to do this other than imitate, which is what Kafka was pointing out.

Rather than try for a series of successive approximations (imitations) to what we feel is good outside of us in another artist or player, whether it be in writing, music, or what-have-you... instead we can work on perfecting our own mind until, as Kafka put it, everything we write or play already has perfection (of some kind), because we do. I would ask you to consider this concept very carefully. It was a key lesson for me.

Rather than learning from the outside in, as is commonly taught (by imitation), we can also learn from the inside out, with the bonus that we end up being original, or at least as original as we are capable of being. With that thought in mind, now let's return to 'blues time.'

These great blues artists are not just good because they practiced a lot, but are 'good' because of 'who' they are through the wisdom of their experience. Many of them have reached a point in life experience where everything they do is somehow authentic. Why? Because they are authentic (at least compared to many of us), and this includes their music. I spent years learning to play the riffs of the great blues harmonica players, when my time would have been better spent improving my mind, you know, improving who I am, the one who is playing all this music.

Having heard most of the great blues artists in person, often many times, I can attest that musical time is individual, a direct reflection of the mind of the player. That I am sure you will agree with, but try this:

As listeners, these great blues artists create or 'make time' in their own image, and here is the remarkable

part: you and I can hear and even take a trip with them on their sense of time, not just our own, and learn from it too. I don't know exactly how it works, but the real artists make and know time that is not only different from ordinary clock time, but different from the time that you and I live. When we listen deeply, we let go of our personal sense of time and get on their (perhaps more experienced) time. I mean, that's what makes the music we respond to so powerful, the kind of time it offers us, like 'good' time or even a great time.

We take a ride or trip on their time, the artist's time, and their time may be (I don't have the words) more spacious, expanded, open, deep, etc. than our own. And in that sense of expanded time the artist creates, we experience both time and life a little differently than we do just on our own. We go for a ride on their time, perhaps feel or learn something while out there in their music, and then, when the music stops, come back and pick up on our own time again. Am I making myself clear?

Anyway I find this concept of living to alternative time through music fascinating, and have tested it again and again over the years. I have told this following story before, but it belongs here, so I will tell it again.

Years ago, while on one of our trips to Chicago to hear the great blues players, my brother Dan and I went into a little place on the north side where the great blues artist Howlin' Wolf was playing. It was kind of late and the place was almost empty. There was the Wolf sitting on a wooden chair way up front, while

next to him the legendary guitar player Hubert Sumlin was playing, just the two of them.

It was quite dark in there too, with a little lamp shining on Wolf. I don't know if those of you reading this have ever heard Howlin' Wolf sing, but if not, you are missing something important, that is, if you like the blues. Anyway, Wolf was singing and he was singing on his time, not mine. It was so intense and spacious that I naturally kind of fell in with his time and pretty soon I was living it with him. He was making time and it was stronger than my own sense of time. He could make time better than I knew how. I went for a ride on Wolf's time.

As I listened in that little club, everything around me, the walls, the chairs, the dim lights, and so on, became completely transparent. In the piercing sound of Wolf I found myself suspended in space, no longer in a little room in Chicago, but just out there, somewhere in the universe, a mind just floating in space. My local reality all just went void or perhaps I saw through the veil of the flesh for the time it took for Wolf to play. And no, I was not high.

In a way it was terrifying, and at the same time exhilarating, that sense of space and time Howlin' Wolf laid down. I was definitely on Wolf's time, and I took a trip with him in his mind, and forgot about my own. Or was I just seeing that my mind was his mind, but just inexperienced and unexpanded? Who knows. I guess you could use the old phrase "he was blowin' my mind!" Anyway, there you have it.

As you can see from reading this account, marching to Wolf's time had the effect of reordering my own

experience somewhat, and then returning me to what I call normal, but not without an affect. We are changed through life processes like I am describing, whether we know and remember them or not. Powerful music, art, or writing can actually change us on the inside, and introduce us to alternate realities that help to open us up and expand or modify our own sense of time. We are affected by great art and music, as in: actually changed.

And there are many other great blues players (and of course, not just blues) who can share their expanded sense of time with us. I mean: what is music anyway? Why and how does it affect us? That's what I am trying to get at here.

Have you experienced this too?

MUSIC: PERSONAL MEMORIES OF THE ANN ARBOR BLUES FESTIVALS

I want to write about my personal memories of that first Ann Arbor Blues Festival in early August of 1969. I already wrote the text for a whole (award-winning) book about the festival, but it was mostly the general history of the festival. You can find it here:

http://www.amazon.com/Blues-Black-White-Landmark-Festivals/dp/0472116959/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1386328730&sr=8-1&keywords=blues+in+black+and+white

I have yet to write my own personal story of that event, so I am working on this for a short video I am putting together. I thought I might post some thoughts here, if you don't mind. And I have to back up a bit and first talk about how it was for me way back then in the 1960s.

I will start by saying that in every life there are turning points, forks in the road, which if taken, change our life. That first Ann Arbor Blues Festival in 1969 was such an event for me. I have never been the same since nor wanted to be.

When I am asked how I happened to miss an event like the great Woodstock festival in August of 1969. (Aug. 15-18), my answer is simple enough. I was still in the throes of (and I am still recovering) from the landmark Ann Arbor Blues Festival two weeks earlier (Aug. 1-3), which in my life was an even more important cultural event: a gathering together of some of the greatest living blues masters in an event that

could never be repeated because of impermanence. Some performers died later that very year, and today almost none of them are still alive. That first blues festival in 1969 and the one that followed it in 1970 were basically one-time events, but I need to preface all of this.

What is called the Sixties did not really start until the middle of that decade, in 1965 to be exact. It was in the summer of 1965 that the band "Grateful Dead" formed in the Bay Area, but the cultural event we call the 1960s did not have just a single starting location. Like a hot rash, it broke out all over this country and then spread to the world. I should know because I was there and came up during that time.

In fact, in that same summer of 1965 in Ann Arbor, Michigan my brother Dan and I formed the Prime Movers Blues Band. We had never heard of the Grateful Dead. What we now call the Sixties arose all across the nation more or less simultaneously, especially where LSD had done its work. In my opinion, the common catalyst, the true cause of what we call the Sixties was the advent of LSD in this country around 1964; the original Sandoz patents for LSD had expired in 1963, so the drug was free to travel and it did.

LSD was literally a game (and mind) changer for a whole generation; it opened up vast mental vistas that are still being explored today, over fifty years later. I dropped acid in May of 1964 in Berkeley California, where I was spending a year. I had tried various drugs before that, including marijuana, peyote, speed, and even codeine – that kind of thing. As I have

written many times, only LSD really got my attention. In fact it was, believe it or not, my introduction to the dharma, to the way things actually are in the mind.

LSD showed me that the outside world I saw and believed in was the result of my own inner projections, including my likes, dislikes, biases, and prejudices. LSD cut through the stagnant mental firewall of the 1950s like a blowtorch. The genie was out of the bottle and not about to go back in anytime soon. It was what I saw on LSD that fueled my interest in phenomenology, the study of my own consciousness and mind. And later it was the dharma that organized it for me and provided a path or method for continued development and even more awareness.

I have thought about these things for fifty years, and I can find no other cause - principle cause - for what we call the Sixties other than the advent of LSD on the scene. It was the single main catalyst that sparked what has been called the hippie revolution. Not everyone took acid, but most of the leaders of that movement did. It changed the mind of a generation, one person at a time. LSD gave an entire generation the courage and will to overturn the status-quo in favor of a new reality, one based on direct experience.

... to be continued.

[The graphic is the cover of a book with blues photos of those first two Ann Arbor Blues Festivals by Stanley Livingston, perhaps the best blues photographs I have ever seen. The book was designed and laid out by my brother Tom Erlewine. I

wrote the text, short bios of artists, an interview with Howlin' Wolf I did, and the history of the festivals.]

MUSIC: THE ANN ARBOR BLUES FESTIVALS

AND

THE PRIME MOVERS BLUES BAND

Although we were not students or connected to the University of Michigan or officially part of the Ann Arbor Blues Festival committee, we were easily identified with blues music in the Ann Arbor area, because we played it all the time. That's how we came to be part of the festivals.

Our band (the Prime Movers Blues Band) was perhaps the first of the new 1960s-style groups in the Ann Arbor/Detroit area, having formed in the summer of 1965. Although some 37 musicians moved through the band over time, the main players were my brother Dan on lead guitar and myself as lead singer and amplified Chicago-style harmonica, sometimes rhythm guitar, Robert Sheff (AKA "Blue" Gene Tyranny" on keyboards, Jack Dawson (or Ilene Silverman) on Bass, and James Osterberg (Iggy Pop) or J.C. Crawford on drums.

We never recorded much and what we did apparently was lost. However, my brother Stephen Erlewine dug a bunch of old moldy reel-to-reel tapes of the Prime Movers out of his basement some years ago. What they amount to is about two sets of songs, one early in our career, and one later. That's all we have! For those who want to hear what we sounded like, here are some songs from back then:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sZO5bsagUqY>

We had been into listening, studying, and playing the blues for years. Moreover, we had been to Chicago a number of times, down to the South and West Side of Chicago to hear the great blues artists play in their own clubs. We saw Little Walter, Buddy Guy, Junior Wells, Howlin' Wolf, Muddy Waters, Magic Sam, and many other blues artists live on their own turf, so we just knew more about the music and the players than most of the students putting on the festival; It was a natural fit. And we were probably more excited about the festival than they were.

As for myself, I was enthused beyond imagining that almost all of my blues heroes were coming to Ann Arbor and would play here. After all, aside from looking for someone to love, about all I did in those days was listen to, study, and play the blues, tracing out the history of this or that artist and trying to hear something of everything they put out.

I have been told that by my almost exclusive interest in Black Music I missed a lot of other music, music by my peers, which just makes my point. From where I stood, most modern (white) musicians back then were doing the same thing I was doing, listening to the great artists, which in blues and jazz means mostly black artists. Why would I be listening to my peers when I could hear Muddy Waters and Big Walter Horton live or on records. Same with Dylan. I had travelled with Bob Dylan back in 1961, and helped him put on his concert at the Michigan Union in Ann Arbor, so I knew him some. Although Dylan was very bright, to me he was just another folk-music traveling guy like myself. This was before he was "Bob Dylan."

Why should I listen to him in particular? Both he and I were listening to groups like the Swan Silvertones, The Mighty Clouds of Joy, and others. Looking back from today, I can see why Dylan was special, but you get the idea.

Artists like Janice Joplin interested me not at all. I had met Joplin and even hung out with her at the Grande Ballroom drinking whiskey. Well, she drank most of the whiskey. It was fun to meet her, but as to her music, I am reminded of a story told to me by the great poster artist Stanley Mouse when I interviewed him some years ago. Mouse said that Joplin rehearsed in (I believe he said) an old firehouse. One day the police showed up at the door because they had reports of a woman screaming. Now, that's funny!

So if you get the idea that in those years I was very myopic, you would be right. I was focused on blues music and some jazz. And we were playing that music wherever we could, in particular at a black bar down on Anne Street in Ann Arbor, a one-block section of black businesses. It was called Clint's Club.

We were performing there several days a week for \$35 a night, and that was for the whole band, all five members. Let's see, that adds up to \$7 a night for each of us. But even promises of real money failed to distract me from my study of the blues.

I have told this story before, but at one point a subsidiary of Motown came up to Ann Arbor from Detroit in long black limousines and proceeded to court our group, the Prime Movers Blues Band. It seems they wanted to find a group of white musicians

that could play black music. We were sometimes racially mixed, but mostly white players.

For a while they drove us around in those limousines and painted wonderful scenarios for us. For example, they arranged for my brother Dan and I to have lunch with none other than Don and Phil Everly, the Everly Brothers. Wow! What a thrill that was sitting at a table for four with our heroes. I'll never forget it.

However the romance did not last long. When it came right down to where the rubber meets the road, they wanted us to play songs that they gave us, with no freedom on our part to choose. I am sure that they probably knew a lot more than we did what would be good for us to make hits. However, I was not a bit interested in being their musical puppet. We totally refused to do what they wanted, and that was the end of the limousines. No more Everly Brothers.

Looking back, we probably refused what could have been a big break, but at the time (and even now) I never blinked. All I did was study, practice, and attempt to play the blues music we so respected. And then came the festivals.

... to be continued.

The graphic is by my brother Tom Erlewine, who designed the book "Blues in Black and White: The Landmark Ann Arbor Blues Festivals," for which I wrote the text. You can read more about the book here: <http://www.bluesinblackandwhite.com/>

DHARMA: DRUGS AND THE DHARMA

Note: If you have time, listen to this blog rather than read it:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2xoxoi11elw>

I should know better than to talk about drugs and the dharma in the same sentence, and I usually don't. Encouraging drug use is not my intention. My view is that you cannot improve the mind with drugs, alcohol, or even caffeine. Aside from the need for some training, the mind is perfect just as it is. And it would seem that there really is no obvious link between drugs and the dharma in this country. However, there is one indirect link that to me it is very interesting, and worth risking a discussion.

In my experience drugs are not per-se "dharmic," with one exception, LSD. And, although they may not be popular, here are my thoughts on acid and the dharma:

In my experience, the direct results of LSD had very much to do with the nature of the mind and how it worked. When acid came on the scene in the early 1960s, it was not just another fun high like marijuana. It struck at the core of the 1950's fixed mentality and split it wide open. In a short time the genie was out of the bottle.

It is a testimony to the universality of the truth of the dharma that it does not have to come in a Tibetan, Indian, Chinese, or Japanese wrapper. Rather, the dharma is like the laws of nature, right up there with gravity and sunshine. It just is. We don't break the

laws of nature; they break us. It is the same with the dharma. We work with it and not against it.

When LSD came along and laid bare some of the internal workings of the mind, that was my first real dharma lesson. Like a mental tsunami, that very first taste of acid left in its wake chaos and instability, but also insights and clarity for many of us. And it certainly did not have the name of dharma stamped on it, but it was very dharmic.

Then, when almost a decade later great dharma masters like Chögyam Trungpa came to America, they made quick work of our acid trips. It suddenly all made sense. And unlike those of us with acid

experience, where we might have this insight right, but had no idea where it fit into the overall scheme of life, the dharma had a place for it. Everything we saw in the light of LSD fit together with the dharma teachings like plugging a piece into a jigsaw puzzle. It was a natural fit.

I had been to the brightest minds I knew (like the Catholic Jesuits) and shared my acid experience asking for an explanation, but they did not have a clue. "Have faith," was about all they said. With my LSD experiences I had somehow ventured beyond the pale of society's consensus and into uncharted waters, territory usually reserved for shamans and those who find themselves in alternate realities and states of mind. I was like a voice crying in the wilderness and there were suddenly millions of us in chorus. We could not really sort it out. What we were seeing was just too different. Like the dharma itself, LSD was a wakeup call.

When the great Mahasiddha Chögyam Trungpa came on the scene in the early 1970s, all that changed. He was totally at home with whatever we had come across in the mind on acid and never blinked. In fact, it is reputed that Trungpa once took LSD and his only comment was "Nothing happened!" Not only was acid not a challenge for Trungpa, but he was able to show people like myself how each insight into the nature of the mind that LSD had given us fit into an overall approach to training the mind that was centuries old – the dharma.

Everything my generation could throw at Trungpa just became more grist for his mill. Believe me friends, THAT was impressive and he immediately tamed thousands of us who had fallen into the scary habit of thinking that we each must be the Lone Ranger (and somehow unique) because of our LSD experiences. Trungpa could settle that question with a simple comment. Nothing we saw in the mind was news to him. Out of the chaos of our acid experiences Trungpa made order. And we just got in line.

What we had seen on acid was the truth or part of it. We knew that. Like a piece of a puzzle, we had no idea where this or that insight fit in. Trungpa showed how all our pieces fit into the larger picture and we agreed. We got it. At least in my case, these two powers changed my life, first LSD, and then Trungpa, who helped make sense of it all. He pointed out that the dharma was a method, a path to awakening, not just a philosophy.

I tell this story because it explains my ambivalence when it comes to drugs. I never got much out of any

drugs (except some entertainment), with the exception of LSD. But I would be a liar if I denied that I learned an inestimable amount from taking that drug.

That being said, I should hasten to point out that I sincerely believe that acid was useful at a particular time in history when the fixed dichotomy of the current thinking of that time needed some air, and acid was a shortcut to the future. It paved the way for what we call the 1960s and, IMO, was the principle catalyst for that revolution. Nothing else came close.

And the fact that what we saw on LSD turned out to be part of the dharma is a testimony to its truth and universality. Thank goodness that the Tibetans, driven out of their own country, wandered into America and showed us where the pieces of the puzzle of the mind that we saw on acid fit. Once I found the dharma, drugs no longer interested me.

SOME ELABORATION

I would be surprised if many readers know how much of our worldview is embedded in what we call the self and its perspective. I had little to no idea in the early 1960s that what we see out there in the world is very much what we project from our mind in here. We are brought up to believe that what we see in the world around us is objective fact, simply the way things are, the way it is.

I had my first clue that I had it pretty-much backward on May 6, 1964 while I was living in Berkeley California for a year and I had just dropped LSD for the first time. And acid was so new back then that what I took was some from the original Sandoz

Laboratories in Switzerland. No need to describe my whole trip or to warn you off from running out and taking LSD today. That was then and this is now. For one, acid has changed and the need and the times for it have really changed, but back then LSD was a segue into a new time for an entire generation.

My point here is, aside from literally blowing my mind, the main take-away from that first acid trip was the realization that much of what we see out there in the world is what we project from deep in here. I don't mean that I just understand it as a concept, but rather that it was then that I realized in real-time my mind's projections. I will give one clear example.

Back then we had mostly heard stories of acid and few had yet experienced it. The rumor was that LSD was anything you thought it was, which turned out to be more-or-less true.

Despite my attempts to make sure I was in a secure location when I dropped acid, I was not. I made the person who was chaperoning me promise that no matter what I said to the contrary, she would not leave me alone. I was afraid what I might do. Clear enough? Yet, the first time I told her I was fine and that she should go, she split. Bam! My influence with her was just too strong. She just believed me!

Anyway, there I was, totally immersed in the phantasmagoria of an acid trip and loose on the streets of Berkeley California very late at night. And here is an example of the truths of acid.

As I passed a dark alley I could hear laughter. And as I peered into the darkness I could see someone

coming toward me. It was a black couple. They were drunk and kind of stumbling in my direction. I could see that the woman was leaning into the man and clinging to his waist. I was apprehensive because back then blacks and prejudice went hand-in-hand. I instinctively drew back.

Then the couple emerged into the streetlight at the end of the alley and they were white! Not only were they white, they were just a couple of college kids out on a date having fun, not even drunk. What was I to think about my first reaction?

Well, what I thought was that in the quick-silver speed of acid I had somehow intercepted my ingrained prejudice and in that slow-motion time that LSD can provide I could suddenly see the wizard behind the curtain, who actually was perhaps more like an idiot. As mentioned earlier, this was not a thought or an understanding. This was a real-time living movie that I was in and I had just stepped behind the curtain of the self for the very first time. My bias, prejudice, and ingrained reactions were suddenly out of the bag and obvious to me. I had finally seen my own projections.

I had actually caught myself in a contradiction and seen for the first time that the world I lived in was a movie screen upon which I projected what I had learned or been taught to project, all my likes, dislikes, biases, and prejudice. I was stunned.

And the whole acid trip that night was like that. In that LSD experience I awoke to real-time psychology. I was suddenly a player within my own mind, and no

longer just an onlooker. From that day forward I was a full-time phenomenologist. I had stepped behind the curtain of the self where the projector is located and was soon fiddling with the gears. I was never the same again, and that is a good thing.

In the crew-cut straight-jacket mental world of the 1950s from which I was emerging, I (and everyone I knew) was wrapped way too tight to have any real kind of life. The whole society was similarly frozen, staring at the same locked-step movie that I had just stepped out of. Imagine that!

And I was not alone. My whole generation soon joined me and we stepped through the back of the mirror together and then down the rabbit hole without as much as a goodbye to the status quo. It was total freedom compared to where we came from. We finally understood... something.

Of course, it is not quite that simple. What I saw on acid that first trip took me years to absorb and even longer to stabilize, which is why I don't recommend drugs. They takes too long to settle down.

Anyway, dharma practice can do the same thing and without the dangers and need to stabilize. But back in 1964, dharma in America had not reached so far as Berkeley or Ann Arbor Michigan, at least not in a form that I could assimilate.

It was then that I began to study my own reactions in earnest. And they were not few, but many. It appeared that I reacted to almost anything and all the time. My personal likes and dislikes filtered almost everything I experienced, and it was not like my tastes

were something special. The net effect was that I was looking through prescription eyeglasses that were anything but rose-colored. Pure, unfiltered experience had not been on my menu. I was a creature not only of habit, but of bias and prejudice, slammed against the walls of the mind by my every passing reaction. And until I began to develop some awareness of all this, I never even knew all this was happening.

The social mindset that emerged from the 1950s was pretty much airtight. Those my age that I knew had no clue either. All of this started to loosen up in the early 1960s, in my opinion largely because of the advent of LSD. That may not be a popular observation, but to the best of my experience it is the truth. Acid exposed the unity of the observer and the observed to most of an emerging generation. We began to witness our own projections and in particular the fact that the strict dichotomy of the subject and the object was not true.

It was the Heisenberg principle incarnate; the fact that the state of our mind directly influences what we see and believe is out there in the external world. LSD unhinged an entire generation and the door of the mind blew wide. We never came back to the 1950s mindset from which we emerged. Suddenly it was the Sixties and there was lot's to do.

Watching the kaleidoscope of the mind reveal its secrets one by one was riveting. The concrete iceberg of who knows how many previous generations was melting and breaking up, a chunk at a time. And whatever spirit had been trapped in that frozen state was freed and lived once again.

So even before the dharma poured into this country, it was already at work here. When great teachers like Chögyam Trungpa arrived on the scene, they just showed us how to do it properly, practice methods that really worked. However, the collective mind was already waking up even before that.

Your thoughts and reactions please.

STORY: HOW I FELL IN LOVE AND GOT MARRIED

Through all my early years, despite all the other interests and activities I had going on, deep within me, there was this search to find my life partner, the woman that I would love and who possibly could also love me. I am not always that easy to be around.

And I can't forget all those late-night walks around Ann Arbor when I was unable to sleep, just walking the streets hoping against hope to run into "her." Well, as it turned out, it wasn't quite that easy. It took time for me to settle down and even be ready for marriage. Here is my story.

As a musician about town, there were always women who wanted to get to know me, but I grew tired of dating, one-night stands, and short flings. I wanted someone that I really loved and to be with her for the rest of my life, you know, the traditional marriage, a partner. And that is apparently a lot to ask from the universe. Anyway, she sure took her sweet time in showing up, but she finally did and I am thankful for that.

Perhaps I had first to build a nest. For many years I had slept on a tiny mattress that I had specially made. It was so thin, little more than a pallet on the floor, and very, very narrow, not built for two. But then in the January of 1971 I found myself getting rid of the mat in favor of a real mattress, in fact, a waterbed, something I didn't need, so who was it for? I'm sure I didn't know, but it was some kind of ritual all the same. Or was it a case of coming events casting their shadow?

As mentioned, I had kind of reached the end of trying to get together with this woman or that -- flings. At the time, my latest attempt was with a young lady who had a room right across the hall from me at 114 N. Division, the so-called "Prime Mover House," where members of my band stayed. I had lived there for some seven years. We both did our best to put something together. In the end it did not work out well. That great love I yearned for and wanted to feel was just not there. We were not even friendly after that and I can't remember if she moved out or was still living across the hall at the time of this story. And I am getting to what happened next, the good part.

I used to play music on Monday nights, just myself and my old Wurlitzer piano, at a bar called the Odyssey. It was on Huron Street in Ann Arbor, just off Main Street. If I remember right, Wednesday was "Wine Night" at the Odyssey and they served this cheap Boone's Farm stuff, but we drank it just the same. So once in a while I would wander down on wine night to hear a band I liked called "Buddies in the Saddle." And way up at the front was a big wide table, sort of reserved for the locals; at least all my friends would sit there. It was set parallel to the stage.

So there I was, sitting on the far side of that table from the stage, right in the middle of wine night, but drinking orange juice. My love of alcohol was an on and off thing. I never drank all that much and when I did, I was often sorry. Anyway, I knew most, but not all, of the people at our table that night, but certainly not the dark-haired woman sitting across from me to my right and perched on an old piano. But she had

apparently noticed my orange juice and made a point of calling me out on it, and loudly, so everyone could hear. After all, this was wine night.

"Drinking orange juice? What are you, some kind of pansy?" Well, that got my attention for sure, and she probably had no idea that as a performer I had no qualms about speaking up in a group or that I was not as shy as the orange-juice guy she thought she was teasing. I could be direct too, so I got right in her face, but in a friendly way. I probably made her squirm a bit and wish she had just left me alone. I can't remember exactly what she said in response to my challenge, but the last part of it was something to the effect she wanted no more conversation with me and that "this is the end of it!" And then something really strange happened, something that has occurred only one or twice in my life.

And that is, as I responded to her ending our conversation, I suddenly could hear my own voice speaking in the silence of my mind as if I were listening to my own self talk, as I said out loud: "This is not the end; this is just the beginning!" As I spoke I found my own words ringing in my head and took them in as almost some kind of cosmic message. "What was that all about?" I thought, and then dropped it. Nothing much else happened that night.

Instead, it all happened about a week later at a favorite Ann Arbor bar called "Mr. Flood's Party," a place that I sometimes performed at. They had a high (but small) stage that looked out over the room, and nestled right near and under that stage was a long

booth, one that could seat a bunch of people, but you had trouble getting out of because of the length.

I was sitting in Floods having a beer with a group of friends. I was kind of wedged in there, but all was good until the woman I had been having that relationship with walked in. Now, as I mentioned earlier, we were not getting along and I could tell from the look she gave me as she came through the door and spied me sitting there that she was out for blood. Worse, there I was, stuck at the far end of the booth and surrounded by friends. She had me in the perfect spot to excoriate me in public, which I assumed she was about to do. And she quickly sat down at the end near the door, blocking my exit. I was trapped.

Well, I couldn't have that, so while everyone's attention was on this woman, and before she could settle in, I slipped over the back of the booth and was out of there, heading deeper into the bar looking for a seat and hopefully more friends, pleased that I had escaped what could have only been a bad scene. However, as I looked I could see that all the tables were full and the only open seats were a few barstools.

As I moved along the bar, in front of me I saw that dark-haired lady that had teased me at wine night. She was sitting on a barstool, and there was an open seat right next to her. Any port in a storm, thought I, and quickly slipped onto the seat beside her, saying something like, "Hello you nasty old woman," to remind her who I was and what she had tried to do to me last week. She smiled.

Yet it seemed that my sitting down with her was OK and we were soon trading small talk. It turned out that her name was Margaret. And then the most amazing thing happened. She told me that she already knew who I was and that we used to live just down the street from one another, and would at times pass each other walking from here to there.

When she said that, I remembered seeing her one day while I was carrying some stuff from Circle Books (the metaphysical bookstore up on State Street where I worked) to my room on Division Street, and back, about two blocks away. To get there I would cut through the corner of the church lawn at Huron and State. And there, sitting on some low steps at a side entrance to the church was this same young lady. I remember that when our eyes met that day by the church my heart went out to her, and perhaps that feeling was returned. I don't know. It was just something a little magical that had happened in passing. I was always hoping to meet the "One."

Anyway, sitting on that bar stool in Mr. Flood's Party that night, it all came back to me. And when I realized who she was, I looked into her eyes more intensely and one of the most profound moments in my life just spontaneously arose. In a flash I was somehow looking through and beyond her personality and deep within her mind. And I was struck to the heart by the purity and innocence I saw there, despite the attempts on her part to appear tough and world-wise.

She seemed so completely vulnerable and open to me. To my surprise, all I wanted to do was to endlessly care for and love this woman, and protect

her from the sorrows and sufferings of what I knew life could bring. I had never felt this way about anyone before, not even close.

At the same time that I was overcome with feelings of wanting to care for this girl I had just met, I also had a metaphysical revelation as I tend to do. I am always having these insights and visions. For all these years I had been looking for someone just like me, but of course a woman -- some other one. There was me (this one) and I was looking for my counterpart (another one), who would love me like I loved her. And this is a little hard to explain, so please bear with me.

Then, in that moment at the bar, I realized for the very first time that in all the world that there was no other "one," but as the Greek philosopher Parmenides had pointed out so long ago: "being alone is." There has never been two, but all along only one. My idea of "alone" and being alone, which I had held close all those years morphed on the spot into a new concept, that of "all one," almost the same word. I got it.

It became clear to me that all dualities resolve into one, sooner or later. So, there was no independent being, "me," over here and then another independent being in "her" over there. Yes, there were two persons, but only one being. Being alone is! Well, being alone was all I had ever known, but this being all-one was new to me, and quite welcome. And in that moment, for me, the two became one.

I can't expect to be understood here; I can only tell it like it was, as I remember it. Anyway, in that moment when I looked into her eyes, all of this just happened,

and without thinking. I write it here in words, but in reality it just happened. I finally understood that the two are already one and always have been so. And it was Margaret's person through whom I realized this eternal truth.

And to take a note from the movie "Jerry McGuire," she had me from that first moment of insight into her purity. I was gone, no longer looking or able to honestly continue in good faith to look outside myself for some mysterious "other," for I had just realized that there was (and could be) no other "one." It was a logical impossibility. But there 'was' Margaret, and it was she through whom I realized this. I took this as a good sign and just naturally responded.

And I felt that unless someone like me, who could see how precious she was, cared for and shielded her from the harshness of life, she, like a rare flower, might be lost in the struggles life brings. I could not bear the thought of this and, in that instant (and probably for the first time in my life) I put someone else's welfare above my own – Margaret's.

I guess, at least for me, that's what love is. There was no way I could just have walked on by her in my life (as I had with other relationships) and just leave her there. Not possible. And it was already too late for that. For the first time I felt personally responsible for another human being and, as mentioned, I was more concerned with caring for her than I was for my own comfort. And that was news!

You might say that it was love at first sight from that very first moment when I looked deep within her mind (or my mind) -- whatever. And for me, that was it. I

was hooked. I had already and without question said "I do" or "I will" to her in my mind, but she didn't know it yet. In truth I was as married as I have ever been from that night on, and not three months later when we held the ceremony.

Anyway, later that evening Margaret and I left the bar together and, for the most part, have never been separated since. As mentioned, we got married a few months later and have remained so for going on 43 years. Lest you get the wrong idea that marriage for me is just a dream, it's not. It is hard work, but what they say about death and old age fits here, it beats the alternative. At least that is my view.

I share this to point out what I have come to know love is and how it happened. So that's the story of how I fell in love and got married. I was thirty years old. She was twenty-three. Today we have four grown kids, three daughters, a son, and one dog.

Let's hear your story if you want to share it.

[Here are some shots of Margaret I took on video back in 1971 soon after we were married, when the two of us ran a greenhouse in the middle of winter in Evart Michigan. Isn't she lovely.]

SUBSTANCES: CAN YOU SMELL THE COFFEE?

What you are looking at here is a very large (and deep) bag of freshly roasted coffee beans from our friends at Higher Grounds (fair-trade) Coffee in Traverse City. I don't know how many pounds this is, but it is enough. Enough for what you might ask?

It is enough for the recording session starting today at our studio (Heart Center Studios) here in Big Rapids, Michigan, for a new solo album by my daughter May Erlewine, with her husband Seth Bernard on guitar, Josh Davis on keyboards (and who knows what else), Dominic John (bass player for Jack White) on bass, jazz-drummer Mike Shimmin on drums, and I am sure a few others. Ian Gorman will engineer it. A few of us will get to drop by and take a listen if we are quiet.

We started getting ready for this a few days ago and the session will go on until next Wednesday, thus all the coffee beans. There will be some serious coffee drinking taking place because these kinds of recording sessions can go on until late at night.

Unfortunately for me, I will be drinking no coffee, although I am free to breathe in the smell of it that will be all around me. It is not that I don't love coffee; I do. I even have a couple of very nice Italian espresso makers around the house somewhere, one of which I bring out on special occasions, but I no longer allow myself to imbibe.

For one, I found out years ago that even if I drink decaf, I won't sleep a wink. And the real stuff will keep me awake for a day or two in a state of trancelike buzz, for sure. So, although I love the smell, taste,

and zip that coffee brings, I had to give it up many years ago. And there is an even more interesting reason I don't partake anymore, and that is creativity.

I am speaking here only for me; your mileage may differ. I find that caffeine in about any form gets a buzz on. I definitely get a lot more done on a couple of cups of java a day, but I discovered a problem with that some years ago. Caffeine in my body is like white noise on a stereo; it fills the bandwidth of my mind with meaningless static. And you can be sure that I checked this out, not just a few times, but for some years. When it comes to giving up something I am addicted to, I am very scientific.

I write a lot, as you already know. As I became more aware of my own internal system, I found that although I wrote a lot more on coffee, the next day upon re-reading what I wrote, it was flat – not very creative in my understanding of that word.

Well, I didn't like that, so I began to write without coffee in my veins and I found I was much more spontaneous, and that those little bubbles of creativity from deep down inside me more easily came to my awareness and presented the best of me. As mentioned, I tried this over and over again.

Somehow, although coffee definitely speeds me up, it is more smoke and not a lot of fire. As mentioned, it definitely gets the buzz on, but that buzz, like white-noise on the radio, just obscures the more creative parts of me from registering the fine points. I used to think that because when I had coffee I wrote a lot, that this was good. But I found out that although the quantity was great, the quality was not so great. It

was missing something, something important, like that little edge of creativity that makes things interesting to me. This was an unwelcome discovery.

In the long run, I valued the creativity more than the coffee experience and found myself giving it up, although I have fond memories of the caffeine in my life.

So there you have it. There will be coffee all around me, but not a drop I can drink without giving up something even more important to me, and that is some creativity. I prefer the mind without alteration.

[Photo taken this morning]

DHARMA: SECULAR MEDITATION

This week's "Time Magazine" cover story for their February 3, 2014 issue is titled "The Mindful Revolution" and it is all about secular meditation and how mindfulness is finally taking hold in this country.

Of course all of this is easy to foretell since mind training is such a valuable skill that I am certain some years from now proof of mind-training experience and expertise will be as important in your job resume as any college experience. You can do more with it, like: anything. As a former director of a largish company (650 employees), I have hired a lot of people and many college diplomas aren't worth the paper they are printed on. They guarantee very little. For many jobs I would hire someone with real mind training expertise over college-paper any day.

As for acquiring mind-training skills, I still don't know of any spontaneous way to learn meditation. If there were one, it would probably have already happened to each of us by now. With meditation there is a learning curve and you have to pay to play, as they say. And unlike many things in life, where we can just plop down some cash and take it home, meditation progress depends on our own time and effort, something often in short supply. And most of us don't even know how to do it properly. It is not relaxation therapy as many believe.

The guardians at the threshold of meditation, at least most kinds of meditation that I know of, are concentration and mindfulness skills. To meditate, we have to learn to concentrate and be mindful and, like

a great wheel, we have to actually turn the wheel to go anywhere. The meditation learning curve will outlast us and wait as long as we do. In other words, we actually have to learn meditation. If nothing else, I know that much, because I sat and twiddled my thumbs for many years hoping meditation would somehow rub off on me without my sincere effort. No chance of that. The good news is that you may have already learned enough discipline that requires concentration and mindfulness to skip meditation 101 and get right into it.

As for the spiritual aspects of meditation, as the Time Magazine article shows, they are optional. Recently a student asked the Tibetan Buddhist Rinpoche I have worked with for the last thirty years whether it was morally wrong to use meditation as part of a sports-training program, like for the Olympics. Rinpoche responded, of course not. Meditation will enhance any kind of discipline. So, if you have to hold your nose because of the spiritual aspects of meditation, don't bother. Just learn it.

As for me, I find the spiritual aspects of meditation more than just helpful, but I also benefit from the sheer secular mindfulness practice of meditation. I use it every day in all that I endeavor. Otherwise I would not write about it as often as I do.

So, the starting point in learning to meditate is the learning of concentration and mindfulness. Either you already have developed some discipline that requires concentration or mindfulness or you have not. If you have a discipline already, just apply the techniques of meditation to that discipline and you can skip over

meditation 101 and jump right in. If not, you just have to bite the bullet and learn concentration and how to be mindful. It does not take forever, but you actually have to just do it. Trying doesn't do it. Only doing does it. OK, so what exactly do we have to do?

I will continue this in the next blog or soon.

[Photo taken yesterday. We have snow, snow, and more snow, and the temperature has plunged and seems to be staying there.... for weeks. It is below zero as I write this and we had about a foot of snow in the last 24-hours or so.]

DHARMA: THE PROTECTOR DEITIES - THE END OF THE YEAR

I know. We are already in the New Year, but that is the civil or calendar year, and not the natural cyclic year as celebrated by observing the succession of New Moons. The beginning of the Tibetan (and the Chinese New Year) will be celebrated on January 31st, 2014, but the actual New Moon that triggers this will occur on Thursday January 30th, 2014 at 4:39 PM EST, which is tomorrow.

And this means that today, Wednesday January 29th, is the last day before the day of the New Moon, a day when all over the world extended pujas are being held built around the fierce protector deities of the various lineages. In other words, these are the dark days before the New Moon, the Protector Days, and today is last and darkest of those days. What does that mean?

For one thing, it means that at 4:39 PM tomorrow, we have New Moon and the end not only of the current lunar cycle, but also of the entire year's worth of lunar cycles. It marks a new beginning. And to me it suggests that these last several days, and today as well, are the dark days of the Moon, perhaps somewhat or even very difficult for some of us.

I always find it hard to get through the three days before the New Moon, and this tradition exists both in eastern and western astrology – the dark days of the moon, what in Medieval times often called the Devil's Days.

Astrologically, as well, these days are internally perhaps very static, which simply means we may feel a lack of real drive, the will to do things and get things done we imagine we should be getting done. That idea.

I don't want to sound particularly heavy, but these are indeed the dark days of the Moon and the end of the year.

Here is another short interview of me by videographer Troy Wehner, in this one I am talking about my own experience with meditation, and how difficult that journey has been.

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

[Image of a protector deity, not a devil, but actually one of the good guys, a protector deity that protects the dharma from backsliding, and us as well.]

MUSIC: PETE SEEGER (1919 – 2014)

I grew up in the folk-scene environment of the late 1950s and beyond. Even back then Pete Seeger was a landmark, a single person who perhaps best represented what the folk music scene was all about to me. So much of that world revolved around Seeger. Even when the younger players begin to emerge, Pete Seeger was always in there somewhere, just being himself. Seeger has passed on, but will never be gone. He is like a rock that has always been there. I was very much part of that folk scene, so perhaps a little history is in order.

By the 1950s, more and more young Americans were interested in their own indigenous music – American folk music. In the later '50s and early '60s, folk music had become increasingly popular, in particular on college campuses and among more affluent white Americans. Along with the interest in folk music came the folklore societies and finally the festivals.

My first experience with these groups was the University of Michigan Folklore Society in Ann Arbor in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In 1957 freshman student Al Young and Bill McAdoo founded the University of Michigan Folklore Society. Today Al Young is the Poet Laureate of California. The Folklore Society was a natural interface between the University folk and the townies – music. As a high-school dropout I had no trouble integrating and being accepted in the folk circles. No questions were asked. We were all just 'folk' and it was a culturally rich scene.

And Michigan was not the only campus with a folklore society. Folk music was popping up on campuses all over the nation and we were interconnected by what came to be called the folk circuit, a constant stream of folk enthusiasts that traveled from campus to campus playing and sharing folk music. The circuit went from Cambridge to New York City to Ann Arbor to Chicago to Madison to Berkeley and back again. We were hitchhiking or piling into old cars and driving the route. Musicians like Bob Dylan would hitchhike into town, hang out, play a gig or two, and soon head down the road. And well-known folk singers came.

Folksingers like Ramblin' Jack Elliot and groups like the New Lost City Ramblers and the Country Gentlemen were regular visitors to Ann Arbor and this was before anyone was famous. They didn't stay in fancy motels, but with us. They stayed in our houses, slept on a couch or in the spare bedroom. We all hung out together and played music or sat in the M.U.G, the Michigan Union Grill and drank coffee all day. Whatever music and culture they brought with them really had a chance to sink in. They shared themselves and their time with us. They were just like us.

Ann Arbor had its own players. The president of the Folklore Society was Howie Abrams and we sported folk musicians like Marc Silber, Al Young, Dave Portman, Peter Griffith, and Perry Lederman. There was also an important lady named "Bugs," but I can't remember her last name. Anyone know?

And we put on festivals and events. For example, the folklore society raised money to bring Odetta to Ann

Arbor where she gave her first college performance. And a young Bob Dylan gave an early performance as part of a small folk-music festival in Ann Arbor put on by the U-M Folklore Society. I am told that I helped to put that concert on, but I can't remember the details. I can remember sitting in the Michigan Union with a very nervous Dylan, drinking coffee and smoking, while we waited for the review of Dylan's performance the night before to come out in the Michigan Daily newspaper. It was something like 10:30 AM when the review surfaced and it was positive. With that good news Dylan proceeded to hitchhike out of town. And when Odetta sang at the Newport Folk Festival in 1960, Al Young, Perry Lederman, and Marc Silber hitchhiked there to see her.

And there was also a subtle change taking place. I could write more, if there is interest. God speed Peter Seeger!

MUSIC: MORE ON THE FOLK SCENE -- PART-2

Since I see no reason to stretch this out for many days, when Seeger's passing is so fresh in our minds, I am just going to blog on this and let those we feel like reading it, read it.

And of course there were the folk festivals, of which the one in Newport, Rhode Island is perhaps the most famous, if not the first.

The Newport Folk Festival was established in 1959 by George Wein, the same man who in 1954 established the Newport Jazz Festival. The first Newport Folk Festival was held on July 11-12, 1959 and featured, among other acts, the Kingston Trio, a group that had exploded to national prominence only the year before. Flanking the Kingston Trio were classic folk singers like Odetta, Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee, and of course, the ubiquitous Pete Seeger.

During a set by the singer/songwriter Bob Gibson at that first 1959 festival, a young Joan Baez made her national debut to a wildly enthusiastic audience of over 13,000 people. The Newport festival is still considered to be the granddaddy of all folk festivals, even though it has been reduced in size in recent years.

The folk scene in the early '60s was very active and organized enough to have a well-established set of venues (coffee houses, church sponsorships, etc.) and routes that stretched across the country and over which performing folk artists traveled, mostly by hitchhiking. By the early 1960s folk enthusiasts everywhere were learning the rudiments of music

research, at least to the point of tracing particular songs back through time to their roots or at least trying to. It was axiomatic at that time that the original version of a song was preferable to later versions, almost always enriching the listener's experience and enjoyment of the tune. "Sing Out! Magazine" was one of the main repositories of this research, our musical collective-heritage.

It should be remembered that the folk-music revival emerged toward the end of the 1950s and the early 1960s, a time when more and more young people were rejecting the culture of the 1950s (the flattop haircuts and what we felt was a cookie-cutter mentality) and thirsting for something a little more real. It is a simple fact that most of us looked to the folk music tradition as a way of grounding ourselves, a way to somehow get underneath or break through the social veneer in which we were raised. Future events cast their shadows and the counterculture hippie revolution that was to come later in the mid-1960s was already emerging.

The Folk Scene

Unlike folk music, whose roots were often in England or Ireland, with blues, to the surprise of most white folk-blues lovers, a trip into the history book was often as easy as venturing into a different part of town, only we didn't know it then. The folk music scene was flourishing on college campuses and what started at Newport in 1959 was echoed in the next few years by startup folk festivals all across America, including the Berkeley and Chicago Folk festivals, both of which debuted in 1961. And, although these folk festivals

also featured some blues (country blues), the blues at those festivals was mostly treated as part of the folk genre, and as a sidelight at that.

For example, one could hear Jessie 'Lone Cat' Fuller at Hertz Hall (Berkeley, CA) in 1959 and at Newport in 1960. In 1960 Robert Pete Williams performed at Newport. Other festivals in the early 1960s had Lightnin' Hopkins, Mance Lipscomb, and Mississippi John Hurt, Rev. Gary Davis, Sleepy John Estes, Jesse Fuller, and occasionally John Lee Hooker. It is hard for me to imagine John Lee Hooker or Lightnin' Hopkins not getting mainstream attention wherever they played. In 1965, an electrified Bob Dylan, backed by the Paul Butterfield Blues Band, shocked the Newport folk crowd and helped to bring awareness of modern city blues to a mostly white folk crowd. Dylan was booed. Dylan's album "Highway 61 Revisited" was released in August of 1965, including the hit single "Like a Rolling Stone."

The Folk Revival – Looking for Roots

This folk music revival in the later 1950s and early 1960s was just that, a revival, an attempt to revive a music that most felt was already deeply embedded in the past. The revival started out looking back and, for the most part, stayed that way for many years. We sought to revive and find our future in past songs rather than writing our own songs for the future.

Initially, younger folk artists were just too shy. Emerging players like Bob Dylan, Ramblin' Jack Elliot (and scores of now-unknown players schooled in traditional folk music) were (at first) not focused on writing songs themselves. Their favorite contemporary

songwriter was probably Woody Guthrie, but most of the songs they played came from even earlier times, sometimes all the way back to England and Europe. The great majority of folk artists did covers of earlier songs, Dylan included. The goal then was to do them well, make them live again, to revive them.

Pivotal artists of the time like Joan Baez and the New Lost City Ramblers were not writing their own songs, but instead re-enacting and re-presenting the finest in traditional folk music. Their technique was flawless, but it was not their own songwriting creativity that was being featured. Groups like the Kingston Trio and the Weavers are perfect examples. The folk music magazine “Sing Out!” is a written testimony to this approach. White America was exploring its roots, but we were looking backward to find what we felt was missing in the present – our living roots. Folk artists as a group had not yet empowered themselves to write for the present, much less for the future. They were too busy trying to make the past live again, reviving their heritage. That’s why it is called a folk revival.

I was fortunate enough to be part of the early folk scene in the late 1950s and early 1960s. There was a route we all traveled that went from Cambridge, Massachusetts to New York City, to Ann Arbor, to the University of Chicago, to Madison, Wisconsin, to Berkeley, California, and then round back again. For the most part we all hitchhiked or piled into cars that could barely run all the way across this wide country. If I remember right, I believe I hitchhiked the distance from Ann Arbor to New York City some ten times, and

hitchhiked to and lived in Venice Beach and North Beach, San Francisco as early as 1960. I even travelled with Bob Dylan for a while, hitchhiking together with my friend Perry Lederman, who then was already a legendary guitar instrumentalist.

The folk route also included side trips to places like Oberlin and Antioch colleges in Ohio, and so on, wherever colleges and universities were. In Ann Arbor, folk artists like Bob Dylan and Joan Baez were frequent visitors, while groups like the New Lost City Ramblers and the Country Gentlemen were pretty much regulars, and Ramblin' Jack Elliot spent a lot of time there. We met mostly in houses or apartments and it seems we spent an inordinate amount of time drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes in the cafeteria of the University of Michigan Student Union, the place called M.U.G, the Michigan Union Grill. I can recall sitting around the Union with a nervous Bob Dylan who was awaiting the Michigan Daily review of one of his earliest performances in Ann Arbor. He couldn't bear to leave town until the review came out. When he saw that the review was good, Dylan was on his way, hitchhiking out of town.

[Photo by Anthony Pepitone]

MUSIC: THE FOLK SCENE: PART 3

SINGERS, NOT SONGWRITERS

For the most part, the folk movement at this time was oriented around covering traditional folk tunes. The folk artists originality was in how well they sang the song and not yet in the writing of contemporary songs. This is not to say that no songs were written; some were. My point is that back then it was all about the 'singer' in 'singer/songwriter' and not yet so much about the 'songwriter'. For most of us, that came a bit later.

I can remember well traveling in 1961 with Bob Dylan and stopping at Gerde's Folk City on West 4th Street in New York. Gerde's was 'the' happening place back then and the folk star of the moment in that club was a guitar virtuoso named Danny Kalb, who later became part of the group known as the "Blues Project." Dylan was obviously jealous of the attention Kalb was getting (you could hear it in his voice), but it was not just petty jealousy. He honestly could not understand what Kalb had going for him that he didn't. It boggled his mind. I didn't know then that my traveling companion was "The" Bob Dylan, but I am certain he must have. After all, he had something to say that we needed to hear.

Remember, all of this was in the early 1960s, well before Haight Ashbury and the hippie scene. Most folkies (like myself) were wanna-be Beatniks, but that train had already left the station. We stood outside conventional society, but we were not so much politically alienated from that society as we were

repulsed by it, and fascinated by the world of music, literature, art, and our own little social scene. Things were happening man! I was 19 years old.

The Folk Blues

Real folk-blues artists like Elizabeth Cotton and Jessie ‘Lone Cat’ Fuller began to be featured at festivals like the Berkeley Folk Festivals in the late 1950s. Many of them came to Ann Arbor where I lived and we heard them live, songs like “Freight Train” (Cotton) and “San Francisco Bay Blues” (Fuller). To folk enthusiasts like myself, this was still just folk music, but you did get a different feeling when you heard the blues. To me at the time, this just sounded like really good folk music – ‘really’ good. Back then we didn’t know much about the blues, but we sure could feel that music.

While folk enthusiasts heard some blues early on (as mentioned), it was at first mostly only the folk blues, and folk blues were seen as just another form (albeit, with a lot of feeling) of folk music. Later, and only very gradually, more and more country blues began to appear, but usually only southern acoustic blues, not music from the North and nothing at all from the inner cities. There was no awareness of inner-city blues or electrified blues and no interest either. At that time electric-folk music was an oxymoron.

Being Part of the Scene

As a folkie myself, I can remember listening to acoustic folk-blues and really loving it, but I treated it the same way I treated traditional folk music, as something that also needed to be preserved and

revived – learned, played, shared - kept alive. It was a natural assumption on our part that we were listening to the vestiges of what had once been a living tradition and we wanted to connect to that past, to revive and relive it. We had no idea that modern electric blues music was not only ‘not-dead’, but was playing ‘live’ most nights of the week probably only blocks away, separated from us by a racial curtain. We just had no idea. The folk music scene had few blacks in it (other than a handful of performers) and those that were present were usually the older folk-blues artists like Sonny Terry, Odetta, and so on. Their music was perceived by folkies as coming out of the past, not part of the present.

Please don't get the idea that our exposure to folk music was only at concerts or folk societies. Like most musicians, we played or practiced music all the time, if only to learn the songs and how to play our instruments. We were also exposed to a lot of jazz. In Ann Arbor in the early 1960s, before bars could serve liquor by the glass, everyone met in apartments and houses around town to drink, smoke pot, and play music. This was primarily a jazz scene and young folkies (underage high-school kids like me) were tolerated as long as we kept to the shadows and sat along the far edges of the rooms.

And quite a scene it was. I remember one house on E. Williams Street in Ann Arbor. Protruding horizontally from its second story hung a huge flag with a picture of Thelonious Monk. At nights, especially on weekends, there was impromptu jazz in that house that went on most of the night, with players

like Bob James, Bob Detwiler, Ron Brooks, and many others. It was music, music, music plus wine and pot. High school kids like me sat on the floor, squeezed in along the back wall. We didn't rate any pot, but we used to snort the ashes from joints that others had smoked. That should tell you how desperate we were to be part of the scene!

Searchin' for Roots

We experienced jazz along with our folk music, but still not much blues. And the jazz was anything but bluesy jazz; it was more frenetic, like bop. And if it wasn't jazz we heard, then it was classical music played in the background on the stereo. Again: not much blues. This is an important point, because when the mostly-white folk musicians like myself were suddenly exposed to modern (and virile) inner-city blues players like Junior Wells, Magic Sam, and Howlin' Wolf, we were astonished.

As folkies made the gradual transition from studying and researching traditional folk music to also searching out historic country folk blues and then on to discovering modern city blues, all of a sudden things lit up. We got it. Blues was not simply R&B or pop music like you heard on the radio, but music by plain folks – folk music! We could see that blues was the same as folk music, only modern, fresh – alive, well and incredibly potent.

What we had assumed must always be lost in the past, like folk music that depended on our efforts to restore and revive it was, when it came to blues, was very much alive and in the present – staring us in the face and more-or-less happy to see us at that. This

blues music we were hearing lived in the present and not just in the past. It did not need us to revive it. Our idea of folk music as something to restore and treasure suddenly moved from the past into the present in our minds. We made the connection. Blues didn't need restoration. It was still with us and it was powerful. It was like the movie Jurassic Park; we had found a living dinosaur, folk music that lived in the present! And this music revived us and not vice-versa!

The blues scene in the early 1960s as played out in the small clubs and bars of Chicago, Detroit, and other major industrial cities, while very much still alive, was by then itself on the wane, only we newcomers didn't know that yet. To us, it was way more alive than the standard folk music we knew. Intercity electric blues music was still authentic and strong, but (for the most part) the next generation of younger blacks was already not picking up on it; they were just not interested. Chicago-style city blues was, to younger blacks at that time, old-peoples music, something from the South, a past and history they wanted to get away from rather than embrace. Younger blacks had already skipped ahead to R&B, Motown, and funk. Forget about those old blues.

My band played in a black bar for something like a year or a year and a half, a bar filled with mostly older black folks and a sprinkling of hippie whites who had come to see us. This was in 1967. Right next door was another black bar, where all the younger blacks hung out and where they played only the latest R&B hits. The younger blacks seldom came into our bar and, in general, were embarrassed that their parents

and elders were listening to blues played by a racially-mixed band – listening to white boys play the blues. How embarrassing! Interest in the classic Chicago blues was just not there for the younger generation of blacks. They felt that blues was music from an older generation, music for old people.

While within the black community the door was slowly closing on the Chicago blues artists (even the artists knew this), another and much wider door for this music was opening onto white America, an open door that would extend the careers for many of these artists and secure their music well into the future.

B.B. King said in Time Magazine in 1971:

“The blacks are more interested in the ‘jumpy’ stuff. The whites want to hear me for what I am.”

[Photo of Pete Seeger at a barnraising. I could go on with this series, but what comes next is the great sea change of the mid-1960s, what we call "The Sixties." At that point the folk scene had opened to a much wider flower.]

MUSIC: FOLK MUSIC SCENE, PART 4

1965: A Sea Change

This will be the end of this series on the folk-scene in the later 1950s and the early 1960s and how it gradually turned into "The Sixties" and the whole hippie scene.

As pointed out, in the early 1960s the folk music revival was one of the main things happening on all the major campuses across America: Cambridge, Ann Arbor, Chicago, Madison, Berkeley, etc. What happened to it?

For one, in the mid-1960s, pop music groups like the Rolling Stones were busy recording covers of blues classics and pointing out the source – the artists who originally wrote and recorded them. White players like me, eager for guidance, hunted down the original blues 45s, which were a revelation to us. I can remember rummaging through bins of old 45s in downtown Chicago and finding just incredible music.

That first "Rolling Stones" album, of the same name, was released in April of 1964. It contained tunes like Jimmy Reed's "Honest I Do," "Willie Dixon's "I Just Want to Make Love to You," "I'm a King Bee," plus songs by Chuck Berry and Rufus Thomas.

The Stones second album, also released in 1964, veered away from the blues and contained tunes recorded by Chuck Berry, Wilson Pickett, Dale Hawkins, songs like "Under the Boardwalk." It also included the blues-R&B tune made famous by Irma Thomas, "Time Is on My Side." In 1965, the album

“Rolling stones, Now!” had the Dixon-Wolf classic “Little Red Rooster.”

From that point onward, the blues content of Rolling Stones albums decreased. In 1965, the album “Out of Our Heads” had no real blues tunes, and neither did their other 1965 album, “December’s Children.” It was those first two albums in 1964, and in particular the first album, that pointed the blues out to many in the white audience. The U.K. was all about authentic blues well before white America ever heard of them.

In the wake of the Beatles and Rolling Stones, late summer and early fall of 1965 saw the emerging dancehall scene in San Francisco and the arrival of bands like the Grateful Dead. This was the beginning of the hippie era, and it’s when my own band, the Prime Movers, formed in Ann Arbor, Michigan. We knew nothing of the Grateful Dead, yet we too arose at the same time and represented a new era in music and lifestyle.

In fact the summer of 1965 was the trigger point for so very much. It marked a change in the folk scene with the advent of groups like the Paul Butterfield Blues Band. If there was a single band that opened up blues to white players, it was the Butterfield Band. That first Butterfield album appeared late in 1965, and it totally kicked ass. The Butterfield band in person was way more powerful than anything they managed to record.

This racially mixed band playing authentic Chicago blues sent a lightning bolt-like signal to all of us who were just waking up to the blues anyway. Their message was that white players could overcome their fear to play black music, including the blues. The Paul

Butterfield Blues Band set the standard and set white musicians on notice that anybody was free to try to play the blues. We were emboldened to try.

Unlike many areas of folk music, modern city blues at that time was anything but a dead art. While the lineage of most folk music required revival, like trying to trace out the history and line of the music, this was not true of blues. The blues lineage was not only unbroken, but indeed very much alive, both on black record labels and in thousands of bars and clubs across the nation. Perhaps some forms of country blues were endangered, but inner-city blues (at least for the older generation of Blacks) was in full swing. White Americans just knew little or nothing about it. During the later 1960s, all that changed. And last, but not least, many of the modern city blues players were still reasonably young and more than willing to be discovered. They needed the money and appreciated the recognition.

Historians would agree that from the middle to the late '60s, music in general was, to a real extent, fusing. The whole psychedelic era blurred the boundaries of different music genres and emboldened white players to play music of all kinds – black, Indian, Asian, etc. The first extended psychedelic-like guitar solo/jam was Michael Bloomfield and the tune “East-West” on the Butterfield album of the same name in 1966. It was over 13 minutes in length and inspired legions of heavy metal players that followed.

[Photo of the great Muddy Waters, with James Cotton on harmonica in the background. James Cotton and his entire band stayed with us at the Prime Movers

House (my band) for some weeks, including the great rhythm-guitar player Luther Tucker.]

DHARMA: RECOGNITION -- SPEED BUMP TO ENLIGHTENMENT

I grew into Buddhism with the idea that it was a graduated path, probably a linear continuum starting from where I am practicing now straight on to my eventual enlightenment -- something like that. I have since found out, in fact, that the actual path to enlightenment is more like an exponential curve, and that it has a very clear speed bump not far from the beginning, more like a dead stop. I wish I had understood earlier that there is this stepping stone (a full stop) between the dharma practice we are doing today and the eventual road to our enlightenment.

There is what in esoteric studies is called a ring-pass-not, an event which must take place within us before we can proceed further. In other words, between practicing dharma as we now do and the road to actual enlightenment, there is an intermediate stage or major step that, while not enlightenment itself, we must negotiate before we can pass through and onward. It comes up as we get into Insight meditation.

I had been under the impression, as mentioned, that the road from beginning dharma practice to enlightenment itself was a continuum, a graduated path with no real speed bumps, much less a stop sign. Well, it turns out that there is at least one major bump or initiation that we each must negotiate and it is called "recognition," as in: recognition of the true nature of the mind. And it is not optional if enlightenment is our goal.

And let's be clear, "recognition" is not enlightenment or anything even close to it. Recognition is more like the sacrament of Confirmation in my Catholic upbringing, literally a confirmation and sign that we are on the right path. Only, in Buddhism recognition can't be conferred by rote, and here is the hard part: recognition is a realization each of us has to come up with ourselves from within, albeit with some help. And by definition there is no faking it. We each have to do this, one by one, and it waits for us until we actually do it, forever if need be. I only wish I knew this event existed before I found out that it did. It would have helped the process.

And this "not-faking-it" is important to understand. You can't get an honorary degree in "recognition," slip by the requirements, just read about it, or somehow place out. We each have to realize it personally. And here is another key thought: chances are that we cannot do this alone. The great rinpoches tell us this. We will need the help of someone who has already mastered this, someone who can succeed in pointing out to us the true nature of our own mind, someone who is kind enough to take the time to do this for us. And how rare is that?

And recognition is quite wonderful. Recognition of the mind's true nature is the point where we begin to see for ourselves how the mind works and (perhaps more important) that we actually can work it, just as we are. Without recognition, there is no seeing the particular dharma path before us that we have to walk. Until recognition, we are in a very real way blind to the future because we have never seen and cannot see

where we are going. Recognition gives us a glimpse of the actual path we must walk, plus (equally important) confirmation that WE can walk it. We can do it ourselves, in fact we must.

So, no matter how clever we are, no matter how much intellectual understanding we have accumulated, we are left standing at the threshold of enlightenment without first actually recognizing the true nature of the mind for ourselves. No one can confer it on us or do it for us.

With recognition, we begin see just how to traverse the long (and I imagine arduous) path to enlightenment itself. Remember that recognition is not enlightenment, but only the ability to see where we are walking, to see the actual dharma path to enlightenment that we personally must travel. And that "seeing" is crucial, especially also seeing that we have what it takes to do the job. This is the point where diligence in dharma practice turns into joy in practice. There is no work-around for recognition, but only the actual act of recognition itself. So, it is very precious indeed.

Recognition is part of the process in learning Insight meditation and is the gateway to the more advanced forms of practice like Mahamudra, Dzogchen, and Maha-Ati meditation. In the Zen tradition, recognition is called Kensho. I find it very worthwhile to have some understanding of recognition, at least that it is required and that we can do it with a little help from our teachers.

DHARMA: MANTRAS

HAPPY NEW YEAR OF THE GREEN WOOD HORSE

First, Happy Tibetan New Year! The New Moon is passed and we are into a new month and also a new year, Tibetan-style. I thought it might be helpful to say something about the very popular short mantra "Om Mani Padme Hum."

The most common mantra in the world is the six-syllable "Om̐ Maṇi Padme Hūṃ," which is generally pronounced and written "Om Mani Padme Hum." The Tibetans tend to pronounce it "Om Mani Pay-Me Hung," and it exists in many other pronunciations in languages like Mongolian, Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Thai, Vietnamese, and so on.

The first and last syllables, "Om" and "Hum" are interjections with no special meaning in themselves, other than that "Om" is a syllable of affirmation and typically begins many mantras and "Hum" often closes or ends mantras. "Hum" or "Hung" (as the Tibetans pronounce it) is semi-wrathful or at least emphatic, and is often used to destroy negativity or to protect.

That leaves the four other syllables that make up the two words "Mani" and "Padme." "Mani" simply means jewel and "Padme" means lotus, and refers to the Padma Family, that of the Buddha Amitabha, the direction West, and the setting sun, often associated also with death and dying. The Buddha Amitabha is typically shown with his two bodhisattvas, of which the one shown here, Chenresik in Tibetan

(Avalokiteshvara in Sanskrit) represents loving kindness and compassion. The other bodhisattva (not shown here) is Vajrapani, frequently depicted as a fierce protector of the secrets of the dharma, but with Amitabha, he usually is shown standing in a peaceful pose.

As to what this mantra means, putting aside the interjections "Om" and "Hum," it is usually said that it means the jewel in the lotus. However, the great rinpoches that I have heard teach say that it actually means "the one with the jewel and the lotus," referring to the image of Chenresik (shown here) in which he holds a lotus in his left hand and a jewel between his two hands that are cupped in the prayer mudra. They say these words simply remind us of whom we are speaking of, you know, the one holding the jewel and the lotus.

Of course, there are whole books written about the meaning of this mantra, associating each of the six syllables with one of the six realms of existence (god realm, jealous-god realm, human realm, animal realm, hungry-ghost realm, and hell realm), but I am not going into all of that here.

Mantras serve many purposes, one of which is to utter a prayer or acknowledgement of a given quality or deity (and deities represent qualities), in this case the deity is Chenresik and the qualities are, as mentioned, compassion and loving kindness, something I know I could use more of.

This Mani Mantra, as it is called, is probably the most common of all mantras, used by millions of people all over the globe. This is the mantra that represents His

Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama and also His Holiness the 17th Gyalwa Karmapa (Orgyen Trinley Dorje), who each are said to be a living representative of the bodhisattva of compassion Avalokiteshvara in Sanskrit, Chenresik in Tibetan, and Quan-Yin in Chinese.

Aside from invoking loving kindness and compassion, the Mani Mantra (like many mantras) is also used as a focus for Tranquility meditation (Shamata), as well as a touchstone for Insight and Mahamudra meditation, helping to maintain clarity and insight through mindful repetition. This is how I often use it.

Great lamas recite this mantra whenever they encounter a living being. I can tell a quick story here. Many years ago Margaret and I put on a series of what we called Family Dharma Weekends out at some lake cottages near where we live. We have run a dharma meditation center since the mid-1980s. The idea was to bring the whole family together, kids and all, in various dharma activities. It was a lot of fun. We would often bring very high Rinpoches out to see the cottages. Well, one time we brought one of the Four Regents of the Kagyu Lineage, the so-called Heart Sons to see the cottages.

However, that particular year the gypsy moths were devastating the trees on the property. Every tree and bush it seemed was covered with these webs from which were hanging countless caterpillars in the midst of destroying the vegetation. Anyway, this particular Rinpoche, on seeing the devastation, immediately went up close to a large bush and began blowing gently on the worms and blessing them. Here we

were cringing from the massive destruction, while Rinpoche was blessing as many as he could, one by one.

While I am at it, I might as well tell one more story of this same Rinpoche. I am not going to mention his name, in case this story is inappropriate, but here goes.

We were sitting with His Eminence in our living room, having just finished a TV interview or something with the press. There we were sitting in a circle, perhaps having tea or something.

Suddenly one of my kids, a daughter, comes running in crying loudly, and yelling "The neighbor's cat is going to eat the baby birds." We know cats and their habits. Of course the cat would eat the baby birds that were nesting in the tree on our property, just outside the door. All I could think of is that I should stop the cat somehow. I had a very low-power BB gun in the house, so I jumped up, grabbed the gun, and ran outside. I forgot for the moment our special guest.

Anyway, sure enough, up in the main crotch of the tree, where the branches divide, about ten feet above us, was a nest of robins, with a whole bunch of little bald-headed babies. And sitting right in front of the nest, with his paws folded underneath him, was a big fat cat with his nose only inches away from the baby birds. And the cat was contemplating breakfast or whatever.

Without thinking I pumped off a few rounds of BBs, but as mentioned, the gun was so weak that the BBs just bounced off the cat. Yes, the cat twitched, but

there was no way it was about to leave. Meanwhile, all the kids were yelling and I shot off a couple more rounds, again to no effect. Then I felt a hand on my shoulder.

It was the Rinpoche. Oh my god I thought, I forgot about the rinpoche and here I was shooting at a sentient being, in this case, the cat. Rinpoche said, "Give me the gun!," I hung my head and handed over the gun. He then said "Where is the cat?" I pointed up the tree to where the cat was sitting as happy as ever in front of those tiny birds.

In a flash, Rinpoche fired off one BB at the cat, hit it, and the cat leaped into the air and ran down the tree. So that's my story

[This drawing was done at our center by Sange Wangchuk who lived at our center for some years, and is now the minister of culture for Bhutan. I am responsible for painting in the colors.]

DHARMA: POINTING OUT "POINTING OUT"

[Note: Last night's concert with my daughter May Erlewine Bernard and her husband Seth Bernard was sold out – standing room only. And the roads were clear!]

The following article is new and here is a link for a free download of a new book for those interested in learning meditation. It is the last book in this list:

<http://dharmagrooves.com/e-Books.aspx#Dharma>

In many Buddhist practices, in particular the yidam or deity practices, toward the end of the practice we rest for a moment in the nature of the mind or try to, but until we actually have recognized the true nature of the mind, we are just going through the motions. That's what practice is.

Any study of advanced Tibetan Buddhist texts quickly shows that recognizing the true nature of the mind is not only essential, it is pretty much the only game in town. Everything seems to funnel down to that recognition, so it pays us to at least to understand and have this event on our radar screen.

Recognizing the true nature of the mind, what is called ordinary mind or "tamal gyi shepa" in Tibetan, is nothing other than becoming aware of our ordinary mind that has always been there. Like our awareness of air or breathing, the true nature of the mind is something constantly with us, but apparently continually ignored. It is so close to us we just never see it -- that kind of thing. For probably a multitude of reasons we have always been separated from that

simple awareness of the mind itself that is our birthright. Instead of identifying with it, we succeed in ignoring the obvious and remain numb in regard to it.

As we continue to practice meditation (after gaining some control of Tranquility meditation) and begin to entertain aspects of Insight meditation, it becomes the task of our teacher and instructor to point out to us (and jar us loose from) our habitual distraction and point us toward seeing the actual nature of the mind. Obviously, this is not an easy task or we would all be father along on our way toward enlightenment by now.

Perhaps "pointing out" is like laser eye-surgery, our ability to see our own nature needs to be enabled. It becomes the job of our guru and teacher, perhaps like an eye surgeon in cataract removal, to help us eliminate enough obscurations until the true nature of the mind snaps into view and we can finally just see it as it is. Such a delicate operation as this is beyond the scope of anyone but a highly trained and compassionate lama, someone who will work with us, warts and all, until we actually recognize the true nature of the mind.

Yes, meditation is going secular, but money can't buy what it takes to succeed in this kind of operation. We would have to have commercial instructors with skills at the level of brain surgeons to carry this off. Right now they don't exist, but it is no doubt they will come in time. Right now, the few highly-trained lamas who can successfully point out the nature of the mind don't charge anything. These lamas do it out of compassion and dedication to the dharma, helping as best they

can any being move toward enlightenment. That is a hard act to follow, especially if the only reward wanted is money.

In text after ancient text, the great enlightened teachers make clear that the chances of our pointing out the nature of our mind to ourselves is about zero to none. "Pointing Out" is a very delicate operation that requires a teacher who has seen the nature of their own mind AND can successfully point it out to another, and who would take the trouble to do this. Moreover, what are the chances that we can find such a teacher, a true midwife of the spirit that can also handle our particular personality and make that recognition possible? Who would be willing to?

As I see it, there is a real bottleneck here with innumerable practitioners in Limbo-land waiting to find a teacher who can successfully tweak them so that they recognize the true nature of the mind. I certainly am not aware of ALL the qualified teachers out there who have mastered this, but even within the Buddhist lineage I belong to, the Karma Kagyu, there are not all that many lamas I am aware of who regularly offer the pointing-out instructions.

And even if they do, we students have to be ready to receive the instructions successfully. In my own case, I have been studying and practicing Mahamudra meditation for 25 years, including 10-day intensives each year, plus having the pointing out instructions given to me three separate times before I got any results at all. Perhaps it is just me, but it was only on the third pointing out that I even got a small glimpse of

the mind's nature. As the vernacular has it, "I am just saying..."

My point is that the pointing-out instructions are very, very subtle and those who can offer them successfully very rare. I feel it is important that those of us who are studying dharma understand what the "pointing out" instructions are about.

Questions or comments please?

DHARMA: THE COST OF AN UNTRAINED MIND

Americans as a rule assume the mind is good-to-go, just as it comes out of the box. Asians, at least Buddhists, don't make that assumption. On the contrary, they assume that our current state of mind, including all of its mental suffering and chatter, are just the obvious consequences of an untrained mind.

Another way to say this is that if we have not learned to work with our instinctual reactions to attachments, positive or negative, we are by definition subject to whatever we react to, and that in perpetuity. In an attempt to manage our reactivity, more and more Americans are turning to meditation techniques, the most basic of which is Tranquility Meditation, the ability to simply concentrate and be mindful.

There are two general ways to learn concentration and mindfulness that I am aware of, by practice or effort and by interest and love. If we have a natural interest and love for something we automatically can concentrate and be mindful. There is no real effort or "trying" needed. We are just naturally rapt in our attention and concentration. That is the first method.

Lacking the natural interest and love for a subject, or because we have never been introduced to a subject, we have to make an effort to try and learn. We have to study and practice. This is what often happens in schools and career training, for example.

Most of us use the first method, love, for our hobbies, those things we just naturally love and attend to. On the other hand, those things we don't already have an affinity with, we have to study and go to school on,

with all the attendant effort and problems of educating ourselves. This making of great efforts to learn is considered normal, but we might agree that it is not a path defined by what we love. We have to force ourselves.

The difference between these two methods of learning, love on the one hand and the need for effort and practice on the other is vast. Of course, we naturally would prefer to learn through love rather than have to make an effort to learn, so that should at least be a clue to how to approach dharma practice.

Since most of us have had years, perhaps decades, of schooling. We are used to having to study, make effort, and practice in order to learn. It does not occur to us to find a way to love learning when it comes to meditation. Equally, it never occurs to us to find something we love and learn meditation and mind training through it.

Tranquility meditation usually has an object of focus, a pebble, a twig, most often just the breath and breathing, and so on. The technique required to learn the concentration and mindfulness of Tranquility meditation can be applied to any object whatsoever, including a hobby or routine you already love that demands concentration and being mindful.

It could be anything: playing chess, tying flies, building model airplanes, carpentry, you-name-it -- whatever has a routine that demands mindfulness and focus, provided you really enjoy doing it. You already have learned the hard part, to perform the task or routine, and with interest or love.

All that remains is that you apply the technique used in Tranquility meditation to allow the mind to focus on the task and rest in that. After all, Zen Buddhists teach that anything we do can be done with focus and mindfulness. If we are not getting the results we would like from our efforts to learn Tranquility meditation sitting on a cushion, try doing the same thing with a subject you already know and love. It works.

KNOW MIND

The mind contains,
The whole world,
As we know it,
And we don't know it.

-- February 2, 2014

Above is a little poem I wrote today for fun, but the rest of this is going to be a bit nitpicky, so you have been warned. As mentioned, I have a bone to pick, as they say, with the common approach to learning Insight meditation. I am willing to believe that this is due to my own obscurations, but nevertheless, I have no choice but to attempt to represent my view as I see it, and not just follow blindly along. How else will I learn? Your comments on topic are welcome.

Typically, Insight meditation has two parts, first what is called the analytic meditation of the pandita, and second, the resting meditation of the kusulu. We are to understand that a pandita is a scholar, while a kusulu is a yogi or meditator, two different approaches to enlightenment. And these two approaches are contrasted.

I get the idea that the scholarly approach of the pandita, while eventually effective, will take untold eons to achieve, while the direct meditational approach of the kusulu might be accomplished in a single life. Hmmmm. Which path shall I choose? The choice is obvious, not the one that takes eons unless I have time of my hands, which at seventy-two years of age I don't seem to.

That being said, most texts on Vipassana (Insight meditation) usually start with a fairly exhaustive bout of analysis as to the nature of the mind, asking questions like where the mind is located, what color it is, where thoughts come from, where they eventually go, and on and on. I am told that in Tibet this kind of analysis took many months.

It seems I misunderstood this analytical approach, and with me it devolved into simple intellectualization or what is called "understanding." For example, if the Insight meditation teacher asks me "Is the color of the mind red?" my tendency is to have a quick thought and come up with the answer, which is intellectual of course, based on just understanding, that the mind is not red... or blue or green.

And I did that for years with all kinds of these types of questions, like: is the mind located in my head or where is the mind located? Etc. My answers were all intellectual, based on what I understood by thinking. When these kinds of analytical questions came up, I would intellectually answer them and then more or less zone or time out, waiting for something more juicy to come along.

I never thought to actually use my mind to look at the mind itself to see if the mind in fact IS this or that color. And that was a big mistake, one that I would not want anyone else to make, so that is why I am talking about it here.

It took me some years to come to my senses enough to interpret Rinpoche's request to investigate questions (like if the mind is the color red, to use that example) not as something to think about intellectually, but rather as an opportunity to actually use my mind to search the mind itself for the answer. "Who woulda' thunk it," as they say.

So even though they call it the analytic meditation of a pandita (scholar), there seems to be a more direct searching of the mind element that is required, not what I understand as just scholarly. I got it wrong, that's all.

The request to look in the mind is not a request to think and abstractly understand, but rather a request to actively use the mind to search itself to see for myself if the mind is in fact the color red, and so on. This is a very different thing from understanding or thinking things, and then responding intellectually. That was my mistake.

When, after years of ignoring such a request, and responding only with my understanding, I finally made an actually effort to scrutinize and look in the mind itself for the answers, I had a very different experience. And the results came as quite a surprise.

First, although questions about the color of the mind, and so forth, have a point, there is something else

taking place to be aware of. Using the mind to look at or within itself is very different from intellectual understanding or just thinking about something. It has a viscous and moving quality that is almost emotional in nature. Or, it is like exercising a muscle for the first time, one that has never moved up until now. You can feel the effort to move the mind in this way and it amounts to an actual experience rather than just an abstract thought. In other words, something is accumulated from the exercise, perhaps learning of some sort, and at least greater familiarity with the mind.

Actually LOOKING is an experience that you can try right this moment. Just attempt to directly look at who is reading this sentence. Look at the looker. It reminds me of those little Scottish Terrier Dog Magnets that I had as a kid. When I would try to push them together reversed, I got some push-back. It is similar to what I experience when I try to look at the looker. Something different is happening there for sure.

The result or answer to the above question about the mind and the color red, might be "The mind is not the color red," but that is just the surface part of it. There is more going on. The effort made to actually look in the mind for that answer is not itself intellectual, but a different kind of experience altogether, as I mentioned above. And it is THAT experience of the mind movement that I am pointing to here, and it is not "mental" like we normally think of the mind as. It has a more physical or force-field component to it. This exploration is what we have to practice and get to know and use.

We can learn to move around in the mind and also learn to move the mind around. This is not something I previously knew was possible and it is anything but just abstract or intellectual. Intellectual understanding and learning to move the mind are not anywhere near the same. This process of actually using the mind to search the mind, for me, has been KEY in learning Insight meditation. You might want to look into it, if you have not already.

This realization means I have to adjust my idea of what a pandita or scholar is. In reality it would seem that through actively searching the mind, the pandita is doing very much what the kusulu or yogi does, which is to work directly with the mind itself, which is to me beyond what I consider "scholarly." I have met Buddhist scholars who have never practiced the dharma they teach, something of an oxymoron to me. The yogi or kusulu looks directly at the actual nature of the mind itself. Searching and looking at the nature of the mind are not identical actions, but more closely related than I would have imagined.

So the bottom line for me is that I have to not be simply satisfied with intellectual understanding, but rather actively use my mind to know itself, to actually get to know it personally by getting in there and moving around until I find where the rubber meets the road, so to speak. Thus my opening line: the mind contains the whole world as we know it, and we don't know it.

I am getting to know it.

DHARMA: TIBETAN ASTROLOGICAL CALENDARS

What You Might Want to Know

I shouldn't have to invoke authority, but just reason and logic, but since His Holiness the 17th Karmapa (Orgyen Trinley Dorje) recently made this statement, I want to share it with you. I quote:

"May the Year of the Horse bring you peace, happiness, and good fortune. Actually, there is nothing special about New Year. The ideas 2013 and 2014 are but figments of the human imagination. Having said that, we can make something good out of it. We can use the idea of transition to reconsider our lives and to renew our resolutions."

As an astrologer for fifty years, I have always been very interested in astrological calendars, and aside from publishing a yearly printed western calendar for over 40 years, I have studied the Hindu, Tibetan, and Chinese calendars in some detail, producing a yearly Buddhist practice calendar for many years, etc.

From the very beginning of my interest in dharma, I questioned just about every monk and rinpoche I met about astrology and the Tibetan astrological calendar. I am sure I was a bit of a pest because it turns out that many Tibetans don't know how their calendar is produced, only how to use it for their daily practice. Of course I was looking to better understand the methods behind making the actual calendar.

And it was very frustrating because not only are most Tibetans ignorant of the inner calendrical workings,

but the calendars they are using frequently are not even calculated for their particular time zone. For example, a great many use a Tibetan astrological calendar calculated for some particular place in India (or even Tibet) while they are living here in America or Europe. I hesitate to enlighten them of this.

As for myself, I was mostly driven by the incongruities I found in the Tibetan astrology system, and anxious to point them out and have a discussion. However, it was like trying to pull someone out of Medieval times into the present in one fell swoop. Pointing this out was not only an exercise in futility, but as I found out, somewhat politically incorrect as well.

And mine was not a casual interest. I worked at it. For example, I hired one highly trained monk (turned civilian), who spoke seven languages and was an astrologer, to relocate to our center where for some years we translated Tibetan astrology texts together. Well, he translated and I helped get the translations into reasonable English. At a later date I sponsored another astrologer-from-India's trip to America, someone skilled in the Tibetan calendrical system. Together we worked on extending the Tibetan calendar based on the Tsurphu system, one of several astrological calendars used by Tibetans.

And lastly, I travelled all the way to Tibet to the ancestral home of the Gyalwa Karmapas, where at something like 15,000 feet I presented the results of my work to the young Karmapa, Orgyen Trinley Dorje, the 17th rebirth of this same being. At that time he named me Tenzin Nyima, "Holder of the Sun." I have also written a free 800-page book on Tibetan

astrology. In other words, I have made efforts. So, what have I found out?

I found out that in some ancient Tibetan and Chinese systems New Year was celebrated on the winter solstice as opposed to the floating New Moon calendar in use today. The solstice (winter or summer) is a precise astronomical event, not something humankind just made up. I have always personally celebrated the solstices, the winter solstice when the Sun begins to move northward again (light returns), and the summer solstice which marks the longest day of the year (Midsummer night's dream), after which we turn once again toward fall and winter. These are the New Years I celebrate.

However, today the Tibetan New Year is celebrated at a particular New Moon somewhere between late January and early March, quite a range in timespan. Worse, the competing Tibetan astrological calendars don't always agree among themselves (or with the Chinese calendar), so Tibetan New Year (like this year) can be one month apart from one another depending on what system you choose. I don't find that confidence building.

What this boils down to is that there naturally should not be two starting points for New Year, but there are, so this is a sign of contrivance on our part. The Dalai Lama has one calendar (Phugpa calendar) and the Karmapa another (Tsurphu calendar), and the Chinese New Year will always agree with one of these two. At least we don't have three competing New Year dates, unless you also want to consider the Gregorian civil year we all use!

But it gets thicker. The synodic cycle from New Moon to New Moon is not an even amount, but about 29.53 days, so twelve of these don't fit neatly into a Gregorian calendar year. Instead they come up short, so they gradually retrograde, forcing us to choose a particular New Moon among others as the start of the New Year. This is a human decision, not natural law. I will spare you the further worries of intercalary months, where an entire month is repeated or dropped, and intercalary days-of-the-month, where a day is repeated or dropped.

But you can rest assured that all of these machinations are manmade and not a natural fact. They are human attempts to make the lunar calendar fit into the solar calendar, which it does not, at least not nicely. It would take an entire book(s) to go through all of the intricacies involved, so let's cut to the chase and point out what those of us who practice dharma can use for practice that is based on the natural astronomical facts.

We all know that the Gregorian calendar and the civil year (January 1) is a contrivance. There is no astronomical event upon which it is based. As mentioned earlier, the solstices are natural events that actually have meaning that goes back millennia. The monthly lunar cycle, New and Full Moons, are natural events that have a long history of meaning. And of course eclipses are a natural part of the lunar cycle.

Other than that, my friends, much of what passes for the Tibetan astrological calendar is designed to facilitate group practice by a monastery full of

ordained sangha, so that everyone is on the same page. The choice of which New Moon will start the New Year is based on a set of rules, but finally the decision as to which New Moon is arbitrary. The same goes for double or omitted months and days – ultimately arbitrary.

What you want to find and can count on is the exact astronomical time (for your time zone) of the New and Full Moon each month (and the other lunar days in the month), and I can help you there. I have a free book that is a 150-year lunar calendar, good until 2054, so that should hold you. The book is called "Dharma Practice Calendar," and you can find it here.

<http://dharmagrooves.com/e-Books.aspx#Dharma>

Also, I have a free monthly calendar at this link:

<http://www.astrologyland.com/>

Go to the above link, look for the "Moon Time" section (lower right) and in the bottom corner you will see a tiny red dharma wheel. Click that red wheel for the current dharma calendar. And the same goes for the solstices.

The rest of the calculations in the Tibetan calendar are anyone's guess how effective they are. For example, if the New Year is arbitrary and the New Moon date that starts it is also, then it is unclear what makes the first 15 days of that first month special, etc. Or if Buddha was enlightened, etc. on the Full Moon of May, that Full Moon could be anytime from early to late May or even into June! There are many, many special days that depend on these human

contrivances. How meaningful are they other than on our say so?

I don't mean to deprecate this ancient system, but only to point out that any events not based on natural phenomena are contrived for one purpose or another. Of course, we can give them meaning as much as we like, and they may become meaningful that way. For my own work, I prefer to stick to actual astronomical events and not what humans devise for their convenience. This is my opinion, but it looks like His Holiness the Karmapa is saying something similar.

However, if we are looking for natural astronomical events to base our practice on, then, aside from planetary considerations, look no further than to the New and Full Moons, the eclipses, solstices, equinoxes, and seasons. That is pretty much all there is, and it is enough.

I hope this has been helpful.

ASTROLOGY: THE ORACLES HAVE IT

Let's talk some about oracles. I like oracles a lot, but I will restrict myself here to astrology as an oracle. Astrology is essentially cultural astronomy, what on Earth these natural astrophysical events mean. We have an endless list of astronomical events we can calculate into the future, and an endless list of events we can calculate that have already happened, but what do they all mean?

Most (I can't say all) astrologers don't imagine that cosmic events in the heavens cause effects down here on Earth, but rather that astronomical events and earthly events are synchronized and appear together in some kind of cosmic dance. We are all in the same boat. The great events written in the heavens are also writ small and acted out on in exact detail here on Earth as well. In other words, the cosmos flawlessly moves together in celestial harmony. That is the modern astrological view.

It is natural for us to want to better understand what is happening to us in our lives. The newspapers can give us an account as to WHAT is happening, but there is no book or news service that can tell us WHY or what it all means. The movements of the Earth, Sun, Moon, and planets have given us our clocks, how we measure time, like days, months, and years, etc. This cosmic chronometer in the heavens seems as good as any other reference for the timing of events, but, still, what do these events mean? Where does meaning come from?

The movements of the Moon, Sun, and Earth define our sense of time, as mentioned earlier, why not the other bodies in the solar system as well? It is a fact that the pull of all the planets in our solar system causes the center of mass (barycenter) of the solar system, which we would imagine is located at the center of the Sun, to actually move outside the photosphere of the Sun at times. Think about it. That is influence.

I like to say that astrology is an oracle, albeit a complex one. An oracle is simply whatever mechanism allows the cosmos (inner and outer) to speak to us. The western occultists called it being "on your contacts." It is like the old razor and shave analogy. We don't care about what kind of razor it is, as long as it gives us a good shave. So the oracle used could be astrology, tarot, runes, or just tossing some numbers or bones. What serves as an oracle for one person may do nothing for another. Remember, an oracle is whatever puts you on your contacts and connects you to your intuition.

With the tarot, our contact is with the cards. With astrology, our contact is with the heavenly movements and their patterns. And our human body is the ultimate talisman. What is important is that whatever oracle we use, that it speak to us, and put us in touch with our own inner intuition. That's where we want to be.

In my life, astrologers (and other soft sciences) have struggled to prove to the rest of the world that astrology too is scientific, when it would be much easier IMO to just push the other way, which would be

to point out that we all need to develop our inner and intuitive strengths, including scientists. In other words, instead of trying to frame astrology in scientific terms, simply reverse the proof, and make science come to us. How would we do that?

By requiring that science turn inward on itself and start to shed some inner light, you know, light up our inner ignorance with experience and knowledge rather than allow science to demand that we prove and bring the inner out and then be told by science that it is not inner (because it's out). What a clever trick that we are foolish enough to go along with, when we could just as easily ask science itself to go within and shine their light there, if it is so bright. And this is actually finally happening by the increased interest in meditation and the mind itself. Scientists too are starting to look within and the objective and subject duality does not last long in there, does it?

It will be far easier for science to go within then it will ever be for astrologers to find examples on the outside that reflect what is in fact inside. In other words, we each have to just go within and see for ourselves. That's a no-brainer, as they say.

So, for me it is always all about oracles and the oracular. Our own experience and realization is what gives meaning to life. And there is at least some humor left in the world. Harvard psychologist Daniel Brown, who is also a skilled meditator and translator of Tibetan, Sanskrit, and Pali, points out that ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder) is rampant right now perhaps because there is a lack of attention and mindfulness in modern society. Of course there would

be more ADD (deficit of attention) in a society without mindfulness.

That's the kind of humor that really makes me laugh.

DHARMA: THE "MEANING" OF LIFE

"What is the meaning of life?" a question familiar to all of us. What does life mean? As Bill Clinton might say, that depends on the meaning of "meaning," but please don't take this discussion simply as an exercise in linguistics. According to the dictionary, "meaning" is seldom anything in itself, but instead intends, conveys, indicates, shows, etc. In other words, meaning always points beyond itself. That's the whole idea. "Meaning" is a simple reference, a label or pointer that points beyond itself, but to where? And this is where it gets interesting.

Words (and for that matter all language) are just labels or pointers, simple references – referrals. They refer us to what they mean. They point beyond themselves. And all our words (every one of them) depend on the sense they make, and sense is always, well, sensual. It involves the senses. If what I say in words is making sense, I am putting you in touch with your senses. That's what common sense is all about. We share it. Words are pointers beyond themselves, but they have to make sense. And sense is always an experience. We sense the meaning. That is key. It's an experience.

In reality, meaning is always a reference to something sensual, to having an experience, rather than anything in itself. Individual words point and have meaning. We can add more meaning through context, by arranging words, one against the other, to accent our intention. Many words used at once can result in a jumble of meanings, unless we can skillfully arrange

them, like a school of fish, to all point in the direction we intend.

So, meaning points beyond itself to an experience we may have. It refers us to that. It points it out to us. All words have to make sense to register, and sense is always an experience, feeling, and the like. If a word fails to make sense, we say it is just nonsense. It makes no sense. For us to get it, every word or thought has to make some kind of sense. We have to sense it, feel it.

The above concept is worth contemplating, so let me repeat. All language, all words, are nothing in themselves other than labels (references) that point at or toward what they mean. "Meaning" itself is just the pointing and ultimately what is being pointed at; meaning points or refers us to the sense of it, which by definition always is an experience we can have. Otherwise, it's nonsense.

So, when we say "what does life mean?" or "what is the meaning of life?" the answer has always to be something that makes sense, as in an experience that we must each have for ourselves. We have to go live it (sense it) and see!

Very refined or abstract language may be lofty or high, but in the last analysis it still has to make at least enough sense or we can't follow it. The sense of words is the carrot that makes it possible to follow a line of thought. In other words, language and thought always beckons us toward the sense world, toward an experience of what it means or points at. It is up to us to jump in. No one can live life for us. The meaning of life can only be found in an experience, by living it.

With constant thoughts and words, we are surrounded by pointers pointing at an experience we are being referred to and can have. Our personal teachers or gurus point to the nature of the mind and put us in touch with it so that it finally makes sense. And every thought we think or word that is spoken has to do the same, make sense, so that our life can make sense. Shakespeare said it perfectly when he said "To be, or not to be."

What I am sharing here may sound like wordplay, but if you will work with this concept you will find that it bears rich rewards.

DHARMA: NATURE AND THE LAMA OF APPEARANCES

I want to say something about how natural dharma is, at least in my experience. To do this, I have to share a bit of my own history, a personal story of finding the dharma. It might be useful to some of you who love nature as I do.

I was born and raised in Lancaster Pennsylvania until the 6th grade, at which time my family moved to Ann Arbor, Michigan where I then grew up. Those early years in Pennsylvania were idyllic. In Lancaster we lived out in the country where my parents built a house. It was the first house built in that area, and it was wedged between two very large farms. There was no one else around for many years. I grew up surrounded by nature. At the end of our back yard was a vast field in which, when fresh plowed, I would find arrowheads. Otherwise that field had corn, tobacco, wheat, or alfalfa. And beyond that field was a small water-filled quarry where my younger brothers and I built a raft, and there were also islands of woods in that sea of farmland in which we roamed. Lancaster is known as the "Garden Spot of the World," and it is that.

Of that time, what I most remember is the natural world, with huge slow-flying moths around the porch lights in the warm late-spring nights, baby rabbit nests in our yard, raising litters of puppies, etc. Nature fascinated me. When I was six-years old my mother, who was an artist, took me along with her to a meeting of local artists at the farm of another artist. Her name was Peggy Dodge. Mrs. Dodge was a

naturalist, and she found in me a kindred spirit, perhaps because one time I waded into a pond up to my neck and emerged with a large water snake in my hands. My time with her was empowering, and from that time onward until I was in my late teens I studied nature with a passion. And I tend to be intense about what I study.

I had rock collections, fossil collections, pressed leaf and flower collections, insect collections, and on and on. I raised skunks and squirrels, rabbits, doves, mice, hamsters, dogs, and scores and scores of snakes, frogs, toads, and turtles, including rattlesnakes, copperheads, etc. My room was like a tiny nature museum, and I am coming to the point in all this.

During those many years of nature study, intensely focusing on nature, I was learning something else at a deep level. I was learning the laws of nature, how nature actually works. I came to respect those laws as absolute, as how things actually are. I also gradually understood that civil law, while similar in many ways to nature, was relative and not absolute, meaning we can twist and bend civil law. That's what lawyers do. However, we don't break nature's laws; they break us. The law of gravity is absolute. What goes up must come down. And now I come to the dharma.

Perhaps because of my isolation and country upbringing, nature's laws deeply imprinted my consciousness. I was given a religious upbringing, raised Catholic. I went to mass each week, to Catholic school, learned church Latin, and was even an altar boy (imagine that!). But I did not take to the laws and

mores of religion any more than I took to civil law. Neither held up to the natural law that was already operating internally within me.

Now let's fast-forward into my twenties. With the advent of girls into my life, not to mention difficulties being educated (I am hard to teach), my world seemed a whole lot more complex than it did back in the fields and woods of Lancaster where I grew up. And I am talking about the 1960s and then the 1970s, so there were all kinds of competing spiritual disciplines surfacing around me.

Among these many spiritual opportunities, there were also some brushes with the dharma, with the Buddhist teachings and Buddhist teachers. Anyway, through all the smoke and dust of those times I found myself picking up on the steady beat of the dharma. It reached my ears and mind. And here is the point:

I could hear the dharma through the din of those times because it resonated with the laws of nature that I already knew so well. In fact nature and the dharma played the exact same music. The dharma was a subset of natural law or vice versa. There was no conversion to Buddhism. I had been converted many, many years ago when I was about six-years old and became a naturalist. Finding the dharma was like coming home, finding myself. And one more point:

Many years later I had a kind of spiritual breakthrough. This was after years and years of Buddhist meditation and training. But oddly enough, it happened (you guessed it) while I was out in nature and not sitting on a cushion. The experience was very

powerful and for a while I was kind of helpless in my attempt to figure out what exactly was going on with me. Then a good friend, a Buddhist monk, heard me out and explained to me that what I was experiencing had a name. It was what is called the "Lama of Appearances." I had never heard of it.

He explained that most dharma students know the Lineage Lamas, the particular school or approach to Buddhism to which they naturally belong, you know, a dharma teacher. But there is also what is called the "Lama of the Scriptures," which refers to the extant teachings of the Buddha and his enlightened followers, which also exist to point out the dharma. Then there is the "Lama of Dharmadhatu," which is concerned with the final goal or state of realization. I am not too clear about this particular type of lama.

And finally there is what is called the "Lama of Appearances," the lama of the natural world surrounding us. In other words, the world of appearances we find ourselves embedded in is also a perfect reflection of the dharma and can serve as a lama and guide to us in pointing out our dharma path. And the world of nature is a perfect reflection or appearance of the mind itself, and thus a perfect teacher.

My lama-friend went on to say that I had stumbled on this method of learning the dharma, and responded appropriately to it. Of course, my years and years of nature study must have primed the pump. And I am getting to the point here.

I am not the only nature lover out there. Some of you reading this may have studied nature as I did. In

which case, you may have already learned a lot of what the dharma teaches. Since the Lama of Appearances, just as it is in nature, is a perfect teacher, no doubt some of you are already perhaps very good dharma students or well on your way to becoming so. So was I, only I didn't know it.

My problem was that while nature had taught me a lot, there were still holes and weak spots in my mind-training. Probably I had not always been the best nature student or had somehow missed part of the picture. If nothing else, the Buddhists are completists. It was with great relief that what I had missed in my own training, the dharma has filled in seamlessly – the perfect hologram – apparent but empty.

So if any of this rings true to you, you might benefit from actually becoming more familiar with dharma teachings. They just might be your cup of tea.

[This is a photo of a young snapping turtle. I found him dried out and exhausted trying to cross a country road on the way to a pond that to my knowledge was not even there. He was in deep trouble. I took him home, put him in a shallow aquarium and re-hydrated him for a few days. Here he is just before I released him in a pond just the right size for him.]

DHARMA: EMPTINESS APPEARING

This particular series of blogs is a bit of a fool's errand on my part because what is non-dual cannot be properly described or pointed out by language, which is by definition dualistic, you know, standard grammar with its subject and an object. It is very difficult to talk about something that is non-dual without falling into some form of duality. Yet, I am (perhaps against my better judgment) attempting to do just that, point out the relation of appearances to the mind.

Appearances are just that, appearances, but you can't judge a book by its cover. If we look at the nature of appearances, such as at any given thought as it appears, no matter what that thought means or points to, its essential nature is empty, clear, and luminous. As mentioned, appearances and the nature of those appearances are one and the same, clear, empty, and luminous. In other words, clarity and luminosity, along with emptiness, are also apparent in appearances. In fact, they are identical. As I wrote in a poem a few days ago:

"Appearances are ...
Not only empty.
Appearances are ...
The emptiness itself,
Appearing."

Our thoughts and words always to point to what they mean, and the meaning they point to can be convoluted and lengthy, like a whole train of thought. But if we look instead at the nature of any thought (rather than the content or meaning that it points to),

we will see that behind its appearance is clear empty luminosity, but that is a dualistic way of describing this. In fact, there is no "behind" to appearances. Appearances themselves are empty, clear, and luminous from the onset. Appearances are the appearance of emptiness itself, just how emptiness appears, as in: the appearances we view are the emptiness itself arising -- non-dual, one thing and not two. As mentioned, it is practically impossible to use dualistic language to describe what is non-dual. I apologize for trying, but I can't help it because I find it so fascinating.

And this non-duality is the essence of Insight meditation.

The "trick" or knack to Insight meditation depends on our learning not to focus on (and be misdirected by) the content or meaning of our thoughts, but rather to look at the nature of each thought, "nature" being what thoughts consist of beyond just their meaning or what they point to. Most of us have never done this, but we can learn to.

In the beginning, this is not easy, because we are used to always following the meaning of thoughts. If, instead, we consider thoughts as windows which we can look through, then we can begin to directly see the true nature of thoughts, which is always clear and luminous emptiness. Looking directly through a thought (or word) at its clear empty luminosity is a new experience for most of us. What do we see? The answer is that we see clearly. The clarity itself is the object of our looking. Aside from clarity, there is nothing to be seen. It is a non-dual experience.

If we can look through all appearances in the same way, appearances become like a hologram, something clear and luminous, but at the same time empty of true existence, just like a dream (or movie) is clear, luminous, and empty of true existence.

Dualistically speaking, all appearances are a direct reflection of the mind, like in a mirror, and they are no more real than a mirror's reflection, but we don't realize this. Non-dualistically speaking, appearances and the mind are the same thing – identical. Appearances are the mind itself in motion, like waves are water in the ocean. We may understand this, perhaps even experience it sometimes, but most of us have no realization of this. Nevertheless, appearances remain vivid, luminous, clear, and empty of true existence. How amazing!

What is amazing is that we (like the deer in the headlights) are fascinated and focused on these appearances, which are a perfect reflection of the mind. But we have yet to recognize that these same appearances are in fact the mind itself. Right now most of us are unable to look at that mind with the same intent we look at the mind's reflection, the appearances all around us. Appearances distract us from recognizing that they are the mind itself.

Instead, when we look into the mirror of the mind, we always see the reflected appearances (including our own reflection) rather than what does the reflecting, the mind-mirror that reflects all this, and we don't see the mind itself, although appearances themselves are nothing but that same mind in motion. This non-dual stuff is complicated to express, as you can see. Even

in western psychology, looking through the back of the mirror has always been considered enlightening or at least initiatory.

When we start to practice meditation we begin to get to know the mind itself as it is, that which reflects all appearances. Dualistically speaking, we learn to look beyond (or behind) the mirrored image of appearances and into the mind itself. And, of course, non-dualistically speaking, they are the same thing.

This concept itself is worth a little reflection, pun intended.

[Photo of me by me, perhaps an example of emptiness appearing. LOL.]

DHARMA: FROM NATURAL CAUSES

It is my experience that intense spiritual or psychological experiences tend to isolate one from the consensus, at least for a time. That is pretty much the definition of a shaman, someone who mentally is pushed outside of society's norms by an inner experience, suffers alternative states of consciousness, and either goes mad or stabilizes and returns to society as a shaman – one who knows alternative states and can instruct others.

As many of us know, we can feel isolated and in isolation in the middle of a city, even surrounded by people and with all the busyness, confusing signs, and what-not going-on. On the other hand, Mother Nature is so much more stable, consistent, and clear that it can make getting our bearings much easier; at least it did for me. Nature gives it to us neat, and straight-up. She never blinks, so it is no wonder that it is recommended that yogis seek an isolated location to do intensive meditation. At the time of this story, I wasn't seeking isolation. I was 67 years old.

In my case, it was the flow of life events that finally separated me from my normal distractions, in particular suddenly finding myself without a job and old at the same time. I had just been let go from my job as a senior consultant for NBC (along with a lot of other people), but I took it personally. For one, I needed the job to support my family.

So I was plunged into a kind of personal isolation by these harsh events, suddenly self-exiled from my family and from everyone I knew. And while this was

devastating, I was also free for the first time in over thirty years from the responsibilities of running a company or working for someone. I didn't really want to just go around complaining or unloading. And, as my first dharma teacher used to say "I had no pot to piss in."

Of course my family was supportive, but right then I was not consolable. I had ended up at one of life's turning points and didn't even see it coming. And I had nowhere to go, so I ended up out in nature, which has always been for me a place of refuge since I was a small boy. Nature was familiar, stabilizing, and consistent, and I knew it like the back of my hand.

I had no job, so I found myself getting up before dawn each day and heading for the woods. This went on for almost half a year. There I was, standing out in the meadows, often soaking wet from the dew on the grass, just watching the sun come up. I was seeking refuge and nature was my instinctual escape from a life that suddenly was just not working, and a return to the one thing I knew best, natural history, nature, and its inhabitants. I didn't even think about it; I just did it. I needed a time out.

And I took along my camera. Having done nature photography since I was fifteen-years old, it was almost a reflex to grab my camera, which doubled as a good excuse to go out in the wilds. People could understand a nature photographer being out there all the time. And I was just out there in the fields, woods, and streams every chance I could, as I mentioned, watching the sun come up, crawling through the wet

grass with my camera, and peering through exquisite lenses at perfect miniature worlds.

At that time I was not intentionally practicing dharma. In fact, my personal on-the-cushion practice went on hiatus as I found myself struggling to cope with my difficult job situation. What I did not realize at the time is that all of these different exigencies were conspiring to create the perfect storm for learning dharma. It never even occurred to me.

I threw myself into nature photography without a thought to the consequences and with all my heart, if only to push aside for a while all of the problems I was confronting in my everyday life.

I already knew nature very well, and my love for it was deep and unqualified. However, I had gradually moved away from spending time in nature over the years since my youth because some of the harsher truths of nature were too much for me to face on a regular basis. I feel the same way about listening to my favorite woman singer Billie Holiday. I don't just put her on for a listen. I have to get up for it. It is too touching and I am not always ready to be touched, to go through something like that. It was the same with nature. However, at the time I am describing here I was knee-deep in facing some of life's harshness, so it made no difference. I was already way beyond that. Nature was more than welcome. In fact, I instinctively sought it out.

All of this was quite organic, and I soon found myself combining nature with the very demanding photography technique of learning to stack focus, taking at times over 100 photos of a flower at various

focal lengths and then combining those photo layers into a single photo that appears to be in perfect focus.

So I was holding my attention very exactly and for long periods of time and loving all of this while I did it. I was giving 100% effort and intense mindfulness, with no thought of reward or the future. The recent past had gone void on me and I didn't see much of a future for myself at the moment. The Buddhists have the phrase "revulsion of samasa," disgust with the cycles (ups and downs) of this world. Certainly I was revolted by what I was going through. So I was just in the present, out there in the wet grass, watching the sun come up, and taking photos of small worlds, worlds much more pristine than my own. Little else mattered.

At the time, it never occurred to me that what I was doing was in any way dharmic. It was what I naturally was drawn to in my particular situation. It just happened. Furthermore, I was not initially aware that by doing this intense photography I would be getting any dharma results. This took time to filter through.

What I WAS aware of is that my early morning sojourns into nature were becoming more and more compulsory. For example, when is the last time you watched the sun come up every day it did not rain for, say, six-months straight? Or, when is the last time you watched the sun come up? I certainly hadn't, for many years before that time. Indeed, all of this was a little suspicious, and even I eventually caught on. Something was happening here and, as the Dylan song says, and I didn't know what it was... at first.

I began to notice that my daily early-morning trips into nature brought greater and greater clarity into my life. After a time, if I wanted a crystal-clear mind, I had to get my camera and go out and photograph nature. Otherwise, the clarity was missing. And I became addicted to the process, if only because of that clarity. To say I liked a clear mind would be an understatement. It was the best mind that I ever experienced.

Yet that clarity was not just being clear-minded. It was vivid, startlingly clear, and each day I could not rest until I managed to get out there and get clear again. This must be how heroin addicts feel, only in my case I was addicted to the intense clarity of mind that my photography enabled. I had to get straight.

This went on for many months, from late May until late fall when the cold weather drove me inside for the winter, and even then I continued photographing in a small room I used for a studio. Gradually I became aware that something was happening here that WAS very dharmic. In fact I was realizing through photography the kind of results that I had attempted to achieve for many years with my dharma practice. Now this was a total surprise!

And the key to all this clarity (and this is why I am sharing all of this here) was the joy I was finding in practicing photography in nature, something I am sorry to say had been missing from most of my dharma practice for decades. I just naturally loved nature, and any effort involved was transparent (effortless) in the arduous process of nature photography. I loved it. Finally I was naturally doing

what it actually takes to practice Tranquility meditation properly (joy and mindfulness) and, with that stability, Insight meditation became possible and began to spontaneously happen as well. I finally was practicing Mahamudra Meditation.

By this point I had become aware that what I was doing was more dharma than what I had done up to that point through many years of dharma practice. But these dharma results were completely entangled and interdependent with this very complex photography process. Instead of sitting on a cushion and trying to meditate, I finally was meditating properly, but the technique was very complicated, involving cameras, lenses, nature, and time. And I had no idea how to separate that baby from the bathwater, the clarity from the photography. It reminded me of the Zen Buddhist tradition of mixing your mind with everything you do, in my case it was "Zen and the Art of Photography." Go figure.

All I knew was that mentally I was very, very happy and satisfied with whatever you want to call it, my new practice, and all of this right in the midst of my personal financial struggles. Prior to this, I had been working with and practicing Insight meditation daily for something like three years, but mostly intellectually, with some moments of experience, but these six months or so of intensive nature practice catalyzed my practice to the point of some kind of spontaneous combustion. I was, finally on fire, dharmically speaking. And it never went away, and that was years ago. It is still right there.

And there is more. When all this came down I saw right through all of the dharma practice I had done up to that point, saw that much of the rote effort and misplaced emphasis was beside the point. I suddenly had no doubt what I had to do as far as dharma practice from that time onward. There was no need for more instructions because at last I was responding on my own, like a baby taking his first breath. I finally got it, and it was enough.

Gone were my expectations, my thoughts and ideas about enlightenment, the whole mass of whatever I had accumulated in my mind over all those years that I thought was the dharma. All of that was eclipsed by the simple satisfaction and confidence I now had. I knew what to do on my own. I could never relapse or go back because I was no longer just having experience that came and went. I had recognized something about how the mind works.

I had a glimpse of what is called "recognition," a long way from enlightenment, but also entirely separate from the endless practice I had been doing all those years. I had finally seen something about how the mind works and, more important, I had seen that I could work it, just as I am. I lacked nothing but just doing it.

The brittle mold of my earlier practicing was now shattered, and all that scaffolding just blew away -- gone. Most of it was pure hyperbole anyway, something that I held up as what I thought was dharma. In fact, all that time I had no idea what was true when it came to the results of meditation. I just didn't know. And now I did, and didn't care what

others thought because I could not do anything but what I was now doing anyway. A cord had been cut. My eyes were open and I could now see for myself. And I looked around too.

This is not to disparage all of the years and many dharma practices that I had done. I am sure that all of them were purifying and good for me. What I am trying to communicate here is the need to find joy in whatever practices we do to train in the dharma. If you cannot be joyful in your current practice, please consider finding something that is naturally joyful for you and bring your dharma practice to bear on that.

And don't misunderstand this story as my claiming to have any sort of enlightenment, whatsoever. I don't. What I did get out of this is to finally see how to practice with joy, so that my actual meditation training can begin. Some of you might want to take note of this.

DHARMA: ME AND YOU

I get asked why I spend so much time on oriental philosophy and psychology, while seemingly ignoring advances in American and European concepts. First of all, in my view it's all global and I tend to go with whatever makes the most sense, but it is true that in my opinion western psychology seems to be playing catch-up with, let's say, Buddhist approaches to the mind.

Asian methods of working with the mind just seem to work well. And this is particularly true when it comes

to references to the Self, our persona, which here in the west is too often thought of as persona-non-grata. Eastern approaches to the self make a lot more sense to me.

As an example of the western confusion about the self, I point to this confusing issue. On the one hand we are told to be our self, to be self-confident, and all of that, and at the same time we are also told not to be selfish, self-centered, and so on. In the western view, this apparent paradox is one that we just can't seem to solve. Which is it? Is the self something "to be or not to be?" That seems to be our question.

It has been many years now since I first noticed that Asian, particularly the Buddhist (but not exclusively), references to the self were rare. As an astrologer, I perhaps first encountered this when various folks from India would request an astrological reading from me. There was zero interest on their part in all of the self-related stuff we so thrive on over here, something most American astrologers are adept at.

The various self psycho-babble that here in the west we excel is totally uninteresting to the Indian mentality. Instead, they want to know hard facts like exactly how many kids they are going to have, and are they boys or girls, etc. – things like that. Well that got my attention in a hurry because I didn't have answers for them.

After that shock sunk in I began to actively look for references to the self (and any real concern with it) in eastern literature, and I came up short. Oh sure, Buddhists are aware of the self, but they are not preoccupied with it as we are. It is not a mysterious

and confounding topic, something to struggle with and against as we do in this country. What's going on here, thought I. How can these Tibetan Buddhist be immune and ignore what we are seemingly engulfed by? How is that possible?

And, as so often seems to be the case, the Tibetan Buddhists put it most clearly. They don't take the self seriously. Many years ago I fell into what was then already a cliché, that Buddhists say there is no self. Well, they don't say that or, if they do sometimes, it is just said in passing to make some other point.

What they say is that each of us will permanently have a self, but that what makes up that self has no permanent existence. In other words, our self or persona is just a necessary cost of doing business in the process of living life, something like our personal secretary, an eternal middleman between the mind and daily functioning. But they go on to say that this same self (what it is made up of) has no permanent existence. And this is where the confusion comes in.

What I understand the Buddhists are pointing out is that while we will permanently (always) have a self or persona, what makes up that self is not permanent. And the Buddhists go on to point out that the self is made up (personally by us) of all our attachments, our likes and dislikes. And... what makes up our self changes as we change, as we grow up. A prominent part of our self-image when we are a kid might be a new bike, but in our twenties it might be a new girlfriend, and so on.

These attachments (this persona), like our body itself, won't survive our death. The Self represents our

persona or mask, and apparently we remove it when we pass on. It is mostly left behind. Something else is what passes on. I don't want to get into all that after-death self-stuff overmuch right now; instead let's focus on how we treat ourselves, which I believe is really telling.

For example, you might ask me why I write so much about myself, and am so self-concerned. That is a fair question, and the short answer is "I don't know anything else, and never have." My self is a natural part of me. What is the point of denying it? Plus, I don't believe the self is something we have to get away from, but rather it is something that we get away 'with'; like a shadow, it goes wherever we go, at least while we live.

So all this talk about firmly disciplining ourselves, cutting our self off, denying ourselves, and all those strong-arm tactics just don't work, or they don't work well. Rather it is like the tar baby in the Uncle Remus tales, the more you punch or struggle with the self, the deeper in it you're stuck.

So my view with the self is: easy does it. As the Buddhists point out, the self will always be with us, but it doesn't have to sit in the driver's seat. That is like having the dummy be the ventriloquist. As mentioned, what the Buddhists say is not that there is no self, but rather that there is always going to be a self, but don't pay it too much mind; it has no "permanent" existence. Like the weather, it's changeable.

The best method I know to deal with my self is to treat it as I should any other person, with kindness and

compassion. The trick seems to be to gradually thin out undue attachment to the self until the self becomes transparent enough for us to see through and beyond its obscurations into the actual nature of the mind. At that point we begin to have a sense of humor about it. It's just our self-expression.

So, the bottom line for me here is that it's OK to have a self and OK to treat ourselves well. You can even like and talk about yourself. I can't say anyone will listen, but we are free to talk as much as we like. It's not a sin. And those who try to hide their self or pretend to be ashamed to ever be selfish, well, aside from just being puritanical, it is pointless. In the old sense of that word, that is just another kind of selfish.

Here is a fun poem I wrote about the self.

ME AND YOU

The fact that,
I like 'me',
Does not mean,
I don't like,
You.
There is room,
For you,
In me.
And,
You can like,
You too.
You too,
Are like me.
I like you too!

STORY: The Roots of the Sixties: The Beats: PART-1

Winter is cold this year and already too long, so I am editing various early areas of my life story, one of which is when I wanted to be a beatnik, back in the late 1950s. Some of this was blogged before, but that was a while ago and these are updates of that material

What is called "The Sixties" actually didn't start until the summer of 1965, which is like halfway through the decade, so what of those little-spoken of years from 1960 through the mid-1965? I don't know what they are officially called, but I call them the Post-Beat years, and they run from the late 1950s to, as mentioned, the summer of 1965, and they were crucial in helping to make the "1960s" what they were. For one, they represented the end of the Beat Movement, the remains of that day.

I was never a hippie, per se, but I was greatly influenced by the Beat Movement of the late 1950s, although I was a little too young for the full experience. That train had already left the station, but I still learned all that I could. And what was it that I learned from the Beats? What was that lifestyle actually like?

For one, I can start out by saying that the beats as I came to know them were very, very serious folk. Or was that just me? They had none of the wild dancing that came along with the Avalon Ballroom and Fillmore Auditorium in the mid-Sixties. They were in no way hippies. Slow dancing, sure. Light shows and

strobes? No. And it was a different kind of drug scene as well.

Let's be clear; the Beats drank wine, not beer. Hard stuff, some, but it was not promoted. No, what we drank as Beats was wine, and wine with cigarettes or whatever else we might be smoking. And it was dark out too. The Beats did not celebrate the sunshine or the daytime as did the hippies when they finally arrived. The Beats were creatures of the night that only really came to life when it got dark out. Sure, we shuffled along the streets in the daytime wearing our old olive-drab army jackets and surplus clothing. I never wore a beret, but some of my friends actually did. I would have felt self-conscious in one. And remember, I was not a 'Beat', but only wanted to be. Alas, I was too young. I searched for the Beats everywhere, but they already were getting old. Even my naïve youth and enthusiasm for their existence could not revive them. It was like sand running through my fingers.

As mentioned, it was nighttime that was bohemian, and I mean all night or at least until the wee hours of the morning. I can remember when the album "My Favorite Things" by John Coltrane was released in March of 1961. I stayed up all night listening to it at Harvey Armstrong's spacious second-floor apartment down on Packard Street. Armstrong not only had a grand place to live, but he had a beautiful girlfriend. I only had a single small room at the time and no girlfriend. I seem to remember I did have some Dexedrine (speed) that night, so sleep was not an option. It was coffee, cigarettes, and Coltrane, and the

heartbeat was fast from the speed. What an album that was (and is). Next to the Miles Davis “Kind of Blue,” “My Favorite Things” was probably my most listened-to jazz album back then. And I particularly love the piano of McCoy Tyner on the title tune. It is just the best. If you have not heard it, really listened to it, by all means do yourself a favor! I had no idea at the time that in only a few short months I would be out on the road hitchhiking with Bob Dylan. Imagine that.

So what does the apprentice beatnik do? Well, I quickly established for myself that he or she is well read in literature and poetry. Ginsberg and Kerouac showed me that. Familiarity with the Existentialist philosophers like Sartre, Camus, and their kin is also suggested, and probably required. Kierkegaard? Yes, and Hegel too. Classical music (at least some of it) is mandatory, and the more the better, and jazz? The Beats were all about jazz. Blues was not big back then, at least in Beat circles, but folk music was fine.

My first home away from home was a tiny single room at 335 Packard Street in Ann Arbor, just across the street from Crazy Jim's, home of the Blimpy Burger, an Ann Arbor landmark that I am told recently has been torn down. This was around 1963 or so, before I moved out to Berkeley, California for a year early in 1964. There was a bed, a wooden chair, a side table which held a hotplate (which was not allowed, next to which was my jar of instant coffee), and a cheap record player, one of those kinds that had a hinged top that closed so you could carry the whole thing as a suitcase. For records I had Mozart and Bach. Mozart's “The Marriage of Figaro” was one of the few

records I owned and the "Brandenburg Concertos" of Bach. I had "borrowed" a few of my parent's records too, which ones I can't remember, perhaps Art Tatum and Joe "Fingers" Carr. I might have had a few jazz records, because that was where I was headed. Needless to say I did not spend a lot of time at "home." I was almost always out, and usually in the M.U.G, Michigan Student Union Grill, where I sat for untold hours drinking coffee, smoking Camel straights, and doodling on napkins with my Rapidograph pen.

And the 'good' beatnik was familiar with art, at least the French Impressionists. So there you have the general idea. I believe I mentioned that Beats only come out at night and stay up to (or near) dawn. Did I also mention how serious life was back then? I did. So, no sunshine, not too much laughing or day tripping, and a strict diet of Ingmar Bergman films and the darker European shtick, which was infinitely preferable back then to any of the more entertaining Hollywood flicks. Those American films were just uncool. It was all about the darkness and depression of Europe.

We would see these foreign films at the university-sponsored "Cinema Guild" in the old Art and Architecture building or at the "Campus Theater" down on South University Street, the only other theater that showed these films early on. In later years you could find them at the "Fifth Forum" downtown on 5th Avenue. As I look back on that time I can't believe I bought into that dark, depressed, alcoholic and nicotine-stained world view. And I really

tried to enjoy it. Back then I would not allow myself to be entertained. Humor was not a highlight in my life. We would take in a dark European film and then spend the rest of the night smoking, drinking coffee, and talking about it. Today those films seem more like horror films to me or just funny. I know... I have no taste. And those dark European films went out of style as the hippies came in.

And jazz. Forget about rock n' roll; I didn't listen to it much when I was a "beatnik." Pop music was on the back burner. As mentioned earlier, it was mostly jazz that we listened to, in particular Miles, Coltrane, bop, and most of all the 'cool' jazz. Beats were, above all, cool. And it was kind of hard for me to be cool. I was excitable, too much of an enthusiast, and as I found out, simply 'not cool'. And then there was the "just sitting around."

We did a lot of sitting around with serious talking, and often I would find myself watching a friend shoot up heroin. I never went there, but I was familiar with all the dope paraphernalia, the little bent spoons, the tourniquet, the flame, the 'works', etc. I most remember my friend Frank Trun who was really steeped in the Beats and a kind of model beatnik for me. He had a little upstairs apartment way out on South State Street near Stadium Boulevard. I would hike down there very late at night hoping his light would still be on so I could dare go up and knock. It usually was and he was friendly to me. How wonderful that any older person could even see me! To myself, there was still nothing to see.

I am sure we talked (probably he talked) about all kinds of philosophy and deep-life matters, but mostly what I remember is Frank shooting up and me watching. Just watching him shoot up was an inoculation against my ever doing it. It was not pretty, but pretty scary. Sometimes I would have to just leave him there and go home. He was out. Later I heard that Tron was killed when his car ran off the road on the Pennsylvania Turnpike while driving back from New York City. I can only imagine his state of mind. Just like that, he was gone from my life - impermanence.

And the Beats lived 'down'. As a rule, my Beat friends had no interest in working a straight job and tended to do just barely (or less) than enough to get by. And they were likely to live in the poorest parts of town where rents were cheap and no one cared how they looked or lived. Theirs was a life of the mind. For the most part, the Beats I knew were dedicated intellectuals and aesthetes.

In reality, much of the Beat movement for me amounted to my just trying to get in the door, to be accepted, and to be like them. Just to find real Beats was tough. Reality is seldom what we hope for or expect. My own dreams and imagination of the Beat movement were perhaps more interesting than the final reality. I never really became an insider because by 1960 that movement had already mostly dried up and grown old. There was no inside to 'become', but only the diminishing remains of what Kerouac and Ginsberg wrote of. Even though Ginsberg lived on and I would see him once in a while here or there, he

was by then a celebrity and no longer just a beat. What I wanted was to have those inspired visions that the beat authors had, not the withered remains of where they had been. I was just a little too late.

Perhaps that was why all the Beats looked so old to me, because I was young. Finding the beat movement was like when the hourglass sand runs out. I tried to grasp it, but it was already gone, slipping through the fingers of time. There was only a taste left. I so wanted to become them.

With the Beats gone or going, soon there remained only a bunch of latecomers like me going through the motions, but that 'Beat' train had already left the station or was trying to turn commercial. But I did have some Kerouac-like times of my own. I actually left Ann Arbor and hitchhiked to places like Greenwich Village (late 1950s), Venice Beach (in Santa Monica), and North Beach in San Francisco. If you have the patience, I will tell some of those stories. In 1960 I hitchhiked across the country on Route 66 to Venice Beach in Santa Monica.

[My mother was a fine artist. Here is a batik mom did of me from a sketch, a self-portrait, I did back in the 1960s. It gives you an idea of where I was at.]

STORY: LIVING IN THE "GAS HOUSE" ON VENICE BEACH 1960

The Roots of the Sixties: The Beats: PART-2

Continuing with my story. Unfortunately for me, I never took to schooling. I guess I am hard to teach. So have ended up teaching myself almost everything I know how to do. Well, there was one year, and one teacher. When I was in fourth grade, a benign teacher by the name of Mrs. Althouse took me under her wing. I flourished, but the very next year, in fifth grade, the mean Mrs. Ryder ended that exception and proved the rule, that I hate school. All the other years I went to school were just a long, long, and boring wait.

There was one other uptick when I won the Biology Award for my high school and got sent to MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) for a special showing of my study of the "Marine Fauna of the North Shore of Boston," but I flunked that award by flunking out the same year, and having to repeat the whole grade. I should mention that I took Algebra One three semesters in a row because I could not understand that abstract a language. They finally passed me, just to get me out of there. Oddly enough, I got straight A's in geometry. Go figure.

And I was not well-behaved either. Toward the end I was thrown out of school a couple of times for bad behavior, and I finally just left school on my own accord, and never finished high school. I was perhaps too anxious to stop with all the teaching and just get out in the real world and live. And so I did.

About the first significant thing I did after dropping out of school was to leave Ann Arbor (along with my friend John Stanger) and hitchhike out the legendary Route 66 to Venice Beach in Santa Monica, California, where one of the great Beat Movement Meccas was already in decline. We headed out U.S. 12 across Michigan to Chicago. There is nothing quite as lonely as being stranded in a poor section of Chicago in the rain in the middle of the night trying to hitch a ride. All I can remember is the wet pavement and the hazy light of the occasional streetlamp, and waiting. It has been a long time, but I believe from Chicago we hitchhiked to St. Louis, to Tulsa, to Oklahoma City, then Amarillo, and on to Albuquerque. In Albuquerque we got picked up by a fellow with a fancy new Plymouth who asked us if we wanted to take a detour for a night down to Juarez Mexico and have some fun.

CIUDAD JUAREZ

Well of course we wanted to go and we did. I will spare you the blow by blow details, but suffice to say that in Juarez I could drink tequila at a bar, and before I knew it I was drunker than a skunk. The tequila led to a whore house and the rest followed the natural order of things. I woke up back in the U.S. in a cheap motel along Route 66 with a harsh hangover, but that was not all. Every cent we had was gone. That man had shown us a good time, waited until we passed out, taken whatever valuables we had (and they were few), and then was on down the road. I was left only with some experience I had never had before and not to mention (later on) a case of the clap.

We hitchhiked on to Santa Monica with some money my parents wired me through Western Union. Can I ever thank my parents enough for being who they were? Back then I just took it for granted.

Anyway, I was already discovering the difference between expectations and reality. But hey, what good beatnik has not been with a whore or two? As mentioned, I came down with the clap. Worse, I had no medicine to cure it. What a mess. It really was no fun. I finally went to some public health clinic in L.A. (such as they were back then), waited and waded through that, and was administered sulfur pills, a very slow cure indeed. No antibiotics for me.

VENICE BEACH SANTA MONICA

For a time when we first arrived at Venice Beach, with the few dollars we had, John and I rented a two room suite where we stayed. I believe the rooms were in one of those buildings along Venice Boulevard, with all the Venice-Italy type arches and trim. The building was more like a home for winos and drug addicts than anything else, and therefore generally creepy. We shared the bathroom with the entire floor and with little to no furnishings, the rooms were more like a wasteland, a place we spent more time away from than in. But our money soon ran out and my friend John went back to Ann Arbor (I don't remember why), leaving me to find my own way. With no more rent money, the rooms were abandoned and I was soon back out on the street. As I look back on it today, I can't remember anyone else my age there, at least not many. Of course I always liked to hang with those

older than myself anyway. After all, they had all the wisdom and experience that I so desperately wanted.

For a short time I worked in a small neighborhood convenience store stacking shelves, something I knew how to do from jobs at the A&P and Wrigley food stores back in Ann Arbor. I had so little food then that back in the stockroom I would wolf down anything I could find around the store and that would be my meal for the day. Of course I had to do this without the proprietor finding out. I am not sure how I left that job, but it might have been when I found a room to stay in the basement of the Gas House. I never liked working for someone else.

What did I do all day and most nights? In retrospect, not much it seems. I would mostly just hang out, ponder life, and talk. Conversations were big. And that was enough back then. Of course I would look for women, but being naturally shy by nature, those opportunities were few and far between, not to mention that I had gonorrhea for most of the time I was in California that trip. That didn't help romance at all.

THE GAS HOUSE

I am trying to paint you the flavor and I could go on, but I write this just to give you a sense of what it was like, where I was coming from, and what I was trying to do. I was living at the (now legendary) Gas House, the notorious art gallery and Beat gathering place at 1501 Ocean Front Walk right on Venice Beach. It held sway for three years, from 1959 through 1961, and was one of the main centers of the Beat movement during its demise. There I met and hung out with

icons like Lawrence Lipton, Eric “Big Daddy” Nord, Mad March, the poet Taylor Mead, the artist Ed Newell, and Tamboo the conga player. Everyone came there, including Kerouac, and later Ken Kesey, and after I left, folks like Janice Joplin, Peter, Paul and Mary, and so on, also came. I remember drinking whisky with Joplin one night (she drank the whiskey), but that was later on at the Grande Ballroom in Detroit around 1966.

This was still 1960 and I lived in an old walk-in cooler (a non-functioning one) in the basement of the Gas House. It was not large, but made of beautiful natural woods inside, and of course there were the racks where food was stored. That was where I slept. At that time I was an artist, or thought I was, a painter in oils and, of course, a poet. Everyone was. I spent my days... or more likely nights... painting, drawing, and writing poems, Beat poems of course. By that time I was not only yearning for the Beat life but, since misery loves company, I was also searching for a partner, a woman to love, one who would love me just as I was. Imagine that! I had no money and lived on what I could find or fall into, picking up old cigarette butts on the long wide sidewalk that ran up and down Venice beach along the ocean. I had nothing, but I was in California and I was living with the Beats. And that was something!

And then there was my friend found hanging from a rafter in his upstairs flat, an artist like me who decided to commit suicide, why I never knew. He was much more gifted than I.

DRINKING SWEET WINE

I remember going to a party along Venice Beach in a small house of a friend or at least someone I had heard of, perhaps it was Tamboo the conga player and Mad March, his woman. I brought with me half a gallon of cheap wine to pass around. I must have been nineteen years old at the time and a young nineteen at that.

When I came through the door of the house where the party was being held, there were two federal narcotic agents waiting. They were frisking each person as we came in, looking for dope, and paid no attention to my wine or the fact that I was underage. They didn't even check my ID. I was directed to sit down along a wall with a string of other folks who already had gone through the same routine. So there I sat while the feds continued to play their game, frisking each person who showed up at the party. Needless to say, I was very nervous.

In my nervousness I opened the wine and started to take a sip or two. Well, before I knew it I drank the entire half gallon all by myself. I didn't want to bring attention to myself as underage by trying to share it. Later, free and outside once again, I puked my guts out for hours. Nothing makes you sicker than a wine drunk, especially sweet wine.

Venice Beach and the Gas House was the real deal, the dying remnants of the Beat Movement, certainly enough to give me a taste of what Beat life was all about. However, all in all, the bloom was off the rose. The characters I found myself with were stained by their own habits and made a better story in a book than close friends. It took me quite a while to

acknowledge my disappointment and realize that I did not want to spend my life with these folks, bohemian or not.

WILD RIDE TO NORTH BEACH, SAN FRANCISCO

I can remember one all-night car ride from L.A. to San Francisco, too many of us packed into the vehicle, penniless, and probably high on something, hurtling through the night and up along the Pacific Coast on highway 101, all squashed together like that. When we finally reached North Beach, San Francisco (which was then the heart of the bohemian culture in that city) near dawn, the first thing we did was to pull into an outdoor vending area and pile out of that cramped car into the cool night air. The stars were out. Someone pried open a cigarette machine and we made off with what coins we could find.

And later, I found myself standing outside a bakery on one of San Francisco's steep narrow streets waiting for the bakers to throw out the day-old baguettes, and we feasted on those. Perhaps one of us would lift a sausage or some cheese from an all-night grocery and we would have that too. And cigarettes; somehow we always had cigarettes. Usually wine appeared along the way as well; that and marijuana were the common denominators back in those days.

I have a drawing of me sitting on a statue on Telegraph Hill, up near Coit Tower. I had climbed up there. It was 4:00 AM, November 2nd, 1960. I believe it was drawn by an artist named Verne or something like that.

And I can remember spending time at the City Lights Bookstore, founded by the Beat poet Lawrence Ferlinghetti. I was finally in San Francisco, in North Beach, where the Beats hung out. I had been to the three main habitats for the Beat Movement, Greenwich Village (NYC), Venice Beach (Santa Monica), and North Beach (San Francisco). I came, I saw, and I was too late. The soul of the Beats had already flown. Only the remains remained. It was not long until my internal clock told me it was time to go back to tranquil Ann Arbor.

So there you have some more story. Had enough, or still want more?

[Here is a portrait of me drawn by well-known Beat artist Ed Newell back in 1960 somewhere around Venice Beach. Also a sketch of me sitting on top of the famous statue on Telegraphy Hill, near Coit Tower. This was drawn by Verne (don't remember his last name), around 4:00 AM on November 2, 1960]

STORY: 1961 HITCHHIKING WITH BOB DYLAN

I will post something about my return trip to Ann Arbor from my time in Venice Beach in 1960 in a day or so. Little did I know that only a few months later, in the late spring of 1961, I would be traveling with Bob Dylan. Here is that story.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s I would hitchhike to New York City often. Back then, unless we had some old junker of a car to borrow or catch a ride, we hitchhiked. Heading out of Ann Arbor, the bad places to get stuck hitchhiking were down by the prison in Dundee, Michigan or trying to get around Toledo, Ohio, that sharp left turn toward New York City. Once you got past those areas, it went pretty smoothly, usually. And we would hang in Greenwich Village in New York City. I must have hitchhiked that route ten times over the years.

I remember being there with Perry Lederman and Bob Dylan back in June of 1961. Lederman is how I met up with Dylan. They were already friends. Perry Lederman was a phenomenal instrumentalist on the guitar. If Dylan and I were in touch today, we would still marvel at what a player Lederman was. Lederman played Travis-style, which we used to term '3-finger picking' and his playing was unmatched. Lederman was not a vocalist, and when he did sing it was not special, but he could play instrumentals like no one I have ever heard. When Lederman took out a guitar, people would listen and marvel. Each song was like hearing a mini-symphony, with an overture, the main theme, variations, and an ending.

I travelled with Lederman a number of times and later in 1964 spent time with him during the year I spent in Berkeley where both of us were living at the time. After that I don't believe I ever saw him again. He died some years ago now and, although there was a CD issued after his death, it was not of his early playing, but something later and not representative, a shadow of himself.

Perry Lederman was also expert at finding and selling old Martin guitars, scavenging them out of attics and garages, fixing them up, and selling them. While traveling with Lederman I have seen some of the best and rarest old guitars in the world, like double and triple-0 martins with intricate perfling around the edges, rosewood and ebony bridges, not to mention intricate inlaid necks and headstocks, sometimes with the Tree-of-Life design. It would be hard to put a price of any of these guitars today. I had one for a while, an old koa wood Hawaiian guitar. I wonder what I ever did with it? Anyway, back to New York City.

I have memories of Izzy Young and the Folklore Center on MacDougal Street in the village. We would hang out there because we had no place else to go, and also because that is where you met other players and like minds. Back then we all smoked all the time, Lederman, myself, Dylan -- everyone. Cigarettes, caffeine, and some alcohol. That was the thing.

I don't know how many days we were in the city on this particular trip, which was in June of 1961, but it was probably a while. We were hitchhiking and tended to spend at least a day or so at each main stop before moving on. We would hang. Plus,

Lederman's mom lived in Brooklyn. I remember visiting her one time and she served us matzo ball soup at a small kitchen table by a window. I quietly ate my soup while Perry and his mom got caught up. I don't remember how we got out to Brooklyn or back to the city. It could have been by bus.

What I do remember is one night during that trip being at Gerde's Folk City on West 4th Street in the West Village with Dylan. We were all just hanging out. In those days we stayed up late, usually most of the night. Who knows where we would sleep, but it was not often comfortable and we were in no hurry for bed. The particular night I remember the guitar player Danny Kalb was playing at Gerdes. He was being featured that night or week. Kalb later became part of the group "The Blues Project."

I am sure Kalb was enjoying his prominence and I can remember him playing, the lights on him, and Dylan, Lederman, and I standing off toward the shadows. Perhaps it was packed because I recall walking around in a crowd and there was not a lot of light. Bob Dylan was not happy about Kalb. I think we all felt that way because Kalb did have an air about him of 'better than thou', and who could blame him. He was the man of the hour that night at Gerdes Folk City.

I can't remember whether Dylan played a few songs later that night himself or perhaps he or Lederman played some tunes elsewhere. I can't recall. But I do recall his being irritated by Kalb, and dissing Kalb was not hard to do. He was just a little full of himself at the time. After all, Gerdes was 'the' place to be.

Thinking back, I don't think it was jealousy on Dylan's part with Kalb. He was not petty, as I recall. He was probably just itching to let all of us know he was Bob Dylan and wondered why nobody could see this right off. Back then (and it is not so different today), if you had something to sing or had worked on your stuff, you wanted a chance to play and show it off. Dylan was a nervous type and it showed.

Keep in mind that back then Bob Dylan was still trying to find out for himself who he was. This was before he recorded his first album. I can remember another time in Ann Arbor sitting with Dylan in the Michigan Union for hours drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes while we waited for a review of a concert or 'set' that Dylan had done the night before. Recently someone reminded me that I helped put that concert on, but my memory is not that good. I am not sure if the set was part of the Folklore Society performance or some other one, but I remember that Dylan was very concerned about how it went over. That is most of what we talked about. He wanted to know. This was before he had the world at his feet. He put his pants on one leg at a time like the rest of us back then. When the paper finally came out and we got a copy, sure enough Dylan got a good review. With that he was soon at the edge of Ann Arbor and hitchhiking on to Chicago and the folk scene there.

Back then there was an established route that folkies like Dylan and myself travelled. It went from Cambridge to NYC to Ann Arbor (sometimes to Antioch and Oberlin) to the University of Chicago to Madison and on out to Berkley. It was the folk

bloodstream that we all circulated on, either hitchhiking or commandeering some old car for the trip. Most of us hitchhiked. Early folk stars like Joan Baez and the New Lost City Ramblers did not hitchhike, but they still sat around with us in the Michigan Union drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes. There was nowhere else to go. I can remember sitting in the Michigan Union with Joan Baez and just drinking coffee and passing time

And another time I remember hitchhiking with Dylan and Lederman, heading out of New York City down the road to Boston and to Club 47 in Cambridge. Here was Dylan standing on the side of the road with a big acoustic guitar strapped around his shoulder playing while I stuck out my thumb. I remember the song “Baby Let Me Follow You Down” in particular. Even though I did not know at the time that this was “Bob Dylan,” it still was pretty cool. This is the life we all wanted to live back then. We were folkies chasing the Beats.

And Cambridge was another whole city and atmosphere. For some strange reason I seem to remember the Horn & Hardart automat there, and trying to get food from it. Club 47, like “The Ark” in Ann Arbor, was one of the premier folk venues in the country, even back then. Today it is known as Club Passim. We hung around there for a spell. I keep trying to remember where we slept, but it must have been any old floor that would have us.

Cambridge was where Lederman and I left Dylan that time. He was heading out west hitching along the interstate toward (I believe it was) Saratoga Springs

or perhaps Schenectady, New York for a gig. Perry Lederman and I were hitchhiking over to New Hampshire and Laconia to attend the annual motorcycle races there, which is another story. I don't know where we slept at the races. I remember it being just on the ground, but still kind of cold out at night.

And the motorcycle races were incredible. Large drunken crowds that, when the official races were not being run, would mass and then part just enough to allow two motorcycles to run first gear against one another while the crowd cheered. The problem was that the crowd pressed in too close and every so often one of the cycles would veer into the crowd and the handlebars would tear someone's chest out. The ambulances were going non-stop way into the night. And it seemed the crowd never learned. It was scary and very drunk out. I remember riding on the race track on the back of a big Norton motorcycle at almost 100 miles an hour, not something I would do today.

This all took place in mid-June of 1961. The Laconia, New Hampshire races were held from June 15 through the 18th that year. This would put us in Gerdes Folk city some days before that.

As to what kind of "person" Bob Dylan was, in all sincerity he was a person like any of us back then, a player or (in my case) a would-be player. Dylan and I are the same age, born a month or two apart. All of us were properly intense back then. I was 19 years old in the spring of 1961. Imagine!

I vaguely remember Dylan telling me he was going to record an album or just had recorded one; it could have been the Harry Belafonte album where he

played harmonica as a sideman on “Midnight Special,” I don’t know. I believe it was later that year that Dylan recorded his first album on Columbia. I don’t remember seeing him much after that.

Some of you may know that I was a music critic for many years, which I don't mention here all that much. Something that I got a lot, mostly years ago, was the comment that Bob Dylan really can't sing. I addressed this in an article I wrote, some of which appeared in the biography of jazz guitar great Grant Green in the book “Grant Green: Rediscovering the Forgotten Genius of Jazz Guitar” by Sharony Andrews (Grant Greens daughter) and published by Backbeat Books. The full article is called “Groove and Blues in Jazz,” which is at this link for those interested in knowing more about bluesy jazz and what albums to find it on, and below is an excerpt:

<http://dharmagrooves.com/pdf/articles/Music/Groove%20and%20Blues%20in%20Jazz.pdf>

Grant Green: THE Groove Master

"All that I can say about Grant Green is that he is the groove master. Numero uno. He is so deep in the groove that most people have no idea what's up with him. Players like Stanley Turrentine, Jimmy Smith, Kenny Burrell, and many other really great soul jazz artists are also groove masters. But the main man is Grant Green. He is so far in the groove that it will take decades for us to bring him out in full. He is just starting to be discovered.

"To get your attention and make clear that I am saying something here, consider the singing voice of Bob

Dylan. A lot of people say the guy can't sing. But it's not that simple. He is singing. The problem is that he is singing so far in the future that we can't yet hear the music. Other artists can sing his tunes and we can hear that all right. Given enough time... enough years... that gravel-like voice will sound as sweet to our ears as any velvety-toned singer. Dylan's voice is all about microtones and inflection. For now that voice is hidden from our ears in time so tight that there is no room (no time) yet to hear it. Some folks can hear it now. I, for one, can hear the music in his voice. I know many of you can too. Someday everyone will be able to hear it, because the mind will unfold itself until even Dylan's voice is exposed for just what it is -- a pure music. But by then our idea of music will also have changed. Rap is changing it even now.

"Billie Holiday is another voice that is filled with microtones that emerge through time like an ever-blooming flower. You (or I) can't hear the end or root of her singing, not yet anyway. As we try to listen to Holiday (as we try to grasp that voice), we are knocked out by the deep information there. We try to absorb it, and before we can get a handle on her voice (if we dare listen!) she entrances us in a delightful dream-like groove and we are lost to criticism. Instead we groove on and reflect about this other dream that we have called life. All great musicians do this to us. Shakespeare was the master at this. You can't read him and remain conscious. He knocks you out with his depth.

"Grant Green's playing at its best is like this too. It is so recursive that instead of taking the obvious outs

we are used to hearing, Green instead chooses to reinvest -- to go in farther and deepen the groove. He opens up a groove and then opens up a groove and then opens a groove, and so on. He never stops. He opens a groove and then works to widen that groove until we can see into the music, see through the music into ourselves. He puts everything back into the groove that he might otherwise get out of it, the opposite of ego. He knows that the groove is the thing and that time will see him out and his music will live long. That is what grooves are about and why Grant Green is the groove master.

[The photo is of me probably around 1960 or so. Notice my herringbone jacket under which is a dark blue sweater! Those were the days.

In the back, standing with glasses, is Carl Oglesby (the political activist and author) and sitting front left is his wife Beth Oglesby. I hung out with them for a while.]

STORY: MICHAEL BLOOMFIELD AND HOW I BECAME A GROUPIE

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

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

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

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

It was the same with the Rolling Stones. Of course I like their tune "Time is On My Side," because that is an Irma Thomas song. What's not to like, but I like the original by Irma Thomas much better. Thomas is one of the greatest woman singers I have ever heard. Period. I had the chance to have dinner with her and hang out some years ago and it was out of this world. Later that night at the gig, Irma Thomas changed her set list to include many of her early songs that I especially love, just for me. We are exactly the same age. I can't say enough about what a great artist Irma Thomas is.

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

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

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

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

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

Our recording of East-West is the first complete rendering of this tune that is extant. If I remember right, we were sitting behind a curtain on the stage recording this, but I could be wrong. My brother Dan might remember. Anyway, the recording we made was issued on an album called "East-West Live" by the Butterfield keyboard player Mark Naftalin in 1996. I sent him the tapes. Here is the album for those interested. Our recording is the second cut. But I digress.

http://www.amazon.com/East-West-Live-Paul-Butterfield/dp/B0000034D7/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1392441358&sr=8-1&keywords=east-west+live

There were many reasons the Butterfield band's imprint on us was so profound. For one, they were just that good, and they were a racially mixed band as we sometimes were. That first Butterfield album stopped us in our tracks and our band was never the same again. That was probably the time we added the phrase "Blues Band" to our name, making it the

"Prime Movers Blues Band." That first Butterfield album served as a wakeup call to an entire generation of White would-be blues musicians, a notice that we could go ahead and try to play the blues, "whiteness" and all, and so we did.

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

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

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

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

But it was Butterfield's lead-guitar player, Michael Bloomfield, who most stands out in my mind. Bloomfield actually was our friend. He cared about us. We could feel it. Michael Bloomfield also played lead on Dylans album "Highway 61 revisited." Michael Bloomfield is one of the greatest guitarists I have ever heard, and I have heard a bunch. Bob Dylan thinks so too, as this quote from a Rolling Stone article (May 2009) shows:

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

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

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

My entire band and I drove all the way across the country (and back) in our 1966 Dodge Van. We had our band name (The Prime Movers) all over that van, but most people thought we were a just another moving company even though across the front of the van we had the slogan “Gonna Ring a Few Bells in your Ears” a quote by legendary New Orleans performer Jessie Hill from his song “Ooh Poo Pah Doo.” Any of you remember that song? Here it is for those of you with open ears:

<http://youtu.be/3qhxE5z9xRI>

How we crammed all of our band equipment and the entire band (I think there were five of us), not to mention five suitcases into that Dodge van and managed to get it across the U.S. is beyond me. We just did it, took turns driving, and made it a non-stop trip. I can remember waking up as we crossed the Continental Divide to find us moving at a snail’s pace surrounded on all sides by a huge flock of sheep. That moment was a long way from what we were going to find in San Francisco and Haight-Ashbury.

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

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

In fact we played blues outside on the pavement next to a local Sausalito Black rib-joint for food, just to have something to eat. We ate a lot of ribs that summer. The Sausalito Heliport was just across the San Francisco Bay Bridge to the north. However, the band and I spent most of our time in San Francisco and Berkeley, where we auditioned and/or played at all the major Sixties clubs, places like the Avalon Ballroom, The Straight Theater, The Matrix, The Haight A, and even the Fillmore Auditorium. We also played in Berkeley at the New Orleans House and other places

And there is more to my Bloomfield story. It was also thanks to Michael Bloomfield that we played the Fillmore Auditorium. Bloomfield not only found us a place to stay, but asked us to fill in for his band the "Electric Flag" when they could not make a gig, at the Fillmore itself. It was August 29th of 1967 at the Fillmore Auditorium that we opened for Cream on what I believe was their first concert in the U.S. or at least in San Francisco. For those of you who don't know about Cream, it was the British rock supergroup featuring Eric Clapton on guitar, Jack Bruce on bass, and Ginger Baker on drums. Their songs included

many classic blues tunes and, of course, their smash hit "Sunshine of Your Love."

In fact I watched Cream (with needles in their arms) shoot up speed in the green room before the show. And I had a shouting match with Fillmore promoter Bill Graham at that time about how to mic our amplifiers. Graham wanted to run our sound directly through these giant walls of speakers, but I wanted them to mic our amps through their own speakers, so our particular (old Fender Concerts) amp sound would be preserved. I am sure I was wrong, but at the time it seemed so right. And shouting with Bill Graham was almost required in those days.

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

http://www.amazon.com/His-Head-Heart-Hands/dp/B00I1CRJN0/ref=sr_1_1?ie=UTF8&qid=1392445893&sr=8-1&keywords=michael+bloomfield

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

<http://michaelerlewine.com/viewtopic.php?f=148&t=53&sid=67fe8580b0baa8fe627efe1bf823d3c2>

[A photo of me playing harmonica in the West Park band shell in the 1960s, probably the time I was playing and jamming with Jerry Garcia. Also, a poster of one of our gigs in San Francisco during the Summer of Love.]

STORY: BLESSINGS OF THE 1960S: EDEN FOODS

"Mighty oaks from little acorns grow." It has taken 45 years, but that aphorism has proved itself true regarding natural foods. There certainly was nothing very natural about Ann Arbor food back in the early 1960s. And I am so tired of ne'er-do-wells telling me that "The Sixties" was a mistake and has brought the country nothing of real value. Are they serious?

I keep waiting for someone to set the record straight, but as Dylan says "It's not dark yet, but it's getting there." So, as we can find the time, let's those of us who were there count the blessings of The Sixties, one-by-one, while we can. I am going to start off with food and my connection with Eden Foods. What would Ann Arbor (or for that matter, the whole country) be like without Eden Foods and endeavors like it? Eden Foods is just one of the great concepts that became companies in the 1960s. Let me set the stage here for a moment.

Diet, like family backgrounds, is very hard to change. In the early 1960s, when I was still (at least in my mind) a beatnik, I was not into natural foods or whole foods, much less organics. I would eat about anything. My mom brought her five sons up on a regular American diet, whatever we can agree that was.

It was only in the later 1960s, after the onset of what we now call "The Sixties" that my interest in WHAT I ate stirred, and I can't remember just how that went down. I do remember reading (and re-reading) "The

Mucusless Diet Healing System" by Arnold Ehret, with his emphasis on fasting and the value of alkaline over acidic foods. Certainly I went on all kinds of raw-foods diets back then, mostly my idea of salads, and probably more so in the summertime. Even today I still believe the best first step when I reach a food crisis (and it seems I reach these all the time) is to fast for a day (or part of a day) and see what's going on with me.

And it's not like Ann Arbor was already "green" or obviously into healthy foods back then. Ann Arbor had restaurants and they were mostly run by Greeks, but they didn't serve actual Greek food, but just the same old mashed potatoes, meatloaf, and olive-drab peas kind of thing. And Ann Arbor also had a handful of good German restaurants, but there is nothing healthy about that food either.

I can't remember when I first fell in with the Eden's crowd. They weren't even a crowd yet back then, but just people coming together. I knew Eden Food's original founders Bill and Judy Bolduc early-on, just as folks about town. I believe they were astrological clients of mine. As for Tim and Pattie Redmond, who also helped found the company, they were friends. In fact, I married Tim and Pattie, something I used to do now and again back in the day, and they are still together!

I'll bet I knew most of the food-folks in Ann Arbor at the time. There were not that many. It probably got more real when Eden Foods asked me to pick the exact date and time for their company's incorporation. As mentioned, I was an astrologer-about-town back

then. And the date I picked turned out to be November 4, 1969. I guess it was propitious, because Eden Foods is still going strong. I am told that Eden Foods is the only large natural-food company that is not today owned by conglomerates, and this probably is thanks to the tenacity and vision of Michael Potter, their current CEO.

Originally called Eden Organic Foods, it was first incorporated as a non-profit corporation by entrepreneur Bill Bulduc, and was kind of a loose natural-foods co-op with a retail store at 514 East William St. in Ann Arbor, which was little more than a small upstairs apartment as I recall.

I also was asked to design a poster for Eden Foods, which promptly became the logo which they still use today, you know, those four little sprouts in a circle. I include it here. For the record, the inspiration for that logo came from my love of the incredible simplicity and beauty of Japanese art, and in particular Japanese funereal crests. I was struck by the utter understatement and clarity of Japanese family funeral symbols. Anyway, that's where Eden's logo came from.

And while I don't want to lean on the horn, I owe you younger folks at least a tiny reminder of how hard-fought the fight has been to bring healthy food to the table in this country, almost forty-five years later! Back in the 1960s, there were no natural-food restaurants, Whole-Foods stores, or anything like that.

Sure, we had health-related stores, sometimes even called "health-food" stores, like the one down on N. Ashley in Ann Arbor, but there was no real food there,

just rows and rows of vitamins and supplements, mostly for older folks. I could never find anything there I wanted to have. To me they always seemed like a throwback from the 1950s or earlier. In late 1971, Julian Moody opened Applerose at 404 W. Liberty and it actually had some natural foods, but it lasted only about a decade.

One friend of ours was Ken King, who founded Frog Holler Organic Farm back in the early 1970s and began producing organic, pesticide-free, food for the Ann Arbor area. They are still going today. And King was also co-owner of Indian Summer Natural Foods Restaurant in Ann Arbor, where we would go mornings to have their incredible natural-grain pancakes. And it was there that my friend Dana Wilkinson made yeast-free loaves of bread each day.

In the early 1970s, for a while, there was also the Rainbow People's weekly neighborhood grocery program, where for a few bucks you could get two grocery bags full of produce hauled in from Detroit's Eastern Market. Margaret and I subscribed to that and it was a good thing. I believe my friend John Sinclair helped to get that going.

My point here is not to put down what was there back then, but rather to point out that just as babies take time to grow up, new ideas and approaches take just as long, sometimes until the die-hards die off, but perhaps nothing takes as long as changing our eating habits, unless it's losing weight.

So, way back then Eden Foods was just a tiny store with a new idea run by people we knew, our friends. I can very much remember macrobiotic dinners and

cooking classes, where we would go to someone's home, learn to cook a macrobiotic dish, and then all sit down and have dinner together. For me, it all kind of started there.

And I will spare you what little I know about the many changes Edens has gone through, changes of ownership, location, etc., like their move down into the basement of 211 S. State Street, where my old alma-mater bookstore Bob Marshall's Books used to be, and so on.

At some point Michael Potter, currently the CEO of Eden Foods, came into the picture. Potter is a piece of work, and that's a compliment. To use macrobiotic terminology, Michael Potter as a person is very "yang," something macrobiotic folks seem to prefer. He is tough, bright, and not about to be pushed around by the exigencies of life. Michael has been a leading force at Edens for many years. I am proud to call him a friend.

Somewhere around the fall of 1974 Potter made his first trip to mainland China, one of at least a dozen trips he has made, something that American businessmen just didn't do back then. That was a brave move, to actually go over to Communist China and connect with the Chinese, eyeball-to-eyeball, and he did the same with the Japanese. Potter has always had real vision and stick-to-it-ness.

By the early 1970s there was a core group of us that were all about macrobiotics. Keep in mind that there was no tofu back then. Sure, you might find some overly-processed soy curd at an oriental grocery, but who knows what was in it or how it was made. We

learned to make tofu ourselves, at home, and it is quite a process, boiling the soy beans, mashing and straining them, pressing them into curd, and all of that. And we pounded sweet rice into Mochi too.

We also made our own pickles by fermenting daikon and all kinds of vegetables. There was no tamari in the stores, so we had to import it in little wooden kegs and casks and store it in the basement. Once again, Edens got it for us. In fact, our damp Michigan basement at 1041 N. Main Street in Ann Arbor was full of all kinds and sizes of wooden tubs from Japan. There was Mugi and Hatcho miso, and other kinds too, plus tiny kegs of omeboshi plums, twig tea, and so on. We were our own bulk-food store. My wife reminds me that I also had a little touch of the survivalist back then, and tended to hoard food.

And we made our own Tekka, a condiment. Raise your hand if you know what Tekka is? We would go out in the yard and dig up Gobo (Burdock root), and so on. We still make Gomasio, roasted sesame seeds with seaweed, about once a month. And we would import seaweed from the east coast and then dry it in the side yard like clothes on the line. See the photo.

The takeaway here is that the above foods were not all that we ate. Maybe at first, when we were purists, but today we eat almost everything, but with an attempt at least to balance the foods we eat, so they work together to keep us healthy. That's macrobiotics in a nutshell: balance.

Of course, personally, I have found myself dropping certain foods from my diet in order to stay alive, so to speak. I gradually realized that certain foods make me

sick, like sugar. I don't eat sugar in anything but natural fruits at this point, and dropping sugar was one the best choices I ever made. I immediately felt stronger and better, because every time I ate a bunch of sugar my body would go into a kind of swoon until I recovered some hours later. I don't mean I would pass out, but I could feel my body struggling with the sugar-high, and that didn't seem worth it. Easy solution: stop eating the stuff. I honestly believe refined sugar is a poison.

And caffeine too. If I drink coffee or eat chocolate, I don't sleep, etc. And in my house we don't eat processed foods anymore. We make everything we can from scratch. I could go on, but you get the idea. What we do eat are whole foods that we like and that are nourishing too. I probably eat too much popcorn these days, but it is relatively harmless. "Relatively" is the operative word.

As mentioned, Eden is something that The Sixties brought us, and it blessed Ann Arbor first of all, and then the rest of the country. However, the one thing I most remember is the little Eden Foods store and eatery at, I believe, 330 Maynard Street, up near Nichol's Arcade, tucked away in a little cul-de-sac that almost looked like an alley. I believe maybe Tim Redmond ran the place. It was there that they made the one food I have never been able to forget, Eden's fresh-made chapatis.

I would go in there around Noon and they would hand me a large warm chapatti that was lightly scorched on the outside from an open flame, but still soft within. And inside would be various steamed veggies

(onions, carrots, cabbage, broccoli, perhaps parsnips) bathed in a sesame-tahini sauce, with a touch of salt. This much of the recipe I know from an old friend, Steve Sailor, who actually got up at 5 AM in those days and began to chop veggies in 5-gallon buckets to prepare for lunchtime at Edens.

I can't think of any meal in my life as wonderful as those Eden chapatis. I wish they were available or that I could make them. I have tried, but it was not the same. As they say, we are lucky if we can step in a river even once!

And before I end this, I should say something about macrobiotics. I owe you that. In the late 1960s I was all about Macrobiotic food balancing, and still am today for that matter. Unfortunately, the macrobiotic diet has gotten a bad rap over the years, something to the effect that if you are macrobiotic you only eat brown rice until you die from malnutrition, and yada-yada-yada. What a bunch of baloney that is.

Macrobiotic foods and diet is not about any particular food. It is all about balancing foods to stay healthy. Brown rice often comes into the picture when we are unwell, as a way to stabilize and stop force-feeding ourselves with junk, at least until we can see where and just how we are out-of-balance. When I overeat and get carried away with food or life, I find the best thing is to just stop eating for a couple of days and let the smoke clear. After fasting (at least for me), brown rice (especially short-grain brown rice) is a good food to begin putting back into my system.

For me, Lundberg short-grain brown rice is like the air I breathe or the pure water I drink, a common staple

(and stable) food, almost like a wrapper, to which other foods are added. Brown rice is a basic life-food for me, something I always go back to, especially when my health gets sketchy.

Anyway, a macrobiotic diet refers to how we balance foods, and not what foods we eat. The actual foods depend on our locale and the climate, like when it is cold outside I eat more roasted root veggies, oatmeal, etc., and when it is hot outside I eat more yin foods like fruit, and so on. That is the balance I am referring to here. That is macrobiotics; it's not just about eating brown rice, although fresh-cooked short-grain brown rice, if you know how to cook it, is mighty special.

In fact, I am eating some right now as I write this and the high temperature today looks to be a balmy 12-degrees out. On a plate in front of me is fresh-cooked Lundberg short-grain brown rice, steamed broccoli and cauliflower, with small pieces of marinated (and lightly fried) tempeh with a dribble of South River organic tamari over all. I can already feel it counteracting the out-of-whack-ness I have been feeling lately. Is food medicine? Actually it is and we can learn to be our own doctor, at least preventively.

What do you remember about the natural food movement?

[Here is the Eden Foods logo I designed. The second photo, which I have posted before, is our side yard back in the day, where we are drying seaweed, probably wakame and dulse.]

STORY: INTO THE JUNGLES OF NEPAL

In the early summer of 1995 Margaret and I made a trip to the mountains above Woodstock, New York where we do a yearly ten-day meditation intensive with our dharma teacher Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche at his Tibetan Buddhist monastery (Karma Triyana Monastery). 2014 will be the 26th year we have done this intensive. Khenpo Rinpoche speaks only Tibetan, so there we were in the midst of having a short personal interview with Rinpoche, speaking with him through a translator. I always ask him if there is anything special he wants me to do, and he always answers "Nothing special, just keep practicing." Once again, I had just asked that question and some others, and Rinpoche had begun to answer. But after less than a minute, he just stopped, looked at us, and declared that he was not going to answer further, and that, instead, we should take these questions to His Holiness the 17th Karmapa, who is the head of our lineage. Like the Dalai Lama, the Karmapa is the head of one of the five main lineages of Tibetan Buddhism.

Margaret and I looked at each other in amazement because His Holiness could only be found at Tsurphu Monastery (15,000 feet) on the other side of the world, deep in the reaches of Tibet. I mumbled something to Rinpoche about, well, perhaps next year, next spring or someday maybe, but Rinpoche looked right at us and said: "No, this summer, as soon as you can arrange it." By this time Khenpo Rinpoche had a great smile on his face as if he were very, very happy for us. I was speechless. He then went on to

speak about impermanence, how life is short, and that none of us know the time or manner of our death. I gradually realized he was seriously directing us to go to Tibet, and soon soon, like that very summer, and I am the kind of person who takes a day or two to decide if I really want to go to the grocery store. You don't say no to your guru. Now that trip is a long story, and you can read the whole thing at this link ("Our Pilgrimage to Tibet"), but here is what happened on one leg of that journey.

<http://dharmagrooves.com/pdf/e-books/Our-Pilgrimage-to-Tibet.pdf>

At that time, we were in Kathmandu and on our way to India, to West Bengal and Sikkim to visit our monasteries there. We were going by plane to the edge of Nepal, where it joins India. When we originally arrived at Kathmandu international airport, we knew nothing about the small domestic airport (right next door) from which we were now about to fly out from to Bhadrapur, a tiny town in southeast Nepal, very close to the Indian border. From there, we planned to cross over into India by jeep at the dangerous border town of Karkavitta and on to Sikkim where we were to visit more Karma Kagyu centers.

Karkavitta was a place where you never let your car slow down because people were routinely robbed and sometimes killed trying to pass through there. I was traveling with my wife Margaret, my two teenage daughters, and young son Michael Andrew. All five of us had elected to go and having arrived at this small domestic airport, we managed to wrestle our own luggage away from the army of touts who wanted to

"help us," and pile it in front of the tiny office of the Royal Nepal Airlines, who had our tickets.

And for the umpteenth time, I confirmed our tickets and managed to weigh our luggage and present it for inspection. As usual, the guards demanded we open up this bag or that one for inspection, only to tell us to forget it the moment we began to comply. I had no idea what kind of plane we would be on, but I suspected (from the size of this airport), it might not be a DC-10. We waited for our flight to be called, with me checking every time any plane was boarded to make sure we were not somehow missing it. Finally it was time and we climbed aboard the small bus that would drive us out to where our plane was waiting. We kept going farther and farther out until we were at the very edge of the airport, passing jets and larger transports, eventually stopping in front of a tiny propeller plane that seated maybe 16 people. Gulp.

The small hatchway of the plane had a 3-4 rung ladder hanging down to the tarmac. Climbing on board, we wedged ourselves into the tiny wire-frame seats and held on. The single flight attendant offered us a tray with cotton for our ears and a piece of candy to help us swallow at higher altitude. Then, with the few people from the bus on board, the pilot climbed in and we took off at once. I couldn't see much from the tiny porthole windows, but I could see the vast green Kathmandu valley unfolding beneath us. In about an hour, we prepared to land. I looked hard to see the airport, but could see little. We dropped lower and lower. I still could see no runway, only a grassy field where cattle grazed, which of course turned out to be

the runway. After they ran the cattle off, bumpity-bump, we landed, swinging around in front of a small ochre-colored building that had a bunch of people in front, and came to a halt. Out we climbed.

It was very hot as my family and I watched the growing pile of our baggage being tossed from the back of the plane. Already pouring sweat, I went to try and find a taxi to drive us the short distance from the airport to the Indian border town of Karkavitta, said to be about half an hour's drive. I was hoping to find a driver who might take us across the border and all the way to our destination of Mirik, a small town in West Bengal. "How far to the border?" I asked one driver. "What border?" he replied. "Why, the Indian border and Karkavitta, of course." "It's a ten hour drive," he curtly responded. Now here was one confused taxi driver, I thought. The border is no more than one half-hour from here. "No," he said, "the 'Indian' border and Karkavitta are at least 10 hours from here by car." I didn't get it.

"This is Bhadrapur, in eastern Nepal, is it not?" "No my friend, this is Bharitpur, in western Nepal" he replied, some ten hours from the border and in the opposite direction from where we thought we were going. I began to get excited and the airport attendant said in his best Hindu-English accent, "Sir, there is no problem. I can stop the plane," which had begun to taxi away. "I HAVE the authority to stop the plane." "Do stop it," I stammered, "We have to go back to Kathmandu right now!" So much for that idea. The plane just took off and vanished into the shimmering heat, leaving us (along with our 5-foot pile of

baggage) standing in a field in one of the hottest parts of Nepal, right at the edge of a tropical jungle. What a deserted feeling that was. The Royal Nepal Airlines ticket agent had misunderstood our destination and interpreted "Bhadrapur" as "Bharitpur." Ouch!

After milling around with any number of Nepalese, all trying to speak English, which they could not, we were finally helped by a Brahmin, often the only Nepalese who actually can speak English. There was very little we could do, he gently explained. We would have to wait at least one day for another plane. That was that. I looked around at the sad state of the town we were in. Twenty-four hours here?

Because of space, I will cut out the part of this story where I rent two taxis and attempt to drive ten hours to India, at which time the taxi with a young Nepalese driver with our two girls in it disappears, and the Nepalese state police organize a manhunt to find them. That was a heart stopper, but the long and the short of it is, we found them safe, but we were right back where we started from, in tropical Nepal and waiting for the plane back to Kathmandu and another day.

Anyway, at the Royal Nepal Airline office I fumed and spouted, refused to pay the young renegade driver much of anything, and arranged to find the most expensive hotel in town, which everyone warned was way too expensive. It was called the Safari Hotel and rooms there went up to \$65 a night. It sounded like a deal to me and we packed up all our gear (and girls) and headed for the Safari Hotel.

Well, the Safari turned out to be a huge (mostly empty) resort, with a pool, a vast dining room, the works, all built around taking safaris into the middle of the Nepalese jungle, wild tigers and all. After weeks of marginal hotels, we all hopped into the pool and cooled out. And cool was needed, for this was a tropical climate – just plain sweaty-hot. The entranceways and even some rooms had geckos (lizards with suction-cup toes) all over the walls, which were great fun to watch as they caught insects.

As we (half starving) waited for dinner to be served at what seemed a very late 7:30 PM, we discovered more about what the Safari Hotel was really all about, which of course (like its name suggests) was taking trips into the nearby jungle straddled atop an elephant. That's a new thought. Since we had nothing to do but wait for the next day's plane, the whole family resolved to set off on elephants the following morning, starting out for the jungle at 5:30 AM. It was our first non-pilgrimage act, and it seemed like the right thing to do.

And sure enough, at the crack of dawn there we were, hurtling down back roads in an open jeep, heading toward a jungle. All around us were grass huts and shacks with people and animals, all starting their day. Everywhere along the way were flowers and plants, long roads filled with blossoms in the dawn light.

We finally arrived at some kind of a hotel camp overlooking a wide river, on the other side of which was the main jungle. As I peered through the haze I could see herds of deer or antelope moving along the jungle's edge on the other side. After being offered

tea, and warned about deadly snakes on the camp paths, we were guided down a path to a high landing where, one by one, several elephants moved in close and allowed us to climb into the wood-frame baskets securely mounted to their backs. It was four people to an elephant plus the elephant driver sitting way up front.

Once on the elephants, they proceeded to walk right down to the river, drank their fill, and began to move out into the mainstream current itself. The river was maybe a quarter mile wide and it had crocodiles. We clung to the small wooden frames which bobbed and weaved as the current got stronger until the elephants finally turned sidewise (facing the current) and began to slowly sidestep their way toward the distant shore, which was a little scary. But gradually we crossed the expanse of the river, climbed up the other shore, and began to move into the jungle proper. It was good to be high up on the elephant because the grass we walked through (appropriately enough, called "elephant grass") was at least a good 5-6 feet high. And we had not forgotten that there were tigers in this jungle.

In the beginning there were narrow paths, along which we saw all kinds of deer, wild boar, and, most important, wild rhinoceros. What an experience! Riding high up on the elephants and walking right into a group of three rhinos – a mom, pop, and three year old baby (not so much a baby anymore) standing in a tiny stream. There they were, just that close, having breakfast.

And then the elephants left the paths entirely and began crashing on through the jungle itself, blazing new trails by tearing off limbs with their trunks and smashing foliage down with their feet. As we made our own trails, hundreds of red insects and torn leaves rained down from the canopy-foliage above. And the elephants would make this deep shuddering sound whenever they smelled something ahead of them in the jungle that they were not sure of. That shuddering sound sure got my attention.

And steep-banked muddy narrow streams were forded, with the elephants often having to get down on their knees to climb up the other side after making the crossing. I must say that the jungle was an experience that I won't soon forget. We sure got right in the middle of a real jungle. It was something. And on the way back, I saw a large crocodile eyeballing us as we came back across the river. Not a time for a swim.

After eating breakfast at the camp at the jungle's edge (playing with giant six-inch millipedes that crawled over our hands and arms), we got back to the hotel about 10 AM, grabbed our bags, and hightailed it to the airport, only to stand around and wait in the heat. The sun was fierce and I was soon soaked to the skin with sweat that later dried, actually leaving salt residue. At last an air-raid siren sounded to get the cattle off the runway so that the plane could land. As the siren went off, boys with sticks swarmed onto the runway and drove the cattle and water buffalo away from the landing strip. The plane was able to land and we climbed aboard,

stuffed cotton in our ears once again, and were on our way back to KTM to catch the correct plane to Bhadrapur, not Bharitpur. However, after this experience, our two girls elected to not go to India with us, but to spend the next week in KTM, just doing whatever they felt like. We could not really blame them and, although we hated to be separated, we said goodbye to them at the airport and went on to India.

STORY: THE CRANES AND THE TOOTHACHE

In the past few blogs I have told of some of my life adventures. More exciting to me still are the spiritual adventures I've lived, so here is one story that is related to how I learned to mix Insight meditation with close-up photography. It is part of a book I wrote called "Experiences with Mahamudra," which is a free read here:

http://dharmagrooves.com/pdf/e-books/Experiences_Mahamudra.pdf

Only here I want to say something about the reverse process, how I learned to separate Insight meditation out from the photography I was doing and use it on its own, not an easy process. It is a story that should interest at least a few of you. It all happened the spring following that summer where I first learned to mix my mind training with the close-up and macro photography I was doing.

The following spring I was out photographing nature as early as January and February, a bunch in March, and constantly by April. And all winter I had been gathering my equipment and upgrading what I could afford. But something had changed internally for me and in a quite unexpected way, but it would take me some months to figure this out. At the time, I was hell bent to immerse myself ever more deeply in nature photography, and my outings were now ranging ever farther from home.

Instead of spending my early mornings at the back of the local cemetery, at the fringe where the wild vegetation meets the well-groomed lawn, as I had

done the year before, I was now actively planning trips to nature spots all over Michigan. I was studying maps, marking locations, and so on. I became fascinated with Michigan bogs and the life possible in those very special environments. It turns out that bogs only really thrive at latitudes higher than 45 degrees. Big Rapids, Michigan (where I live) is almost 44 degrees of latitude, so we have bogs in this area and just an hour or so north of here are really vast bogs.

Why bogs? I have no idea. I am an enthusiast, and there is always something that fascinates me. Perhaps it was that bogs are so very, very fragile, tiny microenvironments that hardly anyone has ever seen, much less spent time in. Isolated from nutrients, since the plant life on bogs can't get nutrients from below because the peat is anaerobic and won't let anything through, many bog plants have become carnivorous, depending on food from above, insects and what-not. Bog plants include the Pitcher Plant, the Sundew, and the Venus Flytrap, among others. Whatever the reason, I was fascinated by bogs and found myself traveling many hours to visit them and carefully photo-documenting what I saw there.

The point here is that I had taken my photography yet another step, not only shooting whatever was available each morning near my home, but now traveling long distances to sample this or that special environment, this particular plant or that one. Without realizing it, my enthusiasm had caused me to overstep the boundary between mixing my Mahamudra practice with nature photography and that of becoming even more of a naturalist than I already was, and I was.

From the time I was about six years old until I was in my late teens I had studied nature with a fierce passion, so I already knew about nature. I knew all the little woodland critters, and I knew them well, their habitat, behavior, and life and death struggles. And here I was further upping the ante as far as being a nature photographer was concerned, big time.

Yet even in my enthusiasm I could vaguely sense something was slightly off, but for the life of me I could not place the problem. It took time for this to gradually sift out and surface in my consciousness, but eventually it did become clear to me that I did not really want to become a full-scale naturalist once more. This is that story. I was (as I do so often) once again confusing the baby with the bathwater, a bad habit I have. It was like a 'Mara', an illusion that confused me. And this all came to a head during a trip up to the top of Michigan's Lower Peninsula, and thus this account.

I had been invited to join a very select group of naturalists who were given permission to enter a rare bog preserve at the very top of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan in order to take a survey of wildlife there. Bogs are very fragile environments and even walking on them is destructive. But this conservation society allowed special teams to enter these closed reserves once or twice a year and I was to be the team's herpetologist. I had been trained in reptiles and amphibians since I was a child, and so knew all about them. I was geeked.

I could not wait to get to Michigan's wild Upper Peninsula and out on those endangered bogs with my camera. The trip was to last a number of days, and I

was up before dawn of that first day and in my car heading north. It must have been around 4:30 AM when I hit the road. The only hiccup was the fact that I had just had some fairly protracted oral surgery (several days of root canal work), and the tooth in question had developed a really nasty abscess beneath it. I was already on my second dose of antibiotics, this time really heavy antibiotics, the first round having not even touched the problem, but I was not about to be stopped by a wayward tooth.

Although I was in some pain and my lower jaw was swollen, I assumed that as time passed and the new antibiotics kicked in, the swelling would just naturally go down. Anyway, hell or high water would not have kept me off those bogs, so on I went.

My first stop was at a small bog at the top of the Lower Peninsula, just before you get to the great Mackinac Bridge over to the Upper Peninsula. I was out on the bog in the full morning sun by 8 A.M., already hours from my home. It was a magnificent crisp morning. Yet I was still having trouble with that dumb tooth, a certain amount of throbbing punctuated by needle-like shots of pain in my jaw. I did my best to ignore it and again told myself that it would die down.

There I was in my hip boots, far out on the surface of the bog, surrounded by moss and small bushes, and carefully stepping my way along in the ooze, which was up above my knees. Each step made a suction sound as I lifted a leg and then placed it back in the thick matrix of the bog. Moving was very slow. I was maybe halfway around the periphery of the small lake-bog when I first saw them, a pair of large Sandhill Cranes picking their way through the bog on

the opposite side. I was thrilled to see them and they were incredible.

As I threaded my way along I must have somehow began to encroach on the area where they perhaps had their nest, for they became increasingly animated. Now these are large birds. They can stand five feet high and have wingspans of six to seven feet across. And their piercing red eyes were on me, and they were not just casual looks. Then slowly I realized they were moving in circles around me.

Many of the bushes on the bog were several feet high, so I could not always see the cranes, but I could hear their frightening calls. I didn't say 'frightened' calls; I said frightening calls, which they were – eerie. And then the cranes began running through the bushes, circling me closer, working together, and they moved fast. Much of the time all I could see through gaps in the bushes was a sideways profile of one of their heads as they circled me. I could see one bird as it ran through the bushes on my right, and then suddenly on my left, there was another bird circling in the opposite direction. I was constantly off balance, and I had to watch my every step lest I step into muck so deep that I would begin to sink down in it. I was carrying over \$12,000 worth of camera equipment, not to mention my life. Bogs, like quicksand, can be treacherous places.

One of the birds would rise in the air and cut directly across my path (only a few feet in front of me) only to disappear into the bushes and take up running around me again. And the cries were now getting really scary. At some point I began to feel like I was being stalked, and visions of the movie Jurassic Park and

velociraptors came to mind. These were very large birds and they didn't like ME. It is easy for me to see how birds were once reptile-like creatures.

Well, that is as far as it went. I finally managed to plot a course through the bog that apparently took me on a route away from their nesting area, while all the time I was moving one gooey step at a time very slowly through the muck. I finally got out of there, found my way back to the car, and drove to the nearest town to consider my options.

By this time it was beginning to be clear that my tooth was not going to just calm down, but instead was only getting worse. I had super strength Ibuprofen and even some Vicodin that the dentist had given me, so I had to dip into those a bit. And this was just the first morning of the first day of a five day journey. I had to decide what I would do.

I went to visit some friends who lived in a nearby city to where I was. I was now safe in a nice home in a town only a few hours from my home. But I had the strange experience of feeling that I was somehow embedded in a scene at which I was no longer fully present. Part of me was elsewhere. It was like a dream or a movie set in which I was only an actor. In other words, I was beside myself. At the same time I was kind of leaning out of it, like you might lean out the back door to get a breath of fresh air. Something had stirred or moved inside of me that day and I was damned if I could figure out what it was. Somewhere back in there I had lost my incentive or my direction. Perhaps these combined events with the birds, my tooth, etc., schooling (like fish), now appeared as signs that all pointed out that something within me

had changed at the core.

Yet by tomorrow I was supposed to be across the Mackinac Bridge and at the tip of the top of the Upper Peninsula, hours from where I was now, and out on those remote bogs, miles from any town (much less a hospital), and the temperatures up there were predicted to be very cold, even for a spring day. After all, way up there it was still hardly spring. HmMMM. What's the message here?

In the end, the throbbing of my tooth and those little sharp spasms of shooting pain told me that marching through a bog for a few days, miles from anywhere, might not be the time to try and push this 67-year old physical envelope. As it turned out, that was the right decision because the second round of antibiotics with its very large dose also failed to do the trick. My abscess overcame all attempts to control it and spread much farther into the bone of my lower jaw. In the end, the tooth had to be extracted and the jaw treated. And I only tell this longish story because this became a real turning point for me. I will try to explain.

Like so many times in my past, I had once again managed to confuse the inside with the outside, the important with the unessential. What had been going on over the last year was that I was now using the outside (nature photography) to look at the inside (my mind) AND I had fallen into the mistake of confusing the two, which was easy to do. Since it was through photographing nature up-close very exactly that I was realizing something about the nature of the mind, I began to elevate photographing nature as the goal or object of my passion, when it was only the means

through which I was experiencing a glimpse at my mind's nature, which is my real passion. I hope that makes sense.

Here I was, trying to upscale my nature trips, when in the end they were only the lens or means through which I was viewing the mind itself. It was the glimpsing nature of the mind that was illuminating. And here I was, buying more equipment, planning longer and more extensive trips, and ordering every kind of field guide I did not already have, and I have shelves full. Well, this all changed, and that early morning faceoff with the Sandhill Cranes was perhaps the turning or pivot point. That experience was thrilling and not really that scary, so I was not scared off by what happened there. But something else did snap around that time and I woke up from that particular dream. It seems I wake up from dream within dream from within dream in my life.

After that I began to realize I was unnecessarily further complicating my life with all these lenses and nature trips, when what I wanted to do was simplify it. I was extruding the naturalist in me at the expense of the simple clarity of resting my mind when out in nature, and it was the clarity of the mind that I was in love with, albeit, as seen through the lens of nature. It is the old baby and the bathwater thing. I had once again confused the two, but I am getting a little ahead of myself. Let me summarize.

Quite early on in the spring of that year I began to notice that the very special lucidity that came when I patiently peered through the camera lens, waiting for the wind to die down (or whatever), was now present without any camera at all. What before was made

possible only by my intense concentration and a really tack-sharp lens had now overflowed and begun to mix into the rest of my life. Then one day I realized that I did not even have to bring a camera along with me out into nature at all. What a thought! "Look ma, no hands!" This clarity that I had very carefully nourished the entire preceding year through my photography had now become the rule rather than the exception. It was not about cameras; it was not about lenses, but about clarity of mind. That was it, and I began to realize this. I finally understood what was troubling me way back in my psyche and I am so glad I did. I could as easily have been lost in an endless Odyssey of cameras and nature for the rest of my life. I still photography nature, but I have my priorities straight at this point.

And now I found that just walking along a road, looking at the vegetation or whatever, produced the same result as hours of painstakingly peering through a camera lens. It seemed that my mind was already somewhat lucid and I could more and more just rest in the beauty of the nature around me just as it is, and it would willingly present and reveal itself to me without the need of a camera. It became clear that I really didn't need a camera at all anymore, and this at first really puzzled me. Whoa, I thought. Now I have these great cameras and all these fine lenses, and whatever technique I had managed to acquire... and I don't need them?

That's right, I was no longer attached to the equipment. That's just what happened. It took time, but I increasingly became aware that what I had loved all this time through the photography is what was happening within my own mind, that pristine clarity. All

that gear was just a scaffold to build a stable Insight-meditation practice and, once built, the camera equipment (as wonderful as it is) was just an empty cocoon as far as I was concerned, for I was now already gone beyond. I guess the moral of the story, for me anyway, is that it is easy to mistake the joy of meditation clarity with any of the objects through which that joyful clarity first appears, again, and become attached to it. It is the baby and the bathwater syndrome. Finally, it is a question of priorities.

Anyone else notice this?

STORY: VISITING THE GOLDEN CHILD

In 1995, at the request of my dharma teacher, I took my family on a pilgrimage to Tibet to see the 17th Karmapa, Orgyen Trinley Dorje, the young Tibetan lama that the Eddie Murphy movie "The Golden Child" is said to be based on, the idea, essentially, that the Karmapa is a living Buddha. Like the Dalai Lama, the Karmapa is the head of one of the four main lineages of Tibetan Buddhism. At the time of this trip the Karmapa was 12-years old, but his incarnation goes back seventeen generations. In fact the Karmapa Lineage was the first of Tibet's reincarnated lamas. The current Karmapa is the 17th, while the current Dalai Lama is the 14th.

I had no real idea how this trip would affect me. We were just told to make the trip by our guru, so we did. I will pick up the story from the point where we actually arrived at the Karmapa's ancestral home, Tsurphu Monastery in the Tolung Valley, deep in the mountains of Tibet at some 15,000 feet in altitude. There I sat, with my wife, two of my daughters, and my son in a little room waiting to see the Karmapa. We were about to spend three days there as the Karmapa's guests.

Every day at 1 PM the Karmapa has a public reception, where a procession of visitors file up, offer a white scarf, and get his blessing. We wanted to do that too, but were told to wait and that His Holiness

would see us privately. We had come with letters of introduction from a number of high lamas, including H.E. Tai Situ Rinpoche, who had been to our meditation center twice. It seemed that from the moment we arrived, all the monks there knew we were Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche's students. We could see them whispering. In their eyes we belonged to Khenpo Rinpoche, and they seemed to know exactly who that was, even way out here in Tibet.

The time ticked away on the slow track as we waited with anticipation to see the Karmapa. I had last seen His Holiness in 1974, but in his previous incarnation as the 16th Gyalwa Karmapa, Rigpe Dorje, yet I felt like I had been in endless touch with him through the lineage all this time. Like the Dalai Lama, the Karmapa is the spiritual leader of an entire lineage of Tibetan monks, one most famous for its yogis and meditators. And this trip happened so fast. Up to a month ago, we had little hope of ever seeing the Karmapa in person, since it was very uncertain when the Chinese would ever let him leave Tibet. He was essentially a prisoner in his own monastery. The Chinese watched him all the time. And now, here we were at his ancestral home, about to meet him in person.

[Note: The young Karmapa, pretending to be in solitary retreat, slipped away from the monastery and escaped to India from Tibet in December of 1999.]

At last, the summons came. The Karmapa would see us now. So off we went in single file toward his

interview room, some two stories up from where we were. And I was right in the middle of the worst of my altitude sickness, still sick and getting sicker. I don't do well at high altitudes, slipping into bronchitis, having to go on antibiotics, and all of that. It happens every time I go to Tibet.

As I climbed the steep stairs toward His Holiness I had to stop and do heavy breathing, just to keep enough oxygen in my lungs. Every few steps, I would find myself gasping for breath as I climbed upward toward the interview room. And please understand that the average Tibetan stairway is more like a ladder (like on a boat) than the kind of stairs we are used to, and steep. You literally hang on as you climb.

We eventually came to a small courtyard in the open sun outside His Holiness' interview room, where we took off our shoes. I actually had to sit down on the roof and pant. How embarrassing. And then up another short ladder to the interview room itself, where I arrived, still trying to catch my breath. I plopped down at the back of the room, while everyone else went on up front and prostrated to the Karmapa. I was so bushed that I did not (at first) remember to do the three traditional prostrations that practitioners do before any great lama. All I could see was this young man kind of inset into a wall of golden brocade at the far end of the room. I slowly moved forward.

Through the 1960s and onward, in my quest for spiritual teachers, I had seen many gurus, yogis,

teachers in person, and so was preparing myself to actually be in the presence of the Karmapa. In the past, when I met great spiritual presences, most were imposing, some almost regal. I was getting ready for a similar experience here, you know, me seeing his powerful presence, but the Karmapa was different. In the end, in his presence, it was myself that I saw, not him. Here is how that happened.

As I reached the front of the room, there was the Karmapa, looking better than I could even imagine, and I had imagined he would be great. All of 12 years old (by our calendar) and five feet tall, but seeming seven feet tall and ageless, he filled the room with his presence. All I remember is how happy I was to see him; He was not scary or distant. He was happy to see me too. I remember kind of getting through my prostrations and fumbling to offer him a white scarf, while kneeling down before him.

He looked at me like I had never been looked at before. His eyes look straight into my eyes and then he upped the ante by focusing intently within me. I was being seen. His dark eyes, almost like the ever-adjusting lens of an auto-focus camera, were actually moving in and out, trying to get the right focus. I had never seen eyes do that, be able to lock gaze with you and then, with the gaze locked, still move in and out, getting a fix. But that was just how it was. The Karmapa examined me for a few seconds and, in the grip of his eyes, it seemed as though time stopped, and then it all relaxed and time moved on again. He placed the white scarf over my head, gave me a

welcoming, kind look, and I sat down in front of him with the rest of our group.

I became aware that there was chanting going on, and gradually realized we were in the middle of the Mahakala puja, perhaps the most important daily practice for the Karma Kagyu Lineage. Later we found out that we were experiencing a special form of Mahakala, one for insiders, complete with Tsok, the ritual feast offering. Karmapa was sharing this with us.

It was very intense, with His Holiness leading the chanting with an intent and often fierce look. Mahakala is a wrathful practice, as some of you may already know, one invoking the fierce deities that protect the dharma. And this one was complete with drums, cymbals, and the various Tibetan horns. I had experienced the Mahakala puja before, but never one quite like this, certainly not one with the Karmapa himself leading it! And I don't quite know how to describe what happened next.

I begin to identify with this puja as not much different from my own practice in many ways, and I found myself examining just where I was with my daily practice, and what it was all about for me. I had done it, without fail, every morning and afternoon/evening for many years. I was to do it until my death or until I completed it by realizing the essential nature of my own mind, whichever came first.

Now, here in the midst of Karmapa's mandala, I began to explore the true meaning and nature of that

practice. What was that practice and what was the essence of it? I thought how in my own idea of myself, to my mind, I was somewhat of a tough character and I carried that strength or toughness into my practice. In fact, I loved the fierce wrathful deities, somehow identifying with them. And now, there in that room with Karmapa, that same strength, toughness, or we might even say fierceness came up in the mind and began to be examined inwardly, but in a new light. And this was no thought or idea that I was playing with. Instead, I was examining myself or, to be more exact, I was realizing part of my self, in this case, that part that had been practicing all these years, the one who did the practice.

And as this realization took place, I saw how my fierceness or toughness was but just a shell or shield covering up this extremely sensitive inside. I was tough, because I was so... so sensitive and, at heart, even kind. In that moment I was flooded with a state of compassion or rather the realization that I was (and always had been), at my deepest part, compassionate, concerned, and caring, and that this was my natural state. It was not something to strive for, but already in fact already always the case – the state of my very being, something that only had to be uncovered and opened up. I did not have to strive to be compassionate, for that was already my natural state. All I had to do was to let go of the attachments that obscured this insight, relax, and just let it shine through.

Again, I should point out that this was not a concept

or idea, but an intense realization that totally involved me. I realized that the essence of my practice, of my fierce presence, was none other than compassion. It was as if, like taking off a glove, I had turned myself inside out. Tears just flowed as I was overcome with this, now so obvious, realization that I was, in essence, very simple – just a soft-hearted, easy mark for this world. And all of my toughness, my fierceness, was nothing more than an attempt to cover over and shield myself from responding too much to all the suffering I saw around me. In that moment, I understood myself and my practice, right in midst of that Mahakala puja with Karmapa. My mind was at rest.

And later, when we left the Karmapa and very slowly drove back down the 40-miles of road that was not really much of a road at all, we saw rainbow after rainbow after rainbow.

So that is what Karmapa was about to me, not some powerful being sitting on a throne. Rather, there was enough space and expanded time within the embrace of the Karmapa's mental mandala and presence for me to realize myself. It was not the Karmapa I saw when I was with him, but myself. That is my definition of a spiritual being, one who helps us realize ourselves, not who they are.

After the puja, we spent some time together with the Karmapa during which he gave the answers to the questions that we had brought to him. He did not skirt the tough questions, but was clear and unequivocal in

his answers. I was deeply relieved, both from the experience I just described and to hear the various particular answers. And later, he came out in the courtyard and just kind of hung out with us. After all, my son Michael Andrew was about the same age. I doubt that very many western families with kids had ever made it to Tsurphu Monastery.

I had heard many stories about His Holiness, both this incarnation and the previous incarnations, stories of amazing actions, all pointing to this extraordinary being. Somehow these stories help to inspire faith and confidence in the Karmapa, that he is who he is -- that sort of thing. Yet these stories were nothing compared to the sheer largeness of his presence. "Seeing is believing," and this kind of thing defies words. How do you explain that when you are in the presence of His Holiness, you have a different idea of yourself, of who you are, why you are here, etc.? I learned things about myself when I was in his presence that I never knew before, important things. The word is "realization." I realized things about myself that I had never realized before.

And I understood why my teacher, Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, wanted us to go to Tibet and meet the Karmapa in person. It occurred to me that for any person with a connection to His Holiness, before continuing your life, drop everything and do whatever it takes to go and meet the Karmapa in person. And only after that pick up your life again. I didn't understand who I was or how best to make use of my life until I met His Holiness. They say that the

Karmapa, along with the Dalai Lama, are emanations of pure compassion. I always understood that, but what I did not realize my own nature was the same. That is worth knowing.

Yeas ago, phrases like "His Holiness" and "guru" were literally foreign to me and smacked of exotic cults and all of that stuff, a hangover perhaps from the New-Age spiritual fads of the 1970s. But meeting the Karmapa, eyeball-to-eyeball, was not foreign at all. It was only too familiar, like finally knowing myself for who I am, confirming who it is I always hoped I was. The entire book of our journey is a free-read here:

<http://dharmagrooves.com/pdf/e-books/Our-Pilgrimage-to-Tibet.pdf>

STORY: FINDING VAJRAPANI

This is a story from our trip to India in 1995, primarily when we traveled to West Bengal and Sikkim where I hoped to request the Vajrapani empowerment from His Eminence Gyaltsap Rinpoche, one of my heroes, and said to be the emanation of Vajrapani in our lineage.

Many years before I had written to His Eminence personally, expressing my deep desire to take (and request that he give) this particular empowerment. I would always receive back the acknowledgment of my letters, but no scheduled trips to America. Now I was traveling (hopefully) for an audience with Gyaltsap Rinpoche in person. It might be helpful to provide some background to this story.

In dharma practice, if we keep at it, we eventually get past beginning meditation practice, work our way through the Extraordinary Preliminaries (ngondro), and finally end up doing what is called our yidam practice, which for many of us becomes a lifetime practice, something very similar in some respects to the Native American practice of choosing a sacred animal. We choose our yidam, the special qualities and deity we resonate with.

In Tibetan Buddhism there are many qualities and the deities that we may be drawn to. In my case, I connected rather early-on with the bodhisattva Vajrapani, one of the protector deities of the lineage

that is usually charged with protecting the secrets of the dharma from degradation.

Since the dharma itself is the truth, it is adamant, unyieldingly fierce in the face of ignorance and those parts of us that resist change. That is the activity of Vajrapani. As an archivist (and protector) of popular culture (Allmusic.com, Allmovie.com, classicposters.com, etc.), Vajrapani just felt natural to me.

Anyway, for whatever reasons I somehow latched onto Vajrapani as the particular deity that I resonate with, and did my best to learn what I could about that deity and those qualities. Furthermore, I wanted to do that particular practice. However, it is required to be properly empowered for any deity you intend to practice the sadhana of, in this case Vajrapani. The bad news is that it appeared that the Vajrapani empowerment was not generally given, at least not in the circles of rinpoches in which I moved. So of course I cast about for information as to where I could get such an empowerment and from whom.

I eventually found out that one of the four heart-sons of the Karmapa (also called the Four Eminences or regents) is considered the emanation of Vajrapani. This is His Eminence Goshir Gyaltsap Rinpoche, who is said to embody the activity of Vajrapani within our lineage. That was the good news. The bad news is that Gyaltsap Rinpoche lives in Sikkim India, and almost never travels. He was like a yogi and not likely to be coming to a monastery near me any time soon,

much less offer that empowerment.

As mentioned, His Eminence Gyaltsap Rinpoche is more of a yogi than the average lama in our lineage, spending most of his time in practice and semi-retreat. Because of the various problems within the lineage, he has also been the main lama to watch over Rumtek Monastery (the seat of His Holiness the Karmapa in India) all of these years. Not given to small talk or to superficial gestures (he is not much on smiles), Gyaltsap Rinpoche just stares at you straight on, so I was told. There he is; what you see is what you get. I always identified with him because I am much the same way, at least not given to laughter for laughter's sake. Perhaps it would be of further help if I explain something about the Karmapa and his four heart sons, the eminences.

The head of the Kagyu lineage, the Gyalwa Karmapa is now in his 17th incarnation, and his name this time is Ogyen Trinley Dorje. Each Karmapa usually has four principal students, called his heart sons or regents. Each Karmapa then empowers these four regents with the transmission of his mind teachings. He literally pours his knowledge and the teachings into the minds of these four students (heart sons) when they are young. Then, when the Karmapa passes on, he leaves a letter telling these four heart sons where he will be born, sometimes the names of his parents, and often in what direction he can be found. The Karmapa is the only reincarnate lama to do this, the 17th in the lineage.

In the case of the Dalai Lama (the 14th to date), the successive Dalai Lamas are selected by a committee, who present possible young candidates with the rigorous test of having them choose from a variety of ritual implements the correct implement that was used by the preceding Dalai Lama, and so forth. It is more complicated than that, but you get the idea.

However, in the case of the Karmapa, as mentioned, a letter is left saying where to find his successor, and various related information. There is no committee. All they have to do is find him. So my point here is that, based on the letter, once the new Karmapa is found, then the four regents (heart sons) are tasked with teaching the young Karmapa what had been passed on to them. They pour the teachings they were given back into the young Karmapa, and so it goes, generation after generation, like leap frog.

His Eminence Gyaltsap Rinpoche is one of the four regents or heart sons of the Karmapa, each of which is the emanation of a particular quality and deity. The four regents are: Jamgon Kongtrul Rinpoche, the emanation of the bodhisattva Manjushri, Tai Situ Rinpoche, the emanation of Maitreya Buddha, Shamar Rinpoche, the emanation of Amitabha Buddha, and Gyaltsap Rinpoche, the emanation of the bodhisattva Vajrapani. I have had the very good fortune to meet and personally receive these particular empowerments from all four heart sons themselves.

Some years earlier, I had requested the same

Vajrapani empowerment from my own root lama, Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, and to my surprise he agreed to give that empowerment (for the first time that I know of) at our dharma center here in Big Rapids Michigan. Along with the empowerment, I received the lung (transmission) and instructions for practice, and that became my practice for a long while.

Along the way our center put that sadhana into a pecha (Tibetan book format) and shared it with others. And some time later Rinpoche asked me to instruct our sangha in that practice, which I did. That is the only time I have done any instruction in the KTD shrine room at Karma Triyana Dharmachakra Monastery, but I have received teachings from Rinpoche for over 30 years there.

In 1995, when I knew we were going to India and Tibet on pilgrimage, of course I wanted to visit Gyaltsap Rinpoche and once again request that same empowerment from him personally, since he is the emanation of Vajrapani. And as I rejoin this story, we are now on our way to India, including Sikkim, and that is where His Eminence Gyaltsap Rinpoche lived.

We had finally arrived at the monastery of the great meditation-master Bokar Rinpoche in the village of Mirik in West Bengal, where our friend Ngodup Burkhar had been waiting to receive us. Ngodup was worried when we did not show up on time. When we finally showed up, two days late, he must have realized that we were not exactly savvy travelers in

India. Probably worried about our fate, he immediately volunteered to join and guide us for the next week on our pilgrimage.

We owe a lot of the success of our India trip to our dear friend Ngodup Burkhar. Ngodup previously served as translator and attended to our teacher Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche for over twelve years, so we knew him well. He was living in Mirik, where he was then translating for the Ven. Kyabje Bokar Rinpoche, who is considered the spiritual heir (heart-son) to the great yogi Kalu Rinpoche, holder of the Shangpa Kagyu Lineage. Bokar Rinpoche is considered one of the main meditation masters in the Karma Kagyu lineage.

There is no way I can thank Ngodup for this kind of sacrifice and the gift of his self and time, not to mention that he is one of the most fun people to be with that I have ever known. I have always wondered about and been on the lookout to possibly encounter a bodhisattva in whatever appearance he or she might make. It is my firm belief that Ngnodrup Burkhar is such a person. With that said, on with the story.

From Mirik, my wife, son, and I headed out of West Bengal India for Sikkim along with Ngodup and our driver, but we never really went back down to the steamy lowlands. Instead, we clung to the narrow ribbon-like mountain roads from village to town and onward. The roads were slippery and frequently fog and mist covered, really only space enough for one vehicle, so there was lots of stopping and backing up

to let some other car or bus pass. We were heading for the Sikkim border and then on to Ralang and the monastery of His Eminence Gyaltsap Rinpoche.

We soon found ourselves driving through large tracts of tea plantations, gardens, and into a vast rain forest, complete with insects singing, ferns growing...all of it wet, wet, and ever green.

This was the tail end of the monsoon season and the rains were just beginning to diminish. But for us, the roads got worse, with landslides and at times entire sections of road missing. Local road crews, with shovels and picks were everywhere, trying to keep up with the sliding mud. As we traveled the final stretch to the monastery, such a large section of road had slid away that we had to creep (with breath held) over what little road remained, clinging to the cliff-side in our jeep, with one set of wheels edging over the space where the road was missing and a sheer drop awaited, and with all of us on the other side of the jeep, leaning into the cliff. I didn't care much for that. In fact, I soon learned never to ride in the front seat, because I did not want to see what risks were being taken. We finally arrived safely.

Gyaltsap Rinpoche's monastery was magnificent and huge. Almost brand new, it stood out among the mountains of Sikkim, right in the middle of what seemed like a rain forest or jungle. Huge beetles and moths were everywhere to be seen in the early mornings. Thanks to Ngodrup and our connections with Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, we were treated like

old friends, given the best of rooms, and fed often and well. Gyaltsap Rinpoche's personal attendant even ate with us and insisted on showing us around the monastery complex himself. Aside from the main shrine hall, where we were able to practice, we saw the special shrine where His Eminence does the red-crown ceremony plus the exquisite apartment they have built for His Holiness, the 17th Karmapa, whenever he may happen to visit. At that time the Karmapa was essentially a prisoner in his ancestral monastery in Tibet.

What a great spirit there was at Ralang, with everything new, and the energy level high. The gompas (main shrine hall) and additional shrines were all exquisite, and we even got a chance to see the dharmapala (protector) shrine, which was not yet completed. For this, they had brought in a master sculptor who then lived there for some extended period of time to create the most beautiful Mahakala statue I have ever seen. About 6-7 feet tall, it was hand fashioned from clay and had yet to be painted. As you can see from the picture, it is exquisite and complete to the last detail. This was one of about ten different statues that this craftsman had sculpted. I have never seen anything better. They were awesome.

That first afternoon we were there we had a brief interview with Gyaltsap Rinpoche, during which I formally requested from him the Vajrapani empowerment, one of my main practices. As mentioned, I had written to Rinpoche over the years,

inviting him to visit our center, and had always dreamed of receiving this empowerment from His Eminence himself, since he is the emanation of Vajrapani in our lineage.

And even though his schedule was very tight, His Eminence agreed to give that empowerment the next morning. And so it was. In his private quarter, my family and I received the Vajrapani empowerment "Dorje Tumpo," a wrathful emanation of Vajrapani and part of a cycle of empowerments originally gathered by the 9th Karmapa, Wangchuk Dorje.

Our stay at Ralung was, for some reason, very full of meaningful events, both large and small, sequenced back to back. Moreover, the food was great or we were 'tasting' great at the time. The giant beetles and moths and the closeness of the rain forest lent an almost unworldly (at least for Midwesterners) feel to the visit. The place was charged and we were up to it. The memory, even today, remains clear and present – a very special time. Aside from the empowerment, watching the lama dances in the very early morning fog made a deep imprint.

STORY: WEST BENGAL AND BOKAR RINPOCHE

Here we were, on pilgrimage in India. Of course I could not help but have at least some kind of agenda, a basic roadmap that I was attempting to follow out. What I didn't fully understand yet was that this was India, where schedules of any kind are very flexible.

I am reminded of one story I heard of an American ranting at an Indian railway station because the train he was waiting for was over an hour late, when a Brahmin standing next to him leaned over and gently told him in perfect English that this was yesterday's train that had not yet arrived, over 24-hours late. Why I tell this is because the Royal Nepalese Airlines had flown us in the opposite direction to where we wished, dropped us in a jungle, and we had lost an entire day, plus another day to set it right.

The upshot of this fiasco was that the folks who were expecting us to arrive at the village of Mirik in West Bengal were worried because we never showed up. And the worry was acerbated by the fact that they knew we had to drive through the very dangerous road from the Indian border town of Karkavavitta, a place where you drive at full speed, without daring to slow down even for stop signs, because bandits routinely overrun cars, robbing passengers, and occasionally killing one or two in the process. Of course folks who knew we were in route were worried, and we had no way to reach them. Cell phones were not common, especially in India, in the mid-1990s. We didn't have one with us.

Our good friend Ngodup Burkhar was waiting for us at the Bokar Ngedon Chokhor Ling Monastery in the village of Mirik in the hills not far from Darjeeling, the area where the 11th century Mahasiddha Maitripa, one of Marpa the Translator's gurus, had done retreat. Ngodup Burkhar, who had translated and attended to our teacher Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche for over twelve years, was now translating for the Ven. Kyabje Bokar Rinpoche, who is considered the spiritual heir (heart-son) to the great yogi Kalu Rinpoche, holder of the Shangpa Kagyu Lineage. Bokar Rinpoche is considered one of the main meditation masters in the Karma Kagyu lineage.

This is a continuation of our story when the Nepalese National Airlines dropped us off in a cow pasture by mistake at the wrong end of Nepal, and left us there. It took us two days to get back to Kathmandu and on track.

This time the tiny plane did seem headed in the right direction and we watched the mountains of Nepal align themselves to our left and the wide low plain of India open out on our right. After about an hour we landed in another grassy field at another miniscule airport, one complete with cattle on the runway: my wife, my son, myself, and our pile of gear. Our two daughters had decided to stay in Kathmandu and hang out while we pushed on to India. Some friends were watching over them.

Once again I set out to find a taxi to take us to the

border and hopefully beyond. As it turned out, there really was only one taxi there, so there was not a lot of choice, a sturdy jeep-like Toyota Land Cruiser. And, in what turned out to be one of our luckier moments, the driver would not only take us to the border, but could drive us all the way to the village of Mirik, high in the mountains of West Bengal. That was the good news. The bad news was that he did not speak any English, but what the hell, we had no choice.

The important thing is that we had been repeatedly warned that the area in India just beyond the border town of Karkavitta was very dangerous and had to be negotiated with care. The best was to drive right through at high speeds without stopping no matter what happened. We were told that cars had recently been stopped and, in the past, people even killed in that area. We could only hope that our new driver was not in cahoots with any bad persons ready to turn us tourist-westerners over to a band of thieves. Such were the thoughts of this crazy American. To aid to my paranoia, as we set off to the border, another man jumped into our open jeep, uninvited. This kind of thing is common in Nepal and India, where everyone wants to get on board any moving vehicle and hitch a ride. Even so, I was visibly alarmed.

Our driver calmed us, explaining that this was his friend and he was only going to the border. And this new person spoke some English and explained that he was a travel agent. He proceeded to further scare us "pretty good" about the dangers of the border town

of Karkavitta and the area just beyond the custom checkpoints. We already knew.

And so we drove toward the border on what was called by our driver's friend a "national highway" (a road that was about as wide as your average driveway). We were stopped every so often by groups of men who demanded one or another kind of road tax. They would lower huge poles to block the road and a large group of men would demand money. One of the supposed causes was some religious celebration that they were preparing for which they required donations. Our driver handled this in one way or another, often promising to pay on the way back (which in fact was a week away). Or, claiming he had no small bills, he would catch them on the way back. Still, all of this was worrisome to us.

After a while we reached the rugged border town of Karkavitta, not a place I really would want to spend the night in, and pretty rough overall. It was like being in the old west. We were passing through its congested streets where they steer by using their car horns. So, horns-a-blaring we reached the border checkpoints for Nepal and India (all three of them), each with their meticulous forms to fill out. I had to laugh. Here I am in the heat of the Karkavitta night, in a one-room office with no screens (malaria!), trying to fill out a form by candlelight that is more detailed than any U.S. Customs form.

And the Indian in front of me is writing these details in an ancient ledger, while high on a shelf above him sits

a stack of similar ledgers, all molding away. He takes all the time of ours he can, insisting on every detail. Sometimes I wonder if they just are curious to see and watch westerners. Why else should it take so long? The Nepalese checkpoint was not as bad, but both (two!) of the Indian ones were excruciating. Yet, at long last we were through the border and onto the hot Indian plain and night.

Although our driver did not speak English, we both knew that this stretch of road just outside of Karkavitta and into India was the dangerous stretch over which we must pass at whatever speed we could muster, which was hard because of the many speed bumps that caused us to slow down to a crawl or sometimes reach a dead stop. These were the areas where we were vulnerable to attack. And night was falling fast, the worst time to travel, which made these areas even more disturbing. To make things even worse, the road was filled with animals and people, which became dark forms slowly moving in the twilight.

But we finally made it through the steamy lowlands and on up into the hills. The road began to climb very sharply and coolness began to replace the hot breath of the Indian plains. Also, the roads were less thronged with people and driving became somewhat easier. We could relax. For hours we climbed higher and higher, now on switchback mountain roads, with an endless stream of packed buses that either we were behind or, if in front and coming toward us, made us back up to let them pass. These are tiny roads, hardly large enough for one vehicle, much less

two. We began to be flanked by huge rain forests, hanging ferns, and tea plantations. I breathed a sigh of relief to be going somewhere where the road was not packed with people. And there was the cool mountain air. We had been driving for hours.

We did not arrive at the small village of Mirik, high in the mountains, until after 10 PM. It was not hard to find directions to Bokar Ngedhon Chokhor Ling, the monastery of Bokar Rinpoche, and we made the slow climb up an even steeper very narrow road. Our friend Ngodup Burkhar, who (when we had not arrived on time) had worried about us for two days straight, had given up for the night and was already asleep. He appeared bleary eyed, but happy we were OK. In the cold of the mountain night, he found a warm room with Tibetan carpet couches for us and proceeded to prepare a fantastic meal of eggs, rice, too-sweet cookies, and hot water or tea. Food never tasted better. After two days of pure adventure, it was good to be at a safe place with known friends. We were soon bedded down at a local hotel, where we were the only guests. Fairly seedy and creepy, and the faucets didn't work, we got out our sleeping bags and fell fast asleep.

We spent the next day with our friend Ngodup at the monastery of Bokar Rinpoche, the meditation head of the entire Karma Kagyu lineage and the chief retreat master there. He is also lineage holder of the Kalachakra tradition, which was derived from the great Jonangpa lineage, the initiation for Tsi-pas -- astrologers.

It was there we visited the rare and beautiful Kalachakra stupa, which contains a huge prayer wheel that rings a bell each time it goes around. It is as big as a small cottage. The stupa and the surrounding wall paintings are exquisite, as is pretty much everything about the monastery, a reflection of the fine sensibilities of Bokar Rinpoche. We were lucky enough to receive a long-life empowerment (Amitayus) given by Bokar Rinpoche to some older monks and lay people. We crowded into the small room where it was given. It was very moving.

Of all the Rinpoches I have ever met, Bokar Rinpoche may be the closest match to our own teacher, Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche. Being in his presence was comforting.

Later, we were able to attend a long Amitabha puja (connected to death and dying) that lasted most of the afternoon. Present were most of the monks and Bokar Rinpoche himself. While I and the monks squirmed and sat through the long ritual, Bokar Rinpoche, high on his raised seat, never moved a muscle. As mentioned, here is a lama that reminds me of my own root lama, Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche.

During the puja there were several servings of tea and also tsok, the traditional feast offering. At each break point, a flurry of the youngest monks dashed around serving everyone, filling the cups to the brim with hot Tibetan salt-butter tea. Although my knees ached after a while, there was this sense of peace

and beauty. My young son Michael Andrew would come and go, in and out, of the shrine room, sitting with us for short times. The large group of monks, in particular the young elementary school-aged monks, watched little Michael like a hawk.

Watching over the little monks and sitting at the rear of the hall in a special seat, the monk in charge of discipline kept a close eye on the youngest monks. This monk was not above moving quickly down the aisle and reprimanding those who were foolish enough to indulge in horseplay, finally evicting one of the worst offenders. Later, he would go down the line of monks, giving some small monies to each of the monks, money that had been donated by patrons to have this particular ritual performed. He also gave a tiny sum to each of the child monks.

As mentioned, we also received the Amitayus Empowerment for long life from Bokar Rinpoche while we were there. Later, in a personal interview Rinpoche, I was further impressed that here was an exceptional lama. His comments were direct and very much to the point. Basically he told us that we had been to see His Holiness and obtained his blessing and that of many other sacred places, both in Tibet and Nepal. We really had no choice but to turn our minds to the dharma and to practice well from now on. This was the kind of helpful comment we received. I was sad to leave Bokar Rinpoche, and look forward to seeing him whenever that might again be possible.

[Unfortunately, Bokar Rinpoche passed away in August of 2004, a great loss.]

When we left Mirik, about 20 monks, who were about to go into three-year retreat, had just arrived from Pullahari, Jamgon Kongtul Rinpoche's monastery in Kathmandu. They had been taken out of pre-retreat to come here to receive a series of special empowerments to prepare them for the 3-year retreat, a process that would take two or three weeks to complete. And something very special happened.

The first lama out of the small bus was the retreat master, Drupon Khenpo Lodro Namgyal. Everyone had heard of Khenpo Lodro Namgyal. Rumor had it that he had been so transformed in his own retreat that everyone could see his extraordinary results. He became the retreat master himself. I knew Lodro Namgyal because years before he had come and lived at our center just after he had become an Acharya. He was there to learn English. So we knew one another, but what I saw this day was more the transfigured lama I had been hearing about.

As mentioned, Khenpo Lodro Namgyal was the first off the bus, and he turned and helped each of his retreatants step off the bus, and this is what I find hard to even think of, much less describe. As each retreatant stepped down, Lodro Namgyal kind of took them into his arms, cradling each of their faces in his hands, like a mother would her child. It was so moving that I had to turn away at first out of pure embarrassment. Perhaps I had been touched this way

by my mother when I was too young to remember it, but in society nothing like this ever happens, not ever. It was stunning.

I have never forgotten that tenderness that one adult gave to another. It moved me so deeply that I could not even bear to bring it to mind until much later, but at the same time I instantly knew that this kind of pure force is what is missing in our lives, to love one another with true tenderness. It only took a couple of minutes, and they were inside and out of view.

When it came time to say goodbye to Bokar Rinpoche, his last words to us were "Tomorrow or next life, whichever comes first!"

And we were on to Sikkim.

STORY: TREASURE REVEALER CHOKGYUR LINGPA

In 2004, along with a group of sangha members, Margaret and I made an eighteen-hour bus trip from Xining, the capital of Qinghai China, to the Yushi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in the central region of Kham in eastern Tibet. We had just flown from Beijing to Xining on a two-hour plane ride and we were heading for the town of Jyekundo on the Tibetan plateau. That trip crossed high passes of over 16,000 feet. The road was so rough that unless you held on, you could bounce all the way up and hit your head on the bus ceiling, and a lot of folks did. And this was a big tall bus. As for bathrooms and amenities along the way, forget it. For the most part, bathrooms consisted of how far you wanted to walk away from the bus and squat. Some of the ladies had special dresses that reminded me of the old hoop skirts popular around of the time of the American Civil War. Others just kept on walking until they were specs on the horizon.

The bus trip was long, gray, and weary. To give you an idea how high 16,000 feet is, the hawks and other raptors walk around on the earth holding their wings out because there are no trees to land on; it is so strange to see these huge birds walking around on the ground.

As mentioned, we were on an exhausting 18-hour bus trip to Thrangu Monastery about five miles from the town of Jyekundo for the opening of a new gumpa or shrine hall. We were traveling with my teacher for the last 30+ years, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, who today is 90-years old. Thrangu monastery was where Rinpoche lived for many years. Perhaps I will

write about the Thrangu Monastery part of the trip in another blog. I am sad to say that the great earthquake of April 14, 2010 (6.9 magnitude) destroyed most of Jyekundo and completely demolished the monastery, killing a great many people. The epicenter was located only about 18 miles from the monastery.

Margaret and I finally got to Jyekundo and into our hotel room, which came complete with the occasional large rat. I was already having breathing trouble from the altitude, which included sleep apnea, and eventually bronchitis that required antibiotics. It happens to me every time. Luckily one of my fellow travelers was an acupuncturist, and that helped.

While we were in Jyekundo we had the opportunity to have an audience with Tsikey Choghyur Lingpa Rinpoche, the emanation (reincarnation) of one the great treasure revealers (tertons), at which time we received his blessing. Chokgyur Lingpa is considered the last of the 100 major tertons and by many the "King of Tertons." In recent times, the Chokgyur Lingpa tulku (rebirth) has had two emanations, the one we met with was born at Tinglung in Derge, recognized by Khyentse Chokyi Lodro, and taken to Kela monastery to be enthroned.

Tertons are dharma "treasure finders" who have special abilities to find dharma teachings that have been hidden by great adepts like Guru Rinpoche (Padmasambhava) in the past. Like timed-release capsules, at the appropriate time when humanity needs a particular teaching, a terton finds it and makes it available. These hidden dharma treasures (called termas) can be physical or mental. If physical,

then there actually is a text or ritual item that is hidden in the ground, in a cave, or actually sealed inside a crystal, rock, or tree hollow. Termas may be also hidden in a lake or spring. But there are other kinds of terma as well.

There are what are called Mind Terma (Mind Treasures) that are hidden within the mindstream of the tertön himself or in the mind of their guru. These too may be found and brought to light. While physical terma frequently are written texts of scrolls, mind treasures emerge from the mind itself and gradually reveal themselves to the tertön.

When a terma is found, whether as a physical text or a mind treasure, it is usually not shared immediately with the public. Typically there is an incubation period, perhaps more like an inoculation, that works in the mind of the tertön until he or she understands, experiences, and realizes it fully. Then it is shared. A tertön who retrieves such a treasure may have to undergo years of practice until the full import of the teaching has been realized. The mind treasure is so seminal that its activity works in the mind of the tertön until it has done its work and is complete.

We spent an evening with Tsikey Choghyur Lingpa Rinpoche and received his blessing. It was a rare opportunity. I enclose some photos.

Dharma teachings are not the only terma that is hidden. As an astrologer I was very interested to find that there are 84,000 astrology teachings that were hidden as terma by the bodhisattva Manjushri, in conjunction with Guru Rinpoche. These astrology teachings originally appeared in our world system in

China, where a youthful Manjushri appeared and from the top of his head poured out the 84,000 astrological teachings, and that is a story all by itself. This occurred in China at a sacred area called Mt. Wu-Tai-Shan, where five mountains come together to form the number-5 die, four mountains in a square with a fifth one in the center.

On another leg of this same trip, I was able to travel to Wu-Tai-Shan with my teacher and our sangha to offer puja and say prayers on the top of all five mountains. It had an enormous effect on my astrology. Perhaps I will detail that in another blog if there is interest among the astrologically oriented.

STORY: A SACRED SPACE IN CHINA

As an astrologer for many decades I was more than a little enthused to hear that Rinpoche was taking us to the one spot on Earth where astrology is said to have originated, a very sacred place in China called Wu-Tai Shan. At the time Margaret and I were traveling with our teacher Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, along with a group of his 3-year-retreat lamas, and some other students like us. Also traveling with our group was the 9th Lodro Nyima Rinpoche from Thrangu Monastery in Tibet. We were on our way to spend a week at Wu-Tai Shan.

I am not clear whether Rinpoche himself had always wanted to visit there or if he just wanted to make sure his students got that chance. Since he does not speak English (and what little spoken Tibetan I know is restricted to reading sadhanas), I never got that question answered.

At any rate, let me tell you something about Wu-Tai Shan, a group of five (flat-topped) mountain peaks located southeast of Beijing that reach up to about 11,000 feet, just shy of where I begin to react to altitude negatively, so that was good. Anyway, I already had been sick enough in Tibet a few weeks earlier.

The five mountains are arranged with four in a square, with the fifth and tallest in the center, like a number-five die. Each of the five peaks is said to be inhabited by a different emanation of the bodhisattva Manjushri, and each peak is a field of activity where a particular Buddha or bodhisattva (connected to

Manjushri) manifests his or her kind particular influence. Unlike other pure realms such as Amitabha Buddha's pure land "Dewachen," Manjushri's realms are said to be right here on earth, located at particular geographic locations such as Wu-Tai Shan. In other words, you and I can walk around in them right now here on Earth.

Mt. Wu-Tai Shan, also known in Chinese as "Clear and Cool Mountain," is one of the four great sacred mountains in China, and said to be the most popular. These five mountains at Wu-Tai Shan follow the symmetry of the five Buddha families, with Amitabha to the West, Ratnasambhava to the South, Aksobhya to the East, Ammoghasiddhi to the North, and Vairocana in the middle.

Wu-Tai Shan has been very important to Tibet as well as China, and the great Indian adept Padampa Sange spent 12 years at Wu-Tai Shan practicing. Tibetan lamas have made it a point to visit Wu-Tai Shan for centuries. In addition, the great Tibetan hero Tangton Gyalpo, the "Iron Bridge Man," also visited Wu-Tai Shan where he gave a reading transmission of the "Litany of the Names of Manjushri" to monks there and stayed on for eight months during which time the five forms of Manjushri appeared to him in a series of visions.

The whole Wu-Tai Shan area is considered mystical and sacred, not just by the Chinese, but by many Asian religions, particularly Buddhists. For some reason it is also recognized by almost all the world's religions as a sacred spot. Scattered throughout Wu-Tai Shan are a great many monasteries of all faiths, including not only Tibetan Buddhist gompas, but

Christian monasteries too. This area is religiously very cosmopolitan, a central meeting for Tibetan, Mongolian, Manchu, and Chinese spirituality – a sacred space.

It is traditional for those on a pilgrimage to Wu-Tai Shan to climb to the very peak of each of the five mountains and perform various prayers and pujas (rituals). The ideal blessing is to visit all five mountains in a single day, something we managed to do.

Wu-Tai Shan is said to be where the bodhisattva Manjushri, the emanation of discriminating intelligence (and also the bodhisattva connected to divination and astrology) is said to have first emanated on Earth. Manjushri appeared there as a youth, a young adult, bright and shining like the Sun. From the top of his head poured forth the 84,000 teachings on astrology and they were all given to mankind, who loved, treasured, and used them. This is said to be the introduction of astrology to this planet.

In fact, the world's people so loved astrology that they neglected some of the more basic dharma practices in favor of doing astrology. My teacher had told me years before (when I asked him about astrology) that astrology is one of the limbs of the yoga, but not the root itself. The root dharma practice is essential to make the limbs grow and function. Manjushri was concerned that mankind was abandoning dharma practice and spending more and more time on secondary issues (again: the limbs, not the root), and so he withdrew all the astrology teachings so that mankind might better see the root practices of the

dharma itself.

The world of humans was very sad to lose their astrology and one of the greatest of Tibetan saints (Guru Rinpoche / Padmasambhava) saw this happening and felt compassion for all humanity in this regard. Guru Rinpoche knew well that astrology is what is called a relative truth, while the dharma itself was an absolute truth, but he also knew that mankind often depends upon relative truths in order to reach the absolute truth.

A relative truth is a path or method to get from here to there in our progress, while an absolute truth is motionless, stateless, and non-changing, having neither beginning nor end. It just is. An example of an absolute truth would be to know the true nature of the mind, while a relative truth might be practicing methods that prepare us to know the true nature of the mind. Astrology is one of the relative truths; it gets us from here to there, spiritually. It is samsaric.

Guru Rinpoche then approached Manjushri and pleaded the case for humans, asking Manjushri to please return the astrology to us. In the end, Manjushri was persuaded and he gave astrology back, but with a caveat. Instead of giving it all back as he had previously, he hid the various teachings in places where we could find it over time, kind of like timed-release capsules. Some teachings he actually hid by placing scrolls under rocks and in caves. Other teachings he hid deep within the mind itself (mind terma), so that at prescribed times in the future someone would find this or that particular teaching. These hidden teachings are called 'terma' and those who find them are called 'tertons.'" The Nyingma

lineage of Tibetan Buddhism is the most famous for their tertons.

I believe I mentioned that during my Tibet trip I got sick, but I didn't tell you that on top of that I got a bit ornery as well, just over little things like food, etc. For example, here in the states we think of Chinese food as egg rolls, Chow Mein, Lo Mein, and so forth. I am good with that. There is no such thing in China. The American take on Chinese food is not what the Chinese themselves eat. They don't serve egg rolls, Lo Mein, and Chow Mein. Instead, everything seems to be coated in oil (and often very bad oils – bad to the taste and health) and served up. I soon got very sick of all that oil and grumpy on top of that or partly because of that. Everything was coated with oil until I felt suffocated by it. And to my amazement, plain rice was almost never served. You had to order it specially. Imagine! Anyway, you get the idea. Little things like food can mean a lot.

During our stay in the Wu-Tai Shan area, we did many practices and visited many holy places. For one, we visited all five of the mountains that make up the Mt. Wu-Tai Shan complex, traveling to the very peak of each to offer prayers and other ritual practices. Moreover, as tradition dictates, we did all five peaks in a single day, which is saying something because each one is literally a 'trip'. Many of the roads were little more than trails in the side of a mountain, but on the top of each peak was an area for practice, either a stupa or some other building or shrine. Many of the peaks were cloud covered, so we literally were up there walking around in the clouds.

But despite my illness and despite my grumpiness

part of the time, the Wu-Tai Shan Mountains somehow still managed to affect me. After we left China and returned home, the most amazing things began to happen to me astrologically. All kinds of astrology began to occur to me, both western and eastern. Perhaps it was due to having traveled to that consecrated area, an area sacred to astrology and astrologers. I can't say for sure, but I went into renaissance mode astrologically and proceeded to understand and write out a whole lot of new astrology, most of which ended up in one book or another. It also precipitated what has been a lifelong love of astrology that was already deep in me out and into a dozen or more books. Bam! They just came out, like a baby at a birth.

I can say that not only did I burn through a lot of veils covering western astrology, but also burned through whatever obstacles or resistance I had to Chinese astrology and began to see what it was really about and to study it more deeply. And it is so beautiful.

All kinds of spontaneous insights and mini-visions took place. As an astrologer, I have no explanation for this, other than my visit to the sacred Mt. Wu-Tai Shan somehow linked me up with the astrological sources and, regardless of my grumpiness, blessed me. I know I didn't deserve it, but it happened anyway. So there you have a little history of our trip to Mt. Wu-Tai Shan in China. There are other stories, and I will try to get to them as I can.

DHARMA: TILOPA'S WORDS OF ADVICE

Sincere dharma practitioners, over time, often feel a strong resonance with one particular deity or another, a kinship. Tibetan Buddhist deities represent different qualities within us, qualities like kindness, patience, generosity, and so forth. And we don't only respond to enlightened qualities, but also can resonate with particular dharmic individuals, past or present.

Of course I feel a link with my main root guru Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche. He has been kind enough to actually put up with me and point out how I might develop some awareness. In addition, some years ago, I also found myself resonating and in synch with a particular historical dharma figure, one of the great dharma masters from India, the Mahasiddha Tilopa, an adept who lived from 989 A.D. to 1069 A.D.

Tilopa is one of the lineage masters of the particular form of Mahamudra meditation that I practice. In fact, Tilopa was the first to receive these particular Mahamudra instructions, not from a physical teacher, but in his mind, directly from the Buddha Vajradhara -- however that works.

I can't say I can fully explain my connection to Tilopa. It just happened some years ago after I read a particular teaching that Tilopa once gave to his main student Naropa on the banks of the Ganges River in India, and it has been appropriately nicknamed the "Ganges Mahamudra." It is like a long poem, which the Tibetan monks call a "doha," literally a song of spiritual experience and achievement.

This perceived connection eventually led to my reading all I could find on the life and activity of Tilopa, but nothing there informed me more than that original insight of the connection itself. It just appeared and it still is there.

Although we have various shrines at our center, including one right here in my office, I also have a statue of Tilopa placed just above the computer monitor where I work. I include a photo taken today, which depicts Tilopa sitting in bodhisattva style (legs loosely crossed) and gazing in his mind, while looking up and receiving direct instructions from Vajradhara, the very essence of the Buddha's realization. This statue, which is about 10-inches tall (and 10 pounds), was made in Patan, a city that is part of Kathmandu in Nepal. It is fashioned according to the Sakya lineage. The Sakya in Patan are famed for their artisans and in particular for statue making. Tilopa holds a human skull cup with his right hand, and a fish in his left hand.

The skull cup filled with blood symbolizes, among other things, impermanence and Tilopa's mastery of death and rebirth. The fish held high in Tilopa's left hand symbolizes his ability to lift up and guide those of us who are caught in the ocean of samsara. There are also several well-known stories about Tilopa and fish.

Tilopa chose to live the life of an ordinary person. He ground sesame seeds by day, and worked in a brothel in the evening procuring clients.

The Ganges Mahamudra teaching is too long to present here, and I am not fit to comment on it. Tilopa

also left what are called his "Six Words of Advice," and I list the six words below. In Tibetan these are single words, but in English they are phrases.

TILOPA'S SIX WORDS OF ADVICE

Let go of the past.

Let go of the future

Let go of what is happening now.

Let go of analyzing or figuring anything out.

Let go of controlling or trying to make things happen.

Relax right now, just as it is.

THE ESSENTIAL OR PITH INSTRUCTIONS

I know. I don't like diagrams much either, but please humor me. This one might be useful, so hang on. The extant written teachings of Buddhism, so I am told, are an order of magnitude greater than any other religion. Although the number of volumes can vary by the particular translation, the early Pali Canon contains some 40 to 50 volumes, the Chinese Buddhist Canon is some 80,000 pages, the Tibetan Kangyur is about 108 volumes, and the Tibetan Tengyur (commentaries on the sutras and tantras) is some 225 volumes. In other words, there is a lot to read.

In Tibetan, these huge libraries have been compiled down to the essential Vajrayana teachings, which still comprise many, many books. And these Vajrayana teachings are themselves boiled down to what often are called the 'pith" or essential instructions. It seems natural that those of us who don't devote a lot of time to studying dharma would gravitate from the extensive works (that take years to study) to the condensed works, and particularly to the absolutely essential or

pith instructions.

The problem is that condensation removes more and more of the explanation, leaving what amount to simple pointers, and finally even those pointers become shorthand (almost ciphers) -- pure code. Those who already have spiritual realization are said to be able to read the pith instructions, which are like freeze-dried dharma. Just add realization and everything makes sense. What about those of us who have not had a lot of realization?

The problem for me has always been to make sense out of the pith instructions. An example of a famous pith instruction is the "Ganges Mahamudra," the pith instruction that the Mahasiddha Tilopa gave to his disciple Naropa on Mahamudra meditation along the banks of the Ganges River in India, and even that amounts to many pages, one single line of which is enough to occupy me for who knows how long.

And then, finally, Tilopa summed everything up in six single words, what are called "Tilopa's Six Words of Advice," the quintessential or 'pith of the pith' instructions, so to speak.

In other words (no pun intended), the expanded Tibetan canon is several hundred volumes long. Just try reading that and keeping it all in mind from the first to the last volume, not that a good English translation even exists. Boiling it down to six words, I am sure we can all remember those six words, but what do they mean and how can we use such advice in daily life? It is analogous to having a fistful of consonants, with no vowels to expand them.

That being said, let's briefly (Tilopa's advice is brief) look at Tilopa's six words of advice with an eye to how they might be used by those of us just starting out. And, of course, I can only tell you how I go about using this advice. There are no doubt other approaches, I am sure.

First, I don't find that these six words of instruction are anything to read with the expectation that something magical will suddenly happen in our mind. They are, rather, slogans for action, instructions for living. Here are the six words, which in English amount to six phrases:

TILOPA'S SIX WORDS OF ADVICE

Let go of the past, rather than prolong it.

Let go of the future, rather than invite it.

Let go of what is happening now in our busy train of thought.

Let go of analyzing, rather than figuring anything out.

Let go of controlling, rather than trying to make things happen.

Relax right now, just as it is.

Luckily, those of us who are already learning to meditate have at least been exposed to the basic technique of Shamata meditation, learning to allow the mind to rest on an object -- our breath, a pebble, and so on. And when we find our mind distracted from the object of meditation (daydreaming or whatever), we simply bring the mind back to the object and allow it to rest there again. Meditation practice is endless starting over afresh, again and again and again, building in the present moment a new and hopefully more perfect past.

This same technique, that of gently resting the mind on the object of meditation, is how I find Tilopa's six words of advice come in handy. The key for me (as with Shamata) is to be mindful of whatever I am experiencing, not just on the cushion, but all throughout my day. Let's go over Tilopa's six words of advice.

Tilopa says not to prolong the past. If we become aware that we are lost in thinking about something past or nostalgic, especially obsessively, Tilopa suggests that we simply let go of that and allow the mind to return to the present and rest there.

In a similar way, Tilopa says not to invite the future. If we become aware that we are speculating about the future, about what is to come, he suggests that we just let go of that and return to the present and rest there.

The same is true for thinking about the present. Many spiritual doctrines say that the present is where we should be, as in the "Be Here Now!" slogan, you know, be present. Tilopa's advice is that we also let go of being concerned with present happenings as well (whatever is going on in our train of thoughts) and just let the mind rest.

Those are the first three of Tilopa's suggestions. The next two, "not analyzing" and "not trying to make things happen" are, in my opinion, just variations on the first two slogans.

"Not analyzing" kind of goes with the past, as in not trying to figure things out that have happened or are

happening, and "Not making things happen" goes with the future, as in not trying to control or make anything happen.

So the first five of Tilopa's slogans have to do with identifying and becoming aware of what we are doing in our mind and letting that go. This includes thoughts of the past, future, and present, along with attempts to figure things out (analyze), and attempts to make things happen (control).

This leaves the sixth slogan, which simply is to let the mind rest just as it is. Relaxing the mind and resting is the essence of Tilopa's advice and also of meditation. It took years (decades actually) for me to understand that by "rest," Tilopa means the same thing you and I mean as rest, like: take a load off and just relax.

It is my understanding that Tilopa's advice is for those who have had what are called the "Pointing Out Instructions" by a realized teacher. What good could they be to those of us who have not had the pointing out instructions, much less realized them? My understanding and experience is that these six words of advice can be very helpful to us even if we have not realized something yet about the true nature of the mind.

Even with the pointing out instructions (and recognition), there is a lot of further practice that has to be done, years for most practitioners. And much of that practice has to do with being mindful and just letting go when we find ourselves caught in a distraction. As mentioned, this is done over and over and over. One of the wonderful things about Buddhism IMO is that it uses the present to make a

perfect past. This is something anyone of us can do.

We can begin that practice right now, whether or not we have had and grasped the pointing-out instructions, and all of our practice will not be wasted, but will only better prepare the way for eventual realization.

In other words, we can begin to be more mindful right now; mindful of just what it is we are doing at any given moment during the day. If we find ourselves noodling in the past, in nostalgia or analyzing our past behavior, we can invoke the first and fourth of Tilopa's slogans, not to prolong the past and not to analyze and just let that behavior go and rest.

Similarly, if we find ourselves speculating on the future, trying to control the outcome or make things happen, we can let that behavior go and just allow the mind to rest naturally.

The same goes for busily following our train of thoughts in the present. Get off that train and give it a rest. Let the mind relax naturally.

These slogans of Tilopa are not something just to consider or think about casually; they are calls to action, remedies for states of mind that we can find ourselves in. And we can invoke them anytime we are able to just pause and be mindful. I find myself doing it all the time, not just on the cushion, but all day long.

I tend to use the six slogans of Tilopa as we might a site map on the Internet, to identify places I am likely to find myself in, and the answer or action is always the same. Let go of what I am doing and let the mind

elastically return to its natural state and rest in that. Past, present, or future, the response is the same: cease and desist. Allow the mind to rest naturally just as it is and always has been.

STORY: TILOPA'S SAGE ADVICE

A few days ago I posted something about the Mahasiddha Tilopa's "Six Words of Advice." I may not have found the right words to communicate the meaning here, and I continue to be intrigued by this sage advice and find it personally invaluable, so please forgive some further clarification.

As to the little diagram or map, I find it actually helps me to be more aware where my mind is currently focused. And most of the time I am anywhere but where I would like to be. That is why these six words of advice are so helpful. Being reminded of what I am actually doing with my mind (and my time), even roughly, points out to me that I am usually, as they say, "Any which way but loose." And how is that?

That is because I am easily distracted and prone to jump on any passing train of thought and take a ride, a ride that seldom goes anywhere I really want to reach. It just spends time and is at best entertaining. And it is a good thing that I like movies, because most of the time I seem to be watching one of my own projections and enjoying (or at least reacting) to it at that. This tendency to ignore the true nature of things is what Tilopa is pointing out. Ignorance = what we ignore.

Tilopa suggests that we allow the mind to just rest naturally, like we would when we sit down in a big soft chair after a day of hard work. Relax. It is not like there is a 'right' place, object, or subject to allow the mind to rest on, but there does seem to be a right way of resting, one that allows mindfulness and clarity to

arise. In other words, this or that object or subject of focus (whatever we are thinking) is not "bad" (or "good") in itself, and negative attachment (revulsion) is no different from positive attachment (love and like). Attachment is attachment. Buddhist fundamentalism would be no different from any other kind of fundamentalism, dividing the world into good and bad, subject and object, and so on. That is not what the dharma intends.

Tilopa points out that it is best not to dwell (be attached) to the past, present, or future, although, as we well know, they are all equally attachable. By that same token, what Buddhists call the "Three Times" (past, present, future) are all equally workable, dharmically. We can start where we are. There is no need to run to them or from them. Tilopa says to just relax and leave thoughts go, just as they are. Don't bother to clean up.

Tilopa suggests that we "let go" of the three times, not to deny or shun them. Thoughts of the past, present, or future are all just that, thoughts. We are advised to become aware that we have become attached to thoughts and to just let go of the attachment and rest in the ensuing release and flow. In more advanced meditation practices, practitioners are taught not to just look at the content of a thought (the train of thought), but instead to look at the nature of that thought, and the most remarkable thing is that all thoughts share the same nature. Once we have seen and realized the actual nature of one thought, we have done the same for all thoughts, past, present, or future. But I am told this takes time and practice.

Tilopa suggests not to prolong the past, invite the

future, or think about the present, but his message, as mentioned, is about not becoming attached or carried away by thoughts, like getting on our train of thought and taking a ride without being mindful that we are doing just that. His is an easy method for waking up.

When Tilopa says let go and 'rest as it is', that rest is beyond attachment of any kind to the past, present, or future. We let go once we realize that we have become attached. For example, if we find ourselves prolonging the past, trying to figure it out, etc., Tilopa does not mean for us to somehow get out of the past and into the present or future. That is not it. In fact, there is no particular place to go, as Chuck Berry pointed out. He means to let go of our 'attachment' to the past and just rest as it is -- however it is in the moment.

Past, present, or future makes no difference. The three times are identical in nature and are not sources of refuge for us. Attachment itself is not somehow evil or bad by nature. Attachment to anything only distracts and obscures our authentic nature, which is why Tilopa suggests we let go of attachment to the three times and just rest in the true nature of the mind itself, which is something we can learn to do. He is showing us how.

For me these six words of advice serve as constant reminders for me to realize and locate my attachments and reactions, relax my hold on them, and learn to just let them go so that the mind can clear. I find that this is a process that I can gradually learn to do all throughout my day, not just in formal sitting-meditation practice. The amount of time I allocate to sitting-on-the-cushion practice is nowhere

near the time I can spend in this particular practice that Tilopa suggests. There are few dharma practices that I have come across that are as easy and simple as this one. Anyone can do it.

I realized early on that going to church on Sunday for an hour or so will never be enough to get a rascal like me into any kind of heaven. It would take real practice time for me to realize much of anything. Tilopa's six words of advice are an easy opportunity to accumulate real practice time, like: all day long. It is, as they say, a no-brainer!

I include here Tilopa's suggestions for those who may have missed them the first time. The card image is one of Tilopa grinding sesame seeds. Some interaction on this would be welcome.

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DHARMA: SPIRITUAL GAPS

The Tibetan Buddhists make a big deal about what they call "gaps," chinks in the seemingly-seamless armor of our self, moments when we time-out from our incessant distractions and come up for air. Without gaps there would be no eventual realization or enlightenment.

Gaps are important because without them we are on an endless subway ride to nowhere – just going along in rapt ignorance of our own mind's actual nature. According to the Buddhists, we have managed to get it just backward and have frozen our gaze looking outward at a world of mostly our own projections. Somehow we have to flip this and learn to also look inward at the projector of all this, our own biases, rather than just outward. For this to happen there have to be breaks or intermissions in this incessant movie of life -- gaps.

There are natural gaps, like the pause at the top of the bottom of any cycle, such as the cycle of the breath, the heartbeat, day and night – what have you. The world we know is all about cycles – returns. If something does not curve and eventually return (bring returns), it is a singularity. We have no way of knowing it exists, much less getting a grasp on it. It takes gaps or breaks in the cycle for this to happen, and we have to learn where they are and how to use them.

If we can be mindful, there are natural cycles and points within any cycle where there are gaps through which it may be possible for us to step outside or

away from a cycle and realize it exists. The Tibetan Buddhists are very emphatic about the importance of the points of New and Full Moon in the lunar cycle as gaps, and eclipses only make these gaps more auspicious. As an astrologer I have been studying celestial and terrestrial cycles (and their gaps) for some fifty years.

So there is no lack of gaps out there, only a lack of awareness of where these gaps are and how to use them. I am hoping that any of you reading this have had the experience of waking up or snapping out of some syndrome or cycle you were lost in. Suddenly we are back again, present, but back from where? Who knows? We can be lost in a distraction that entrances us for seconds or for years. I find it kind of scary when suddenly I wake up and realize I have been missing-in-action for who knows how long. It happens to all of us. And gaps are the means or doorway to remembering – waking up.

There are two main ways I have found to use natural gaps to better realize the nature of my own mind, one of which I have just described: studying the nature of natural cycles and their articulation points or gaps, and then learning to use them. This takes a lot of diligence, time, and practice. There is another way which has proved to be more useful in my experience and that is: practical instruction.

Unfortunately, personally speaking, I was unable to get instruction as to the nature of the mind and how to realize it from the teachers I encountered while I was growing up. Our society is just not into that. I first found it during my extensive study of Black musicians and their music. I was fortunate enough to meet and

interview scores of great blues players, and I was captivated as much by their state of mind (life savvy) as by their music. Many of them knew their own minds and I did my best to learn from their example. And I did.

Later, when I met the Buddhist masters in the 1960s, and particularly the Tibetans in the early 1970s, I found instructors that I could learn from that not only knew the mind, but had a systematic method that I could actually learn. And I have done my best to do that.

I don't want to go on and on here, so I will just say this. What was needed in my case was to flip my entire mental view from gazing out at the world and trying to draw conclusions (and I was way too young for conclusions) to learning to look inward at the mind itself, as in: my own mind that, without knowing it, I already was more familiar with than I would have thought. It took the Tibetan Buddhists to help me make that flip and provide me with true spiritual sustenance, like a newborn baby finding its mother's breast – a real connection.

It was at that point that gaps became very important in my learning experience, basically with the gradual deconstruction (like the old game 'Pick-Up-Sticks') of my own self-image, locating the gaps in what had been an almost seamless veil of my attachments, and learning to see through my own grasping-ness at the nature of the mind behind my own self, something I had never seen-through up to that point except perhaps those few times that outward tragic events had shattered myself long enough for some transparency to arise.

My whole point here is that gaps or breaks in the endless distractions to which I am subject to (because of my own attachments) are the only opportunities to break through the suffocating cocoon of the self and get a breath of fresh air, to see beyond the obscurations of my own self.

I know. This is old news, but for the most part it still rules, big time. Taking advantage of the natural gaps in our clever self is difficult, difficult to find the gaps, and difficult to know how to use them. This is where a practical teacher is invaluable. I was originally quite upset to read that it is almost impossible for any of us to expect to unravel our own tightly-knit knot of self-preoccupation without someone who can point out to us how to do it. For years I had the arrogance that I could do it all myself, but I finally admitted that I had put together only certain pieces, not any whole-cloth map or route.

I didn't like the idea that I had to seek outside help from a spiritual friend, someone who actually knew how to distract me from my distractions long enough for me to see something in the mirror of the mind besides my own reflection. I found such a practical friend in the Tibetan Buddhists and what is called the "Pointing Out Instructions," not enlightenment (that comes much later I am told), but simple recognition of the true nature of the mind beyond my self's biased ministrations. There is something beyond our own self.

DO-IT-YOURSELF DHARMA

Self-liberation is a term I encounter often in dharma texts. For me this always has a double-meaning, first that (hopefully) I will eventually be liberated from being bound or obscured by my own bad habits and begin to see through the endless distractions of my busy-body-self and it's grasping at attachments. That is my hope.

And second, and more discouraging, I have this growing realization I must liberate myself by my own efforts. No one else is going to do it for me, no matter how long I wait. After all, that is why it is called self-liberation.

Having been raised in the Christian religion, I automatically assumed that some highly realized being could just touch my forehead and zap me into a kind of enlightenment. So far that has never happened. And Buddhists don't even make that claim. In fact, just the reverse, and they offer reasons.

The Buddha himself (or herself, as there are female Buddhas too!) could not just reach out and zap me into enlightenment. Enlightenment, so the Buddhists say is, by definition, something we each must do for ourselves, just as the Buddha (who was an ordinary person as we are) did. I mean: that's the whole point. So, if we are waiting around for the Second Coming or for a Buddha (or someone) to automatically enlighten us, we better make ourselves comfortable. It has been and will continue to be a long time.

And the reason is that nothing is holding me back

from realization aside from my own self-imposed impurities and obscurations, the sum-total of my attachments, and what-have-you? Buddha Nature has been within me all the time and, like the sun shining in the firmament, is obscured only by my own habits and attachments. Any time I am ready, I can begin to remove those layers of obscurations and let the sun just shine through. It is all up to me. On days when I am feeling lazy, that thought can be depressing.

And the Buddha, Bodhisattvas, and other realized beings are not there to do it for us. They are there to show us how we can free ourselves. After all, that is what the Dharma is, simply the method Buddha used to enlighten himself. Dharma teachers exist to point out to us 'how' to do it, but it is up to each of us to actually turn the wheel of our own dharma. Only we can turn the crank.

So, the good news is that there is a way to remove whatever is obscuring us. It is called the Dharma, a simple method. The bad news is that each of us has to do it for ourselves and realization will wait for us as long as forever, until we get around to actually doing it.

Finally, "self-liberation" has a third meaning for me, a meaning which I have pointed at in the preceding two blogs on Tilopa's "Six Words of Advice," and that has to do with allowing things to self-liberate themselves or, as the Tibetans say, a snake can uncoil itself, but that takes real practice I am told.

DHARMA: TRUE DREAMS

I have always been struck by the fact (so the Buddhists tell me) that Buddha Nature is already fully within us now. It cannot be improved and nothing of it can ever be lost, no matter what we do, good, bad, or indifferent. However, we can, layer on layer, cover over and obscure our own essence and true nature, and it is obvious to me that we do this. But there is something I want to point out that, while not exactly subtle, still escapes me most of the time.

It has to do with this idea of substantiality – existence. It seems like we are all a little schizophrenic, at least I am. On the one hand I have no problem distinguishing my nighttime dreams and daydreams as being, clearly, insubstantial. These dreams may be meaningful to me, but they lack the substance and smack of everyday outer existence. I can see that.

Yet, I continue to imbue my outer workaday-world with extreme substantiality. It exists very emphatically indeed; at least I believe it does. And here is what I am getting at:

This is related to the repeated suggestions from the Tibetan Buddhists to the effect that we should "Consider all phenomena as dreams," one of the slogans from Atisha's "Seven Points of Mind Training." I have heard that phrase for many years, and often tried to see my daily existence as a dream that I am having, but without much success. How can I lighten up and begin to experience this daily external world as more transparent and "dreamlike?" It's usually anything but dreamy.

And here is what I believe is the problem. I have no trouble whatsoever seeing through my dreams, daydreams, not to mention video games, fantasies, science fiction, movies, etc., i.e. that they are insubstantial and not somehow 'real' like getting up in the morning is real. So I am completely sane and familiar with parts of my life that I can see are insubstantial or dreamlike. No trouble.

What seems a little crazy is that at the same time I have imbued this outer world I live in with substantiality and reality that is anything but dreamy or transparent. In fact, it is often hard, brutal, and all about where the rubber meets the road. How do I manage to compartmentalize these two? This is what I find puzzling.

Obviously I am totally familiar with the insubstantiality of dreams, that they are not real or substantial. We all are. Where did this dichotomy come from? The Tibetan Buddhist practice of "Dream Yoga" seems to be intended to help break down that dichotomy and expose the insubstantial or dream-like quality of day-to-day existence.

In the last analysis, the Tibetans are pointing out that this life we live each day is no more real than our nighttime dreams, and what we call reality is just another dream we are having that we can wake up from. At least that is my take. Living in my own dream has always been an internal slogan inside my head for as long as I care to remember. I am sure I am not the Lone Ranger in this. But for me it remains another abstract thought, not a realization.

That's really all I have to say on this. I don't have any magic solution to this duality and I have not been introduced to Tibetan Dream Yoga practice, other than just peripherally. That is a practice usually reserved for three-year Buddhist retreat, part of the "Six Yogas of Naropa." That being said, it is clear that I have imbued what we call 'reality' with great substantiality, with hardcore existence. Life is real. Sure, every now and then that reality can get a little transparent. Late-night walks in the heat of summer used to do it for me. That is what the Midsummer Night's Dream must be all about. In those late-night three-o'clock-in-the-morning moments I actually thought I could see plants grow. That kind of thing. My real life can also, at times, get a little transparent, but mostly not.

My point (at least to myself) is simply that I already know how to function (and well) with dreams and insubstantiality. It is ingrained in me and not news. I find that thought helpful since it points out to me that I am not a complete novice when it comes to perceiving insubstantiality, and that I don't have to learn anything new that I don't already know and use every day. I do, however, have to reconcile my little schizophrenia between dreams and "reality," allowing insubstantiality for dreams, but perhaps taking day-to-day existence too seriously. Lighten up Michael.

It seems that I am still kicking this around in my mind, so perhaps more tomorrow. Where are you with this issue?

DHARMA: REACTION OR RESPONSE?

Something I often write about is responsibility, literally: the ability to respond. We all have it in us somewhere, but not always at the ready. It is one of the byproducts of successful dharma practice to bring out our ability to respond. And an ability to respond can be contrasted with how we react to life. In fact, there is a case to be made that the difference between enlightened or skillful action and unenlightened or unskillful action is the difference between involuntarily reacting to an event and appropriately responding to it.

It was the Harvard psychologist and excellent Mahamudra teacher Daniel P. Brown (author of "Pointing Out the Great Way") who first made it clear to me how recognizing our reactions is the key to Tong-Len practice, a Tibetan Buddhist practice that helps us to be more accepting of our self and inclusive of others. And this is something that we can check out easily in our own lives. Are we responding or just reacting?

To me, a reaction is pretty-much involuntary on my part. I react, without thinking, either outwardly, inwardly, or both. I can't help myself. But just as physical pain in the body (like when we burn ourselves) is an early warning system that something needs attention, our reactions to life and its events (involuntary or learned) point out clearly where we have drawn a line between what our self is comfortable with and what is not comfortable. Do we really want to draw lines?

Reactions come in all sizes, from self-shattering events to micro-reactions so small that their only indication is increased tension. All of these reactive wrinkles in our life can be ironed out with a little bit of dharma practice. In general, the practice of Tong-Len (sending and receiving) is the recommended remedy for over-reacting. And reactivity is so easy for us to check out.

All that is required is to become more aware of our reactions, whatever gives us pause or startles us. In fact, our reactions are a pretty good thermometer, not only of our reactivity, but also a passable guide to our future practice – where we need to learn.

Take a look! Are you reacting or responding? If we find we are reacting, then perhaps some adjustment of our attitude would be useful, just as we would adjust the sails on a boat to take a different tack. If, instead, we are responding to whatever erupts in an appropriate manner, then we are on track, so is it a reaction or a response?

If our response amounts to a knee-jerk reaction, then it probably is not an appropriate response. We can temper it with a little Tong-Len practice. I personally have found that examining my mindstream for reactions, coming to terms with why I am being reactionary, and then finding a more appropriate response is one of the most beneficial dharma practices I have found. And we can easily do it all day long, gradually converting reactions to responses.

Since I don't always make enough time for sitting meditation practice, I appreciate practices that I can do on-the-go, so to speak, methods to accumulate

real practice time.

For those who would like to learn more about toning reactivity, please see the free book "Tong-Len: The Alchemy of Reactions" at this link:

<http://spiritgrooves.net/e-Books.aspx#Dharma>

MUSIC: ARE PLACES SACRED?

Ever wonder about the place where you have lived most of your life? Places do have qualities and are we too a product of those qualities? Is the state of Michigan where I live also a state of mind? I didn't used to think too much about this, but I got my eyes opened a bit back in the 1980s, plus back in the 1970s I developed an astrological mapping/relocation technique called "Local Space," which is now used by astrologers all over the world. Here are three things that I have learned about Michigan (where I live in a small town called Big Rapids) that I consider interesting.

PENINSULAS ARE SACRED

We all know that Michigan is the only state that is a peninsula surrounded by fresh water, in fact two of them, appropriately called the Upper and Lower Peninsulas. I never thought too much about the fact that Michigan is a peninsula until some years ago when I put on what I have been told is the first conference on Hindu Astrology in the United States. This was before Hindu Astrology was called Vedic astrology, as it is today. And I put on a second Hindu Astrology Conference a few years later. People came from all over to attend.

In the course of putting on those conferences I invited a number of Indian astrologers, some of whom traveled all the way from India. Hosting these conferences is a story in itself, but I will tell that another time. I can, however, remember late summer nights as these Indian astrologers would stroll arm-in-

arm (six persons wide) down the center of the street where I live, something I would never think to do. I was worried they would be run over by some American in a hurry. Fortunately that never happened, but I didn't want to spoil their fun.

In the course of welcoming these Indian visitors, they seemed to have no idea where Michigan was, even though here they were. They asked me if I had a map and would please show them where in the world Michigan is. I soon dragged out an atlas and pointed to the state of Michigan. There it is, I said. And to my surprise, my visitors, almost every one of them, began to ooh and aah about what they saw. Now I like Michigan, but why would these perfect strangers make eyes over it? It was the shape of Michigan that caught their attention; in particular that Michigan is a peninsula.

Apparently in India any peninsula is considered a sacred place because it is in the shape of a lingam or phallus, not something that Americans are (or probably want to be) aware of. They went on and on about it, and ever since that time I have been curious to see what possible benefits or consequences there might be for living in a state that has this sacred shape. If ancient India declares peninsulas sacred, what is the effect of that? They are an ancient culture, so it must be something.

THE LAKES AND WATER

Of course, I have always loved that Michigan has more than 11,000 inland lakes, and this is not counting ponds, which are lakes of 25 acres or less. And forget about the fact that Michigan itself is

surrounded on three sides by water, the Great Lakes.

In fact, as a kid, Michigan license plates used to have blazoned across them the words "Water Wonderland." I believed it. Other states have many lakes, but none are a peninsula and closely tied to 1/5th of the world's fresh water supply.

The Great Lakes (also called inland seas) are the largest-surface freshwater system on Earth. Only the polar ice caps contain more fresh water and those caps are now slowly melting into salt water. Meanwhile, the Great Lakes contain 84% of North America's fresh water, not to mention 21% of ALL the fresh water in the entire world, enough water to cover the 48 contiguous U.S. states to a depth of almost ten feet. Lake Michigan, nearest to where I live, is almost 1000 feet deep at its greatest depth. Now that's a lot of water.

YOU CAN'T SALT THE SALT

And to go with that water, we have salt. Some 1200 feet beneath the city of Detroit is a vast salt dome, said to be part of the largest salt deposit in the world, some 71 trillion tons of unmined salt, the Detroit Salt Mine.

The Detroit Salt Mine has over 100 miles of subterranean roads, and is an industry that predates automobiles, with a product older than the dinosaurs, some 400 million years. Many miners were killed building that 1200-foot shaft down to the deep mine and any equipment that was lowered down in the 6'x6' shaft never came back up, and this includes the mules they needed, who once down there, lived out

their sad lives in its depths. What a grotesque thought.

And it is not just Detroit that has salt. Geological studies estimate that beneath the 55 counties of the Lower Michigan Peninsula are over 30,000 trillion tons of salt, more than any other place in the world. The entire lower peninsula of Michigan sits on a bed of salt.

Salt is not valuable today, but in the past it was as valuable as gold in China, which used salt coins for payment. Roman armies were once paid with salt, which is where the term "salary" originated. It came from the Latin word for salt, 'sal'.

So there are three things about Michigan I have been pondering, the fact that it is a peninsula, is surrounded by 21% of all the fresh water in the world, and that it sits on top of the greatest deposit of salt on the planet.

Maybe Michigan needs all that water to quench our salt thirst. Just the fact that Detroit sits on a vast dome of salt is enough to say that Detroit is Yang, as in Yin and Yang. Right? In fact Michigan itself has to be very Yang, because all of it sits on salt. Does this salt and all the water mean anything to those who live here, and what about this idea of peninsulas being sacred? "Inquiring Minds want to Know," as the magazine says.

Does America have naturally holy places as India and other ancient countries do? America is not that old, but the land beneath our feet is as old as China and India, so what about that?

I have some thoughts about this sacred peninsula we call Michigan, but I will have to share it in another post, as I can organize my thoughts.

ASTROLOGY: THIS INTRA-ECLIPSE TIME

Let's remember that we are in an intra-eclipse time, that very special two-week period between back-to-back eclipses, in this case the recent Full Moon Lunar Eclipse April 15, 2014 (3:43 AM EDT), to be followed by the Annular Solar Eclipse (New Moon) on April 29, 2014 at 2:15 AM EDT.

I have written for many years that eclipse times (and in particular the two-week period between two concurrent eclipse times) are a time when visions are possible and very near the surface of our conscious mind. A very great Rinpoche taught me years ago that while New and Full Moons are times of enhanced inner alignment, if that New or Full Moon is also an eclipse, our inner winds & channels (chakras) line up even more perfectly. We are in tune, so to speak. If we will take the time to be observant, we can be aware of these visions.

This is why the Tibetans traditionally set aside the days of New and Full Moon (more so if there is an eclipse) as days of observation, days to monitor and observe our own mind. This whole two-week period is such a time, so those of us who understand this might set aside a little time, at least some moments to relax and allow ourselves to be aware of what is happening within, because the vision of an eclipse happens to all of us at these times, "IF" we can take time to become aware of it.

Now visions, for lack of a better description, are often portrayed (at least graphically) by an image that appears in the sky or mind, but that is IMO just a

rather crude approximation of what a vision is. If you are looking for a movie to appear in your head, you will probably miss the real vision.

A vision is a time of intensiveness, almost like a life-shiver that comes over us, a quickening. There is the time before a vision, the vision itself, and then the time after the vision, and the time after a vision is when we can realize we have changed, or at least have changed our view somewhat. A vision is a day or part of a day (sometimes days) when we are living more intensely -- vividly. As mentioned, a vision has a before, during, and an after. It is an experience of intensely being there, being present, taking it all in, and hopefully being aware of it.

In summary, a vision is not a picture in the heavens or sky of our mind, but rather a vivid time, a pivot experience (often a turning point) that separates the past from the future by absorption in living the present, thereby laying down a marker of experience in the mind that does just that, engraves our mind with a moment that is more intense than any immediately before or after. At times of vision our consciousness can rise to the occasion.

Of course, what our personal vision is capable of varies as we vary. Most of the time, so it would appear, we don't even record the experience consciously. But every now and again, if we will make some effort to be aware, we catch a glimpse. And that glimpse is always fertile... seminal and, like a handhold taken by a climber on the face of a sheer cliff, it is these visions through which we climb the tree of our inner life. They are crucial to our inner growth.

I have a number of free books and videos on the Moon, eclipses, and "The Vision of the Eclipse" here:

<http://dharmagrooves.com/#&panel1-1>

As for myself, I have been very quiet lately, busy, but very quiet. Just when the warm spring sun finally came out, I have gone in. So I am out but also in, so to speak. Here are a couple poems I wrote about "in and out" many years ago. They will have to do for now, until I find new words.

HERE I AM

I am in it all,
The end,
And that's all,
And the ever it's coming to be,
And in me is out,
The shadow of doubt,
And the 'in' that is 'out',
Well,
That's me!

IN OR OUT

In is not within the out,
And out without the in.

No,
In is without the out,
And out within the in.

Sept. 29, 1970

DHARMA: IT'S ABOUT TIME

So much has happened of late that it is hard to go back far enough to recount it. As William Butler Yeats said so well, "The grass cannot but keep the form, where the mountain hare as lain." So true, but I will try to catch up here. First, a few words about where my mind is right this moment, in the wee hours of morning, and then something about what's happening around here. Here is what I am thinking about as I try to fill you in, so at least this part is fresh.

I find that reinventing yourself never works. It is already too late. Better to sample from the present moment, however dull, than it is to attempt to reanimate a more colorful past. This whole idea of reanimation is such a ghoulish affair. And the past is such a murky area to poke around in. Where is the percentage?

If the moment is not present, it is not a present moment, obviously. Dwelling on the past is only an attempt to dwell in the past. It can't be done. We can only live now and even that is questionable. This is why historians are so nostalgic. It goes with the trade. If we hang back, life drags us along, which psychologists label as masochistic. They are correct in that.

The same is true for the future. We can't live there, yet. We can strain in the present to force the future, but we can only lean forward so far. Psychologists label this as sadistic. When our strength fails, and it will, we fall back into the present, where we hopefully find ourselves.

But even the present has its problems, because we endlessly hover or fluctuate between past and future thoughts. Even the present is barely there at all, and the so-called present moment is no final resting place – no peace. This whole "time" thing is problematical, not only theoretically, but also if you drill right down and carefully examine this present moment.

When I can manage it, I find the present moment a good place to rest in and abandon thought entirely, to just let go. Even letting go requires a technique. Perhaps this is why great Buddhist meditators allow the mind to just rest as it is, and while resting, look THROUGH the present moment (like a window) into the nature of the mind itself rather than get caught up with what they call the three times, the past, present, and future. Enough rambling. Here is what I have been up to since Monday.

DHARMA:FIRE & BRIMSTONE DHARMA

I'm on my way out of town for a couple of days, so I may not be able to respond to any comments on this post. And I realize that what I am about to discuss will be a little scary to those of you who are considering learning meditation practice, and I only mention it because, sooner or later, you are going to come across these other practices and you might as well understand what they are all about. I am not by nature a fearmonger, but there is this.

One of the main reasons I left the Catholic church where I was raised is because of all the fire & brimstone teaching. I didn't like the idea of a god who was so punishing, not to mention the nuns who smacked my knuckles with a ruler, etc. As a confirmed naturalist at a young age, I could see all too well the harsh reality of nature, but at the same time I experienced its beauty as well. However the beauty of Christianity, perhaps because of how I was treated, was slowly lost on me. My interest just ran out.

So, while I found myself more comfortable with the Buddhist approach to life, I was also always on the lookout for that Old Testament fire & brimstone specter as well. And, although Buddhism is much more accepting and flexible than the Christianity I grew up in, it too has a no-nonsense component that gradually reared its head in my dharma practice. Let's talk about that for a moment. We all have heard of meditation practice, but there are other practices that you will discover also exist.

To me, the classic or archetypical example of what I am pointing at here is what is called ngöndro practice. When I first heard about ngöndro I wanted to run screaming at the very thought of it. It was scary beyond my imagination, even more so when I would seriously consider the thought of doing it myself.

For those who have never heard of ngöndro, it is a kind of dharma boot-camp, a set of five techniques that are so arduous that when I first heard about them, my thought was "No!, I am not doing this. Not ever."

And what I was reacting to are the following, what ngöndro consists of, which are 111,111 full-length physical prostrations on the floor, as in: hard physical exercise. And while you are prostrating, you also recite a prayer taking refuge in the Buddha, his dharma teachings, and those who can properly teach the dharma 111,111 times. This is then followed by 111,111 recitations of a hundred-syllable mantra, which is further followed by 111,111 very complex offerings of a mandala, placing little heaps of grain on a copper plate. And finally, 111,111 prayers requesting the blessing of your teacher and the Buddhas. That should slow us down, right?

What was not clear when I first heard about ngöndro is why it exists. It is not primarily intended to be a life-long practice, although some do it. It is not something you have to do or that everyone does. It is purely remedial, a simple remedy, but for what? It sounded like a trip to the woodshed when I first heard about it.

Ngöndro is a remedy for those of us who are too clogged up with distractions and obscurations to

properly learn basic meditation, as in: we are getting nowhere with our meditating. It is exactly like looking through a pair of dirty glasses. We can't see much so, sooner or later, it is easier to first clean the glasses, before we try to look through them. Ngöndro is about cleaning our mental glasses, removing obscurations and distractions. It is a remedy for obscured inner vision and inflexibility. I was the perfect candidate.

In fact, in Tibet, dharma students often do ngöndro BEFORE they ever try to seriously meditate. Think about that please. Perhaps the only reason that here in the U.S. we first try to learn to meditate is because ngöndro is too difficult for Americans to contemplate. Yet we are very comfortable with various physical exercise programs. Well, ngöndro is essentially the same thing, but it is primarily a mind-exercising regime, as in: the mind is something we also have to get in shape and learn how to use.

Ngöndro is designed for the hard cases, of which I certainly was one. For years I tried and tried and tried to meditate, but I did not get very far. Why? Because my basic mental obscurations were just too thick and I was too easily distracted. Finally, it was suggested that I take a step back from meditation and prepare my mind through this series of exercises (the ngöndro), and THEN try to mediate. It is voluntary, something we can do to help make meditation easier. I finally agreed to do this because I could see I was getting about nowhere and I had real trust in my teacher.

Ngöndro was, as I feared, quite difficult for me, an ordeal of both patience and practice that took several years for me to complete. I worked at it pretty

diligently, doing both a morning and an evening round of practice. And although my first take on it was that it was as medieval as all hell, I gradually came to understand that, like physical exercise loosens up our muscles, ngöndro shapes our inner mental approach into something more workable. In fact, looking back on it, ngöndro is a psychologically brilliant way to get in mental shape, which otherwise might take many lifetimes.

I am not going to go into detail about the different parts of ngöndro practice because that is best done with a teacher and spiritual guide, but they all make perfect sense. And now a funny little story of my own experience with ngöndro. Sometime after I had finished ngöndro I had an interview with my dharma teacher, the rinpoche with whom I have worked with for over thirty years now.

I always ask him each year if there is anything he feels I should be doing different with practice than I am. He usually says, "Nothing special. Just keep practicing." But this particular year, he asked me a question. "Do you want to know what I would do now if I were you?" Of course I did. And he responded: "I would do another ngöndro."

After the shock wore off, I did just that, and that second ngöndro made a huge difference. It took that much work to bring my mind around to being flexible enough to really being able to practice meditation properly. But then, I am a hard case, but since then I have learned to actually meditate some. True meditation is the most useful tool I have ever learned in this life that I have lived.

The difficulty of ngöndro practice is not what I am trying to convey here, rather that when we begin to realize the difficulties of our own mental situation, sometimes strong medicine is needed. Mind-training practice also has that available for us in the ngöndro.

DHARMA: STRANGE THINGS HAPPEN

The mind is strange, at least my mind can get that way. Everything is running smoothly and I am all happy doing something or other and suddenly that thread runs out and I come up with nothing. Nada.

Or, things are going along and all of a sudden I am thrown out of whatever I was in and standing there, outside of what I was just inside of. The knee-jerk reaction is to want to get back into whatever I was into because suddenly I am on the outside looking in. And here is the rub: that never works out. I can't go back or snap back in once I pop out.

Instead, what is needed (at least for me) is to accept things just as they are, including the way I feel (which is often not good by that time), however that is. I can't help but want to return to whatever content feeling I remember, but as they say, you can't go home again.

What I can do is throw out my expectations, complaints, memories, etc. and just start all over again with whatever is at hand, just as we do with basic Shamata meditation – bring the mind back and rest in the present. Let me perhaps be clearer.

I am in some kind of groove and things change. I pop out of that and suddenly find myself odd-man-out with my own self. It's uncomfortable, and there is no way to scramble back into being just content. I am already not content and out-of-joint.

What does seem to work is to relax and start over (so to speak), start with the uncomfortable (not-content)

situation in which I find myself and rest in that, accept that, and begin again. I use to piss and moan, but these days you will get no more from me than perhaps a faint sigh; I just accept what is and rest in that.

Probably more than you want to know, but that is how it is with me these days.

ASTROLOGY: TWO X-CLASS MAJOR SOLAR FLARES TODAY

I seldom post two blogs in a given day, but some of you will want to know we have just had two strong X-Ray solar flares (starting around 7:42 AM EST), the highest class of flares, and sure to move the mind around in there. I have written books on solar flares and how they affect our mind, produced videos describing them, and authored many, many articles, all of which can be found here for those really interested in learning more about this very powerful phenomenon. Here is the link. Poke around and you will find a lot on solar flares.

<http://spiritgrooves.net/#&panel1-1>

These two X-Class solar flares came one after another, and the second was accompanied by a CME (coronal mass ejection) event that hurled solar plasma out into space which may give Earth a glancing blow. Scientists are still trying to figure that out.

Anyway, if your mind (and brain) just turned a little mushy and you are having trouble with focus or concentrating, don't sweat it. Just relax and go with it. Solar flares are, in my opinion (after fifty years of studying astrology), the single most powerful astrological/astronomical event I am aware of.

They move the mind and turn the wheel of our individual karma and dharma... big time. Solar flares can be very creative times for us too, pivot points that demarcate entire sections of time – important life events.

I can think of no better words to describe the inner effect of solar flares than those of my own daughter, a wonderful songwriter, in a song she did years ago on her album "Sleepless," called "Waterfall," and these words:

"Close your eyes and forget it all,
Just when you think know the way the water rolls,
... Waterfall..."

I could only find this not-so-great live recording online of the song, taken while (I believe) a storm was coming on at a festival, but it gives you the flavor.

http://vod.com.ng/en/video/zqVdqm-_knE/Daisy-May-Waterfall

Or, the original (and marvelous) recording of "Waterfall" is still available here:

<https://earthworkmusic.com/store-ind?i=66>

ASTROLOGY: RIDING OUT SOLAR EVENTS

Two large X-Class solar flares in a row (like we had yesterday) is unusual, not to mention that we have had a pretty quiet sun for some time. [and a third one this morning]. This indeed is an event. Scientists concern themselves, and rightly so, with the effect of solar flares on various radio transmissions and the possibility that such a flare could bring down the communications or electric grids and cause damage that could take weeks or months to overcome. This happened in 1989, when a smallish flare took out Hydro Quebec's electric grid, leaving Canadians without power for an extended period.

My interest in solar flares goes back a long way, but has been mostly concerned with the internal and creative effects of large flares on consciousness. German supreme-court justice, astrologer, and climatologist Theodor Landscheidt, a friend of mine, wrote a book on the effects of such flares on creativity years ago called "Children of the Light," but it is in German. I initiated an effort to translate this very import work into English and it was done by my dear friend (and superb astrologer) Robert Schmidt, but so far Landscheidt's widow has not allowed the book to be released.

Landscheidt's book is a study correlating the recorded history of large solar events (flares, CMEs, etc.) with famous creative individuals, and the import is that these massive solar disturbances very much affect consciousness of individuals like ourselves, often creatively.

At the same time these solar events can be very disturbing because they serve as interrupts that short-circuit whatever we may be doing at the time through the infusion of pure change (like a shot of adrenalin) into our psyches that tears through our psychological membranes, often leaving us feeling disconnected and isolated from our more comfortable recent past. In its own way, solar flares bring down our personal inner electric-grid, even to the point of damaging or shattering the self, which then takes time to pull itself back together and reanimate. Despite its "selfish" (pun intended attachments, the Self does act as the control center for most of us.

The double-whammy of today's two X-Class flares I venture to say is pretty damaging, at least disturbing (or disconnecting) the status quo enough to leave us with a large gap of remedial work in order to put our psyches back together again.

I have written extensively about this, created videos, and produced man articles, which can be found here:

<http://spiritgrooves.net/#&panel1-1>

I am only commenting further here because I personally have experienced the inner disruption and possible temporary damage of these particular flares, and want to point out that this is not all bad. In fact, these massive solar events help to break up and break-down the suffocating conservatism of the Self, often bringing a breath of fresh air into our lives, welcome or not.

At first glance such events may appear to be immobilizing, but when the smoke clears and our very

conservative Self knits itself back together again, the re-worked self often is an improved model, incorporating the influx of solar change into our overall system and view. However, this takes time.

My advice from studying these massive solar events is to relax and roll with the flow of incoming change. Sure there will be blackouts or disconnects mentally and especially psychologically, but our natural inner process (our very up-tight self) will move heaven and earth to repair and bring the Self back online again. In fact, these breaks or gaps are healthy, although we don't tend to like to feel vulnerable -- naked or exposed.

If you cannot immediately get back online with yourself, consider it similar to a power outage, where you have to light a candle and be with yourself for a while until power is restored. Here we are talking about the nature of our psyche and self that is facing an interrupt and perhaps may require some gazing on our part into the void. It is all good unless we panic or insist on reanimating something that has been made obsolete by the solar changes and can't be resuscitated.

In other words, just take a break and allow things to cohere, to become coherent once again. Given a little time the hum and drum of life will pick up and we will be back behind the wheel of whatever direction we are driving. Although it is disturbing, I do my best to be patient and allow myself to reanimate as smoothly as possible. There will be things I can't remember or perhaps hollow shells I can no longer get back into, and forcing these things is not advised. A sense of humor about this kind of thing really helps.

Just take a deep breath and begin again.

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS ADDED TO POST:

THIRD SOLAR FLARE – A third X-Class solar flare erupted Wednesday morning about 05:06 AM EST, strengthening and extending the effect of the first two X-Class from yesterday. Bend with the wind is my suggestion.

Solar flares affect us globally. Everyone is exposed and affected. However, we are not all equally sensitive in terms of awareness, or to quote from Dylan's "Ballad of a Thin Man," "Because something is happening here. But you don't know what it is, do you, Mister Jones?" Many just feel confused, but those who have somehow thinned out their obscurations appear to be more aware of these solar events. In other words, we are all going through it together, but some among us may be more aware of what is going on within their consciousness and psyche.

Are these solar flare effects hard to see or follow for most people? Not really, but you can't look outward and expect to see them. Instead, they come from the inside, where they are all right there and bigger than life. Perhaps the most common thread we might be able to pick up on is a certain ennui or confusion that sets in, a lack of direction because solar change, as mentioned, short circuits or changes the flow of energy, much like a flooding creek can change its course. We are not used to being left high and dry.

In my own case I find that solar influx frustrates and

interrupts the carefully-manicured script I have been following, leaving me temporarily without direction or at least without the particular direction I had been tracking. It is like someone had pulled a circuit breaker, leaving me somehow at sea

I have studied and am used to this. Even so, I am still subject to solar influx as are we all. What I can do is control my reaction and respond as best I can to whatever changes inside me. It usually requires that I set whatever I have been recently working on aside, simply because somebody pulled the plug. I have no juice. Next, I relax (or try to) and wait to pick up on whatever new threads I can see arising in the mind. There is no use forcing old threads just because I have a will to do that. That only delays recovery. We are all subject to the present moment and it is there that we find whatever new threads or directions for us.

We have to recover our balance, find some workable thread, and follow it. It soon becomes the new normal. After all, the Self is nothing more than a house of cards.

ASTROLOGY: SOLAR CHANGE AND OUR HOUSE OF CARDS

Solar flares continue to roll in, although only the three X-Class flares so far. Two M-Class flares (2nd highest class) occurred Wednesday, June 11th. Some of you have written asking for a better understanding of how massive solar influx affects our sense of self, so here are some comments.

What we call our "self," while tenacious as hell in terms of its attachments, is still a relatively fragile construct. The Buddhists point out that although what we call the "Self" has no true existence and is but a useful fabrication, it is "permanent" in its function as a control center or glorified personal secretary. If we did not have a self, we would have to invent one, which is exactly what we have done. However, the self is a "persona delicata," so to speak, and easily upset, as we all should well know.

We are used to the more gradual influx of solar energy and information via the rays of sunlight each day and have built our routine and consciousness around that level of solar change. When a massive surge of solar energy (such as a solar flare takes place), we are almost instantly inundated not only externally (radio and communications interrupts) but also internally, consciousness-wise, and this house of cards we call a self is the first to break down.

Part of the problem is our own memory or lack of it. When sudden change is injected into our mindstream as happens with these solar flare eruptions, it kind of blows out what we might call our mental transformers

– ways of handling change. Our mind gets blown out and we short-circuit whatever we have been working on, and often find ourselves unable to think clearly. Sudden solar flux blows out the highs and the lows and we lose the filigree -- the fine connections -- leaving us stuck somewhere in our own mind with no clear direction and often a disjointed memory of exactly who we are or what we were doing before the solar flare took place.

As mentioned, with sudden solar events it is common to lose our directionality and perhaps even a sense of the path we were on. This manifests as an inability to remember just what we were doing or at least why we were doing it, or it can be as simple as suddenly having no juice for a particular direction. We literally forget what we were doing (or why) and no longer have any motivation to do it. This scenario should be familiar to all of us if we will just take a look.

Anytime the Self is severely upset and modified by change, there is a remedial period during which the 'self' attempts to reorganize and pull itself back together, and here is the rub. More often than not we are no longer quite the same self we were before going into the change, but we don't realize this because it is our very self that has changed.

The self we paste back together or collect after a solar flare may be at an earlier or later stage than where we left it when we vacated or it was shattered. After all, the Self is our own collection of likes and dislikes. Of course it feels like the same self to us, but there is no guarantee it is. And we have no way of ever knowing, one way or the other. Let me run through the phases:

We are cruising along in our day-to-day life and a strong solar flare occurs. It could also be some sudden or tragic event in life, but let's stick with a sudden solar influx for now. The intense solar energy injects itself into our mindstream, carrying with it not only the sheer power of change, but probably also new information. The two may be identical. The upshot is that we are popped out of whatever groove we have managed to have created and find ourselves out-of-sorts, quite literally beside ourselves and looking around. Here we are, suddenly high and dry, with no clear past, present, or future. By necessity we have to shut down to some degree and have to wait this inner storm out until it corrects itself and that takes time. We often just come to a standstill, but may not even fully realize that. Realization is always at a premium, it would seem.

Under the stress of change, the self has broken down to some degree and may even have been shattered. Our conservative self-preserving forces attempt to re-start or reanimate the self and use whatever it can pull around us as cover. When that process has run its course, we arise once more as a self, more-or-less reconnected and attached (however we are), but with perhaps little to no memory of exactly what went before. No matter, we are back, up and running again.

Gradually we relax, begin to build, and re-establish some groove. Things start to take on form and direction once more. The modem of the self has reset and we are reanimated. Life continues on a track and we like that. Anyway, it is what we are used to.

As we all know, it is relatively easy to upset ourselves and feel out of sorts. It can be as simple as a dirty look or a failed exam or job interview. More severe shock sets in when we lose a loved one or a job, and so it goes. The interesting thing about solar events like flares and CMEs is that they are relatively impersonal and not initiated by anything we have done or that is done to us, yet they are powerful.

I don't want to take the time here to lay out a rap on how close we all are to the Sun, internally – consciousness-wise. Let's just say we depend on the Sun for all light, warmth, and life. That should do it. I would also point out that our flickering consciousness is identical to the activity in the Sun. When the Sun gets tickled, we sneeze -- that sort of thing.

As a solar flare from the sun explodes, hurling a huge mass of solar plasma into space, it takes about 8 minutes for that sunlight to reach Earth, and somewhat longer (at times) for the solar plasma to reach us, no more than a day or so, but sometimes much sooner.

Let me ask you a question. Where do you think real inner change comes from? I will spare you the lecture, but change in the Sun is change in ourselves. A huge quantity of change from the Sun (like a solar flare) blows our mind to the degree of shutting down the self and scattering (at least for a time) whatever house of cards we have been building. And solar change is a double-edged sword.

On the one hand it breaks down our self and causes us to draw a blank for a time, at least until we can reconstruct it. On the other hand flares bring needed

change and information suddenly, not in the gradual daily stream of sunlight we are used to, but in quantum leaps. It blows our mind like the proverbial seven angels of the Apocalypse blow their trumpets. Intense solar change is a little Biblical my friends.

Our knee-jerk response is always to rebuild our self once again, and as fast as possible, often from the ground up. In that sense we are like Sisyphus, condemned to push a rock uphill forever, only to have it roll back down, an endless rebuilding of a self that obviously has no permanent existence or meaning – an exercise in futility, but still, an integral part of our life.

This whole cycle is what the Buddhists call Samsara, the unenlightened world. I like to play on that word and say "Some Sorrow." Unenlightened in that we ignore or are unaware of what is taking place. Is it no wonder that sooner or later we might want to learn to see beyond the curtain of the self or see through the mirror of the self and beyond our own reflection? Hard to do.

Solar flares are relatively rare opportunities when we have no choice but to change. We can learn to take this intense change as a sailboat takes the wind. We can set our own sails. That is what mind-training practice is all about.

ASTROLOGY: OUT-OF-SORTS: HOME REMEDIES

A number of you have messaged or chatted me up asking to learn more about how we get ourselves back to normal after the impact of one of these large solar flares. This is pretty simple stuff, but I will share what I know about it. It may be too tutorial for some of you, so just skip over this blog.

Once in a while my "self" falls off the wagon, like after a push of change from a large solar flare. When I am out-of-phase with myself, there are suddenly two of us, the uncomfortable me that feels at a loss and the other "me" that I used to be, which I know is now only a memory of what I recently was when I felt "non-dual." My very conservative "self" would prefer to be that way again. But synching the two of us together is not always an easy task, at least for me. You can't go home again, as they say, or even step in the same river twice (or even once some Zen Buddhists say).

When our "self" stops working or just collapses, leaving us feeling outside of where we were, how do we get back together with it again? Before I give you my opinion on this, it is my duty to point out that these loss-of-self experiences, going "naked" without a self, are considered healthy and a great dharma practice by the Buddhists that I read. They should not be ignored. That being said, the reality is that most of us just want to get back into ourselves as soon as possible, so here are my suggestions.

The problem is the dichotomy or duality we experience when the self just goes empty or deflates. Most everything (as we know it) just stops and we can

feel stranded or out-of-sorts. The common symptoms of solar flare impact on the self and consciousness are as follows: headaches, warm or hot feeling in the mind, fogginess and confusion, inability to focus on tasks, A.D.D., loss of direction, hard-to-think, loss of impetus and energy, etc. Self-related symptoms include a breakdown in the self, weakening or shattering of self-image, deflation, loss, plus an increased sense of vulnerability and emptiness.

The basic idea is that we have a breakdown of the self, and a loss of direction and goals compared to what we were, which is what we remember. The symptoms are identical in terms of change to those stemming from a tragic personal loss, but in this case they are not caused by life-changing personal events, but rather by the influx of change caused by large solar flares and CME events. The self is sensitive to sudden change or an increased rate-of-change and becomes the bottleneck in the equation, either adjusting to the change or losing control and self-destructing to some degree.

If you have experienced a deep personal loss where many of your attachments just evaporated and you didn't care about them anymore, then you have an idea of how the self reacts to a change-overload. It shuts down, vacates, and goes void or empty. The same thing happens when solar flares impact consciousness. There is a loss of direction and a general shutdown. We find ourselves standing outside what we would call our normal self. Most experience this as a "bad day," a day when we have lost direction, have trouble focusing, or just have low energy. There is general confusion. And this sense of loss may stretch on for days, weeks, or even longer.

The remedy is a simple one, but not that easy to actually do quickly.

The very fact that we find ourselves at a loss is problematical, as mentioned earlier, because it points out that a separation exists between where we are now and somewhere we perhaps want to be, like back to feeling normal. However, it is already too late for that. We can't go back, but only onward.

Trying to return to the past, by definition, never works. It is gone. Trying to experience again what now is a memory is not where to put our emphasis. This effect happens a lot in spiritual disciplines when we have a very successful meditation or insight and spend the next three months trying to repeat it, and making no progress whatsoever -- that idea.

Instead, what works (albeit with some effort) is to accept things just as they are in the moment, uncomfortable, difficult, out-of-sorts, or what-have-you. In other words, embrace what 'is', warts and all. You know, "Love the one your with," so to speak, in this case whatever state you are in.

Everything we need is present now, but not if we are caught up in trying to repeat the past or demanding and looking for some future result, i.e. comparing. It is very much easier to create a new past and a new future in the present than anywhere else. There is nothing missing but our acceptance of how things are, however lousy, for starters. Even if they are not fun at the moment, we must first accept things as they are and rest our focus on that. That is the first step.

When we can do that, at least our sense of self is

back in the present again and not yearning for better times or hoping for the future. More often than not, whatever schizophrenia or duality we originally felt subsides... and we can move on. With acceptance of whatever is, the self is restored or on the way to resolution. However, we may have to repeatedly dose ourselves with accepting things just as they are and resting in that present condition.

An image I used to use for myself is having a "death grip" on a baseball with one hand. The grip really hurts by now and the only way for it to feel better is to let go, relax our hand, and take a new and more gentle grip on the ball. In a similar way, we have to let go of the past or future and get a grip on the present, even if, starting out, it is boring, dull, painful, headachy, or what-have-you?

Just as with basic Shamata meditation 'practice', when we bring our focus back to the present and rest in that, sooner or later, with enough repetitions, by accepting our out-of-sorts self as a good place to start, it 'takes', and what was two is once again one. We start to feel like our old self or, more correctly, we have found a new normal and are no longer looking into the past or the future. We have stopped crossing our eyes and can begin again.

I find this method actually works and it beats twisting and turning in the wind wishing we felt differently or were somewhere else.

DHARMA: SAY IT AGAIN PLEASE

The last few blogs have been about the Self and how it responds to change and some of you have responded to the discussion. Now I would like to repeat something I blogged about recently that I feel didn't fully take, but is most helpful. Repetition in dharma concepts is not boring, but almost necessary for them to be absorbed. I want to go over those pith instructions of the great Mahasiddha Tilopa one more time, and I suggest you read it again as if for the first time. It is only a question of when they will sink in, not if. And when these very simple suggestions are incorporated (i.e. we actually do them), they are life-changing.

The Tibetan Buddhists point out, and from early on in their tradition, that the mind, like a tongue with a white coating, is covered over with a film of thought that obscures our true nature. And with every unrealized thought, that coating gets thicker. We hear this from every side in the teachings and it turns up in a great many of the essential Buddhist texts.

The pith extract called the "Six Words of Advice" (from the great Mahasiddha Tilopa), which is said to be all we need for true realization, starts out with three kinds of thoughts we should let go of, and I have mentioned these three many times in my posts.

The first suggestion is to let go of any thoughts of the past we find ourselves having. "Don't Prolong the Past," is the traditional translation, but of course we Americans don't like "Don'ts," so it may be more palatable for us if we just say "Let go of the past"

rather than " Don't dwell on the past."

This is easy enough, no? We can be mindful and catch ourselves when we get caught up in memories, nostalgia, or some kind of Déjà vu, and respond by just letting those thoughts go. Drop it. Let the thought vanish (and it will) and just rest in the present moment that remains. And we don't just do this once or twice, but make a habit of it. Do it as often as we can be mindful, all day long if we can.

Then Tilopa says the same thing about the future. Let go of any thoughts or speculation about what is to come. His words are "Don't invite the future." Let those thoughts also go and they will vanish, leaving us with our mind resting in the present. Also we can do this all the time or as much as we can manage.

And last, let go of thoughts and conceptions about the present moment. They say "Don't think about the present." Abandon thought ABOUT the present and just allow your mind to rest in the present. We can do this all day long. Note, they don't say to abandon this present moment, but just thoughts or conceptions about it.

So the past, present, and future are not something to overly think about, but in each case we just drop these thoughts and allow the mind to rest naturally in itself. That comprises the first three words of advice Tilopa offers us. He then adds two more qualifiers.

He suggests that we also let go of analyzing or trying to figure out anything, past, present, or future. And he then adds another, the fifth suggestion, that we let go of any efforts to make things happen. Don't try to

make things happen; don't push or make effort in that direction.

And finally, Tilopa's sixth word of advice, the pithiest of his pith instructions is simply the suggestion to let the mind rest as it already is and always has been.

Perhaps these six words of advice are too simple and just go in one ear and out the other. We just read them and say "Yes" or "Of course" to them all and let it go at that. These six suggestions are meant to be examined and acted on, daily, hourly, and each minute, if we can. And we can.

By consistently learning to do this, to let go and drop all of these five kinds of thought, and to each of them apply the sixth suggestion, to rest in the moment after we have let them go, we will begin to remove that film of thought that obscures the true clarity of the mind.

In other words, we are not being hammered so much by the big karmic mistakes we make as much as we are literally buried by the inundation of the micro-karma from endlessly thinking, judging, comparing, etc. all day long – unnecessary thoughts. And they add up, each a contribution to our obscuring residue.

And Tilopa does not say to block or otherwise stop thoughts -- not at all. He merely says to let them go and they will dissolve of themselves like a cloud vanishes in the clear sky.

If we practice letting go of these thoughts whenever we can realize we are having them, this particular kind of micro-karma stops accumulating and, gradually, we become clearer rather than more

opaque. We are no longer endlessly coating our tongue, so to speak.

I am sure that there may be a better way to explain this, but I don't know how much more clearly I can present this very straight-forward message. Many Tibetan Buddhists point to Tilopa as where the great tradition of Mahamudra Meditation came from. And Tilopa did not leave that much writing for us. Tilopa's Upadesha (practical instructions), commonly called the "Ganges Mahamudra," is his main teaching and it is only a few pages. And then those few pages are reduced to Tilopa's "Six Words of Advice" mentioned here, which is said to be all we need to fully enlighten ourselves. That and a good teacher will help us actually realize this.

I can't imagine who among us could not begin to catch himself or herself in these kinds of thoughts, just let them go, and rest in what remains when these thoughts vanish. This is not rocket science.

Of course, if we practice this, it will be "practice." We have to learn the technique of being mindful and allowing these thoughts to vanish of their own accord. That will require some effort in the beginning, but it soon becomes automatic. Before we know it (hopefully with awareness) we will be resting in the nature of the mind (our mind) more and more of the time. At the very least we will be resting. And a huge amount of micro-karma, as described here, will not be accumulated. Our mental complexion will clear up.

I should not have to add, but I will anyway, that these instructions of Tilopa don't mean we never think about the past, like where we left our keys or of the future,

like that we have a dentist appointment, etc. Instead it refers to the almost endless comparison, doubts, worries, fears, prejudices, likes, dislikes, and on and on that most of us succumb to. These amount to obscurations.

If we can just drop the unnecessary obsession on or dwelling in minutiae and just give it a rest, the rewards are great indeed. This technique is pure Buddhist mind training at its best and relatively easy to learn.

DHARMA: SPIRITUAL MILE MARKERS

[This is a long one folks, for which I apologize, and probably not for everyone. However we can all enjoy this photo of flowering chives taken very early one morning.]

I'd like to discuss how to tell if we are making progress in meditation or mind training. I am surprised that there is not more information available on this topic, but I find that in many spiritual disciplines there are few recognizable mile markers, no way to know where we are at, much less how far we have yet to go, and most of all where we are going to! Where is that?

One thing about Buddhism is that it is list-prolific, with endless lists of the exact steps for just about any spiritual experience we could imagine. There is only one problem with that, which is that lists are by nature condensed versions of more elaborate procedures. The upshot is that unless you have had the particular experience being described personally, simply reading a one-line description will give you no clue. So Buddhist slogans and lists are more confirmatory than anything else. I often can kind of figure out that I have had a particular experience (if I have had it) by looking at a list, but I am mostly clueless as to what it is about if I have not yet had the experience. It makes looking down the meditation road pretty much impossible. And this brings me to my point in this blog, clear transition points in our mind practice.

I can't speak for other spiritual approaches, but I have at least found one major mile marker in the Tibetan

Buddhist path that we all can measure our progress by and that is called "Recognition," being the recognition of the true nature of the mind -- our natural mind. The Zen Buddhists call it 'Kensho'. I first heard about recognition when someone said to me: "If you have any questions about whether you have recognized the true nature of the mind, than you haven't." That piece of advice immediately troubled me.

I am not used to having such a hard line drawn and would much rather feather that line a bit so that I don't have to be discouraged by somehow not having made the grade to one realization or another. Anyway, this idea of "recognition" being something like a switch brought me up short because I was used to just leaving things a little bit vague so that I can kind of have it my own way. It took me years to understand that lineages exist so that we can't just do whatever we want with this information. And now a (hopefully useful) digression:

Starting anything requiring practice takes faith and energy, faith that we will get across the learning curve and energy to make that journey. This is no more-true than with meditation and mind training. And spiritual practice is more difficult than, say, guitar practice, learning to play the guitar, and I will explain why.

As I like to say, if I want to learn to play the guitar I can put on some guitar music and remind myself what I am trying to attain. I can hear the music. I know that practicing scales, chords, and guitar fingerings is not the same as just playing music, but at least I know what music sounds like if I could play it. However, this is not true with spiritual realization and meditation

training.

The technique of learning to meditate is at least as difficult to learn as playing a musical instrument. In fact it is more difficult because we can't just put on a CD or DVD and hear or see what realization or enlightenment is all about, and this difference is huge.

If I am honest, I have no idea what enlightenment or realization is like or even "sounds like" until I actually experience it. Whatever books we have read, people we have talked with, teachers we have listened to, etc. perhaps help us to form a concept or picture of "realization" in our mind, but it is all made up as we go along. I fear it is mostly whatever we think and lacks the defining experience of realization until, of course, we have that realization. This point is worth some serious consideration.

I am not sure how useful it is to just shine ourselves on in all of this. I wasted at least thirty years supporting my own self-made ideas of what I was supposed to be experiencing in meditation, with no proof whatsoever (like: no actual realization). I endlessly compared my daily meditation against the map I had drawn in my mind of what I thought progress was supposed to be like and what I was supposed to measure up to. If I would have any good meditation session, I would try to repeat the experience for months afterward, of course with no success because comparison of that kind is a meditation killer.

And in the end those concepts I basically made up about realization were nowhere close to the reality. In fact, I was just plain wrong! How could I have a real

idea of something I had never experienced, which is what I am trying to communicate in this post.

And other dharma students (and everyone around me) also unintentionally shined me on. We were all in the same boat. Here in America we are so shy about sharing our inner "spiritual" experience and path that it is a wonder we ever realize anything at all. And this is no fault of my Buddhist teachers. No way. They laid the dharma out very clearly, but I interpreted it according to my own understanding, which was in the end no real understanding at all. Talk about the emperor's new clothes or the elephant in the room!

All was seemingly very good until I came up against the hard line I mentioned earlier, something the Tibetans called "recognition." Now recognition is not enlightenment or anything close to it. In the long graduated path of dharma practice, "recognition" is very much closer to the start than the finish line. If you don't know about it, you probably should, because in the all-too-often vague world of spiritual experience, it is the one hard line or at least the one that we beginners will rub up against with certainty sooner or later.

"Recognition" refers to the recognition of the true nature of the natural mind. Yes, it can come in glimpses and peeps, but that is not how it usually is described. Recognition is usually something we learn directly from our main or root teacher through what are called the "Pointing Out Instructions." In fact, what is called our "Tsawi Lama" or root teacher is typically defined as that teacher who successfully points out to us the true nature of the mind so that we recognize it. All our dharma practices (all of them) end in the

leading edge of that hard line I mentioned: recognition. And recognition is really hard to grasp without having the actual realization, like impossible IMO.

And it is also faithfully reported in almost all the Buddhist texts that I know that we (by ourselves) cannot successfully point out to ourselves the true nature of the mind... period, end of sentence! There is that hard line again, and underlined. We can't just fudge our way through recognition. And it gets harder yet.

Recognition is a way station on the dharma path where, like some of those video games my kids play, we pick up certain blessings and powers, and the energy to go forward. And the funny thing is that without that energy we can't move forward, but only endlessly forward to the edge of that hard line of recognition – a true line of demarcation. So we can't fake recognition and we can't move forward without that energy, without actual recognition. In truth recognition is what they call in the western occult traditions a "Ring Pass Not." You cannot get around it, but can only pass through it, and to pass through it is to be changed forever, almost like a definition of an LSD trip. That's what I mean by a "hard line." Like death, we can't wiggle out of it.

In fact, it is taught that we do the common preliminary Buddhist practices and then the uncommon preliminary practices (and a lot of more advanced practice) to prepare us for one and only one thing: recognition. We can't somehow get grandfathered in, buy our way in, or fake our way into recognition. Let's just say, like one of those customs-offices between

countries, the line at the recognition-station is very long. Traffic is backed up and few get through.

There are no fake passports to recognition, and you can imagine you have had recognition if you wish, but there you will sit until you actually do have it. We can perhaps fool other people for a while, but in the end, we can't fool ourselves. This is part of the beauty of the dharma; it is by definition authentic.

What's the benefit of my laying out for you some hard and fast rules about the facts of "recognition?" Isn't it just a bit depressing? I agree that it may sound like tough love and perhaps it is, but it was helpful to me as a wake-up call to learn that my own made-up ideas of enlightenment and what-not were just that, something I imagined. I had no real experience with enlightenment and everything I had imagined was just about wrong. Worst of all, after a while my made-up ideas about enlightenment became the main thing holding me back from actually having authentic realization. What a Catch-22 that is!

It was not until I began to deconstruct my fixed ideas about enlightenment and admit to myself that not only had I not had any realization of the nature of the mind myself, but that the standard I held up in my mind as to what realization or enlightenment was, itself, was nothing more than whatever I had scrambled together from books, teachings, hearsay, and mostly my imagination.

And the mistake I was making was holding up these imagined concepts and comparing my actual daily meditation experiences to that phony standard and judging myself. "Nope, that's not it" and "Nope, that's

not it either," and on and on. Instead of learning to rest in the nature of the mind in the present, I was doing this endless comparison all the time – thinking about it. Of course that only further obscured my mind. What was I 'thinking' aside from just thinking? Not much.

For me the first real step toward "recognition" was acknowledging to myself that I didn't know the first thing about enlightenment or realization because I had never experienced it. And there is no shame in that. How could we know what we don't know until we know it?

But in the run of dharma folks I hung out with, we all kind of tacitly supported each other in the impression that we knew what we were talking about. We certainly spent zero time telling one another that we did not know or that we had no idea of what enlightenment was like. I never heard that, not even once. Not ever.

And when, through the fog of my understanding of the dharma teachings, I gradually came up against the hard line of recognition, I was not used to acknowledging what I did not know, in this case anything about recognition of the mind's nature, much less actually recognizing it.

And the tricky part was that I could pretend I kind of knew and I am sure others would not wake me from my dream of that, but the downside is I would still actually not know. And I want to know.

The path to even having the glimpse of recognition I eventually managed was long and arduous, and

certainly mostly unnecessary if I would have fessed up early on. Most of all it involved nothing more (or less) than actually going and looking at the mind for myself, which of course is exactly what the Buddha did.

Buddha is said to have turned the wheel of the dharma and, since I was raised a Christian, I assumed this was like Christ dying for all our sins. Buddha did that for us. However I come to find out that Buddha did that for Buddha and that we each have to eventually do it for ourselves – turn the wheel of our dharma. Otherwise it will just sit there forever waiting for us to do something.

DHARMA: MEASURING SPIRIT

Measuring spiritual experience is difficult and in the Tibetan system there are two main ways to do it. One way, quite common, is to just count up to a certain number the mantras or other practices we do, like how many full-length prostrations we have done, and so on. 111,111 is a common target number. 108,000 is the actual number, but the extra 3000+ are to make up for the ones we don't do properly. It is the same idea with mantras. Perform 111,111 recitations for each syllable of a mantra. Thus the famous six-syllable mantra of compassion and loving kindness, "Om Mani Padme Hum," would be recited 666,666 times and that would signify that you have done the minimum number for that particular mantra or practice.

Although performing a certain number of repetitions for a given practice does not guarantee anything other than you did that many, it is still commonly used as an approximate gauge for measuring spiritual practice. Practitioners keep count on malas (like rosaries) or even little click-counters.

Much better yet is to perform a particular practice (with no limit to the number) until certain unmistakable signs appear in the mindstream and life of the practitioner. This is the preferred method for measuring spiritual practice, although you may need a teacher to authenticate your accomplishment.

All of these practices -- mantras, prostrations, mandala offerings, prayers, and what-have-you -- are considered "preliminary" practices, preliminary to the recognition of the mind's true nature that we discussed in the first part of this article. So "recognition," although not anywhere near

enlightenment, is a very important landmark in dharma practice, at least among the Kagyu and Nyingma Tibetan lineages, as well as many Zen Buddhists.

In my early years of meditation practice, I had never heard of "recognition" or, if I heard of it, I had no idea what it meant. I thought it might be part of Zen Buddhism or something. No, early on I was going for "enlightenment," not that I had the vaguest idea of what that was either. For many years I actually thought that I was meditating when actually I was only "practicing" meditation, trying to learn it.

I had no more idea of what enlightenment was than I did of the 'heaven' in my Catholic upbringing. Enlightenment was whatever I had picked up over the years, some concepts, an idea, but I had never experienced enlightenment any more than I had ever been to heaven. And heaven is a one-lifetime one-way trip, while it can take many lives to reach enlightenment.

My point is that I used my made-up idea of enlightenment as a mirror to reflect any and all spiritual events into, anything that happened on or off the cushion, as if my concept of enlightenment was factual. It was not. Then I would judge whatever I actually was experiencing while meditating against my "idea" of enlightenment and make judgments about myself, which was a real waste of time – talk about the blind leading the blind.

Why do you think I am writing this? Not to bum anyone out, but perhaps to help others not spend the thirty years of practicing meditation that I did thinking I was meditating. I should have been working closely with someone who really knew meditation and could

help trip me up with my B.S. I had a great lama for overall advice, but I saw him only once in a while and for a short time. All of my peers were as closed-mouth as I was. We never inquired or probed into each other's practice which, when it comes to basic meditation, should be no secret. I would like to see that change. That's why I am writing this.

I find it a good thing that there is something like 'recognition' between me and enlightenment because as I have mentioned, I had no idea or experience of enlightenment, and still don't. Recognition, on the other hand, is something anyone of us can achieve if we will follow directions and work with a good teacher. You won't learn it from reading books; I can promise you that.

And I repeat, "recognition" is not enlightenment or even close to it, but merely what we might call the threshold, a doorway to the path of realization and eventual enlightenment. It is the breakthrough I was waiting for and it can mark the beginning of real meditation and a point where we do pass "Go" and collect the two-hundred dollars, so to speak. After recognition it usually takes years of practice to stabilize and deepen what was recognized.

In summary, we have a plethora of preliminary dharma practices all leading up to the moment of recognition, when we catch a glimpse of the actual or true nature of the mind, which is just our everyday ordinary mind that we have managed to ignore all this time.

The precise process of pointing-out that leads to recognition is subtle and not something I will try to explain. It is done through working with a teacher who gives what are called the "Pointing Out Instructions,"

in which he or she points out to us the true nature of the mind. This pointing out may happen many times, as many times as it takes for us to actually get what is being pointed out, i.e. the true nature of the mind itself.

Of course recognition shows us nothing new, but rather something that has always been there, an integral part of us all this time. What is new is our finally seeing it. I liken recognition to those figure-ground paintings where there is a picture hidden within a picture, but we can't see it. However, when it is pointed out, once we see it, forever after we can look at that painting and instantly see the picture-within-a- picture. Recognition is like that, not an experience (with ups and down), but a simple realization – a change of view. Lamas sometimes liken it to recognizing the face of a friend in a crowd of people.

Recognition is, as the Tibetan Buddhists say, not an experience that comes and goes, but a "realization," that once we see, it is forever there. Actually recognition is very matter of fact. We realize it once and that realization remains with us from then on. However, recognition also brings with it confirmation and authenticity that not only galvanizes us into independence, but deeply energizes us so that dharma practice is no longer an effort, but rather becomes an obsession (in a good way) that we seek out. And we don't have to 'try' to practice; we finally can see for ourselves what is needed and just do it as much as possible, like: all the time.

Above all, with recognition we become responsible for enlightening ourselves, just as the Buddha had to do. No more looking upward for handouts. We clearly see what is our responsibility, and we respond. Suddenly

we are behind the wheel of our own dharma and in the driver's seat.

Now, I have sort of short-changed you here on explaining the details of recognition and how it is achieved, and that is because not only am I not qualified to teach it, but I have had only the briefest glimpse of it myself. But I have studied it enough to have understood the basic facts about recognition, at least as far as I know.

The main message here is that every practice we do, from beginning meditation all the way up to the very edge of Mahamudra meditation, is preparation for recognizing the mind's true nature. Recognition is the fruition of all streams of practices and the key to beginning Mahamudra Meditation. As I understand it, Mahamudra Meditation makes no sense without recognition of the true nature of the mind.

I know. All this talking about recognition is probably unintentionally off-putting. It can't help but remind us that we have not yet had recognition and turn us back upon ourselves to take a look at our practice. Are there things we want to adjust in what we are doing? If it is possible to doubt, we should take note of that. Is there someone who can advise us or are we, like I was, locked in our own cocoon of isolation.

On the other hand, if we have had recognition, we could care less what anyone says because we have all that we need, which is enough.

If you know, you know, and you know you know.

Let's discuss, if you will.

[Between rainstorms this morning found me out in a very wet microclimate on my knees taking this photo

of a couple of Michigan's "Showy Orchids." Aren't they lovely! Mosquitoes were everywhere all around me.]

DHARMA: HOW TO STOP ACCUMULATING KARMA

Reactions, we all have them. When they are voluntary, reasonable, and measured, they are called 'responses,' but most of the time they are knee-jerk and pretty much involuntary – reactions. We react pretty much all of the time, often at levels we are not conscious of.

If these micro-reactions were harmless, that would be one thing, but they are not. They are fierce karma producers and they are on duty 24x7. We can pretty much blame our reactions on our Self, you know, that selfish construct of our likes and dislikes that we create and continue to support. But laying blame does not put any real distance between us. The self is our very own shadow.

It helps to take a close look at our reactions as a first step towards deconstructing and disarming them. And reactions harm us in at least two ways. First, their constant flinching blurs the clarity of our mind and gradually digs a deep track or groove in the mindstream, every last one of them. Reactions endlessly coat and obscure our consciousness and that coating builds up into a brittle veneer that we can't see through.

And second, to make things worse, every reaction creates karma that ripens over time and comes back to haunt us and exact its piece of flesh.

It is perhaps easier to understand the first effect of reactions, the idea that they gradually dig a groove in

our mind and continue to underscore it ad infinitum. It is no wonder that over time the clarity of our mind is obscured by this accumulation.

The second effect, the creation of karma, might require more explanation. Our self reacts to those things we like and dislike constantly. We program ourselves that way through experience, training, society, and what-not. Our minds usually are a hotbed of reactions going off every second and often in bursts. We have little to no control over them.

For example, we react with annoyance, fear, or discomfort (and perhaps all three) when someone we don't like walks into the room. No, we may not allow ourselves to have a visible reaction, but our reactions are visible to us if we will just look. Not only have we reacted to this person somewhere in the past, but that memory is stirred every time we meet, with the result that we are digging the track of that reaction ever deeper.

And it is not just people that we react to, but also to colors, smells, touch, etc. and not only anything our senses can provide, but an endless stream of quips, comments, critiques, complaints, and thoughts, thoughts, thoughts about each issue. At times our mind becomes a hurricane of reactions – a windstorm of wincing, each one bearing damage now and for the future -- karma.

Our every prejudice, reinforced through repetition, becomes karma that will ripen over time and require us, sooner or later, to come to terms with it down to the finest detail. We are at the accumulating end of karma, perhaps not the big blows of karma like killing

and stealing, but the incessant beating of the mind by the onslaught of our own reactions. It never stops. Is it no wonder that the Buddha points out karma as a main component of our suffering.

I used to tell myself, "What suffering? I feel great," but over time I have come to acknowledge that my own mind (indoctrinated by me) is an enormous obscuration that I cannot see through clearly. And the layers of obscuration not only get thicker; each reaction will demand its own day of reckoning sooner or later.

So, if we are not aware of our own reactions, it is not because they are not there. They are there if we will just look. The question I ask is: what can I do about them?

Obviously the first step is to become aware that we are having reactions. Witness them from moment to moment. It is not that hard to do. Once we are aware of a reaction, we can learn to neutralize it until we no longer respond, almost a Pavlovian remedy.

It is not an elaborate procedure: recognize a reaction, look at it, acknowledge that it is your reaction and not one else's, drop it, and rest in the space it leaves. If we do this consistently, we gradually wear down the residue and remove the groove that particular reaction and subject involves until we no longer react. And we stop accumulating karma for that particular issue.

Of course, in the beginning we must start in the midst of a swarm of reactions and just work away. But we

soon get the hang of it and can cycle through the procedure instantly, like a mental bug zapper.

Technically, this is a form of a dharma practice called Tong-Len, translated as "Taking and Sending." We take in our reaction, own it, and send back our energy to sooth and heal the gap between ourselves and what we are reacting to outside what we consider our self. Tong-Len is an endless removing of the difference between our self and others, whatever we label as "not-us."

This kind of Tong-Len practice, which is easy to do, gradually removes the obscurations we accrue through judgments, biases, and other reactions. Simultaneously we stop accumulating karma and our obscurations become more and more transparent. We can begin to see through them.

This is the kind of dharma practice that can be done all day long, one that has huge rewards and is relatively easy to do at that. And we don't have to be Buddhist to do this practice.

DHARMA: THERE COMES A SEA CHANGE

Strong inner psychological events can shatter our sometimes fragile sense of self, forcing us beyond conventional societal norms and into a period of extreme vulnerability. Recovery from those states pretty much defines us as a shaman. Failure to recover drives us a little crazy and condemns us to forever orbit society at a distance – a singleton.

Strong outer events, like the death of a loved one or other great losses, shatter the self for a while, until it can heal itself and reform. I covered this in the previous blog.

But there are still greater events, low-level changes to the self, almost subliminal in nature, surrounding particular rites-of-passage events in life that we go through and experience, not always consciously. I call them sea changes. The "Prime of Life" is one of those, but there are others, one of which I am now going through and will share with you. I might as well give you some of the personal details.

What I didn't know until recently was how broad-based and stealthy deep change within the self can be. I was (as we all are) used to short-term upsets, you know, a few days, maybe a week... that kind of thing, even though one of my favorite selfie-quotes is "The straighter the line, the finer the curve." In other words, there is no such thing as a straight line. Sooner or later everything comes around in a circle or a spiral. Yet our ROI (return on investment) can take a very, very long time. That is what karma is all about, long-term investments and returns.

As mentioned, I find that there are some "self-shattering" eruptions that implode within us in what

can only be called slow motion, and the fallout from that kind of implosion takes months or even years to come to our attention. We don't see it because it is we who are imploding and feel something changing, but we are mistakenly looking outside ourselves for the causes.

Like the title of Neil Young's album "Rust Never Sleeps," deep-sea changes within ourselves work away on us like some kind of acid-eating brine, leaving us somehow psychologically detached, yet totally unaware of that fact. We become floaters. We just don't feel like our old self, and for good reason, because we're not. We are changing despite ourselves, yet can't put our finger on it.

I confess that I don't always see these sonar-depth changes coming. It is not like a police siren or even someone flagging us down, but much more invasive than that. The reach of these slow changes embraces everything, including any early-warning systems we may have set up. It is like one of those hurricane-like shear or straight winds that sweep across the plains of life, except it is stone silent. In my recent case, I never saw it coming. It was not like me seeing a storm coming out there, because it was the self in me (the one who is supposed to be doing the looking) that was changing. I saw nothing coming, but I was changed by it nevertheless.

I hope I am making some kind of sense here.

As pointed out above, it was not similar to one of those tragic events that happen in life, like the death of someone we love, an event that registers and upsets whatever train we are on, while we witness it. In those events we are present. This change I am describing was much deeper and more pervasive

than that, and I finally realize what caused it. It was as simple (or profound) as my retirement after fifty years of clinging to the job of staying alive and supporting my family, and all that means. And we each have some similar scenario working for us.

I had long ago sublimated (and forgotten) how traumatic it was for me, a rather sensitive young thing, to drop out of high school, forgo college, and walk the tightrope of life without a safety net, while all those around me wagged their fingers goodbye at me as regards having any security in the future. I had completely forgotten how painful and scary that time was. Like one of those sensitive-to-touch plants, I had drawn in some of my feelings and held them close all these years. Perhaps we all do. Now that my entrepreneurial career-struggle is over, I find that I am starting to emerge, but who am I?

And although my formal career ended on a particular day and time last summer, the letting go of the fifty-plus years of struggling to exist set off a groundswell inside me that, like a tsunami, has been a long time coming to consciousness, but when it hit, it was ten-foot tall and just flattened me. Letting go of such a profound and deep-seated attachment (grasping) found me swirling into the current of my life's events without a rudder. I was immediately just swept away and I didn't even know that until recently. I am just waking up now, as the dust is settling and the stars are coming out again. Talk about Rip Van Winkle. Part of me has been asleep or in a death-grasp for fifty years!

I just had no idea how much I had clung to my routine all these years, like a man clinging to a stone in a hurricane. When I finally retired last summer and could afford to let go, of course I was just swept away.

I am now a recovering retiree, re-forming in this cold spring of 2014, pulling myself back together and trying to figure out who I am once again, older and hopefully wiser than before. "What doesn't kill us only makes us stronger," is the old refrain.

I always thought that it is the challenges out there in the world that I have to watch out for. It never occurred to me that simply letting go of deep-seated life-long attachments (like a career) could precipitate such a free fall. I thought letting go of attachments was liberating, and so it is. Of course, how could I have any idea what liberation of this kind entailed? Liberty and liberation had always been pretty much pie-in-the-sky talk on my part, you know freedom... being free. What exactly is that?

This actual experience of liberation from my career attachment is NOT something the self is going to appreciate, it being the arch-conservative that it is. Just the opposite! I like the analogy of my retirement as letting go of the one rock that I had been clinging to all these years in the rushing stream of life. Letting go was just that, letting life go free and suddenly finding myself carried away in the torrent of change, with nothing to hang on to or grasp, no routine. I am used to life-long grasping and struggling.

So there you have it. Here I am, floating free, no longer attached to making a living, but also I feel suddenly at sea (or up a creek) without a paddle. All this happened last August (2013). Let's see, it is now May of 2014 and I just got my head above water for the first time in these last few days. That's about nine months for the cat to come back, for me to come up for air, which is quite a swim! It's like when your computer goes off to think and takes a long, long time to return, if ever.

Anyway, it seems I am "in process," letting go of fifty years of struggle and attachment-to-survival, you know, providing for myself and my family. The process of detachment I am experiencing is not a gentle thing at all, but it is transformative. I will have to wait to see how I turn out.

Working with my first dharma teacher back in the 1960s, Andrew Gunn McIver (who was once a travelling initiator for a Rosicrucian order)... he would repeat to me certain phrases, and even have me memorize them, sometimes calling me out to recite them in front of others.

One of the most mysterious of these phrases was something about the word "liberty" and liberation. He said that in Scottish (he was born in Glasgow) the word liberty or its root "lib" meant to cut off or castrate.

All these years I never understood why he told me this. But I now feel it is linked to this process of detachment I am describing. I believe Andrew was referring to how all of us are bound and attached to our sexual energy. Like turning off the career attachment, detaching from our sexual energy I am certain is an even greater letting go. How wonderful my teachers and guides have been for me in life. I can never thank them enough.

Everything that is bound will be released in time, the law of karma. How many other circles (or cycles) am I on right now that are still sublimated and yet to return?

That's life.

DHARMA: FREE FALL

Something that I find incredible, as in "hard to believe," is how change can sweep into my life, turn my apple cart upside down, and shatter my self-image into a million pieces. And often it takes me a long time to even realize this is happening!

And when I finally do, like one of those old re-animator movies where the monster heals himself, my tired-old self madly moves heaven and earth trying to pull itself back together again so that it does not feel so naked. I call this my "Humpty-Dumpty Self," but in this case, Humpty-Dumpty does manage to put himself back together again... and usually as fast as possible.

Those times during which the self is shattered and I am kind of wide open, naked, and twisting in the wind, tend to be brief in the greater scheme of things. And it pays to relax when this happens. I make an attempt to look around a bit because those open windows in time quickly close and I am soon back to business-as-usual once again, lost in my daily distractions. These are called gaps.

In those times of change, those gaps when the self becomes shattered or transparent (I can see through it), I tend to be disoriented, off track from my usual bent, and literally just upset. When a loved one dies, it is like this. Those times when we have lost our normal compass, however upsetting, are actually (at least for me) refresher courses in how to be alive, how to live, so they should be treasured, not feared. This is what I try to tell myself, but there is no one listening, because my usual self is exactly what has been shattered and gone missing.

During these time-outs, when I have fallen off my normal groove (or rut) and am once again a free agent for a day or part of a day, even a week, or, as has happened recently, many months. I no longer care about what I usually care about, and find myself losing interest in avenues I have been fiercely traveling up to that point. I am suddenly alone and, as the bard said, "with no direction known." And we all go through these times. I am at a loss, but of what?

If I look carefully, it is not so much that anything is lost (at least not permanently), as it is that I have momentarily let go of my death-grip on what 'I' think is reality and am forced to do a little free fall, like it or not. I love this quote of Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche:

"The bad news is you're falling through the air, nothing to hang on to, no parachute. The good news is there's no ground."

Those times when our self-image gets shattered (and we all have them) are like that, a free fall, but one we not only recover from, but we come back refreshed and better able to manage life than before 'IF' we will relax and just let it happen. After all, it is happening.

Of course if I struggle against change, as my first dharma teacher taught me, I am like the Cling Peach, where the pit tears off flesh as it is removed. With the Freestone Peach, the pit just naturally pops out. I thought about that one for years. I have always liked the Freestone variety myself.

The moral of this little story is that we do recover; the self re-animates and does come back, warts and all. We all-too-soon become our old (or slightly modified) self again. And although for most of us this out-of-the-body experience is a terrifying (and usually relatively brief) ride, it is something I am slowly learning to

treasure, not fear. Sure, it is disorienting, but it may be my only opportunity to get outside myself long enough to actually learn something new and get away from my constant dialogue with none other than my own self, for the self is all about (you guessed it) only itself. There is more to life than that rat race.

So, when we vacate (vacation) and this loss of self happens, I try to tell myself to have faith, to lean back and feel the breeze when I am in freefall, and to just let it happen. I know my normal self will come back sometime, just as the Sun comes back each morning. You can count on that. In fact, it is unavoidable. However at the time, the emptiness of freefall can be deafening.

In this world, not all is as it appears. Things sometimes can be upside down from what they look like. In retrospect these self-shattering moments are more of a blessing than a curse. My guess is that enlightenment, if I ever get there, is learning to enjoy the freefall more than my normal ignorance of it. In other words:

It is only in the last few days that I have begun to realize that I am coming out of a time of immersion in the cosmic ether, one that has gone on now for many months. And the instant I find my self finally taking control again, at that very moment I simultaneously realize, like the fly who has just stepped into the spider's web, that this familiar sense of myself that I have been missing is a trap I just stepped back into.

How ironic is that? LOL

DHARMA: THE SIDESHOW

Looking back some forty years, the key to meditation progress (at least for me) has been to just relax and allow the mind to rest. And by rest I mean the same thing you mean by rest, as in "give it a rest." Resting in the present moment allows everything whose time has come to present itself naturally. Using western psychological terms, if we think too much about the future and trying to get to it or make it happen, we are pushing the curve, what psychologists call being sadistic. On the other hand, if we dwell on or overly prolong the past, we are behind the curve, as in: being dragged through life by time. This is masochism.

Shakespeare said it well in his phrase "Ripeness is all." That is what allowing the mind to rest is about, letting things come to us naturally as they ripen, or as the kind-of-gross popular saying puts it: go for the "low-hanging fruit." LOL.

Learning to relax in the present does two things. As the restful moments accumulate, they create a new and more relaxed past which we begin to identify as our own past, and we gradually cease to identify with what went before, however rough or nightmarish that was. Resting in the present simultaneously best prepares us for the future by welcoming it in a relaxed way. I believe I first heard this from the great siddha Chögyam Trungpa in the phrase "relax as it is," his translation of one of the slogans from the "Seven Points of Mind Training" teachings by Atisha.

In many of the Tibetan Buddhist practices it is advised to keep an image of your root teacher or life guide above your head, either just above your head facing the same way you are or above and in front, facing

you. This may sound a little strange to the western mind, but think about it. All it really points out is that keeping someone we trust and respect always in mind can be purifying. Of course the Buddhists believe that having an open channel with a great teacher or a Buddha is just that, a channel through which blessings and clarity actually flow. Try it sometime with the person you most respect in life, living or dead. Experience that sense of purity for yourself.

We can drink from any old puddle and pond if we wish, but invoking the influence of someone "we" love, admire, and respect makes a lot more sense. The Buddhists even go so far as to say that great beings like the Buddha or adepts like Naropa or Tilopa, although long gone, can still inspire us, and not just as thoughts we think. If our intent is pure and our appreciation of them is strong, they can be a channel open to us through whom we can receive their actual blessings and insight, regardless of if they are still living or not. The mind is infinite and eternal. No real truth is ever lost, and that by the definition of truth. It is the one thing that endures.

The Christian phrase from the New Testament "Angels will lift you up in their hands, so you will not strike your foot against a stone" is in my opinion just another good way to point out that keeping great beings in mind, whether above your head or wherever, is a good move. It can help us to become and stay more aware.

In fact, the whole notion of 'purity' is something to consider, the idea that a pure or focused intent (keeping your eyes on the prize) is worth having. I find that with the Tibetan Buddhists, a pure intent is everything when it comes to accumulating karma.

As my first dharma teacher used to say to me (often), "Michael, if you spend all of your time in the sideshow, the main tent will be gone." I find that as I naturally become aware of my own bad habits and let them go, I can better experience and know the purity of my own mind, and it feels good. Our intent is present all the time and ultimately it determines our karma, good and bad. It pays to keep it in mind, which is what mindfulness is all about.

MUSIC: MICHIGAN AS A MUSIC LAND

I have blogged recently about the idea of sacred space and sacred places, and somewhere in there I promised to share my thoughts on what the fact means to me that Michigan's lower peninsula is surrounded by 21% of all the fresh water in the world, and sits on the largest deposit of salt on this planet (30,000 trillion tons). What follows is just my opinion, so take it with a grain of Michigan rock salt. And Michigan being musical does not mean other places are not, and so on.

I have been an astrologer for something like 50 years, so I have learned that water is connected to the planet Neptune, and that Neptune also rules music, so I end up connecting Michigan + Water (Neptune) + Salt (Yang) = Powerful Music in Michigan. If I then add the traditional concept from India that whatever land is enclosed within a peninsula is sacred, I end up with Michigan possibly being a special or spiritual place for music to appear in the world. Of course, I already believe this is so because I have seen it with my own eyes, and I am not the only observer.

In the late 1930's, the great folklorist Alan Lomax spent considerable time in Michigan completing a survey of the folk music of the Great Lakes region, recording traditional music in both the lower and upper peninsulas – and of many nationalities. He would later write that Michigan and the Great Lakes area is, and I quote, "the most fertile source" of American folklore that he had encountered. That statement confirmed my own intuition that music and Michigan indeed are some kind of special combination. For myself, I already knew this to be the case.

We can't overlook such massive Michigan music phenomena such as Motown, the magical Interlochen Center for the Arts, the world-renowned Elderly Instruments store in Lansing, and The Ark in Ann Arbor, one of perhaps two folk venues in the entire country that has persevered with excellence since the 1960s. And there are other examples I am sure, like the powerful jazz scene in Detroit years ago, and those first two Ann Arbor Blues Festivals, in which all the great blues artists gathered in Michigan.

And since my ego likes to find how "Michael Erlewine" fits into any situation (if I can), it is not lost on me that the largest music database-site in the world is the All-Music Guide (allmusic.com), which was founded by yours truly here in tiny Big Rapids, Michigan, right in the middle of the mitten. But that is not the end of it either.

It remains true today that Michigan continues to be musically fertile; there is the Earthwork Music Collective right in my own backyard, which I happen to be involved in. This group of 30-something-year-olds is and has been a major musical force in Michigan and the Midwest, and continues to be, which brings me to my plan.

I have to admit that I have been a bit at sea since I "retired" as to exactly what to do with the tail-end of this string of events I call my life. Sure enough, out of the ashes of my retirement, phoenix-like, arises this desire to make a short documentary on Michigan and music, starting perhaps with some indigenous music, then sharing some of the great music that folklorist Alan Lomax found and recorded, followed by taking a magical mystery tour of some of the Michigan music legends (as mentioned above), and ending in the present day with the very important work of the

Earthwork Music Collective, in which some of my own family is involved. This should keep me busy.

My son Michael Andrew (and perhaps some others) are joining me in this effort, and the folks at the Library of Congress Alan Lomax Archive have offered to be of help. Hopefully such a film may bring greater awareness of Michigan music, and also highlight what today's younger musicians in our area are doing right here and now. It will also serve to get me out of the house after this winter of my discontent.

Suggestions are welcome.

NOTE: I will also be doing what I can to inform readers of the various projects that the Library of Congress and the Alan Lomax Archive, headed up by Todd Harvey, are offering this year, which include a wonderful "singing" e-book (with text and videos) called "Michigan-I-O," a series of podcasts entitled "Alan Lomax and the Soundscapes of the Upper Midwest 75th Anniversary of the Library of Congress Folk-Song expedition to Michigan," and a traveling exhibit "Michigan Folksong Legacy: Grand Discoveries from the Great Depression." More details on the Lomax Archive are here:

<http://www.loc.gov/folklife/lomax/michiganproject.html>

DHARMA: A SENSE OF SACRED SPACE

I want to continue this discussion of sacred space, consecrated objects, and blessed people. The word "sacred" comes from the Latin "sacer," which means to set something apart from the ordinary as holy, as in to consecrate, venerate, dedicate, or associate a place or time as special or sacred.

Many countries, mostly ancient societies like China and India, have sacred places or sites. That is what pilgrimages are all about. I have been on pilgrimage to Tibet, China, Nepal, and India in West Bengal and Sikkim, etc., but have heard very little about making pilgrimages here in North America except to places like the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, Elvis's home, etc. Why is that?

Perhaps it is as simple as that we have never taken the time to find and consecrate those places in America that we might consider sacred. We probably don't even know where they are, but they no-doubt exist. In the U.S. we have done this with places of natural beauty, and have scores of national parks and other physical attractions, but have perhaps not had the time as a nation to yet discover those places with an inner beauty, sites that distinguish themselves from the profane as special by how they affect us spiritually. However, we can assume sacred space and places in this country do exist and are radiating whatever inner beauty they inspire while they wait to be found and known. Aside from Native American sacred sites, I don't know of many.

The sacred shows itself as sacred by standing out from the ordinary, usually by transporting us beyond our everyday sense of time into a special sense of place and time. The sacred is somehow distinct from

what we ordinarily know and expect. It stands apart. When something stands out to us from the surroundings (either as a person or a natural form), causing us to become aware of it or it somehow making us more aware, it is sacred to the degree that we are aware of the change. It is consecrated by the experience itself.

How this works is pretty easy to see in our own life. To begin with, we can become aware of what moments or places are special or sacred to us as individuals. For example, check out where you go to find peace, whether it is in the beauty of nature or just to a favorite chair or corner of the house? In other words, what have we set apart or aside as being special? What do we already consider as sacred?

Sacred is as sacred does. Ultimately places are declared sacred by individuals who experience or find increased awareness or intuition in their presence and note that or point it out to others. Places are consecrated through this process of awareness, not awareness of the places so much as awareness of ourselves in these places, an important point.

If we have few sacred sites here in America, this is a reflection of our own state of mind and the fact that we are just not yet aware of these locations, for such places must certainly exist. At this point in American history we may have to discover them for ourselves. Perhaps those most sensitive or aware among us will locate these sacred places in North America by experiencing themselves there, point them out, and we can travel and see for ourselves what makes it special. Does it work for us too?

After all, is this not why we go to the lake or river or pond or stream, to mix our mind with whatever natural

awareness we are capable of experiencing at that place and time? There is definitely a mixing of our mind with what we consider sacred going on all the time. Each of us must have people, places, or things that we experience (or have consecrated) as "special." We just have to become aware of them.

Our opportunity to become aware of the sacred always comes at the borderline between the ordinary and extra-ordinary, at the threshold between these two worlds. The great writer on these matters, Mircea Eliade, used the word hierophany as the manifestation or appearance of the sacred in this profane world, what Gerard Manley Hopkins called "inscape," the way inward beyond the profane to the sacred. A whiff of the absolute always brings relief from the relative and the ordinary. We wake up.

Places that can be sacred to us as a nation undoubtedly exist, but like all sacred places they must be discovered and consecrated by individuals who become aware of them. As mentioned, sacred is as sacred does, so to speak. We can easily see this in our own lives. Perhaps the place where we first meet a loved one is sacred to us by that meeting, or the house and town where one of our children is born. The "sacred," as the root of the word itself suggests, is that which is set apart from all that is not sacred, from the ordinary or profane. It stands out as an axis from which we can "see." We endlessly do this all the time, creating a personal hierarchy of what is important (and thus sacred) to each of us. These places enable awareness and self-discovery, so they are hard to miss.

My point is that places of possible pilgrimage must be consecrated by those who are aware of and changed by them. Just as we flock to national parks, drawn by

their natural beauty, places that invoke inner awareness must first be found, experienced, and consecrated by people like ourselves. Someone has to actually do it. Countries like India have had thousands of years to find their sacred places. Americans have yet to do it, although Native Americans certainly have. We go to their sacred places, because we have not yet found any (or many) of our own.

Each of us is well on our way in this process, which we can see by just making a mental list of those places and/or rituals that we personally consider important and thus somewhat sacred to us. This could be as close as our favorite author, book, poem, or any of the visual arts that transports us, and of course movies that move us. Anything is fair game, but we must consecrate it by being aware that it is important to us by how it transforms us and treasure that.

Sacredness does not go without saying. Rather, we must say it again and again and again by consecrating and re-consecrating our loved ones, families, wives and husbands, children and pets – whatever makes life worth living for us. This is what is most sacred to us. We don't have to be religious to have the sacred in our lives. Sacred is whatever we value above the ordinary. In that sense, we are all religious.

Do I consider Michigan sacred? I guess I do. I know I live here, but may be unaware of all the reason why. And I know that I have little areas of nature that I like to visit that I find restful. It may not be a national park, but just a shady nook by a small stream nearby. Again, sacred is as sacred does. It is up to me to consecrate what is sacred with my awareness of what stands out. In other words, these special places wait

for me to be aware of my own inner nature when I visit them.

If nothing is sacred to me, it is because I am not sensitive to the awareness they offer. But even the most unaware among us has his or her favorites, those special places or objects in life that we love and where (or through which) we find peace, places we have consecrated by our own enhanced presence.

And objects can be consecrated. I enclose a photo of the mala (rosary) of a great rinpoche I met, who through many, many years of saying mantras has worn down these Bodhi seeds, blessing them with millions of mantras. That is consecration.

But for the record, the most powerful, the most consecrated places I have ever experienced were not places but rather people, those beings consecrated by lineage and capable of causing people like myself to realize who we are, on-the-spot, so to speak. That is the most sacred space I have known, my own mind, thanks to these great teachers for pointing it out, showing me where it is.

Your thoughts?