

Dharma Blogs 2017 Summer



by Michael Erlewine

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2017 SUMMER

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INTRODUCTION

This is not intended to be a finely produced book, but rather a readable document for those who are interested in my particular take on dharma training and a few other topics. My thanks to Patti Singleton Williams for helping me to gather this all together. These blogs were from the Summer of 2017, posted on Facebook and Google+.

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

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A TWO-WAY STREET

July 1, 2017

[Here is another interjection in lieu of the series I have been running, but I will get back to that soon. This is a photo I took of my teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche on a trip to Tibet and China some years ago. We were having a picnic by a fast-moving mountain stream. A funny story: at this picnic, many of us stood up and performed something, like music, a poem, something dharmic, whatever. As I musician, I had brought with me a harmonica and was going to play some blues harmonica for everyone. There was only one thing that I had forgotten, that we were in Tibetan and out on a high plateau. When I got up to play, the altitude was so high that there was no air and my lungs could not play the harmonica. Just air sounds and squeaks came out. Everyone was entertained anyway and I sat town, laughing.]

I am now retired and, to a significant degree, in a more protected environment and out of the swing of the mainstream. Certainly, I'm missing out on this or that current hot topic, but I'm not missing the rush and roar of business-as-usual in America. In fact, this bit of distance has allowed me to see how meaningless so much of what I used to do was and is.

From where I now stand, the parallax view is that some things are more important than others. Of course, I always believed that, but I certainly did not see it as clearly as I now do. Life has to be something more than simple survival and the old saying "don't sweat the small stuff" makes a lot more sense to me now than it used to. Given a little distance in time and

some things aren't worth worrying about. There's just no percentage in it.

Time is always running for all of us, but for older folks like me it is also running out. It makes one think. What is important? If you are young, it can be important to find some way to just keep going, of course. Later on, one wonders where we are going and especially where we are going when we reach the end of the line and pass on. Pass on to where and how?

If I had it all to do over again, I would have studied and practiced the dharma sooner and more vigorously. That's for sure. When the waves of life start lapping on the far shore, we're brought up short in a hurry. Are we ready for this transition and what does being "ready" mean anyway?

When I look back, especially at younger people these days, I want to reach out, perhaps even wave my arms and flag them down. There's an end coming, my friends, at least a big speed bump, so slow down and consider carefully just where you are headed. As Shakespeare said, "Parting is such sweet sorrow." We are going to have to give it all back, so be beginning to do just that.

Making and saving more money won't help. Exercise at best will only postpone things. So, what will help? And the answer to that, as far as I can tell, is the dharma. Only it will last and serve to make our eventual transition easier.

I could just move on and tend to my own business, but I find that I actually care about others enough to at least attempt to get your attention. I know from experience that when we are young, we are protected from the law, including the laws of nature to the degree that we are healthy. But that shield weakens

over time, unless we conserve and begin to limit our exposure to the elements.

To me, the Dharma is pure aerodynamics. What Buddhism calls the “view” is much like (to use an analogy) setting the sails on a boat to better take the wind and get to where we want to go, rather than to just end up anywhere or somewhere that we did not intend to go -- sailing.

There is a common misunderstanding about dharma teachers, especially with tantric or Vajrayana Buddhism, that the dharma teacher somehow pours the precious teachings from his vessel into the vessel of his student.

In my experience, it is not so much that “something” is poured or transferred, as it is that the teacher helps to set the sails of the student to best take the winds of change and life. What is transferred is more an attitude or orientation to life rather than some secret set of teachings. In other words, the teacher arranges and tweaks the student so that he or she is properly oriented (has the correct “view”) in order to grasp the nature of the mind and how it works.

So, what am I saying here? In the sea of folks out there, I can't expect to get the attention of more than a few, and perhaps a very few. In my own case, it took repeated dosages over many years to properly grab my attention enough for me to do something about it. And it is difficult (or can be) to practice the dharma and get past the purely rote mechanical stage of learning the techniques. For a technique to be realized is a different story from just going through the motions of practicing, as many of us do.

We all know the old saying “It's not like its brain surgery,” etc. No, it's like mind surgery, but it is done

without implements and successfully only by an authentic teacher. When I consider the odds of all that is needed coming serendipitously together so that we recognize the nature of the mind, I just shake my head and want to walk away. But I don't.

So much depends on finding an authentic teacher with whom we can work, but equally and perhaps even more so, as students, we have to be ready to receive that training, and that is no small order. We have to totally trust our teacher and do what is asked, and that kind of trust is not particularly American, except perhaps in the military. Only here, we take direction based on love and respect – trust.

So, there is a lot of water going over the dam, but very few candidates with the capacity to receive the more advanced dharma teachings. It may be like those computer chips where, in relative terms, it can take an almost endless amount of time for a single instruction or event to occur. I sometimes wonder if something similar is true with the ability to receive the dharma. It's hard to wake up.

And it is written that there are 84,000 dharmas. It is up to each of us to try and find and find and try the various dharmas until we discover one that we can respond to and learn from. There is a lot of written dharma out there to consider. For any one of us, some dharmas will be too conceptual and just over our heads, not juicy enough. We will know when we find the right one because we "get" it or get some part of it so that we change our view enough that we deemphasize our fixations and they begin to become more transparent.

When I was young, I read many, many books and articles and sought out all kinds of teachers, hoping

each would be workable. I gave little thought as to whether I was a fit receptacle to receive the teachings, and did not fully understanding that the teacher/student relationship in Vajrayana Buddhism is a two-way street. The guru and the student have to mutually connect and in a very special way.

I know that the “dharma” is getting increasingly popular recently and that more and more folks are at least giving it lip service. Still, in this country, there are few that take it much farther than just talk, IMO. Yet, there are a few of readers here who may actually want to learn and practice the dharma, which is why I blog.



SITTING TOO LONG

July 1, 2017

[Photo of the much-feared “Gomden” meditation cushion, with its too-firm texture and sharp corners and lines that dig into the legs. These were (for us) impossible-to-sit-on block-like cushions, and the word “gom” in Tibetan means “meditation.” So, we had very long sittings on very hard cushions. Later, we learned to sew and to make our own Japanese-style less-hard round “zafus.” Here the Gomden is sitting on the rectangular Japanese zabuton mat.]

Back in the early 1970s (and for many years afterward) the idea of sitting in meditation for long periods of time was all the rage. Much of this came with the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa’s emphasis on sitting for long periods of time, like for hours, but better yet was for an entire day, week, or even a month. Trungpa’s “Dathün” (month) letter is a hallmark from that time.

And too many instructors wielded this demand to sit for long periods like a weapon. It drove those folks away who could not manage to sit that long, myself included. For all that we beginners knew back then, this sitting for long periods was the only way to approach tranquility meditation (shamata).

Well, it wasn’t the only way, but rather the only way we knew of at the time and we felt bad if we went off the reservation and sat as long as we felt like, but not much longer.

Now, fast-forward 30 or 40 years and the view has expanded. My current dharma teacher, for example, is fine if we want to sit for a long time, but it is not

necessary or even particularly recommended. Rather, he suggests sitting for a short time, but perhaps with many sessions, all short ones. Rinpoche focuses on the quality of our practice, not so much the duration.

And, of course, by now I have a better handle on all of this too. Meditation is not something we can just take by storm. IMO, forcing ourselves to sit only results in approach/avoidance on our part, i.e. not wanting to sit at all. And, frankly, meditation deserves (and demands) better treatment than sheer force of effort.

Meditation does not adapt itself to our demands, but rather vice-versa; we adapt to it. Oddly enough, I have discovered that meditation requirements are as sensitive as we are. Ironic. And meditation is not like driving a square peg into a round hole, but requires much more finesse on our part than that. We must learn to tread softly.

It may sound like I am knocking sitting for long sessions, but I'm not. If you can do that, fine. However, in my experience, Americans respond much more readily to tailoring our sitting to our capacity to actually sit comfortably. Gentle does it, in my book, without just wimping out and doing nothing at all. There is a middle-way between being too hard on ourselves and being too easy and that's very Buddhist.

Actually, tranquility meditation is very interesting. Its result is said to help in stabilizing the mind, causing it to settle down and become, well, tranquil. But, like a secret recipe, there are a few ingredients that we need to know more about, and one of those is love.

We need to "love" to practice to get much of any results, and how do we order that up? It's hard to love a bare-bones technique that we have never mastered.

Just (damn-well) DOING it does not do it. There is an old European quote:

“He wrote canzones because he had a will to write canzones,
And not because love moved him to it,
And no one thought much of him or his canzones.”

Our meditation style will reflect how we approach it, so our approach deserves some consideration. I agree that this has to be carefully thought out. In my case, I found it easier to find a form of concentration (and mindfulness) that I already loved and mix my mind and meditation training with that, rather than trying to force myself to meditate by sheer rote practice.

It's called tranquility meditation for a reason, because the result of the training is a calmer, more tranquil, and stable state of mind. At least, we should be moving in that direction. If you are not getting that, then you may not doing the practice properly. It's that simple.

There is nothing particularly dharmic about focusing on a pebble or a stick (or the breath) when learning tranquility meditation, so this kind of training can be practiced with anything that you already have mastered, like tying flies, playing chess, programming, video editing, and so on. Do you have anything that you LOVE (and have mastered) that requires concentration and mindfulness? If so, consider trying that for your tranquility practice support instead of a pebble or a stick. That's what I did.

In my case, I had trouble learning tranquility meditation just by rote practice. Unfortunately for me, I have to really care about something in order to learn

it, and I had not much feeling (one way or another) about looking at a pebble or my breath. However, as soon as I concentrated using something I really love, tranquility meditation (and insight meditation) came quite easily. This is a VERY important point that deserves our careful consideration.

I spent some 34 years practicing tranquility meditation and never got much of anywhere. That's right, thirty-four years! Yet, when I finally found myself practicing meditation using something I care about and love, which in my case was nature photography, everything developed quite rapidly. This is why I say, at least in my case, I had to actually love the particular technique I was using in order for any results to accrue. I am sure that many of you will learn much more easily than I had to, but that's my story.

I write this because I don't want to see anyone else have to spend the time I had to spend in order to learn tranquility meditation. It was a waste of my time. I only wish someone would have pointed out to me what I am trying to share here with you!

As it is, my root teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, did point out to a group of us that anyone who programs or does detail work on a regular basis has an advantage. Here is his direct quote:

"I do not know that much about it because I do not use one, but having watched people work with computers, I think that the type of concentration that people employ in order to work on a computer is probably a good opportunity for looking at your mind's nature. Judging by the demeanor and facial expressions of people as they work on the computer, it involves a state of concentration that is equal to that of a state of great pleasure or great misery [laughter],

and therefore I think that if you want to see the nature of your mind you should look at it while you are working on your computer.”

I can't say whether Rinpoche was being serious or just kidding us, but the moment he said that I realized that, at least in my case, it takes great concentration to do the work I do. For the previous 35 years I had worked on computers, pretty much seven days a week for 12-14 (or more) hours a day as a computer programmer. I learned extreme concentration during that time. I had to, but I also loved what I was doing!

So, kidding or not, in a flash of realization, I knew that I had already mastered the concentration necessary for tranquility meditation long ago. And here I was, all these years, pretending to learn meditation by rote through the instructions for tranquility meditation I had been given. You can't salt the salt, so my pretense went nowhere.

From that time onward, I began a three-year period of much more intense dharma practice, the result of which was that I finally made some progress in meditation. I could go on, but hopefully you get the idea. We have to love our practice (as we love our hobbies) and make it our own, not just practice out of a book or by instructions that we do not challenge to see if they work for us. As they say, “Seize the day” or as in this case we may have to adapt the dharma as much as we can to our own situation and personality.

Of course, be respectful, but don't be shy. That's what I have learned.



Here is what I actually sit on, a gomden case partially filled with Kapok. I have tried many kinds of cushions. I have been to both eastern Tibet and central Tibet and never saw the hard block-like gomdens shown above. What many Rinpoches sit on is more like what I sit on or vice-versa.



AWARENESS OF AWARENESS

July 2, 2017

I am not by nature that interested in social anthropology, but since the dharma is so embedded in Tibetan culture, it was hard to avoid learning something about the culture of Tibetan Buddhism. It is a whole world to learn about, one that was at first very foreign to me. For example:

Most Tibetan rinpoches are what are called “tulkus,” which means they are reincarnated teachers, born again and again as the same teacher. There is a difference between being reborn and being reincarnated. Most of us, 99.9% of all beings, are said to be “reborn,” meaning that we are reborn, not reincarnated. We are not the same “person” as we were in our last birth, but simply reborn as driven by our particular karma, from which we fashion a new person in our new life.

Only very high beings like the Dalai Lama or the Karmapa and other rinpoches are said to be “reincarnated,” meaning that in some sense they are the same identity they were in their previous incarnation. So, again, most rinpoches are in some sense reincarnated, although some very few rinpoches, who are not tulkus, are designated as rinpoches. These few are not reincarnated, but due to their remarkable behavior are designated rinpoches, and they may become a tulku in their next life. I am not an expert in all this, but just a reporter on what I have read or been told.

In each lineage, like flowers, there are always tulkus being reborn, so we have a range of rinpoches, including older, middle-aged, and young tulkus

around us at all times. In Tibet, these rinpoches, who are said to be their best and brightest, are openly shared with the general community. They are made available to the public like a major resource. In the West, our brightest have to kind of fight their way into visibility, but I won't go there just now.

As Americans, we are used to looking up to older people as wiser and more experienced than are we, but in the Tibetan Buddhist world, many rinpoches are discovered and enthroned at about 18 months of age, so we look up to these beings, but they are much younger (and said to be wiser) than we are.

As I came into the dharma, I began to meet rinpoches (and high rinpoches) who were younger than I was, which was a new experience for me, this looking up to younger persons for wisdom and experience. In 1997, my family (including my 11-year old son) and I spent three days high in the mountains of Tibet meeting and spending time with the 17th Karmapa, who was at that time 12 years old. It was mind boggling to have two young boys in front of me, one of which was, to all appearances, also ageless.

When I look around, meet, read the teachings of, and so on among the various young rinpoches in my lineage, I can't help but wonder which of them I might like to take teachings from. The one that stands out that I seem to click with is Yongey Mingjur Dorje and I have had the opportunity to meet him a number of times in person and even have an interview.

Mingjur Rinpoche strikes me as very bright and extremely capable. In the late spring of 2011, Mingjur Rinpoche left his monastery in India to become a wandering monk for four and a half years. He took nothing with him and essentially disappeared to live

on the streets and in mountain caves. He came out of his retreat in November of 2015.

I can say from my experience of Mingjur Rinpoche before and after this wandering retreat that he was greatly changed by this experience, and he was incredible to begin with. Although I have not had the opportunity to see him in person since he returned from his journeys, I can immediately tell from the videos that are available that he is more direct and pithy than ever.

This is already getting longish, so I will not try to describe some of the teachings of Yongey Mingjur Rinpoche, but I will in another blog. Here is a brilliant teaching by Mingjur Dorje in two forms, one that takes an hour or more, and the other in five minutes.

I encourage you to watch the long one, but I know that many of you don't have that kind of time, so I include the short one.

Meditation in Daily Life (1:18 hr)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PiZkZoVYWhU&t=3718s>

Meditating with Awareness (5 minutes)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9YuPIV0c1pY>

[Photo from video]



COMMENTS ON THE AWARENESS TEACHING

July 2, 2017

[Several of you have asked for more explanation as to what Mingjur Rinpoche is teaching in the two videos in the previous blog, so I will do my best. If you have not watched those videos, it would help. Here goes:]

What Mingjur Rinpoche points out is that awareness is a given, that it is an active part of every living being on the planet. What is rare is our awareness of that awareness. Seemingly, that is what is in short supply. In other words, awareness is like the tip of a blowtorch, burning bright and always present with us, right there within each one of us, and every living being. It is working 24x7, whenever we use our mind. It's what allows us to read this page. It is what lights up our life each day, our clarity of seeing when we are aware of anything at all. But we don't look at our awareness, but rather just use it to see what we are looking at.

What we are not always aware of is our own awareness, that we (each of us) are already aware but don't realize it. That is what meditation is all about, to become aware of our natural awareness, not just once in a while, but constantly – all the time. There is no reason that we can't always be aware that we are aware, but we have to make a habit of it.

As mentioned, one problem with implementing being aware that we are aware is that we don't have a habit of being aware of our own awareness. We may have it pointed out to us that we are not aware of our innate awareness, and then turn our attention to that, but for how long? Sooner or later, if not almost immediately, we are back to focusing on whatever external affairs

we usually consider. We don't regularly look at our innate awareness.

To help with this, traditional meditation techniques like tranquility meditation, at least in the beginning, employ traditional supports (something to focus our mind on) so that it is easier to remain aware and mindful. It's like if we were in the swirling waters of a river, we might reach out and grab hold of a protruding branch to stabilize us. Typical external supports in meditation practice are things like focusing on a pebble or a twig, with the most common (and portable) external support being, of course, following our breath.

By focusing on an external support like a twig, we are not examining the qualities of the twig, but rather using the twig to remind us to stay mindful of our own awareness, to keep our eye on the ball. We focus on the twig, but in reality, like the photographer that used to say "watch the birdie," we are taking a snapshot and being mindful of our native awareness. In time, the awareness of our intrinsic awareness becomes a habit, much like in the Mahamudra Lineage Prayer of the Karma Kagyu, there is the line:

"As it is taught, unwavering attention is the body of meditation."

The phrase "unwavering awareness" contains the operative words here, along with pointing out that it makes up the body of meditation. How profound is that? And what better instructions could there be?

And it is so helpful that Mingjur Rinpoche points out the obvious, which is what dharma is all about: that we already (and always) have perfectly clear awareness (or could have if we just look) as to what is happening with us. Even if we are feeling confused,

we can note that we are confused and be clear about that. In these teachings, Rinpoche is pointing out this innate clarity, which is always present in us. And he goes on to lay out a roadmap as to how we can make that inner clarity a habit instead of a once-in-a-while observation.

In these teachings, Mingjur Rinpoche points out that all of the many traditional meditation techniques of the dharma have one thing in common, that they are about developing awareness of our innate awareness, which is not exactly rocket science. We can be aware of our awareness by just looking at our own awareness, the awareness that is reading this page. However, to maintain that awareness of our awareness takes developing some mental muscle-memory or habit to retain it, to keep observing it. And that, of course, is what all of the many meditation techniques are about.

If you grasp these teachings and check them out, it opens the door to identifying with the clarity of our seeing and not just with what is being seen, like seeing our sometimes confused state of mind. In other words, at the very least, we can be clear about our own confusion, i.e. that we feel confused. That awareness is not confused, and we can identify with it, instead of the confusion.

[Photo taken by me of a rupa representing the precious golden wheel or chakra in the mandala practice of the ngondro.]



VISITING A TIBETAN ORACLE

July 3, 2017

[I am going to post some stories over the next days about my experience with learning Mahamudra Meditation, my story, so to speak. But here is a little note about visiting the famous oracle of Ramoche Temple in Lhasa, Tibet.]

I have been an astrologer for over fifty years, so in 1997, when a Tibetan astrologer that I had brought over to our dharma center to help work on figuring out some tables for the astrological calendar in the Tsurphu astrological tradition (part of my lineage) heard that I would be going to Tibet and to Lhasa, he made a special request of me. He said that in Lhasa, near a monastery called the Ramoche Temple lived a very famous woman oracle. Would I go there during my visit, find the oracle, and give her a question that he wrote out in Tibetan and bring back her answer. I said, of course, I would try, and so we did.

Lhasa was the first major city we went to when we arrived in Tibet and it was there that the altitude sickness first really hit us, so it took several days to negotiate that. Walking up even a small flight of stairs felt like I was 100 years old. But we did more or less recover, and set about trying to find the oracle.

Well, we soon discovered that the Ramoche Temple is not some little shrine, but part of a whole complex, so finding the oracle soon found us searching down side streets and alleys. I spoke little to no Tibetan, so we depended on our Tibetan guide.

Anyway, after some serious searching we found the oracle. She was a very dignified lady in conservative

clothing, probably in her forties. Nothing like what might pass for a New-Age-style “oracle” here in the West. She was very quiet and quite formal, almost “tweedy.”

The oracle used a little copper mirror, something like the one shown here, but not as fancy. It did not even really reflect anything, but she looked in it anyway. And then she would interpret what came to her mind.

She answered the question for my Tibetan friend and our translator wrote it out. I have no idea what the question was or the answer. It was all in Tibetan. Then, on a lark, since we were already right there, we had her look in her mind at all our kids, one by one.

She told us about each one, and while I can’t repeat it here, because it is the kids business, a lot of it was remarkable and right on the money. More important, it helped me to understand my kids better and be more prepared to help them when they were older.

We went on with our trip, finally wending our way up the forty miles rock-road to Tsurphu Monastery, the ancestral home of H.H. the 17th Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje, with whom we spent some three days. I presented to His Holiness some of the work we had done on the Tsurphu astrological calendar. He gave me a dharma name “Tenzin Nyima,” which translates to something like “Holder of the Sun.” He did not know that in the West, as an astrologer, I am known for my work with heliocentric astrology, the astrology of the Sun. Go figure. The Karmapa was all of 12-years old at the time.

More stories in over the next few days.



ON THE VERGE

July 4, 2017

[I know I should not post twice in the same day, but I have a question for you that you might comment on, please.]

The dictionary says that the verge is “The point beyond which something begins or occurs.” So, “on the verge” is where I spend a lot of my time, lately, but on the verge of what, I probably can’t tell you, but I can feel it. It is a very uncomfortable (or incomplete) feeling, but also kind of hopeful. To modify a line from The Bard, “Something is happening here, but I don’t know what it is, do I.” No, I don’t.

I do know that, so far, there is no way of scratching this itch. The closest I have come to explaining it to myself is that I am on the verge of another form of meditating, one without worrying about thoughts, and one that wants to meditate for a very long time at that. I could be passing on, for all I know, but I don’t think that’s it.

I have been so active in my life that it could be I just need a rest and want to do absolutely nothing for a while. It’s like I am on the tip of the top of something, with nowhere else to go. All I can do is remain here, and somehow learn to rest in this unrest. There, that description comes real close to the reality, “rest in the unrest.”

To do this, I would have to let go and come to a floating rest, as I said, on the tip of the top of my consciousness. Yet, I can’t quite do that. I’m still a bit unsteady. I would rather not be minding this itch, but rather just resting in whatever there is, wherever I’m at.

Or, it could be that I am reaching a point, or need to, where I am making no effort in minding anything at all, but instead am just completely resting, allowing whatever “IS” to sustain me and hold me up. Perhaps, think of it as a hovercraft on the top of consciousness.

There, I have put it into words as best I can. Perhaps like the needle in the haystack, someone out there reading this that identifies and knows what to do with this state of mind can enlighten me about how to best use this situation. Then again, it could just be the far reach of one end of the pendulum that I call “me.”

Let me know if you know what I’m talking about.

MAHAMUDRA: MY STORY

July 4, 2017

[What follows, as I have time to present it, will be the story of my own introduction to and experience with learning Mahamudra meditation. Accounts of Mahamudra training will differ, but I find it helpful to hear from other practitioners how it is for them. If anything is tailor-made individually for the practitioner, it is Mahamudra practice. Anyhow, this is how it went for me. This will take several blogs, and questions are welcome.]

Here is the story of how I managed to get a glimpse of the recognition of the true nature of the mind. I write it not to boast or show off, but because having had this initial recognition, I immediately saw how simple it is and how all those years I had managed to look every-which-way-but-loose in trying to see it.

My wish is that something that I write here may make it easier for others to have this recognition. And, any teeny-tiny part of what I write here that is useful, I dedicate to all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, that they may further assist all sentient beings to become enlightened sooner than later.

BUDDHISM AS PHILOSOPHY

Growing up in Ann Arbor, home to the University of Michigan, meant that I was exposed to a cosmopolitan atmosphere most of my life. As early as the late 1950s, I had read a smattering of Buddhist literature, mostly Zen, although my take on the dharma back then was that it was intellectual, something that, like Existentialism, we would stay up late at night talking about while drinking instant coffee

and smoking cigarettes. In the 1960s, I toyed with some more advanced dharma concepts and certainly played a bit at meditation, particularly Zen Buddhism (where I sat Zazen), but it was not until the 1970s that I actually did what I would call any real practice, starting February 12, 1974, to be exact.

This was the date that the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche came to Ann Arbor to speak. I had read some of his books with great interest and was eager to see him in person. As it turned out, since few people knew of him, when I called the number that was posted on the announcement, I ended up as his chauffeur for the weekend, also designing the poster for his public talk. He was still that unknown.

After meeting Trungpa at the airport in my beat-up Ford station wagon, one of the first things that Trungpa did after I drove him to where he was to stay in Ann Arbor (after everyone left him to tour the university), was to beckon me into a small office room, sit me down in a chair, and spend an hour or so personally teaching me to meditate, although he never mentioned the word “meditation” and I had no idea what he was showing me. I was just very glad to be with him, to be in his presence. Years later, I understood that he was teaching me his version of tranquility meditation (shamata), with its emphasis on the out breath and resting in that.

It was Trungpa who first pointed out to me (and to everyone I knew interested in Buddhism) that the Buddha always intended the dharma as a method or life path, and not as something just to think and talk about. Back in 1974, that was real news to all of us. From that year onward, I tried to intensify my study of the dharma and learn to practice it. I was not all that

successful at practice, but I continued to be attracted to the great tradition of Tibetan Buddhism.

But it was not until 1983 that I found my personal or “root” teacher, the year that I met the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, the abbot of Karma Triyana Dharmachakra Monastery (KTD), which is located in the mountains above Woodstock, New York. That’s when I really became serious about dharma practice. Khenpo Rinpoche was the teacher I had always dreamed about meeting and I have been working with him ever since, some 34 years now.

And, of all the Buddhist teachings I have attended over the years since then, the yearly ten-day Mahamudra intensive with Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche at KTD has been the most striking and influential. The first ten-day Mahamudra teaching was in 1989 and this yearly event (I have not missed a one) is now going into its 30th year in 2018. In addition, sandwiched somewhere during that time were two years of intensive Mahamudra teachings and practice with His Eminence Tai Situ Rinpoche, one of the regents of the Karma Kagyu lineage.

This article is not an introduction to Mahamudra meditation, but simply a recounting of my encounter with this profound technique and its effects on me personally. Mahamudra meditation is considered the main form of meditation practice among the Karma Kagyu lineage of Tibetan Buddhism.

I am not trying in this short piece to teach or even introduce readers to the more advanced techniques of Mahamudra meditation. Here, it will have to be enough to simply say that to learn Mahamudra meditation, one has to first understand it conceptually (at least a bit) and then work with a qualified teacher

who can actually point out to you (help you recognize) the true nature of the mind, after which (if you grasp the pointing out instructions), you must diligently practice the Mahamudra techniques. This much information is readily available all over the Internet. As for myself, I have had a great deal of teachings on Mahamudra and have been well exposed to it analytically as well, which simply means that I understand conceptually the basic ideas and have learned the practice.

Academic or conceptual understanding of Mahamudra by itself can never qualify as “recognition” of the mind’s nature, much less realization (except perhaps over innumerable lifetimes). Mahamudra meditation, by definition, is beyond the reasoning mind. In a similar vein, the many experiences that I have had that might be related to Mahamudra, bits of illumination for a day or part of a day, also are not what Mahamudra is about either. While many or most Tibetan Buddhist practices are designed for gradual progress toward illumination (a smooth incline), Mahamudra practice has at least one very clear speed bump and its right at the beginning, and that is: recognizing the true nature of the mind. You either have or you have not had that recognition; there is no “Well, maybe I have and maybe I haven’t.” If you have it, you know it. If you are not 100% certain, then you have not had it. In general, that is the case.

RECOGNITION

Because it IS a threshold event, recognizing the nature of the mind has become a huge topic of speculation among those who read about and are learning to practice Mahamudra, replete with wild expectations and preconceptions based on the

imaginings of those who have never had the realization.

As mentioned, “Recognition” of the mind’s nature is one of those experiences (actually, a realization), and they say, that if you have any doubt whatsoever about your recognition, then you have not had it. And this is a real arrogance-stopper for most of us. If we are being honest, we know we have not had that realization, no matter how much we wish we had. In the Zen tradition, this recognition is called “Kensho,” and they make just as much fuss about it as the Tibetans. And most important, our expectations and hopes about what that realization is like are ultimately perhaps the single greatest barrier to actually having the realization itself.

You can’t recognize the true nature of the mind many times, but only once, although some are said to have “glimpses.” If you have to do it repeatedly, then you are just having various ‘experiences’ of the mind, but have not yet recognized anything. This is because ‘Recognition’ is not some kind of temporary experience, spiritual high, or lofty state of mind, like many imagine. And recognition is not enlightenment!

Instead, it is simply finally recognizing or seeing for ourselves how the mind actually works for the first time, just as we might recognize an old friend in a crowd or it is like one of those figure-ground paintings where suddenly we see the embedded image within the larger painting. It is a simple “recognition,” a recognizing, and not a transport to some blissful state of enlightenment.

As mentioned, “Recognition” is a not transport to a higher state, much less enlightenment. In other words, in recognizing the mind’s nature, we don’t

graduate to some higher plane. In fact, it is just the opposite. Recognition is finally realizing the nature of our own mind and how it works, just as it naturally is. And like all realizations, recognition, unlike spiritual experiences, does not fluctuate up and down. Once you have it, you always have it. It is like when we realize how to turn on and off a light switch; we never forget. Only, in the case of recognizing our own mind's nature, it is somewhat of a more dramatic realization, to say the least.

Enlightenment and the path toward it is what we begin to work toward AFTER recognition of the mind's true nature. Of course, there is no way for me to communicate this properly with words. However, I wish I had understood this distinction early on. It would have been a huge help.

As mentioned, 'recognition' is like gazing at those figure-ground paintings; you can't fake it. You can give up looking, but either you see the embedded image or you do not. You can memorize what you are told you should see, but finally you either recognize the mind's true nature or you do not. And recognition is just the beginning of real practice, not the end or any kind of final result or stage. This is key. Recognition is your ante in, only the doorway to Mahamudra practice. You literally cannot do Mahamudra practice without that initial recognition, so it is like the ring-pass-not or guardian on the threshold that the western occultists often write about.

Practitioners like me can study and undertake most dharma practices and work up a pretty good semblance of a successful practice. We can certainly talk ourselves into believing we are going somewhere and perhaps others are impressed too. But this is why they call it "practice" and term the practices we do

“Preliminaries,” because they are just that: prelims, qualifying exams, and a getting ready for the actual work which has yet to begin. “Recognition” is the where dharma practice catches fire.

Next, on with my story.

MAHAMUDRA: MY STORY (Part 2)

July 5, 2017

THE 10-DAY MAHAMUDRA INTENSIVES

My teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, had given what are called the “pointing out instructions” once before at the yearly ten-day Mahamudra teachings, but try as I might, I had failed to grasp what it was that actually was being pointed out, and so my experience remained largely conceptual. I read about it. I was not able to actually practice Mahamudra, because I had not yet had a glimpse of the true nature of my own mind, which, as mentioned, is a prerequisite (by definition) for Mahamudra practice.

Then, at the ten-day Mahamudra teachings at KTD monastery in 2005, while studying a text by Karma Chagme Rinpoche called “The Union of Mahamudra and Dzogchen,” Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche once again gave the pith instructions, what are called the “pointing-out” instructions, the instructions by and through which a receptive student may be able to recognize the true nature of the mind. These instructions were part of the actual text by Karma Chagme Rinpoche, which my teacher was presenting and commenting on.

ANALYTICAL MEDITATION

Of course, I had heard all the words before. I had been repeatedly exposed to what is called the Analytical Tradition, in particular the “The Analytical Meditation of a Pandita,” which is often introduced by asking the student to actually look at his or her own mind and answer simple questions like “Is the mind the color red?” or “Is the mind the color blue?” This

kind of talk had always been a super yawn for me, for it was obvious to me that the mind is not red or blue. What was this all about? I could never understand why something as profound as Buddhism could resort to such simple questions.

So, I had heard this kind of presentation for years (in many formats) and I always told myself (privately) that 'this' particular kind of teaching was probably not for me. Either I didn't get it at all or it was too easy. I couldn't tell, but I knew the mind was not the color blue. Perhaps some academic pundit delighted in answering such questions, but it was the best I could do to politely ignore the temptation to be condescending of this approach. Is the mind red? Of course it's not red. The mind is not red! And so I not-so-patiently waited until particular section of the teaching was over and we could hopefully get to some of the good stuff, something juicier that would actually grab me.

But, in Rinpoche's presentation I WAS intrigued to learn that in Tibet, when this approach was presented, monks would be given a question such as "Is the mind red?" and then asked to go off and think about it for three entire days and nights, then come back and give their answers, after which they would be given a similar question, but perhaps with the color 'green', and this would go on for something like three months. Hmmm.

Hearing this troubled me, for monks (not to mention rinpoches) are not foolish people. What on earth was this all about I wondered, this asking: what color is the mind? And it is no secret teaching; the same analytical approach has been taught all over India for centuries. Anyway, I finally stopped trying to wait this section out and began to pay more attention to what

Rinpoche was presenting. It took a while, but my take-away from all of this questioning stuff was that Rinpoche was asking us to actually stop thinking academically (conceptually) about this and simply go and look at our mind and see for ourselves if it was red or green or whatever the question was. And that approach VERY slowly began to sink in.

LOOK AT THE MIND

I meant no disrespect, but I had never before followed Rinpoche's request to look at the mind to see if it was red or blue because I felt the question made no sense to me or that I already knew the answer. Yet, in this teaching I was also starting to pick up on the fact that Rinpoche was not asking us to think, but rather asking us to get off our mental duffs and actually make an effort to look at (and in) our own mind, right there on the spot.

I had of course always assumed that I already knew my own mind. After all, I was a dharma practitioner and it was 'my' mind, but now I was hearing something just a little different. Perhaps my habitual familiarity with my mind had not included actually looking at the mind itself, although I automatically assumed I had already done that long ago, back when I learned to meditate. In truth, I knew something about using the mind, but had never really looked into or at the mind itself.

And so, very slowly at first (and not without some struggle), I actually began to make efforts to stop just looking outward at what was going on around me, and instead turned and tried to look inward at the mind itself. I mean, I looked! This was not easy.

Of course, I was already familiar with the little chatter-box inside my head, whoever it is that plans out my

day for me, saying things to me like, "It is almost time for lunch" or "You have a dentist appointment tomorrow," and so on. Whoever that inner person is, it is not really me, and I didn't like him or 'it' very much. It is annoying and way too much of a nag. And it yammers on ceaselessly. So, I began to at least differentiate myself from that uptight narrator in my head. That talking voice was no friend of mine -- just not my kind of people.

And Rinpoche was asking that we look at whomever (or whatever) it is inside of us that is looking at all the stuff happening outside in the world. I guess that would be "me." Now, this was a whole lot more difficult than just putting some distance between me and my internal narrator. When I tried to look at "who" in there was doing the looking at the outside, it or "I" just would not hold still. It was like those magnets that repel one another. Every time I would try to look at the 'looker', the whole thing would kind of flip around. It was very tiring to even try. You can try it now for yourselves: just look at who is reading this page. Try and find the 'who'.

Meanwhile, what was happening through all of this was that I was very gradually beginning to exercise 'mind muscles' that (to my knowledge) had never been exercised before in my life. And they were soon the equivalent of very sore or very stiff muscles - hard to move around. I had never done this kind of thing before and it amounted to giving me a mental Charlie Horse. It cramped up my mind and was very awkward, but it 'was' a new experience.

The whole thing was a little like trying to erect a large circus tent in the middle of my mind, struggling to push up massive tent poles to stretch and raise the canvas until I had some mental room to just look

around in there. And it was hard work, for these mental muscles had perhaps never been exercised before.

And, as silly as it seemed to me, I even began looking to see if my mind was red or some other color, whether my mind was located in my head, my heart, or my belly, and so on. Of course, the answers were all negatives, just as I had always thought, but in the process I was up and walking around in there, getting to know the place a bit. And so it went. Was that what Rinpoche wanted us to do?

Where before I had kind of mentally slept through this kind of questioning, now I at least was going through the motions – getting some mental exercise. I was also following the instructions from my teacher, which I had so conveniently ignored up to that point because I thought these questions went without asking. Instead, I was asking them again myself, doing what Rinpoche was requesting us to do. And that little bit of exercise began to open up doors for me.

The teaching went on like this for days, as Rinpoche very carefully led us into actually looking at our minds. And I was finally following along. These simple exercises help, this plus the fact that apparently by this time I had done enough practice over the years (or somehow managed to accumulate enough merit or whatever it was that I had needed) so that I actually was able to recognize or glimpse the true nature of my mind. It was not what I had expected. There was no lightning bolt from on high, but more like an exclamation point! Needless to say, it was nothing like I had led myself to believe all these years.

Of course, my expectations were whatever I had managed to distill from books and the teachings,

mixed with the tales of other practitioners and then sealed with my personal take on things; in other words: a jumble. Like most of us learning this, my preconceptions and expectations had managed to thoroughly cloud and obscure an otherwise cloudless sky. Here it is worthwhile to backtrack and take a closer look at what I had expected.

THE POINTING OUT INSTRUCTIONS

It is said in the Mahamudra teachings that the main and perhaps only function of the guru is to point out to the student the true nature of the mind. After that it is up to the student. “The Nature of the Mind,” this phrase immediately raises expectations reminiscent of the realm of Zen koan-dramas. One thing I never had managed to understand is that recognizing the nature of the mind is not the same as enlightenment (whatever that is), so let’s start there, and this is important:

What is meant by the phrase “recognizing the nature of the mind” (as I understand it) is more like being able to finally see the actual problem I was having with meditation and the mind all along, like: I had no idea what the mind was about, and that is embarrassing.

And, having finally had some recognition, I then saw that the nature of the mind is not something beyond my current reach (as I had always implicitly assumed), not a place to get to, but rather more like very simply seeing how the mind actually worked for the first time, seeing that the mind (my mind) was in fact quite ‘workable,’ as in: “Hey, I can do that!” And I finally could see a little into how I might work it. And being a somewhat clever guy, this was a very practical revelation. So, this is what seeing the true

nature of the mind is all about, a new take on practice, not some euphoric rush of bliss.

Perhaps the most important result of recognition is that the responsibility for getting enlightened immediately switched from books, texts, and my teacher onto me. What I saw or recognized made “me” responsible, and only me. That had never happened before. I was always looking for someone or something on the outside strong enough to affect me and somehow enlighten me. With this event, I realized that it doesn’t come from outside! It never could.

As obvious as it seems, I could see that was not about to ever happen and I could now see why. Only I could enlighten myself. It was my job, not someone else’s. In pointing out the nature of the mind to me, and my somehow getting the gist of it, Rinpoche had completed his responsibility to me and succeeded in making me fully responsible for the first time. I responded! But with that responsibility also came some insight on how this mind training business could be done.

When I originally read in the classic texts about “seeing the nature of the mind,” I assumed and expected some grand fireworks-like display and that I would be immediately transported into some transcendental state of illumination. You know: “enlightenment” or something like it, whatever I had imagined that was all these years.

Expectations are seldom ever our friend and almost always obscure the actual path and the reality. It might be better to say the teacher points out the nature of ‘how’ the mind works rather than simply say the teacher points out “the nature of the mind.” The

'nature of the mind' seems so mysterious, yet the actuality is anything but that. In my case, the less that is left to the imagination, the better. My imagination has filled me with preconceptions and impossible expectations all my life.

In other words, at least in my recognition, the 'Aha!' experience was not "Aha!, this is finally some enlightenment," but rather a simple: "Aha! I get it now. So this is how the mind works; even a beginner like me can do that! This is actually workable, something I could actually do."

It is remarkable how in an instant, my years of expectations vanished and were replaced by something simply practical that finally made real sense to me. How absolutely encouraging!

The "pointing out" instructions didn't in any way mark the end of my practice and my graduation to some higher "bodhisattva-like" level (like I had always wondered or imagined), but rather the end of my imitating what it is I thought practice was supposed to be and the very beginning of actual useful practice. Finally, I got the general idea of how to work with my mind and understood in a flash that I had been mistaken about this all of my dharma life, like perhaps 30+ years!!!

For the first time I saw simply how the mind works and that there was no reason that I (as I am, warts and all) could not just do it. And that WAS a new experience, to somehow be at the same level with reality – to see it clearly. It was up to me to figure out just how to work with this new information and to put the time in. Perhaps most important of all, I suddenly had the enthusiasm and energy to make it work that I had been missing all along. No more boredom and

laziness when it came to dharma practice. Finally, I wanted to do it! No forced effort required.

And while the fact was perhaps less exotic than what I had mistakenly expected, it was (if my opinion counts) the first tangible result of many years (decades) of practice, and it was not just a passing experience, but a simple realization as to what had to happen next, like: when you realize how something works, you just get it. You don't forget, because it is not a simple experience, but recognition. That quite ordinary insight was a form of recognition, and it was permanent.

In reality, for me this was a huge result after about 32 years of meditation of the "sounds-like-this" variety, years during which I sincerely went through the motions, but with little result that I could see. I had been rubbing the sticks and getting little heat and no fire. Suddenly, there was some heat and also fire. While not what I had expected, this was what I had always dreamed about having happen: visible progress.

(To be continued)

MAHAMUDRA: MY STORY (Part 3)

July 5, 2017

THE WORKABLE MIND

After I had a glimpse of “Recognition,” the mind was suddenly workable for me; all I had to do was to work it, and I could now see that even I could do it! After perhaps thirty years, I actually understood something about meditation. Not the enlightenment-revelation I had in my expectations, not the thunderbolt from above, not something beyond this world of Samsara, but something much more down to earth and already very close to me – the nature of “my” mind, that is: how to work with it. After all my years of theoretical “practice,” things finally got practical and therefore actual meditation could begin and not just practice. Nevertheless, as minimal as perhaps my realization was, it brought about a profound change in my approach to meditation (and to my life!).

I left that year’s ten-day teaching with a very different idea as to what my practice was going to be about. For one, it was now crystal clear to me that the amount of daily practice I was able to squeeze out up to that time would never be enough to get me to any kind of enlightened state. It was like going to church only on Sunday for an hour. Being the devious, lazy, bad boy that I am, I would never get to heaven at that rate. I had never been that much of an angel anyway, more like the black sheep of my family, and that too was a problem.

I could now see that mind practice required way more effort than the small amount of practice I had been doing each day, which practice itself (over time) I had nickel and dimed to death as it was. It seemed that

everything else in my life managed to come first and distract from my dharma practice and, on top of that, my whole approach to practice was cloaked in expectations, disappointment, and finally frugality of effort. At that point in my life, I was doing as little actual practice as I could get away with and still look at myself in the mirror. I was worn out.

Worst of all, practice was not a joyful affair for me. It was something I just did and continued to do, sometimes only because to not do it at all would be more horrible than the pain of actually doing it. I could not even consider the consequences of just stopping practice altogether, although I was very tired of it. Quitting was just too scary to consider. The dharma was too much a part of my ego, my identity, to just stop practicing. If I wasn't a dharma practitioner, what the heck was I doing with my life?

But what I now realized was that, like it or not, my daily practice (even in the best of times) had been simply way too small an effort to ever get very far along my personal dharma path. At best, the most practice I had ever done was around two hours a day, and even that much practice would probably not be enough to clear the various obscurations I had managed to collect. I needed a full time dharma practice and I was a part-time player.

One thing I did realize from Rinpoche's pointing out instructions was that all of my years chained to the computer as a programmer had given me a real ability to concentrate and for long hours at a time. That was not all bad. As a computer programmer, I often would work 12 or even 14 hours a day glued to the tube, as they say. And, although the computer work might not be particularly dharmic in nature, the concentration I had acquired was quite real, lacking perhaps only a

more pure motive than making money, although that is not fair to me. In my life, I have always turned my hobbies into ways of making money, so mostly I loved what I did for a living and did it with a pure heart. If only I could tackle dharma with the concentration and enthusiasm that I put into my various computer and entrepreneurial projects. I had been thinking and dreaming about this for years. And here it was!

The pointing out instructions I had received from Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche and the resulting technique it inspired (and made possible) was something that actually stood up very well off the cushion, that is: in everyday life, in what is called post-meditation.

PUTTING THE TECHNIQUE TO WORK

I slowly began to apply the techniques of mind training I was learning to what I was doing on the computer all day long. During my computer work, whenever I would catch myself in a distraction, when I popped out of whatever I was deeply involved in and found myself once again outside my concentration zone and just looking around, I would attempt to practice Mahamudra meditation and then dedicate the merit – hundreds of times a day. It could be as simple as a dog bark, a phone call, the doorbell, an unwelcome thought, etc., whatever it took to startle me out of what I was concentrating on. The result was that I was suddenly forced out of whatever I had been focused on and just instantly there – awake in the moment. Those gaps in my concentration were the only instants I had to insert dharma into my work, but there were a lot of them.

It was in those gaps or moments that I would remember to look at the nature of my mind or the nature of the thought that I was having. In the

beginning it was only momentary glimpses, brief glances at the nature of a thought, at the nature of the mind, but I persevered. After all, I had virtually nothing better to do with my time in those moments anyway, so whenever I found myself startled or popping out of whatever I was engrossed in, I took that opportunity to at least try and look at the nature of my mind, and to then rest in that true nature as much as I could. In this process, I was gradually exercising the mind.

I had seen the nature of my own mind, how it works, which as I mentioned does not mean I was enlightened in any way, only that I had realized something about how the mind actually worked or was, and even that tiny look was enough to begin unraveling some of the obscurations I had labored under all my life. And I liked what I saw and was beginning to learn to rest in the nature of the mind, however brief those times might be.

Those moments of resting were short, at first perhaps more like nanoseconds than something more enduring, but the total amount of actual practice time I was doing off the cushion added up to more than I had been able to practice at any other times in my day, including time spent on the cushion, which at that time was a kind of a joke. Every time I headed for the cushion, it seemed like I put on the robes of expectation, arrogance, embarrassment, past failures, and irritation. The cushion was eventually going to get a much-needed rest, but at that point this was still some time in the future.

This new process of post-mediation practice was not something I could measure in days or even months. It took about three years of this kind of exploration before I really had it down to any useful degree, but it WAS useful and it actually worked, which translates

to: perhaps for the first time in my many years of mind practice, I really liked practice, something I had devoutly wished for all those years. If there was one thing I was ashamed of and always feared, it was that I could not find much joy in practicing. I knew that this was not the way it should be, but I was powerless to bring joy to something I could not find the joy in. And it took the shock of an outside event to really push me over the edge into totally new territory. Next is that story.

MAHAMUDRA: MY STORY (Part 4)

July 6, 2017

ON MY OWN AGAIN

[This part of the story is a long one folks, but to tell it right, we need the whole story.]

I had been working for the preceding four years or so as a senior consultant to a subsidiary of NBC, one specializing in astrology, something I know quite a lot about – 50 some years of experience. I was putting in long hours for them (and for myself), because I was building content, something I am well-known for in my career as an archivist of popular culture, creator of the All-Music Guides (allmusic.com), the All-Movie Guide (allmovie.com) and other entertainment sites. It is not unusual for me to put in 12 or 14 hours, seven days a week. I was getting up at 3 or 4 in the morning most days, concentrating on programming, on creating thousands of tarot-like cards for astrology in Adobe Illustrator, writing courses, and other text-related projects. And I took plenty of joy in that.

All of these tasks were perfect to test out my Mahamudra practice, which was coming along really well. All it lacked was the motivation that comes with a worthy object. In other words, I was practicing Mahamudra while working on essentially mundane tasks, instead of the “dharma” itself, although my intent and motivation for astrology were very pure and heartfelt. Now, if I could only transfer my new love of dharma practice to sitting on the cushion!

SUDDENLY FREE

In late May of 2008, while attending an astrology conference in Denver, Colorado (along with 1,500 other astrologers), the head of the NBC outfit I was working for, who was also at the conference, told me that I no longer would have a job with them after June. In an attempt to pare down expenses, NBC laid off a lot of folks, and I happened to be one of them. Of course, this was a real shock to me, since I had been working so hard at it, and the financial ramifications simply meant that

I would soon have no income whatsoever. At almost 67 years of age at the time, finding a job was probably not too easy, even though I had a lot of skills and experience plus a good reputation. But it went beyond that for me. It was one of those corners life offers us that we somehow just have to get around.

After the shock of hearing I would soon have no job (which ruined the conference for me), it turned out that I had to leave the astrology conference a few days early when I found out that His Holiness the 17th Karmapa was suddenly making his first visit to the United States and to his main seat in this country, Karma Triyana Dharmachakra Monastery (KTD) in the mountains above Woodstock, New York. This was our monastery! I could not miss that event and, as it turned out, I could be useful as part of a video team to film the event. As it turned out, personally, I was able to film some events where they didn't really want anyone present. I had been around KTD so long that I was pretty much some kind of fixture there anyway, so they asked me to do it.

I would love to tell readers about the visit of His Holiness, but that would be a whole other story, but the gist of it was that seeing His Holiness was a big shot in the arm for me. I also took hundreds of still photos of the event and after I got home, within a few weeks, I had made a 200-page coffee-table sized book of the visit of His Holiness which I made available for the close sangha. You can download it here, if interested and see by their faces how happy folks were.

http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/KarmapaKTD_2008.pdf

The book was inspired, not so much by me as a photographer, as by the fact that all of the people I was photographing had just been with His Holiness and were shining with happiness and had a light that was clearly obvious in the photographs.

The time with His Holiness certainly helped to put the fact that I no longer had a job into some perspective, but to suddenly be without a paycheck was a shock, and it sure went through my system like a lightning. Where before I was working long hours at my job, suddenly I had all kinds of time on my hands – a really big gap of time in my life. Talking about popping out

of what you were focused in (the so-called gap in Mahamudra practice), well, this loss of a job to support my family was a really huge and shocking gap, and I popped out big time. Here is how I was able to actually look at that gap:

THE PHOTOGRAPHER

I had been working as an entrepreneur without a break (or a gap) for over thirty-six years straight. When you work for yourself, you don't have weekends and holidays off, or at least you don't live for them. When you love your work, time off and vacations are meaningless or, worse, boring. That is how I always experience them. And now, with all this time on my hands, my past interest in photography (and recent photo work at KTD Monastery with the Karmapa) began to come out, and photography plays an important role in my story.

I had been deemed a photographer by my father (a really good photographer himself) ever since he had given me a little Kodak Retina 2a camera back in 1954, when I was something like 13 and sent me on about a 3,000 mile trip across the U.S. and Canada (with a dip into Mexico) on a bus with a bunch of kids my age. He had explained to me before I left how to take good pictures, and I listened. Apparently I had taken some great pictures because he couldn't say enough about them when I returned, perhaps the only time my dad ever felt that way about anything I had done. The long and the short of it is that I came away from that time as a kid with the sense (perhaps only in my own mind) that I had a really good eye for photography.

And I had been toying with photography for a number of years. Like many of us, I had of course taken the requisite shots of my family, our dogs, and what not. And, as part of a large archival database that I created for documenting rock and roll concert posters, I had purchased a Nikon D1x system and carefully photographed some 33,000+ posters. For this, I had built my own vacuum table, had an exact light setup, and so on. So, I knew at least something about photography.

But in the late spring of 2008, after falling out of a job, I found myself embracing photography more deeply, perhaps just as a way to find some stability from my chaotic life at the time. And then there was my interest in nature. Even though this

breakthrough (for me) Mahamudra event happened only some years ago, I have trouble pinpointing just how I happened to start going out into nature again. I was a trained naturalist and had intensely studied nature from the time I was about 6 years old until in my late teens, and I mean intensely. In my early teens I was even given a tiny office at the University of Michigan Museums building, just because I was somewhat precocious. I was into it.

My wife loves nature and for the last many years had done all she could to get me out in the woods, streams, and fields again, but I had pretty much declined the invitation. I don't know why exactly. Perhaps it was because I felt that nature had been early-on my real teacher and I had learned my lessons. Certainly school had taught me almost nothing. Whatever life lessons I carried came from observing how nature behaved, and, once learned, I was unwilling to open up that book again. Why is that?

Now that I think about it, here is probably the reason: My favorite female vocalist of all time is Billie Holliday. No other voice has moved me so utterly than she has. That being said, the fact is that I don't listen to Billie Holliday very often, hardly ever. Why? Because I have to really prepare myself or work up to hearing her sing, because she puts me through so very much emotionally that I am not always ready to let that happen. I tell you this because it is the same with nature and her lessons.

THE NATURALIST

I studied natural history for so many years and with such diligence that there was not much I missed as to what goes on out there in the woods and meadows. I know every frog, salamander, and snake, not to mention insects, and you-name-it. I not only know them, I know all about their lives and deaths. I have caught them, held them, and loved them.

Nature is so absolutely candid and direct that she leaves almost nothing to the imagination. Nature does not know mercy. It is all laid out for anyone to see, and it is not a story without emotional affects. I did not need to become a Buddhist to love the life in every living creature. I always felt that way. When I was confirmed in my early teens as part of

Catholic ritual, my chosen confirmation name was Francis, after St. Francis of Assisi, the saint who loved and protected animals. That was me. I have often joked that I like animals better than people, and I wasn't being all that funny. It is kind of true. The Buddhists tell us that animals are bewildered. I feel great compassion for their bewildered state. I am working on feeling the same compassion toward human beings.

So nature, like listening to Billie Holiday, was probably something that I really had to work up to as far as re-immersion is concerned. It is just way too sensitive for words. Nature is beautiful, but nature is raw. Every last animal out there lives in constant fear. They are always looking over their shoulder for something bigger than they are that wants to eat them. And they are always looking for some smaller animal to eat. They have almost no rest their entire lives.

The whole concept of impermanence and the fragility of life are everywhere present in nature. The countless tiny tadpoles that don't mature before the spring pond dries out, the mass of worms and slugs that get caught on the tarmac as the fierce sun comes over the horizon and dries them to a crisp, the huge Luna Moth that is so heavy it can hardly fly, flutters in the still morning light, trying to find a tree to hide in for the day, and is snapped up by the bird just as it tries to land, etc. You get the idea. It is endless and merciless.

And this is not an isolated story, not the exception that proves the rule, but just the opposite: this is the rule, with almost no exceptions, ever! Life is brief, fear-filled, and accident prone for almost all sentient life.

And humankind is not an exception, although we choose to ignore how Samsara (our confused state) actually is. We are one of the very few beings that have any real control over our destiny and we never have as much control as we imagine. The rest of the animal world are simply bewildered, too stunned by their lack of real intelligence to protect themselves.

I trust you get the idea here that I am painting; it is one of a nature that has no mercy, and death is inexorable in its presence and swiftness. Nature is also incredibly beautiful. Is it any wonder that I had to cross over some kind of threshold

to really want to take a closer look at nature again? I already knew well what nature is about. You get the point.

BACK TO NATURE

But in that year of 2008, I was not in an ordinary frame of mind. I had just been shaken out of every sense of safe I knew, at least financially. I had been put out, turned loose, and set free from any path or trajectory I thought I was on. So, it is no surprise that I easily crossed over that threshold, one I had avoided for so many years, and immersed myself once again in nature, the way things actually are. I already was completely vulnerable, reminded personally to the quick how things can be when we have no control. I was in the mood to lose myself in actuality of nature, to immerse myself in its reality. And the camera was probably my ticket to ride, my excuse to get lost (yet found) in nature once again. It was like finding my roots, like going home. And it was somehow consoling.

I became absolutely fascinated with photos and camera work, what is called close-up or macro photography. For me, this meant close-up photography of nature and all the living things surrounding us. And in what was perhaps also a symbolic gesture, I got out of my office. For years, I had been afraid to leave my office lest I miss an important phone call or whatever next thing I was waiting for. As mentioned, my wife had tried just about everything to get me out of my stick-in-the-mud office, but to no avail. But now, I just walked out into the fields. It was dramatic. I vacated.

Each morning would find me out in the meadows and woods at sunrise, just as the sun came up, lugging my camera equipment around. There in the mist and dew-covered fields I would be photographing all that was beautiful or, many times, just sitting there in the grass, soaking wet, as the first sun rays peeked over the trees, and simply doing nothing. Here is a poem I wrote about that.

TIME FOR NOTHING

Excuse me for the moment,
No matter the reasons why.

I just need more time to do nothing,
But gaze into clear empty sky.

And I am not talking about just weekends. I watched almost every sunrise from around late May through November, until it became just too cold to take my camera or myself outside for extended periods of time. Think about that for a moment: I watched EVERY sunrise for half a year and this after seldom ever leaving my office for 30 or so years. Think when the last time you saw the sun rise was. My family must have been puzzled.

As I look back on it now, it was of course a very remarkable time. Here I am remarking on it! But what was most remarkable about this time was not at first apparent to me, and this is what I want to tell you about here.

PHOTOGRAPHY AND MAHAMUDRA

The experience I had accumulated over the preceding three years or so, doing Mahamudra practice on my computer, had kind of extended itself to anytime I did close concentrated work. I am at home with drudgery, at home in very concentrated and tedious work. I need only point to that fact that I single-handedly (and later with a staff of many hundreds) recorded, reviewed, and documented every piece of recorded music from 10-inch records on up to the present. Similarly, we documented every single film and movie, complete with its entire cast, and video games, plus rock posters, etc. You get the idea. I can be obsessive. My personal collection of CDs (which I no longer own) now sits in a warehouse in Ann Arbor, numbering well over 700,000 CDs and counting.

My point, as mentioned, is that I have a high tolerance for tedium. And nothing is more time consuming and demanding of concentration than computer programming and video editing, that was: before I encountered macro photography.

And I don't know for sure why I got into macro (close-up) photography, as opposed to landscape photography or just walking in the woods and meadows, but I have a guess. It could have been that looking through an open lens with real great clarity at a tiny diorama, at a world that was obviously

ever-so-much more perfect than the one I was used to (or experiencing at the time) somehow was freeing to me. Every tiny fly and insect appeared so incredibly complete, so bright and perfect in every respect at the micro level.

The outer (and business) world that I knew had beautiful patches and rotten ones too, areas that were stained beyond appreciation. But here, in the micro world, you could always find some little bit of perfection, perhaps a newly hatched dragonfly that was absolutely fresh in every way. And I particularly like dioramas, miniature scenes - the tiniest of landscapes. I was transported by what I was seeing.

I can tell you that nothing I have ever done requires as much patience and concentration as doing macro photography. It can take half an hour of excruciating pain to hold a physical position with a tripod and camera until the wind manages to die down, just to take a single photograph of a flower or insect. And I am NOT known for my patience, but in photographing nature I had found a worthy teacher.

AND LENSES...

Before long I was spending up to several of the best hours of the day (at dawn) immersed in peering through various special lenses at the lives of tiny critters and plants. I soon found myself searching for finer and finer lenses, so I could see ever more clearly into these very perfect micro worlds. Yet, I still just couldn't see clearly enough, so I just needed even better and better lenses. The outside day-to-day world I lived in might seem dingy and worn much of the time, but these micro worlds were as fresh as a new flower or just-hatched butterfly. And: I was soaking it up.

Without really thinking about it, I was using all of my Mahamudra experience and techniques here in these micro worlds. And I literally mean "without thinking!" As I concentrated on this photographing, looking deep into and through the lens, I began having extended periods of resting my mind, but I was not at first fully aware of this. I mean: it was true rest. As I look back now, I can see that I was (me,

Michael) absolutely resting my mind and life in the tiny scenes I was peering through lenses to see.

I was finding deep rest in those miniature scenes. And I so much needed the rest that I was not at first aware that I was (I believe) also resting my mind in a dharmic way, and in a profound sense. When I point out that I was not fully aware of what was happening, this is an important point.

Please keep in mind that I was holding a precise position with camera and tripod, frozen to a stance, so that a tiny insect does not fly away, and at the same time waiting for the incessant Michigan wind to die down long enough to take a photograph. All the while I am peering through this very special light-gathering lens into a micro world at a tiny critter. And clarity! The world I could see in there was awesome, beautiful, and so very, very clear. I was resting in that clarity, resting my mind. And I loved what it did for me. It was beyond thought or thinking. I didn't care about the resulting photograph; I was in love with the sheer process of "Seeing."

For some reason, through the looking glass (so to speak), I was able to rest my mind like I had not been able to do it on the cushion or even in my work, and for a long time at that! It would take a book to explain what resting the mind is really all about. No, a book could not communicate what I am referring to here. It would take being personally shown how to rest the mind, but I can't do that here and I don't see myself as a teacher, but as a sharer of dharma.

Before I knew it, I was looking forward to these forays into the dawn as if my life depended on it. I could not wait to get up every morning, go outside in the fields, and launch myself into this particular state of mind. I vaguely knew this was connected to my practice, but that knowledge was not important at the time, which tells you something by itself. In fact, it was the furthest thing from my mind. I just liked getting my 'mind right' out there in nature. I was fascinated by what I saw through those lenses. In the end, of course, what I was seeing was related to my own mind. It was totally addictive.

TURNING THE MIND

As I look back today, what was really taking place is all too clear, and nature held just the reminders I needed to keep my attitude adjusted. The four Common Preliminaries of Buddhist practice, what are often called the “Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind toward the Dharma” are ever present in the natural world, things like the preciousness of life, impermanence, the laws of karma, etc. All of these are literally magnified and obvious in Mother Nature, where kill or be killed, eat or be eaten, and things like a flower that blooms for one night, a huge moth that lives but 24-hours, etc. continually reminded me of those precious four thoughts. I didn’t have to remind myself. Life in nature reminded me instant by instant, day by day. It can be heartbreaking. I had not looked at impermanence this closely for many years, but I was looking at it now. Raw Nature is the best reminder of the “Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind” that I know of or want to know of.

For that spring, summer, and fall, I was really away from the madding crowd, off by myself, observing my own mind in the midst of purely natural phenomena. But what I did not at first see was how much I was changing; perhaps “stabilizing” is a better word. It was my mind and my practice that were stabilizing. When I was out in the field and flowers, I could rest my mind, I could see the nature of thoughts as they arose, look at their nature, watch them dissolve, and not drag around some sad thought all day long. I was thrilled at the crystal clarity of the mind. But most of all I was finding rest, resting my mind in all that clarity -- deeply seeing.

Where before in my daily life I was perhaps engrossed in figuring out why so-and-so did this or that or how I managed to embarrass myself in some situation, now thoughts like that could be seen, not for their content, but in their actual nature and I watched them just dissolve like dew on the grass or clouds in the sky. In an instant they were gone, back where they came from, away, and I was not etching yet another karma track deep in my mind. The Beatles phrase “I’m looking through you” comes to mind. That’s what I did with thoughts, looked through them like windows into the mind itself.

Each morning I was up way before dawn, gathering my equipment and heading out the door. It seemed I could not get enough of what I was finding out there in nature, peering through my camera lenses, but in reality I was learning to rest in the true nature of my mind. I was practicing Mahamudra, but in a more direct manner than ever before. And I didn't even bother to think much about it. I was too involved in doing it, just being there.

I knew I was using Mahamudra techniques, but I was not initially aware of how deeply I was changing internally. That awareness only came much later. And I studied camera equipment like there was no tomorrow, in particular fine lenses. I just somehow could not get lenses that would gather enough light and open up my vision as far as I needed. Every spare dollar I could scrounge went into sharper and sharper lenses. I scavenged up and sold my older equipment for this or that more accurate lens, tele-converter, close-up diopter, or whatever would bring more light and acuity to what I was doing. And fine lenses helped.

I studied lenses. I went to optometrists and discussed with them the sharpness of lenses and what was needed for the human eye to see at its very best. I got new glasses and special magnifiers for the eyepiece in my camera. I tracked down lenses that are almost never found, lenses that are legendary for their ability to gather light and to focus with extreme accuracy. I burned through the finest lenses that Nikon had to offer (and that is many) and on into lenses that are even better than anything Nikon has commonly produced.

I worked with special architectural lenses, lenses that tilt and shift, allowing you to bring a whole flat field of flowers into focus, the nearest and the farthest flower, all perfectly clear. I stacked lenses one on another to get even closer in. I used tele-converters, diopters, and extension tubes to reach beyond what I otherwise could. I began to stack photos, which means to take a series of photos, each at a particular focal point, from near-to-far, and then merge the stack to make a single image where all parts, from front to back, are in perfect focus. The stacked photos mimicked the mind in being perfect.

I am just giving you a taste of what was a real obsession on my part, and a learning curve. I took more than 50,000 photos during that period and gradually became a better and better photographer. That is not such a lot of photos, until you take into consideration how long it can take for one macro photo to be taken.

And through all of this, it was not the resulting thousands of photographs that concerned me. I hardly looked at them. Instead, it was the process that had me spellbound, the clear looking at the subjects and the “seeing.” It was the seeing! And it was the resting. Ostensibly, I was looking through finer and finer lenses at nature. In reality, I was learning to look at my own mind through the process of photography, and I had managed to confuse the two. Yeah, “Zen and the Art of Photography” is a book I could probably write about now, if only I practiced Zen.

I was learning to rest my mind in the moment and allow whatever natural beauty there was to present itself to me, to show itself, to appear. Everything was clear, luminous. And the sheer exhilaration involved is hard to describe. Everything was lucid. I was lucid - clear as a bell!

And, although I continued to practice Mahamudra during my ordinary workday, as I found this or that project to do, it was mostly in those rarified mornings out in the dawn and the wet grass that my mind could fully rest and appear lucid. I was addicted to it right off and could not wait each day to get out there among the bugs and flowers to get my mind right.

And, as mentioned above, this went on from late May until late November of 2008, almost every day when it did not rain. I don't know what my family thought, other than I had become a camera nut and that I didn't have a job. I don't know what I thought about it myself. I never thought about it. I was spending an inordinate amount of time doing it. My extended family and friends would drive by me where I was setting up one shot or another along the roadside and give me strange looks, like “Oops, there he is again. Doesn't he work anymore?”

I didn't have a job (I was looking for one), so I had the time and, after a lifetime of working jobs, building companies, this

was the first real break I had ever given myself and I put it to good use. It was wonderful. It was transformative.

STABILIZATION

All of this time, what was really happening (as I look back now) is that my Mahamudra meditation was stabilizing. After all, I was doing it not only on those early morning shoots, but all the rest of the day as well, as much as I could happen to remember or wake up into moments to do it, which was more and more often.

My initial fear and guilt that I was no longer interested in sitting practice, and doing sadhanas and other practices began to fall away. I just did not care anymore what it looked like to those around me or even to my old self. Whatever it was that I was doing with Mahamudra was enough for me. I was full up and I was in love with and happy with my practice for the first time in my life. It was thrilling!

So, it was just natural to move off the cushion for a while after so many years of sitting there. I had done two ngondros (traditional extended sadhanas), not to mention other more complex practices, like the Karma Pakshi Sadhana, etc. and I imagine I had accumulated what I was able to accumulate. I was tired for the moment of on-the-cushion practice and inhaled Mahamudra practice like a breath of fresh air. I was ready for it!

It was clear to my family that I was no longer spending much time on the cushion and their looks and glances told me that they probably didn't approve and certainly didn't understand. After all, I didn't really understand myself what was happening. Michael, who had been more or less diligent as a practitioner for so many years (decades), was out-and-out playing hooky. The cushion just sat there on the floor.

There was no excusing it. And I did not care. I just knew I had found my way and was progressing somewhere after all the years of anticipation. I was my own counsel in this regard. Outside approval or disapproval (my own or others) could not change my mind or my behavior. And so it went.

When summer ended and winter came on, I had to curtail my early morning explorations and gradually move back inside. I

looked forward to the following spring with unusual longing, but I also found that I was able to carry on my mental training at my desk and around the house with no problem. Something had changed within me and permanently, but I was not really able to get a handle on it until the following spring when I was once again headed back out into the fields and woods.

To be continued.

MAHAMUDRA: MY STORY (Final Part 5)

July 7, 2017

SPRING SURPRISE

[Here is the final part of this series. There is one more essay, but I will publish that tomorrow. Sorry for the length of all these, but I want to get this story out there. The free e-book is here:

Mahamudra: My Story

<http://spiritgrooves.net/.../e-books/MAHAMUDRA%20BOOK%20V3.pdf>

This book will also have a Kindle version at \$.99

https://www.amazon.com/dp/B073S8G1VR/ref=sr_1_1...

And a printed paperback version at \$6.00

https://www.amazon.com/dp/1548683612/ref=sr_1_fk_mr0_1...

And out I did go, as early as January and February, a bunch in March, and constantly by April. And I had been gathering my equipment and upgrading what I could afford. But things had changed 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 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. I was studying maps. 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 them. Out there, isolated from nutrients, since the plant life on them can't get nutrients from below (the peat is anaerobic and won't let anything through), many bog plants have become carnivorous, depending on insects and what-not for food. 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 document 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 Mahamudra practice and that of becoming more of a naturalist than I already 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 all about nature. I already 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 naturalist was concerned.

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 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. I was (as I do so often) confusing the baby with the bathwater again, 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. It is a good story.

I had been invited to join a very select group of naturalists who were given permission to enter a rare bog preserve at the very top of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan (adjoining Canada) 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 bogs with my camera. My 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 touched the problem. I was not about to be stopped by a wayward tooth.

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

THE TURNING POINT

My first stop was at a small bog at the top of the Lower Peninsula, just beneath the Mackinac Bridge. I was out on the bog in the morning sun by 8 A.M., already hours from my home. It was a magnificent morning. Yet already I was having trouble with that dumb tooth, a certain amount of throbbing and little sharp shoots of pain. I did my best to ignore it and told myself it would die down.

There I was in my hip boots way out on the surface of the bog, surrounded by moss and small bushes, and carefully stepping my way along in the ooze. I was maybe halfway around the small lake when I first saw them, two 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 eye was on me, and they were not just looking at me. 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 the cranes began running through the bushes, circling me, 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 it circled me. I could see one bird as it ran through the bushes on my right, and then suddenly on my left was the other bird circling in the other 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. And I was carrying over \$12,000 worth of camera equipment, not to mention my life.

Or, 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 large birds and they didn't like ME. It is easy 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 to shore that apparently took me away from their nest area, 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.

By this time it was beginning to be clear that my tooth was not going to just calm down, but instead was only going to get worse. I had super strength Ibuprofen and even some Vicodin that they 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 at their home near where I was at. Here I was 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. It was like a dream or the set for a movie in which I was an actor. 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 there I had lost my incentive or my direction. Something had changed at the core.

Yet, by tomorrow I was supposed to be at the tip of the top of the Upper Peninsula, hours from where I was now, and miles from any town (much less a hospital) on a remote bog, and the temperatures there were predicted to be very cold, even for a spring day. After all, way up there it was still hardly spring. HmMMM.

In the end, the throbbing of my tooth and those little sharp spasms of shooting pain told me that marching through a bog miles from anywhere might not be the time to try and push this 67-year old physical envelope. As it turned out, this 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. Let me explain.

THE OUTSIDE IS INSIDE

Like so many times in my past, once again I had managed to confuse the inside with the outside, the

important with the unessential. What was going on over the last year was that I was using the outside (nature) to look at the inside (my mind) AND I had fallen into the mistake of confusing the two. Since it was through the nature that I was realizing my mind, I began to elevate natural history as the goal or object of my passion, when it was only the means through which I was experiencing my mind's nature, which is my real passion. I hope that makes sense. It's like the old image of a finger point out the moon. The photography was the finger, not the moon.

Here I was upscaling my nature trips, when all they were to me in the end were the lens or means through which I was viewing the mind. 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 had a lot. Well, this all changed, and that early morning faceoff with the Sandhill Cranes was perhaps the turning 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 up there or around that time.

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, and it was the clarity of the mind that I was in love with, 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 2009 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 was now present without any camera at all. What before was made possible by my concentration and a really tack-sharp lens had now overflowed into the rest of my life. Then one day I realized that I did not even have to bring a camera along with me at all. This clarity that I had very carefully nourished the entire preceding year through my photography had become the rule rather than the exception. It was not about cameras; it was not about lenses, but about clarity of mind. That was it. I began to get it.

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 the lens. My mind was already somewhat lucid and I could more and more rest in the beauty of the nature around me, which would just present and reveal itself to me... and 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... and I don't need them?

That's right. That's what happened. It took time, but I increasingly became aware that what I had loved all this time through the photography was what was happening within my own mind. All that gear was just a scaffold to build a stable 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. This was at first disorienting, to say the least.

MIXING THE MIND

It is easy for me to write all this now, but it took a while for all of these thoughts to really sink in, and it was not until I made my yearly trip to see my dharma teacher in late June that it all came together. 2009 was the 21st year that Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche has offered a ten-day Mahamudra intensive at KTD Monastery and I had never missed a one. In fact, seeing and studying with Rinpoche for those ten days was the highlight of any year. 2009 was no different.

Being with Rinpoche for ten days each summer means so much to me. For one, I found that I was always the best kind of me when I was with him, when I was present and within the embrace of his mandala. And going back home after the ten days was always something of a mixed bag, driving the 800 miles back to our town filled with Rinpoche's blessings, much of that grace which I would soon manage to fritter away as I settled into my more ordinary life.

But this year was to be different. Part of the Mahamudra practice I had been doing during those early morning camera practices included a very special form of guru yoga, which I can't detail here, but the idea is simple. Guru yoga is nothing more than connecting with your teacher, taking that connection to heart, and mixing your mind with the mind of your teacher. That's it. There are many forms of guru yoga, so it is not a secret.

I had been practicing that along with my Mahamudra training. And I had done guru yoga before, during the two ngondros I had completed, so I was familiar with this kind of practice. However, where before I had painstakingly marched through the practice, keeping count of how many this or that I had done and how many more I needed to complete the practice, my

recent guru yoga practice experience had been different.

In the last year, as I was doing the macro-photography, I was very much taking to heart this guru yoga practice, doing it as often as I could remember to do it, and actually somehow mixing my mind with that of my teacher. I really enjoyed doing it and I did it joyfully, but I had little awareness of the effect of this practice on me until I travelled to our monastery for our yearly visit with Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche.

As mentioned, it is always a joy to see Rinpoche again and to be in his presence. I am instantly at my best and I like that. This year was different. When I arrived, of course I was thrilled to see Rinpoche, as always. It is great just to be in the same room with Khenpo Rinpoche. But this year there was a change.

I soon realized that I did not feel any better in his presence than I did before I left home to see him. Keep in mind that I had been feeling pretty good at home. In fact, the Rinpoche that I had been mixing my mind with through guru yoga and the Rinpoche I experienced at the monastery were exactly the same this time. I didn't get it at first, but over time, while I was with him, I understood that somehow my practice had brought Rinpoche from out there in the world, out in that monastery in New York, here and into my heart. Now they were in most respects (at least as far as I know) one and the same. Rinpoche had been mixed to some degree with my own mind.

This is not to say that I was like Rinpoche, but rather to say that whatever I was back home on my own (with my relation to Rinpoche at a distance), that now when I was with him again in person, they were the

same. He was with me as much at home as when I was with him at the teachings. Wow!

A fear I had always had was: what would happen to me when Rinpoche someday passed on and I was left alone in the world without him to be with – a terrifying thought! Sure, there are many fine rinpoches out there that I could work with, but there is no replacement for your root lama, the one who cared enough to accept you just as you were and put up with you until you could learn a little dharma.

Somehow, in this last year, I had (at least to some degree) internalized Rinpoche and made him a part of me forever. It was clear to me that it was the heartfelt guru yoga that I had been doing as part of my Mahamudra practice that had made this possible. How incredible!

I had brought my camera and several important lenses along with me to KTD and had planned to use them in the early morning, you know, shots of mountains, clouds, rising mists and fog – all of that. But once there, I seemed to have lost all interest in photographing anything. And I wondered what that was all about.

THE RETURN OF THE HERMIT

Lama Karma, one of the 3-year year retreat lamas at KTD (whom I consider a close friend) was kind enough to listen to my recent practice experiences, what I have been relaying here to you and his comment hit me like a freight train.

What he said is that my experience with the photography and all that it entailed was right out of a dharma handbook – pure tradition. Mahamudra practitioners are encouraged at a certain point in their

practice to go out in the wild, to caves and faraway places to meditate, when they have received the pointing out instructions, and while in those places begin to actually practice and train in Mahamudra. And I had just done a modern equivalent. I had not left town, but I had spent my most important time away from people, out in the fields and woods, watching the sun rise again and again – by myself.

It was this solitary time during which my practice was able to settle in and stabilize. And my friend pointed out that once stabilized, my need for some solitary time had evaporated. That was perhaps why the camera and photography thing just naturally dissolved. In fact, once Mahamudra has stabilized, it is customary for practitioners to re-enter society and test their mental stability in the midst of crowds, day-to-day business, and all other challenges. And, along with that need to be alone that went away, so did my need for cameras and interest in photography. Just gone! [Note: I still do plenty of photography as of 2017.]

And this is exactly what was happening to me. I didn't need to be alone any longer and I was in the process of separating the baby from the bathwater. The baby was my Mahamudra practice and the bathwater was all my camera gear and my need to practice through it. I didn't need the support of the camera any longer. I also did not need to be out in nature all the time, either. It is not that I did not appreciate natural beauty any longer; it just made no difference to me where I was anymore.

And in an increased way, I wanted to do what I could to help others get started in the dharma. I am doing that now.

So, there you have at least a brief account of my experience so far with Mahamudra. Of course, now I am just on the first step of a long journey to learn and someday master Mahamudra. And, although I am not yet enlightened in any way, I at least understand something about what I have to accomplish and something about how to go about doing that.

THE PRICE OF EFFORT

July 7, 2017

As the great poet Robert Frost wrote, “Something there is that doesn’t love a wall” in his poem “Mending Wall.” Only, as regards meditation, I would rephrase to, “Something there is that doesn’t love making an effort.” We make efforts, for sure, and we probably wouldn’t get far without them, but like pushing a sled over the top of the hill, we also are looking for the point where we can just hop on and ride.

The upshot or moral of this little analogy, at least as it relates to meditation training, is that making effort requires a price to be paid somewhere down the line, later if not sooner. Yet, to do anything, even change our life course ever so slightly (but deliberately), requires some effort. And learning new techniques, especially if it requires great effort, flies in the face of what meditation is all about. So let’s discuss.

If we are starting out in the dharma, we somehow have to make an effort to learn the techniques necessary for meditation, yet we would be better off if we already just somehow knew these techniques and did not have to make the effort of learning them. So, there is a kind of Catch-22 here that, practically speaking, becomes a speed bump or obstacle for most of us in learning to meditate. In other words, we have to go out of our way (change) to learn it, i.e. make effort.

And, if we do go out of our way, that effort to learn or change has to (somewhere down the road) be resolved so that we can get back in line once again with a more “effortless” way of living or being. We make an effort so that we can accomplish something,

but in resting in meditation, “spiritual effort” is an oxymoron.

We can't eat our cake and still have it too, so we can't make effort and have it be effortless. What goes up must come down; going out of our way through effort has to eventually end up absorbing the effort it took to cut a new track, path in life, or develop the muscle-memory for tranquility meditation. Just about every meditator has to solve this little inertia equation.

So, forcing ourselves to meditate (making ourselves do it), however gently we do that, by the sheer laws of physics, requires a price to be paid. It's like driving a car; it requires a driver. And in meditation, the driver is effortless-action or what might be called “love” for what we are doing, but how is that achieved if we don't know if we love meditation or not until we do, until we try it out? And “trying” doesn't do it with meditation, only just doing does it, etc.

If we make an initial effort, then the resulting effects of that effort has to be re-absorbed (or otherwise reduced) until it vanishes back into non-effort. We can't take love by force and still call it love and we can't learn to meditate by force alone. At some point in learning sitting meditation, our effort to meditate has to succumb to the joy of actually meditating. So, if we try real hard, if we discipline ourselves and force ourselves to meditate, that very effort often becomes a direct obstacle to actually meditating. That's what “non-mediation” in the more advanced practices is all about, not “trying” to meditate. So, what's the way around this, if there is one?

Well, the usual or most common approach to meditation is to make an initial effort (or efforts) and, once we get the hang of meditation (and learn how),

then it will no longer take effort and we can begin to remove whatever traces or stains were made by our initial effort. The danger with this approach, IMO, is that since effort obscures meditation, we may not be able to get past the stains of our own effort to practice and experience the beauty of meditation, which by definition, is effortless. In other words, our very effort obscures or prevents our realizing the results of meditation.

There must be a reason why learning meditation by effort is so popular; it must work, but perhaps it does not work (or work well) for everyone. The “noise” of making effort may drown out the more subtle rewards of meditation until we fail to experience those rewards at all, but only feel the effort. And we can’t make efforts forever, because advanced meditation (Vipassana) is “effortless.” And, we all look for the grooves.

Obviously, if we could learn meditation technique so that it is more effortless, then perhaps the practitioner could hear and feel the music (so to speak) of meditation and be more self-inspired to keep practicing. Like fusion, meditation has to become recursive enough to be self-inspiring. We can’t just make efforts forever and still end up resting our mind. “Resting the mind” naturally requires the removal of effort, and this by definition.

So, this round-robin circular argument doesn’t go anywhere except around and around. What’s the solution? In my opinion, the solution is to not use force or effort in learning meditation, especially if you are already having trouble learning to meditate. Instead, because tranquility meditation (Shamata) is about concentration, cast about in your life to see if

you have ALREADY learned to concentrate doing something you really care about or love.

For example, a fisherman may love to tie flies, which is very exacting and involves real concentration, and they have already learned this, with effort or not. The point is that they are beyond learning the technique and already love to do it. “Loving to do” something that requires concentration is what we are after here. Then, simply learn to mix your tranquility meditation technique with tie flying and see if that works for you. It worked for me when I used close-up nature photography.

Tranquility meditation (Shamata) has no particular object to focus on. It can be the breath, a twig, a stone, or whatever. Tie flying or photography is as legitimate as any other focus for tranquility meditation. So, if you have already mastered something that requires concentration AND love doing it, then feel free to use it for learning meditation. In the case of fly tying, you would focus (mindfully) on the process of tying flies, without being distracted, etc. Your meditation practice would be the same as “on the cushion,” only you would do it while mindfully tying flies and not by minding your breath or focusing on a twig, etc.

In my case, I had a kind of perfect storm happen and just fell into using photography for learning meditation. The personal factors involved in my case, simply put, were among the following:

First, I had the shock of losing my livelihood (job), which created a huge gap of time that lasted about six months, during which I was not in my normal state of mind. That set the stage.

Aside from the above gap of “time,” I was under a LOT of pressure to provide for my family. I had the even more important gap of having to deal with the loss of livelihood and the ability to support my family, which gap was a greater factor than the time gap.

During these gaps, I took myself away from my daily routine of forty years, at least for a good part of each day, and did this for a solid six months. I was out in nature watching the sun come up, isolated and alone, and ignoring everything else. I shed all my worries as much as I could for that time each day.

I was focused on observing nature, something I was already an expert in since my early childhood.

And in that “time out” each day, I learned close-up photography, something I already was partially trained in, but I completed and surpassed anything I had done before.

Without any obvious effort other than loving to do it, I applied myself to the discipline of taking photos and the discipline of setting up and waiting to take very difficult camera shots. Again, the “love” in doing it was key.

And this went on for many months, like half a year.

Yet, the most important factor, along with the shock and pressures of having no livelihood, was that (perhaps only to avoid looking at the upset to my career), I threw myself into this close-up photography 101%, with all of me... and I was loving it. “Love” is always the answer, and it was true here.

Anyway, that is what it took for me get the hang of meditation, a lot of factors that all came together, as I said, like the perfect storm. You will have to examine your own life to see what it would take for you to

come up with your kind of a “perfect storm.” I did not plan it out; it just happened to me and I found myself in the middle of it. And what a storm it was.

I probably would not have chosen this set of factors, because some of them were just too painful to request, but that’s what it took to get my attention so that I was able to actually learn meditation. This fact gives me pause. I write all of this because I am amazed at the strength or force of circumstances that it took to pop me out of my life-long bubble of just “keeping on to keep on” and I worry that you or others reading this will not take strong-enough measures in learning meditation. Before this took place, I had no idea how serious we have to get in our practice of dharma. It’s nothing like sitting for an hour a day. It could be helpful for you to know how difficult it is to get grave (serious) about actually learning the dharma and meditation.

And last, but not least, just because I tell this story and it is out in the public, I want to say that what happened with me and meditation need not be considered unusual. Please don’t make me an exception! I spent decades trying to meditate, with a perfectly ordinary state of mind. I simply did not know how to do it correctly or what “correctly” was. Please take what you can from this account as a “flag” for your attention and find your own way into meditating properly. It is worth the effort (or the lack thereof) to achieve this.

THE GRAND CROSS

July 9, 2017

A number of you have written or messaged me about the very powerful Grand Cross that is holding forth in our solar system right now (heliocentrically). You want more information, so here goes. First some background:

Back in the early 1970s, as soon as 4-function calculators appeared on the scene (about 1972), I was all over them and had soon published for astrologers how to use the little 4-function calculators to calculate astrological charts. The small calculators grew into programmable calculators, and then in 1977 into home computers. I had one of the first home computers in 1977 and had programmed the entire planetary system to within minutes of arc in as little as 8K of RAM. Soon, I was programming and sharing my programs with any other astrologer who wanted the code.

Yet, I soon found out that most folks could not program and so I was sending them copies of my finished programs at no charge. Well, that didn't work, because soon I was spending my whole day copying, verifying, and sending these cassettes out all day long, and was not able to support my young family. So, of course I began charging something for my work and Matrix Software was born. According to an article for Red Herring Magazine, I had the second oldest software company on the Internet, the oldest being a tiny company called Microsoft. And so it went. I don't want to sidebar here too much, but some of you younger astrologers probably should know the history.

Now, as a programmer I began to program all kinds of astrology and one technique I programmed was the heliocentric natal chart. Traditional astrology had always used geocentric (Earth-centered) astrology, which is a snapshot of the solar system from the point of view of Earth, the third rock from the Sun, so to speak. But few people had ever looked at the solar system, not as Earth viewed it, but in its own right, with the Sun being the center, rather than Earth. Of course, that's how it is in fact, as any astronomer can tell you.

Well, the long and the short of it is: as I discovered for myself heliocentric astrology, I was astounded to find (and this took time) that it was WAY more accurate for what interested me (dharma, spiritual matters) than traditional astrology. Who woulda' thunk it?

Anyway, over some 40-some years, I have worked on and developed heliocentric astrology for my own work, right along with the standard geocentric astrology. The two astrological views (geo and helio), each provide a different view of the same birth moment, etc., much like one of those old stereopticons – astrology in 3D.

Starting around 1975, I defined some 60 astrological patterns in the helio chart that I called StarTypes. And around 2008, during a VERY difficult personal time (the same time I had some breakthroughs in my dharma practice), in order to console myself, I began to design a series of astrological tarot-like cards. And I designed and I designed and I designed, until I realized that I had done some 13,000 cards (some were duplicate sets) of about every astrological and spiritual discipline I knew about.

And these included cards for the sixty StarTypes (archetypes), like the one shown here, in this case for the Grand Cross astrological pattern in heliocentric astrology. These patterns are also useful in the standard geocentric chart, but less so. The helio chart (solar system) is the reality, while the traditional natal chart used for centuries by astrologers (geocentric chart) is a snapshot taken from Earth's perspective of the sun-centered solar system. Anyhow... that's some background for you. Now, for the Grand Cross.

I have an entire, detailed free book on these StarType patterns, all sixty of them called "Dharma Chart, Karma Chart" about the heliocentric and geocentric natal charts and how they interact pattern-wise. You can find it here among some of my astrological books. Just scroll down.

<http://spiritgrooves.net/e-Books.aspx#Astrology>

As for the current Grand Cross, here is a little text from that book on this very important chart pattern:

StarType #3, THE GRAND CROSS

Symbolic Image: An acorn, from which an oak tree grows. The seed is clearly seen, and from it, sprawling roots and a towering oak tree have grown.

EVENT INTERPRETATION

This chart pattern in the helio sky could be a very special time for using our intuition, taking in or absorbing a penetrating vision, new information that we can't so much see or even "think," but that we can feel deep within ourselves, like the resonance of a bell being rung at your very core - a seminal moment.

Our common sense and ability to play on hunches and feelings is heightened now and we may have the ability to just "know" things at this point, making

decisions by the seat of our pants, rather than through logical thinking. We can feel our way along right now, just sensing what is right or wrong, what is going to turn out well, and what is not. And we can't depend on what our mind sees at the moment, but rather on what our heart knows and feels. This is a time where key imprints can occur.

Now, if you are born with a Grand Cross in the helio, then you might like to read this.

CONCEPT

First, this StarType is a rare bird. It seldom comes up in the heavens and it is probably the single most useful (and used) of all the StarType patterns. We should prepare to access those who have them.

Folks with this StarType are born with information somehow embedded in their very physical fabric, information of enormous use to others, and to the world they find themselves living in. This StarType is one of these types and the keyword is 'seminal,' so take note. This StarType's influence will be felt by everyone who comes to know them and almost everything they touch will bring results, but not always for them personally.

And this too is important: this StarType's gifts don't depend on what they personally think or say, not even in how they appear or what they do. Think about that for a moment. It is what they ARE that is important and the information (if we can call it that) that this StarType carries embedded in their very genes and self. This StarType has only to make themselves available for others to benefit and take advantage of what they carry locked in their makeup. Sounds like a sci-fi film, right? Sorry. Let me try to say it more simply:

This StarType communicates by their very nature and presence information and ideas that activate and stir up the general process of life - start things. Think "catalyst." From contact with this StarType, ideas arise and come into the mind and thus (eventually) into being through mere proximity to them. Again: this is non-verbal. It does not matter if this StarType is nice or not nice. It just happens. They function as a catalyst.

RELATING TO THE GRAND CROSS

Relationships are not only important to this StarType , but are of crucial importance. By nature, they are intuitive (perhaps even psychic at times), very much feeling their way along and through life by using their gut sense, and whatever hunches they may have.

Another way of saying this is: this StarType sees the trees way more than the forest. They hunger to get more perspective and to better grasp the "big picture." To help with this, relationships come to the rescue.

Since they are strong in intuitive and natural savvy, they would benefit from partners that can bring them some of the overall perspective that they like, in particular the green StarTypes, like the Kite and Grand Trine. But any "green" type will probably bring some benefit.

Relating with these green StarTypes, perhaps even working closely with them in a business or personal way can help this StarType develop better overall vision, perspective into their life and their capabilities, and what best to do with their life - what route to take.

KEYWORDS

Beyond words. Innate intuition. Non-verbal. A seminal influence. The Loved One. Charismatic. Center of Attention. Intuitive. Touchy Feely.

SUGGESTIONS

This StarType is intuitive to the point of tunnel vision, and their sense of whether things feel right or wrong is profound. Everyone who knows them benefits from their natural instinct for the truth and they exert a seminal influence on all they come in contact with.

The price they pay for this gift is that they sometimes gets lost in the trees and can't see the forest, or have trouble seeing the big picture and remembering what this life they are living is all about.

Therefore, this StarType can benefit from the more pure types of 'The Lover' StarType, in particular the Grand Trine and the Kite, who will help them to better understand what they are going through, who they are, and to perhaps guide them in day-to-day decisions. Look for the Grand Trine pattern, which is the large green triangle.

As for the blue-bordered cards, keep in mind that they have the qualities of both the red-bordered and the green-bordered cards within their makeup. When relating to them, this StarType will want to invoke the care-giving and advice giving aspect of them. They will call out the lover in the blue StarTypes, with them being the loved one that they care for.

SAILING IN SAMBARA

July 9, 2017

[Before I start the blog, here is an image of the Sixty StarTypes. This is the woman's version, but there is also one for men and another for events. You can find your StarType (and card) in the table at the back of the book at following link (and scroll down):

"DHARMA CHART, KARMA CHART"

<http://spiritgrooves.net/e-Books.aspx#Astrology>

As my dharma teacher of 33 years pointed out to me, knowing that I was an experienced astrologer, "Astrology is one of the limbs of the yoga, but not the root. The root is the dharma."

That being said, what then is the role of astrology in this world? And the operative phrase here is "... in this world," because what Rinpoche was pointing out by saying that it is one of the limbs of the yoga is that astrology is what the Buddhists call a "relative truth," meaning it is dualistic in that it has a subject and an object, like "us against the universe, sort of thing. Dualism is not only a hallmark of samsara, it pretty much defines it. And duality is the world we live in.

It is important to grasp that by being a relative truth, astrology is confined (restricted) to this samsaric world. Since astrology is a method to reposition our place in the world, in a realized or enlightened world, there would be no need for astrology, since we would already be where we are now trying to get to.

Astrology is an integral part of samsara, plain and simple. I feel it is wise knowing this fact up front, before depending on astrology overmuch. And I say

this as an astrologer of over 50 years' dedicated experience. I love astrology, but it has its limits. We would be wise to realize this.

In other words, astrology is a tool, something that we can learn to use, but astrology is limited to adjusting and readjusting ourselves within samsara. The analogy I came up with, which I have posted here before, but it is apt, is that of a large sphere, say the size of Earth, covered with water. Astrology is like a sailboat out on all that water. Through using astrology we can set (and reset) our sails to catch the wind, so that we can sail right out of where we are, on to another place, as long as it is on the globe or sphere, which we call samsara.

In other words, astrology can be very useful for bettering our position in this life or, as I say, making ourselves more comfortable WITHIN the limits of samsara. Astrology is wonderful for this kind of positioning or adjustment of our circumstances. However, as Rinpoche pointed out to me, astrology cannot take us beyond the surface and to the center of the sphere, from which we can see the entire surface of the globe, so to speak. Only by realizing this fully samsaric world through the dharma is that possible.

Against this fact, when using astrology, we must keep this limitation in mind. And I do. So, astrology is not something I believe in. It has nothing to do with belief. Astrology is something I use (or don't use) to better my position or view in life. And I do find astrology useful for some purposes, especially as a language to talk with others, as I am doing here. Yet, in those three-o'clock in the morning come-to-Jesus moments, IMO, astrology has no permanent answers. Yet,

dharma does, in that it points out to us how we can realize whatever situation we are in.

Astrology is a temporary solution (like life itself) for our ills, IMO, and not a cure for samsara. Samsara, if realized through dharma; that is the cure.

So, I find using astrology to navigate in this samsaric world very helpful at times, but in Samsara, all roads only lead around and around, but never out of samsara. To repeat myself, to get “out of samsara,” so to speak, we must realize it fully. We must realize the situation we are in, before we can change it. Realization of samsara is what is called Nirvana. And the path to that realization is often called The Dharma.



Sixty StarTypes

PREDICTING WITH ASTROLOGY

July 10, 2017

As astrologers, we should be clear about astrology's predictive power. There are many "astrologers" out there who claim to predict things, including the stock market. None of the astrologers I have met seem to be able to predict the money market, otherwise they would be rich, and in all these years there is still no sign of that, much less them sharing a technique that I could use to make money. Silence.

Let me point out what astrologers CAN predict, which is precisely what any good astronomer can predict, and that is the movements of the heavenly bodies above us. Why? Because that is science. It was either astrologer Jay Jacobs (or his father "Moby Dick" Jacobs) who deemed astrology as "Cultural Astronomy," which I feel is an accurate description of what astrology does and can do.

The astronomers can successfully predict that the Moon will conjunct Venus in the heavens on such and such a day and at such and such a time on that day, and it will happen every time as they say it will. Astrologers (or anyone else) can't do better than that. So, what is it then that astrologers can do with predictions?

Astrologers can take the precise astronomical prediction that scientists determine and, if they are skilled, perhaps tell us what that predicted conjunction of the Moon and Venus means to us, personally or culturally. And astrologers agree to disagree (and find their differences) in the meaning of any particular astrological event they are interpreting.

To my knowledge, we astrologers don't (or cannot) predict anything, except as our predictions relate to an astronomical event. Folks who predict this or that event without reference to an astronomical event are not astrologers, by definition; perhaps they are psychics of one kind or another. Of course, some folks are both astrologers and psychics, but be sure to separate the one from the other. I will tell a story.

Years ago, when my company Matrix Software was having conferences here at our center (36 in all over the years, although some were about the dharma), we held a conference on financial astrology. Twenty-two well-known financial astrologers were invited, camped, and spoke at the conference, some of whom were the best known financial astrologers in the world at that time.

A lot was said, needless to say. And I was very eager to learn even one good technique that would help me use astrology to make money, because although I had studied astrology for decades, I knew of no such technique. Anyway, at that conference I heard none, and I listened as best I could. But I did learn something.

One thing I can say is that it did not seem like any of the speakers present at that conference had any money. If they did, they kept the fact well hidden. It seemed to me that most of these astrologers helped advise business folks on how to make money one way or another, but it seemed that they had not made any (or much) for themselves. If I could make money using astrology on the stock market, the first thing I would do is make myself a lot of money, so I did not have to worry about such things. THEN I would advise others, not the other way around.

Yet, it seemed that these folks, these speakers, had never taken the time to do that, if they even could. And I base this opinion on the fact that, since I put on the conference, I well know that a good number of the invited speakers (I won't name names) came to me privately and had to borrow money for bus or train fare to even get to the conference. Needless to say, this was somewhat disturbing to me at the time. It did little to impress me to further study financial astrology.

So, I learned a lot from that conference, but not what I had hoped to learn, primarily that financial astrology was either an oxymoron or did not function all that well. I liked the folks who came to speak as people and we did have some fun. Yet, to the best of my looking around and listening, I could not see a rich person in the crowd. They were folks just like me, or so it seemed.

So, I write this, as mentioned above to point out that while astrologers may (or may not) be psychic, the astrology part of us uses the astronomical scientific facts as our touchstone or talisman, which we then interpret as best we can. Astrology depends on astronomy to function. In other words, we can't interpret astronomical events that don't happen.

Every time I write about this topic, I get lots of stories about how much money this or that astrologer made. It may be true, but I never met one personally and I have met thousands of astrologers over the years. So, as they say, "I'm just sayin'."

[The six StarType cards here are just examples of how useful studying large-scale patterns in the Sun Chart (helio chart) can be. Using it here just for some design, nothing to do with this article.]

The free book “DHARMA CHART, KARMA CHART” has a table in the back where you can look up your StarType card. The link is:

<http://spiritgrooves.net/e-Books.aspx#Astrology>

“THIS MAGIC MOMENT”

July 11, 2017

Yes, a song by the incredible Drifters, but here I am talking about this present moment we all share. There is nothing more fresh than this very instant, now. Moments that drift into the past soon morph, fade, and are annotated or embroidered, becoming mere caricatures of themselves. My wife often tells me that my account of things has been embellished, taking on importance as time goes on, etc., and it's true.

Anyway, we call them memories, which is a good name for them. There is some beauty there, of course, but seldom enough to compete with the present moment itself. In other words, we don't (and can't) live there. And that goes for the future too. What a foggy place!

That same fresh moment does not look the same later on, even if nothing but time itself has changed. I find this true even in writing this blog. Often, I will write several blogs ahead of time, when the mood strikes me, but give them a couple of days and IMO, something is already lost or leaking. They are still “brand new,” never published, but their use-by-date somehow betrays them. They no longer feel right to me. That's how fast (at least) I change.

And obviously, this has to be my problem, my shifting view and state of mind; I have already visibly changed in the intervening days since I wrote them. Yet, I don't feel that way if I write a piece and post it right away. Then, it is “of the moment,” as fresh as I am. This points to the fact that I change with time and the things I write are reflections that mirror what I am thinking and where I am at in that moment. Articles

written a few days ago may no longer reflect where I am today, right now. I've already moved on; it's that fast.

Just as we don't like stale air or to inhale air that we have already breathed, there is something similar going on with our own creations, if we look. There is no-doubt a premium on the freshness of the moment, if only that it includes us -- everything happens there.

How this relates to dharma is that the present is also where all dharma is practiced. The academics slice and dice the present moment until everything is either past or future except an infinitesimal split second, which is declared the "present." Well, here we all are in that present, however you want to slice it. Everyone (every last being) in this world, in this solar system, this galaxy, etc. is bathing in and waiting around in the very same exact moment. It's a very large water cooler that we all hang out around, but that's where we live. This is it!

INTERFACE: CHAKRA POINTS

July 12, 2017

Over these last weeks, along with the formation of this power heliocentric Grand Cross we are experiencing (which exactly triggers my natal Sun/Earth alignment), my life has segued rather abruptly into a little astrological sidebar, so I will share some of that with you here.

As some of you know, I have been an astrologer for over 50 years. As the first astrologer to computerize astrology (1972-1977) and share my programs with my fellow astrologers, I have been very involved. Back in the early and middle 1970s, I had a rather creative time when I discovered (or developed) a series of astrological techniques that didn't exist before I looked into them. Some of them are:

- Local Space Relocation
- Interface Planetary Nodes
- Deep-Space Astrophysics
- Burn Rate Retrograde Phenomenon
- StarTypes Planetary Patterns
- Full-Phase Aspects
- ... and others.

Well, in these last few weeks I have been approached to be part of a team that will take some of these techniques global and make them available on smart phones as well as on iPads and desktops. Up to now (for decades), I have tried to introduce many of these techniques to astrologers, but there was little to no interest, so this new startup will take these techniques to people all over the world via media, as mentioned, like smart phones, etc. I will share more details about this new project with my Facebook friends as they

becomes public, but what I can share now are a few of the techniques that will be implemented.

So, I may be a little more active here discussing in astrology than I have been for some time. I hope my dharma friends will understand. I usually write about what I'm currently into, and right now (for a month or so) I will be doing some astrology, so I hope you enjoy it.

INTERFACE

One of the techniques we will be implementing is the book I published in 1976 called "Interface: Planetary Nodes." There is a free e-book at this link, just scroll down and look for "Interface."

<http://spiritgrooves.net/e-Books.aspx>

You can read some of the technical details about this technique in the book, but here I would rather present the Interface concept in plain English, so I will point out the essence of the technique. See if this makes sense to you.

Our solar system consists of nine planets in roughly circular orbits around the central body of the Sun. And these elliptical planet's orbits are not in the same plane with one another. Instead, each planet's orbit is inclined to the others at an angle, with the upshot that two times in an orbit any planet moves into the plane of (and alignment with) each of the other planets' plane.

In other words, for some period of time (short or long), a given planet is in the plane (and aligned) with one of the others. For example, at my birth the planet Jupiter was at its node with Venus, which means it was in alignment with the plane of the orbit of Venus. Venus was somewhere in its own orbit, but for that moment

Jupiter had moved into alignment with orbital plane of Venus. So, we say that Jupiter was at its inclination to Venus, i.e. Jupiter was “inclined” to Venus, which happens perhaps twice in roughly 12 years. Jupiter has two times when it is in the orbital plane of Venus, a north and a south node with Venus. This is getting a little technical, so I suggest those interested read the book, which has lots of diagrams and tables on all this. You should be getting the idea that this is all about inclination, when one planet is inclined to another.

I should also point out that just as there are two points of interface or alignment of one planet with any other, there are also two points when a planet is as far apart from being inclined as it gets, at what we might call its “square” point. The nodes or points what that planet are disinclined to the other. I have only one of these in my natal chart and that is that the planet Mars is disinclined to my natal Earth. I will let you figure that one out for yourselves, but my family could easily explain it to you. LOL.

Now this is all about our solar system, so it is heliocentric, not geocentric, meaning that it is about Sun and its planets, not about how Earth views the solar system. That would be geocentric or Earth-centered. My friend (and astrologer) Theodor Landscheidt did research on how these nodes appear from Earth, but I failed to find that as useful as the natural orbits around the Sun. Earth is deeply imbedded in the solar system, realize it or not.

What I found through all of my research is that these orbital crossings and nodal alignments are deep-down, and they work at the level of what commonly are called the chakras. So, while the technique involved may seem far-out, the vibrations they trigger

on are profoundly near to us, part of our very inside essence.

So, to use the above example of being born with Jupiter at the interface with Venus, suggests that my life path (Jupiter) was one of loving or valuing (Venus) my career. And it is a fact that I have made my living by building business around my hobbies (amateur), what I loved to do anyway. You get the idea.

I also have Neptune at the Interface point with Jupiter, which mixes an otherworldly or metaphysical concept of unity (Neptune), again with my life path, thus interest in astrology, dharma, and so on. I used this interface for my example in the included images.

I can rattle these points off for you, but it is hard for me to convey how deep these particular Interface points are in our nature. In a word, they are representing the traditional chakras, plain and simple. I hope you are getting the idea.

Anyway, this little smart phone app that we are developing will allow you to examine your natal Interface points or check out the active points for the current day and moment.

BURN RATE INDEX: RETROGRADES

July 12, 2017

Just when I got myself fully retired and put astrology somewhat in the background for a while, up it pops again. It reminds me of one of my favorite old country-music songs, Dolly Parton's "Here You Come Again," which I include here for fun.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bflkeWVTNk0>

I don't even have programming languages on my current computer, but I am putting them back on now. And, as mentioned, I am most comfortable blogging about what I am doing at the moment, and this moment (and for some time to come), I will be designing and programming some astrology, so dear Facebook friends, this will be a theme for a while around here. I hope you enjoy it!

And the technique I will share with you today, "Burn Rate," which is a novel technique based upon the forward and retrograde motion of the planets around the Sun. And this technique combines both traditional geocentric astrology with heliocentric astrology for what I consider is a dynamite technique. I will try to give you the good idea here, but I did write a whole book about it, with ephemeris in the back to look up your chart, about this very seminal technique.

I had long felt that astrologers had not made the best use of the planetary retrograde motion, and I feel that this technique rectifies that to a large degree. You astrologers out there, see if you agree.

This technique is fully illustrated and explained, with interpretations, in the book "Burn Rate: Retrogrades in Astrology" at this link. Just scroll down.

<http://spiritgrooves.net/e-Books.aspx>

As most astrologers well know, a planet is retrograde when it appears to move backward through the zodiac in the heavens above. That is called retrograde motion. Then, after a while, it becomes stationary and begins to move forward (direct) through the zodiac once again.

Retrogradation is distinctly an Earth-centered (geocentric) phenomenon, but I was surprised that few astrologers know how much this phenomenon includes grasping both the traditional geocentric view and the heliocentric or sun-centered view.

One very important concept to keep firmly in mind is that, from the solar-system (heliocentric) view, there is no backward motion (retrogradation), but only the regular endless forward-motion of each planet through the zodiac. What is called “retrograde” appears only from Earth’s view of the Sun and solar system. Just as with two trains that pass one another, the slower train appears to be moving backward, when really it too is going forward, Earth’s changing view of the other planets as it orbits the Sun causes the apparent (but not true) appearance we call “retrograde.”

What I did was take these two motions, that of the helio position and the geocentric position of each planet, as the planet moved, and compared how far the geocentric planet position got away from its actual heliocentric position through the motion.

And a remarkable observation appeared by studying these motions. A planet’s position here on earth appears to move ahead in the zodiac from where the heliocentric actually is, so the geo planet’s apparent position moves into the “future” of the zodiac, a part of

the zodiac that the true (helio) position has not reached, but pretty soon will. In that said, the geo position for the planet ranges beyond reality into the future, so to speak.

Then the geo planet position stops (stationary) in the zodiac (still ahead of its helio position) and slowly (but gradually, then faster and faster) retraces its steps backward through the zodiac, until it reaches and conjuncts the helio position. This is all in the “future” of the zodiac, but that is not the end of it.

The retrograding planet then continues out of the future, past its helio position in the zodiac, and begins to enter the past, an area of the zodiac that the heliocentric planet had recently passed through. The geo position continues to retrograde farther and farther back through the zodiac, until it comes to another gradual stop, this time called “Stationary Direct,” after which it once again turns direct and begins to move forward back up through the zodiac (for the third time) toward its helio position, until once again it conjuncts the Sun, after which it moves into another (future) stretch of the zodiac, which the heliocentric position has not seen for an entire orbit.

I hope you get the physical idea of what happens. As for interpreting, it is pretty simple. When the geo planet position runs ahead of the actual (heliocentric) position, that planet (or quality in us) gets farther and farther into the future of the zodiac in what could be pure speculation. My natal Mars is like that, some 87% ahead of the helio position for Mars. My activities or drive are way ahead of the curve. I am incredibly active and usually about things that are very future-orient, i.e. I am creative.

On the other hand, my natal Mercury is 86% behind the helio position, deep in the zodiac past (relatively), but having gone direct, it is once again moving forward. My mind and thinking is very much acclimatized with the past, so my analogies and examples are always very practical, making use of what is already known, etc. And so on.

To finish up the idea here, any given planet can be ahead (in the future) of its helio position or behind (in the past), back where the helio position has just been. AND (this is important), whether ahead or behind, the planet can be either moving forward (direct) or moving backward (retrograde). In other words, we can have Mars in the future of the zodiac, moving either direct or retrograde, or in the past of the zodiac, again moving either direct or retrograde.

To use my natal Mercury again as an example. For me, since I have Mercury direct in motion, but way behind the Sun (in the past), this means that Mercury is going over this same degree of the zodiac for the THIRD time in a row, so that degree of the zodiac is pretty much known territory by now. Mentally, I have the experience. You may need to study this, and my free book is easy to read.

Any geo planet that goes beyond the helio position for the same planet is going into fresh or virgin zodiac territory for the first time since that last full orbit, so it is all about future or new ideas, etc. When it turns retrograde and moves back through the zodiac, still in the future, it passes over that same zodiac degree for the second time, so we already have some familiarity.

Then, when it (still in retrograde) moves over the helio current position back into the past (and turns direct again), we go over that same zodiac degree for the

third and final time for that orbit. We should be experienced with that part of the zodiac by now.

Burn Rate is a measure of how much difference there is between the geo and helio positions (basically), although the inner planets are treated slightly differently than the outer planets, but it is the same idea. This difference in position I consider the amount of change in perception that it takes to pull these two images together into one. This, because we know there is only one actual movement through the zodiac in the heavens, but from Earth's perspective it can appear very different than it is. For example, my traditional geo Mars is at 9-degrees of Aries, but my helio position (same instant in time) Mars appears to be in 24-degrees of Aquarius. How do you resolve these two? And that potential for change (resolution) is what I call Burn Rate.

We could hazard an interpretation that outwardly my geo Mars is Aries-like, but inwardly (helio position) it always accomplishes an Aquarian goal. And, you can add up the change for all the planets in your natal chart and get the total Burn Rate for the chart. Some people have lots of changes to go through in life, and others don't. My biggest "change" planets are Mars and Mercury, so I can expect a LOT of changes in my mind and in my activity, and that's been true. I am very active, and my mind has gone through incredible changes.

I could go on, and my e-book does just that. But check out this template for Burn Rate for different media, to be made available on smart phones and see if it interests you.

FULL-PHASE ASPECTS

July 13, 2017

Some of you have messaged me to say that you like this kind of detailed explanation for these techniques. Try your teeth on this on, because here we come to a technique that may be a little difficult to grasp, but I can assure you, it is very much worth the effort. First, let me tell you how I fell into it.

Like all astrologers back in the 1960s, I was brought up on the books that were available at the time, so I pretty much got in line with what I read. It was only later, after I began to seriously research astrology for myself that I discovered that astrology it is not all that cut and dried, with exact cubbyholes and all. In fact, I began to wonder who has bothered to really look into certain areas of astrology, maybe for centuries, if ever.

We all learn the basics of astrological aspects, the major aspects which are comprised of conjunctions, oppositions, inconjuncts, semisquares, sextiles, squares, trines and so forth. It was some years after I started in astrology that I realized I was interpreting an astrological square aspect the same, whether it was applying (waxing) or separating (waning). This is not something I would do with the Moon cycle, where even I knew that a waxing Moon was very different from a waning Moon, and so on. What about the planets and so forth?

The long and the short of it is that I ended up spending a number of years studying aspects from the ground up, and very diligently at that. What I discovered was that there is a huge difference, like “all the difference in the world,” between a waxing and

a waning square, and so on with the other mirrored aspects. That's the whole point here, that there IS a difference between waxing and waning aspects and that difference is ALL the difference there is, and it is very important that we interpret mirrored aspects differently.

I only found a few astrologers that recognized these twin or mirrored aspects past mere lip service; two of them are L.E. Johndro and Dane Rudhyar. Most astrologers just interpret a square as a square, whether it is waxing or waning, applying or separating. To them, a square is a square is a square, etc. Not so.

After much study, I ended up using what I call the "Sweet Sixteen" set of aspects, which are comprised of the conjunction, 4 inconjunct types, 4 semisquares, 2 sextiles, 2 squares, 2 trines, and one opposition. Then, over the years, I faithfully changed all of my interpretations to read, noting whether they were applying and separating. I call these mirror-aspects "Full-Phase Aspects," because they delineate both waxing and waning aspects as separate. And this difference made a huge difference in my interpretation work. Anyway, so far what I have said is just a prelude to what I want to introduce you to.

I studied the synodic cycle very closely and I found a new way to look at a chart (any old chart) in a very revealing way using Full-Phase Aspects. Let me explain this technique and see if this is understandable to you:

With any two heavenly bodies (like the Sun, Moon, and planets) orbiting one another, one of them is moving faster than the other. So, that faster moving planet is always in the process of making all sixteen

major aspects to the other. And, by calculating the angular separation (angle) between the two, we can see what phase aspect between the two goes from zero (Conjunction) through the Opposition and around 360-degrees to the next Conjunction. However, there is one caveat with this technique that I will now explain.

When we look at our natal chart on the 360-degree wheel, with all of its aspects, it is hard to see at a glance which is the faster moving planet and to keep all of them in mind. So, for convenience sake, I wrote a little program that will sort all of the planets in a chart so they can be arranged in sequential order in a separate chart by their angular separation.

This makes looking at a chart very helpful, because it reveals the nature of the “type” of aspects that best describe us being grouped together as far as whether that are waxing or waning. I call this the “Phase Chart” and it has been implemented in the BlueStar Program from Matrix Software.

Now I am in the process of making this Phase Chart technique available to work on smart phones. So, a Phase Chart is a round wheel with a single planet as a focus (at the top) and the aspects to that planet by all the other planets are arranged by angular separation, that is, by whether they are waxing or waning. Starting at the top with the conjunction, the angular separations go counter clockwise around the wheel, so that the left side (hemisphere) contains all the waxing aspects and the right side all the waning aspects. In this way, we can see the flow at a glance.

Using this technique, we can examine a natal chart by using any one planet as a focus. For example, here is the heliocentric Phase Chart using my natal Earth as

the focus. The other planets are then ordered by angular separation from zero to 360-degrees, with the waxing aspects on the left hemisphere of the wheel and the waning aspects on the right. And we can see at once where the waxing/waning emphasis is, without trying to do it in our head.

Since all cycles (or circles) have a similar structure, we can see at a glance which of the four quadrants in the chart are emphasized, which hemisphere is strong, which of the four chart angles are emphasized, and also which of the aspect types (colored rays in the wheel) are emphasized. I may post a larger wheel in a comment.

Using the Phase Chart, it pretty much reads like a story book. Let me use my heliocentric chart as an example, with the focus on my natal Earth. You can read more about how this all works at this link. Just scroll down until you see the book “Full-Phase Aspects.” Now the little story:

“Full-Phase Aspects: Astrology’s Mirror”

<http://spiritgrooves.net/e-Books.aspx>

Since the Phase Chart can be divided into upper and lower hemispheres, with the upper marking our “inner” or private self (surrounding the Conjunction) and the lower the “outer” or public self (on either side of the opposition), we can easily see that I have more planets in the lower-half (hemisphere) of the chart (public) than the upper. So, I am publicly more of an extrovert than an introvert, as you already may know from all my blogging about what I do.

Then, in the first quadrant (upper-left top) I have one planet, Mercury, in the area of effortful planning, so I am always creating with my mind. In the second quadrant I have Neptune right on the trine aspect.

The second quadrant is all about doing, building, and Neptune is spiritual things, as well as music, film, and so on. Well, I built the largest music database on the planet and one of the two largest film databases, was a musician for years, and so on.

But the most pronounced part of the chart is in the third quadrant (lower right), which has to do with awareness and sharing that awareness. I have Jupiter, Venus, Uranus, and Saturn all together in the waning trine (240-degrees), mirrored (as mentioned) by Neptune in the waxing trine. That configuration, to me, says it all about what/who I am, and you would not have seen this so easily just by looking in the standard natal chart.

And lastly (for this brief look), let's examine actual aspect emphasis, which are the colored rays in the chart. We can instantly see that the green trine aspects are very strong, containing five planets. These are an energizing aspect, so I should have lots of energy. And the only hard aspect is the Mercury coming into a waxing semi-square.

Anyway, very briefly that is how I read these Phase Charts, which are already built into Matrix BlueStar, as mentioned. I no longer own that company, but I founded and built it. If you grasp how Full-Phase Charts work, you may find, as I have, that these are very useful and easy-to-read charts... AND they actually work beautifully!

SOLAR FLARE: CORONAL MASS EJECTION

July 14, 2017

[We interrupt our normal blog-cast for a solar event.]

We are approaching solar minimum, which will take place around 2018-2020. Solar minimum is exactly what it sounds like, the point in the eleven-year solar cycle when the Sun is most quiet, often going for long stretches of time without even a single sunspot. With the absence of a strong solar wind protecting Earth during solar minimum, cosmic rays, the traces of cataclysmic events in deep space events, more easily penetrate our atmosphere and expose us to these rays. Normally we are shielded from cosmic rays by the umbrella of the solar wind from the sun.

However, right now, even with the quiet Sun, we are experiencing a powerful M2 Class solar flare, complete with a large coronal mass ejection (CME), which has just been hurled at earth. This large flare (which persisted for over two hours) took place on July 14th and the CME which it hurled at Earth arrives this weekend of July 15, most probably on the 16th.

Such a powerful flare (and CME) is very unusual for the quiet Sun, but obviously it happens. IMO, astrologers would do well to become more aware of this kind of intense solar activity. For heaven's sake (so to speak), as astrologers, we chart out the most teeny and weeny planetary aspects and make a mountain out of them, while these massive solar eruptions all around us go unnoticed. Why have we not embraced these vast solar events as part of our astrology?

Unfortunately, for the last 400 years or so, when astrologers and astronomers first went their own ways, astrologers have steadfastly refused to acknowledge the importance of the Sun's activity in their astrology. This negligence boggles my mind!

When Copernicus first pointed out that the Sun does not revolve around Earth, but just the other way round, astrologers never accepted it, except conceptually. They continue to act like everything revolves around the earth and use only geocentric astrology. While, after Copernicus astronomers broke away and suddenly had two charts in hand (the geocentric and now the heliocentric), the astrologers have only depended on the one chart, everything from Earth's view. It is like trying to see the depth of things with only one eye open, instead of the usual stereo. Astrologers still act as if everything revolves around us, i.e. that the Sun goes around the earth. It does not, of course.

Even today, modern astrologers have yet to receive the full empowerment of the Sun and be initiated at the psychological level into the solar mysteries, something astronomers did 400 years ago. For some reason, astrologers are still waiting for the other shoe to drop. The most arrogant belief, IMO, are those who believe that here on Earth we are spiritual beings with "souls" or whatever, but the vast Sun that we literally circle around is nothing more than a big ball of hot gas. How sad is that?

If we are spiritual beings (or think ourselves so), there has to be something to our Sun more than simple physics. And, as ignorant astrologers have told me for almost 50 years, "We live here on Earth and not on the Sun. Why should I look at a chart of the Sun?"

And, of course, they don't look at what is right before their eyes.

I should point out that astronomers have risen to prominence in society and academia, while astrologers languish in near poverty. Is that not a message? I well remember when (many years ago) I tried to get a loan from a bank for my first programmable calculator (with which to program astrology) and was foolish enough to tell the loan officer that I was an "astrologer." He then looked up "astrologer" on his list of loan risks and it was right there, just above migrant workers. Loan denied!

So, I hate to rant, but good grief. When are astrologers going to wake up to the sheer power of the Sun that gives us all its warmth and life itself? End of rant.

Anyway, we are having a solar event in the next day or so, one that will literally reach deep into our psyche, bringing us the most recent changes from the Sun, changes we are all going to HAVE to assimilate, like it or not.

I am not going to repeat here everything I have written about using these solar events astrologically, but you can read any number of free books and articles at this link. Just scroll down and look for books like:

SpiritGrooves.net/e-Books.aspx

Solar Flares

Sun Storms

Vision of the Eclipse

Or, under Spirit Grooves Videos at this link:

<http://spiritgrooves.net/SpiritVideos.aspx>

Watch these free videos:

Solar Flares and the Mystic Son
Solar Eruptions and Creativity
Solar Storms and the Psyche

Many astrologers that I have known follow the very predictable events in the sky of the Moon and planets using calendars or ephemerides, but they seem not to be able to follow the eleven-year solar cycle, much less the Sun's behavior on the day-to-day level, even though the government posts these events online 24x7. Here is the link:

<http://www.swpc.noaa.gov/products/goes-x-ray-flux>

So, dear astrologers, it is time to become aware of what our Sun is doing each day and take these solar events to heart and into our practice.

FINDING THE LIFE PATH

July 14, 2017

It has been a long journey since I first became interested in things astrological back in the late 1950s and early 1960s. I don't know if history has always had such an exponential curve, but I do know that so much happened so fast in the 1960s that I cannot possibly tell someone who was not there (in words) how it was. This line from the poet Yeats comes close:

“Because the mountain grass,
Cannot but keep the form,
Where the mountain hare has lain.”

Once the doors to astrology were open to me, I burned through all the books on the subject I could find and went from there straight into the mind itself. The mind is where the treasures of the ages can always be found, a library that never grows old. When being asked, in all the world of astrology, what single concept is the most precious to me, it would have to be discovering what I call the “Dharma Chart.”

The dharma for each one of us is simply the particular path to awakening (to finally “getting” it) that will work for us personally, our specific personal path. There are said to be 84,000 dharmas, so it is clear that one size does not fit all. When I asked my dharma teacher of thirty years about the value of astrology in this world (which the Tibetan Buddhists all use), his answer was this:

“Astrology is one of the limbs of the yoga, a relative truth, but not the root. Dharma is the absolute root.”

In other words, astrology is a relative truth, which means that it is good for helping us to make progress in getting around (from here to there) on the periphery of the sphere of life, but it cannot take us to the center of that sphere. Only the dharma can do that. And by “dharma” is meant our personal dharma path, the one that actually works for us, that wakes us up.

Heaven knows I tried to mine the traditional astrological chart for my dharma path. All astrologers do. We each need to find the path to awakening in this life. IMO, nothing else is as important as knowing our particular dharma path, the key to how we can wake up, be aware, and become realized.

I studied my natal astrology chart (geo) for years, trying to figure out the puzzle that is “me”. What I did not then know then is that there was another way of looking at my astrology, in fact another complete chart that is a concise map of my particular dharma path. And this discovery of the Dharma Chart was actually a double discovery, because at the very same moment I could read my dharma from this new helio chart, I realized that the traditional chart I had been using all this time was a chart of my karma, and not my dharma. All this time I had been trying to read my dharma from my Karma Chart, from the traditional astrological chart.

Of course the Dharma and Karma charts are related and, while trying to decipher one’s dharma from looking at one’s karma is not impossible, it is very, very difficult. The number of astrologers who seriously know the Dharma Chart are few to none, IMO. And yet the Dharma Chart has been there, staring us in the face for over 400 years. Long ago, most astrologers just chose to ignore and not look at it.

The only folks who looked at the Dharma Chart centuries ago are what today we call astronomers, and even they ignored its spiritual aspects, and to me the spiritual and creative path is the essence of life lived.

Back then astronomers were astrologers, and astrologers were astronomers. But when the astronomer/astrologer Copernicus pointed out to the world that in fact everything does not revolve around us, around Earth (as we may like to imagine), but in truth Earth revolves around the Sun (and not vice-versa), this was news that not everyone took in or ignored.

In that moment of discovery hundreds of years ago, we suddenly had two astrological charts, the traditional Earth-centered chart that had been used for centuries and a new Sun-centered chart that Copernicus had just pointed out. However, rather than embracing that Sun-centered (heliocentric) chart and using two charts, most astrologers turned away from it and simply ignored it and do to this day. However, the astrologers who went on to become the astronomers of the world embraced both the new heliocentric (Sun-centered) chart AND the traditional geocentric (Earth-centered) chart, and continue to this day to use both charts. They were empowered by this new chart because it was real and made sense. And literally, as they say, the rest is history. Astronomy and Botany are the two oldest academic professions, so the astronomers must have done something right.

Mathematically it is possible to derive the Dharma (heliocentric) Chart from the Karma (geocentric) Chart, because it is just another way of viewing the same planets and the same instant in time, only from a different angle or perspective. And of course, that is

what most astrologers try to do. However, this is extremely difficult, like bending over backward, when it is so much easier just to read one's dharma or life path from the heliocentric natal chart, which is the natural Dharma Chart.

We are each entangled in the midst of our karma, our life, and the traditional astrological (geocentric) chart is a perfect map of that – personality and life circumstances. Yet the key to grasping and unraveling karma has always been the particular dharma path we are on. And your personal dharma path (key to awakening) is probably very different from my own. The heliocentric Dharma Chart is a map of our path to waking up, how we can awaken. I have shouted this from the rooftops for over forty years, but this message has still to be heard by most astrologers. Let me try again:

The traditional geocentric astrology chart is nothing more (or less) than a snapshot of the solar system from the point of view of Earth, embedded deep within that system. It is one view or perspective of that larger system. Wouldn't you like to see a chart or map of the entire solar system (heliocentric) that we astrologers are so busy taking snapshots (geocentric charts) of? That is what I am talking about here.

When I first got into astrology, the idea of a "dharma" chart did not exist. Back then, there were no home computers and not even simple 4-function calculators. Every astrology chart was done laboriously by hand, using pencil, paper, books, and log tables, and few people could do it, but that is another story.

Studying my standard geocentric astrology chart in the early 1960s gave me an alternate way of looking at myself, call it a second opinion (and some relief)

from the toxic psychological descriptions of that time, labels that were then all the rage -- words like paranoid, manic/depressive, schizophrenic, etc. That was how we grew up thinking about ourselves, not at all helpful for a young person. Anyway, I soon identified with my astrology chart and inhaled its alternate description of who I was compared to the labels society had tried to pin on my generation.

I just assumed the standard geo astrology chart of me (that we all know) was a map of my spirituality (or whatever we can agree to call it), when instead it was a map of my karma, the circumstances and personality in which I found myself living. Valuable? Of course, but it was nowhere near an overview, much less a map of how I might awaken and take advantage of my life. It did not clearly show a spiritual path toward the realization of the world I lived in, and I needed that path. Back then I struggled to glean whatever specks of spiritual truth I could from my natal chart, when just by looking at my own birth moment from another (more inclusive) perspective, the path would have been clear to see. When I finally discovered the Dharma Chart, it flipped me.

Keep in mind, as mentioned earlier, that back then there were no astrology programs. I was the first person in the world to program astrology on home computers and make those programs available to my fellow astrologers on a regular basis. This was in 1977 and computers for home use were then brand new. According to an article done for Red Herring Magazine, the company I founded, Matrix Software, is the second oldest software company still on the Internet. The only older one is a little company called Microsoft. That should tell you something. This was then a wild frontier.

Anyway, as a programmer, I naturally found myself exploring and programming various astrological techniques, and one of these was heliocentric or sun-centered astrology. I knew nothing about it. For me, it was one more technique to program and figure out how to interpret. After all, that was what I did in those days.

So there I was, peering through the lens of my traditional natal chart (and training) at this novel heliocentric perspective of myself and trying to make sense of what I saw there. And the helio chart gave a very different take on me, on who I was, what I was capable of, and so forth. Hmmmm, I thought to myself, this IS the real me! Without realizing it, I had fallen down the rabbit hole and was about to go through an earth-change in consciousness. Before I knew it, I was identifying more with my heliocentric chart than with the traditional geocentric natal chart I was used to. Wow!

Please think about this for a moment.

The traditional astrology chart had been my whole world, astrologically speaking, and I had just transferred my identification from that chart to another (in my opinion) more complete view of myself. In the helio chart I found the spirituality that I had always tried to intuit from my geocentric birth chart. Here indeed was a Dharma Chart.

And this “Dharma Chart” was the “me” I had always felt I was inside, but never had any confirmation of in my regular geo chart. Before I knew it, I was inside the helio chart full-time and looking out at (and through) my personality (traditional natal chart), rather than the reverse, where I had previously been -- an outsider looking in, looking inward. There I was,

suddenly on the inside looking out for the first time! It was empowering, to say the least, and it felt so natural. That's what I meant earlier when I said I "flipped" it. "I" flipped.

I had somehow transferred the seat of my consciousness to a deeper center (or view point) and finally identified myself as a spiritual being, a traveler on a path to awakening, a path I could follow! So, if anyone asks me if consciousness-transference is possible, I am here to tell you it is, because it happened to me. Looking through the prism of my heliocentric chart, everything finally fell into line. It was a superior view, an overview, which is what I most needed at the time.

And although (of course) I still use my Karma Chart, I have never gone back to that old geocentric natal-chart view of my spirituality, because it was "through a glass, darkly," to borrow a phrase. The heliocentric Dharma Chart is the natural way to view our spirituality, an inner self (Dharma Chart) looking from inside through the lens of our geo personality (Karma Chart) out at the world. All my life I had been an outsider trying to get in. I didn't know myself. The helio Dharma Chart introduced me to myself, and I am forever grateful. And I found that my consciousness is seated, not only here on Earth, but also at the center of the Sun. Behind our personality and circumstances (geo chart) is a spiritual being and path (helio chart). Make sense?

These two charts, the Dharma Chart and the Karma Chart, are just different views of the exact same moment in time, the same planets, etc. Of course each view is intricately embedded in the other, if only we could unravel it, but there is no need. We have both charts to look at. I have to laugh (and I mean

laugh) when I think of how many years I struggled to read my dharma path from the standard traditional geocentric natal chart. It was not designed for that.

I believe the psychologist Carl Jung would have called the Dharma Chart our Archetype and the tribe we belong to. It takes two views or perspectives to triangulate, and in astrology it is possible to look at the planets and your birth moment from different perspectives or angles, from views other than the standard natal chart that has been used for the last millennium. In fact, without some differential for comparison, how is anything known? One of my favorite jazz tunes, a song by Les McCann, is called (humorously enough), "Compared to What?"

With two (or more) perspectives available, we can triangulate and get a three-dimensional view of, in this case, our own essential nature. The Dharma Chart and the Karma Chart naturally complement one another because they are simply two different views of the same planets at the same moment. The Dharma Chart is a view of who we are on the inside and the Karma Chart is a view of what we are up against on the outside and have to deal with and go through. In hierarchy, the Dharma Chart is the key to our karma, just as in Buddhism, dharma is the key to all karma. The helio is the mother chart, the geo the child.

It took me some forty years to reduce the complexity of the helio chart patterns to something communicable. In the blogs that follow, you can find out about your Dharma Chart and your Karma Chart, your Dharma StarType and Karma StarType, and see your both Dharma and Karma cards. Enjoy.

You will be introduced to the many whole-chart patterns (StarTypes) that make the Dharma Chart unique in interpretation.

THE SHOCK OF SOLAR CHANGE

July 15, 2017

The influx of solar change does affect us. We can ask ourselves: where does change come from? Aside from the obvious effects of karma (action and response), how do we explain these quantum leaps of change, like the intense solar flare (and it's CME) that we are about to experience?

As they say, "Coming events cast their shadow," and we are now entering the edge of change, with more to come. "Round and round she goes; where she stops nobody knows."

Speaking of "round and round," the carnival with its merry-go-round and 4H fair is in town this week. Margaret and I have been walking down to the fairgrounds around 6 AM each day to see the animals. The pigs are too much. Incredible. Very vocal and quick to let you know when they are not happy. And row after row of horses in stalls, each with their head hanging out to greet us. What incredible bulging wide-angle lenses they have for eyes. They must be able to see all around. And the cows, huge bulky bags of meat that are so very gentle. We say hello to them all and offer them mantras.

And as to the carnival (and fun), all my kids are coming today and tomorrow with grandkids in tow, kind of a gathering to celebrate Margaret's birthday in June and my own this coming Tuesday, July 18th. I will be 76 years old, but am still kicking and on no prescription drugs! The grandkids will want to see the animals at the fair, and so we shall. And now for the current solar flare.

A QUANTUM OF CHANGE

They say that change is the one thing that never changes, but the degree of change does change, and that's what (IMO) the solar flux and its variability is all about. I feel that the intensity of solar activity is connected to what degree and type of change we are each subjected to, internally. And we all get radiated equally. Strong solar activity, such as we are experiencing now, with the impending CME (Coronal Mass Emission) hitting Earth on July 16th represents a sharp shift in the intensity of change, especially as we are approaching solar minimum in the next year or so (11-year cycle). The Sun is usually quiet at this time, so this current very-long flare and resulting CME is all the more obvious. It interrupts our life to bring us change.

I know that it's not just arbitrary, but it can seem arbitrary, when suddenly we are jerked out of whatever level of consciousness and life-focus we currently are living at and find ourselves either on an extensive sidebar or having to completely change our focus permanently. I believe this same change (that we all experience together) affects different folks differently. Intense solar change can be like that, at least in my experience.

And, with strong change like we have now, it's usually the level of my life that I am aware of that changes. Like an internal elevator, the degree of change finds my consciousness (and especially my level of awareness) going up and down, sometimes into the higher stories, but just as often down into the basement. Not enough is understood (or written) about change and yet it is the most constant variable in the world.

Of course, solar change, as in sunlight, is a constant. It takes eight minutes and 20 seconds for the light of the sun to travel from the Sun to Earth. Particles like the solar wind, which blow day and night, take longer and massive events like coronal mass emissions (CMEs) require a day or two. And that's where we find ourselves right now, in a time of fairly extreme solar flux.

The CME from yesterday's very long solar flare (July 14th, 2017) should be rolling in later today, the 15th, but it is predicted that the bulk of the CME will impact Earth on Sunday the 16th, tomorrow.

Of course, these solar variations and emissions physically affect Earth's radio transmission and radio reception, and sometimes even our power grids, but we can read about that anywhere. What is not written about much is the effect of these massive pulses of change on our consciousness, emotions, and states of mind, yet if we look, they obviously do.

Many folks find themselves just overwhelmed at these solar influx times, even to the point of having to go and lie down. Others have headaches and confusion that take days to clear up. And most of us find ourselves changing, despite ourselves, and sometimes at our very core. Plus, directions and purposes that were firm and linear yesterday can go into what seems like an endless loop today. What on earth can we do?

Well, we can't stop the Sun from shining or even want to. That's for sure. And, if the Sun wants to sometimes issue larger packets of change than the normal sunlight, we have to just take it. And to me, it seems like these quanta of change are very condensed and expand on contact with our

consciousness, much like colored dye in water or one of those new mattresses in a box that suddenly fill the room. And we can never seem to get the toothpaste back into the tube. Change is a result that never changes.

These concentrated packets of change turn out to be everything from Pandora's Box to sometimes (so it seems) just what the doctor ordered, i.e. good, bad, and indifferent. At least that's how I find CME change.

As for this current CME, so far, aside from being disturbing (which they all are), this injection of change (for me) is a little dark. I notice I am having dreams that are just shy of being nightmares, so that's what I'm getting out of this, so far.

It does suggest that I should perhaps just relax more and roll with it this time, rather than stand up and fight the change (which never works). I should just be as accepting as I can. What it means for the whole world, I cannot tell you. I'm my own little thermometer out here in Michigan monitoring the winds of change on me.

It is particularly apparent to me as a writer, because the tone or vibe of my writing, which may have been stable for days or even weeks, suddenly shifts and I can't write like that anymore. The process of change adds a period and "end of story" mark to whatever I've been working on and that's that. I just have to move on and start over. Endless beginnings are what life is like, but one end.

WHAT IS REALIZATION?

July 16, 2017

[We are in the midst of a family reunion here, our four kids and five of our grandkids all together. There are different groups, kids (and my game-playing son) playing games, while out on the patio my three daughters are going through bags of baby clothes that Margaret has pulled out of the attic. And the other vital theme is food and what could be the next meal, not to mention snacks in between.

As for me, I usually share things I find interesting here on Facebook of something or other that I have realized. But today, I am just commenting of something I have been thinking about a lot lately, the concept of spiritual realization. Humor me and read on or find something more interesting to you. Thanks.]

Many Buddhist texts contrast the difference between our common experience and realization. By “experience,” they mean our ordinary day-to-day, visceral, emotional ups-and-downs. And by “realization,” they mean just that, and some of the pithy Buddhist texts (upadesha) go on to say that “In the midst of experience, realization can arise.” But what is realization?

An example of realization is realizing how to turn a light switch on and off for the first time. At some point we realize that if we push the switch up, the light comes on, and if down, the light goes off. That is a realization. From then on, we don’t have to figure this out each time. Once we “realize” how it works, that realization is permanent. This is a mundane example of realization.

However, spiritual “realization” is a little (no, a lot) more difficult, because with a light switch we are focused on one small part of our world (and can lean on the rest), but with spiritual realization we are turning our entire world on at once and, because we have no purchase or fulcrum, where is the switch to do that?

Well, the “switch” or means to turn on spiritual realization is The Dharma. And, as mentioned, when “Realization” arises, it often does so rather suddenly, but typically is incomplete. We get a glimpse, which is why it is necessary to expand and extend any realization that we have through practice. It is like stretching pizza dough. And an oversight I often make (almost always) is to mistake the baby for the bathwater, as they say. I will explain.

Any spiritual realization is so precious in my experience that, no matter how it appears, it is very difficult for me not to become attached to the form or wrapping through which it first appeared, you know, the horse it rode in on rather than the realization itself. I’m talking about appearances here.

I have seen this again and again in my own life, never more obvious than with my photographing nature. Oddly enough, I had my initial bit of realization through taking close-up photos of nature and, of course, I immediately set about buying better lenses and more nature field-guides, rather than realize that it was the “realization” that made all this possible, not the lenses, etc. That’s what I mean about the baby and the bathwater.

This is a simple confusion and, after a while, I usually catch on, figure out which is the baby, and eventually let the bathwater go, but probably not always.

Anyway, how would I know if I don't know? That's what realization is about: realizing. This grasping at the outer form of appearances and not identifying with the inner (that which realizes) is very, very common. In fact, it is hard NOT to do it, which is what dharma practice is all about, to rectify that.

Like magnets, we tend to cling to the surface of things in our projection, rather than to push off and float free as the center we supposedly are, which is the pure awareness. Like the proverbial tar baby, my awareness appears all too often to be stuck or wrapped around the external, but we all know it is not. It couldn't be.

And what most amazes me, and is very hard to describe, is that in our constant glomming on to appearances as we do (to which we stick like glue), we are endlessly reinforcing Samsara, habituating (and limiting) ourselves dualistically to subject and object. In other words, we do it all the time! In fact, it's mostly what we do and that without thinking. How to better explain this?

The best analogy I can find is that of a movie, a projector, its projection, and our watching it. What is hard for me to realize is that my own projection, in this case the world outside as I see it, is just that: my projection. Yet, I fail to identify it as such, and fall spellbound into the trance of watching my own movie, of which I am the creator, producer, and director.

However, I fail to see that this projection I'm watching is myself (I'm the actor!) and identify it as such. Instead, to me everything "out there" appears as the "other" (and separate) reality of the outside world, rather than my own movie overlaid over whatever actually is out there.

In other words, I fail to recognize the movie I am watching as my own projections. Sure, every once in a while I can perhaps see through all that projection and beyond to the reality of whatever actually is, but most of the time, I just sit back, put up my feet, and watch the show in all its mesmerizing full-color, amazement, and sometimes horror. I'm mostly hooked.

So, in summary, I tend to become attached to the outer object from where any little bit of realization first occurred, as if that object is responsible for the realization, rather than from within my mind and realization.

We are easily attached to the form through which our realizations appear. Of course, the realization itself can never be attached, and that by definition. It's like saving the box that the present came in rather than the present itself.

The problem is that our insatiable thirst for gratification finds us grasping for spiritual satisfaction in the same way, but coming up only with disappointment and empty forms. It's like sand running through our fingers or trying to catch a ghost. Of course, spirit (and realization) is not graspable, and this too by definition. And worse, since we already are the spirit or awareness itself (and may not realize it), we can never get outside the mind to grasp it. The best we can do is to realize the spirit that we already are and have always been.

REALIZING STABILITY

July 19, 2017

I want to say something about what we do with a realization (such as “Recognition” of the mind’s true nature), once we have a glimpse of it.

The more we practice dharma properly, with heart and proper intent, the more stable our realization can become after we first achieve it. At least, that’s the idea. That spark of realization called “Recognition” (as to the true nature of the mind) is like dropping a match in the center of a field of dry grass. At that point in our dharma practice, a fire is started that burns from the inside outward, in all directions, evenly, eventually consuming the entire field.

The Tibetans say that the light of a single match can remove the darkness of eons. That’s what I’m talking about here; however gaining real stability in this takes most of us quite some time. And, it is all about awareness, including becoming aware that our progress is gaining greater stability through exercising realization. Yet, first we have to have that spark, that first match.

After that initial spark of recognition, our realization cannot but expand, unless we consciously let it lay fallow. An early teacher of mine, a Unity minister (Christian) used to say “The Word of God has to do one of two things; it either must die or it must grow and spread. Well, it can’t die, because it is the truth, so it will have to grow and spread.” I feel the same way about the Dharma, once it takes hold of us through what is called “Recognition.” Unless we allow it to fade, the dharma naturally expands and stabilizes itself. That has been my experience. It goes viral.

It took me some considerable time to figure out how to use what realization I came up with in the larger sphere of my life. It is easy to make the mistake of associating (become attached to) any realization we have with the context and time in which it first arose, rather than as a means (that realization) to expand and extend it to other areas in our life. After much experimentation and contemplation, at least in my case, the best way for me to do this is to relax, because making great effort at this stage in our practice is counterproductive when it comes extending our realization.

Yes, we make effort, but it is an effort to relax (if that is not an oxymoron) and let our realization naturally find its way into all the parts of our life. It will. My problem was that if I had some realization in one area (for me it was close-up nature photography), I ended up focusing on that particular area, rather than on the realization itself.

The example that I always give is of close-up photography. Because my initial realization arose through the process of photography, I became attached to the photography, rather than to the realization. It just slowed me down and it took longer for me to extend the realization to other areas of my life, like writing and, eventually, anything at all.

Yet, I'm getting there, but more slowly than I would have, had I been aware enough of what is going on to have the courage to more quickly extend (or allow it to extend) the ability to realize. Because, that is what realization "is," something that can be learned, at least as far as I know. If we let it just lay there, attached to our initial glimpse or its context, that is exactly what NOT to do. The process of realization has to (wants to) gradually become a habit and an

automatic one at that. Perhaps I am not being clear enough.

It is a perennial problem for spiritual practice of any kind that when we get a little shot of progress, like a powerful insight (or even some kind of vision), the first thing we do is become attached to that experience or progress and try or want to repeat it again, often in the same context, much as I pointed out in my example with photography. Because my original realization came through the process of photographing nature, I bought more lenses and a better camera instead of nursing the realization.

Of course, the lenses and cameras DID help me extend my realization, but it also limited me to having this clear and lucid capability only when I was doing photography. In other words, if I wanted my mind to be clear, I had to grab my camera and go out shooting photos. I hope you grasp this idea, because it is important. It took me at least a year to even begin separating my “realization” from my photography, and then, through that, expand and extend it to other activities throughout the day.

And it was all because of a lack of awareness and courage on my part. I could have used an authentic dharma teacher close-by, one who might have encouraged me to be more adventurous and explore my ability to realize rather than be so attached to photography. Eventually this did occur. A friend (a retreat lama) happened to visit, and when I told about what I was going through, he pointed out what was going on with me so that I could understand it, i.e. what I have been describing above.

Once that happened, I began to untangle myself from my attachment to photography at a much greater

pace than I was previously doing, which had been more like feeling around in the dark. I didn't stop doing photography. That's not the point, but I began to find other areas in my life where I could extend my realization and exercise the same insight besides doing photography. This is what "extending" realization is all about.

Here I am trying to be as detailed as I can in explaining this in words, yet the reality at the time was far less formal and much more confused. I understand it now and can articulate it, but originally I was more than a little lost as to what was happening to me. This change or metamorphosis was a big deal.

Stability and "balance" in dharma is just that, not being upset or thrown off-balance by every little passing emotional breeze, but rather receiving and responding to each challenge naturally. It is one thing to WANT this kind of balance, but quite another to see it actually taking place within you. As life hurls one after another event at us, instead of wincing or being negatively impacted, we learn to just roll with it. In other words, we respond instead of react.

And I have to point out that the enabler of all this stability is, of course, an increased awareness on our part, increased enough to track incoming challenges before they arrive and deal with them accordingly, and with some kind of skillful means. The news here is that the process of extending and expanding realization, itself, is a natural one. We don't have to work it up, but only to not block or obstruct it. In other words, the expansion and spread of realization is self-fueling. Yet, it all depends on reaching that spark of "Recognition," which is why we initially practice dharma and what all the many practices are designed for.

HOW I FELL IN LOVE AND GOT MARRIED

July 18, 2017

FALLING IN LOVE AS "REALIZATION"

It's my birthday (July 18th), but as Margaret my wife tells me, "It's your birthday, so this is your day." OK. On this day then, I would like to tell you about the day I met Margaret and fell in love, which was a spontaneous realization that I had many years ago and, just like dharma realization, it is still true some 46 years later.

I had had crushes before, but this has to do with my falling in love to the point of marriage. I had never done that before or since. And this was a natural realization, one of the most powerful (and lasting) I have ever had. I have told this story before, but I have added some to it here.

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 kind of intense, so I'm 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, watching plants grow, just out there walking the streets hoping against hope to run into "Her." Well, as it turned out, it wasn't quite that easy. It took time (years) for me to settle down and even be ready for marriage. Anyway, 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, of 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 with 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.

I don't know why it took so long. Perhaps I had first to build a nest. For many years, I had slept on a tiny mattress that I had specially built for me. It was so thin, little more than a pallet on the floor, and very, very narrow, not built for two. But then, for no particular reason, in the January winter of 1971 I found myself getting rid of the little 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 sign that I was changing. Or, was it just 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 that time, my latest attempt was with a young lady who had moved into 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. Anyway, this lady and I both did our best to put something together. Although she was very nice, in the end we just didn't fit. That great love I yearned for and wanted to feel was simply not there, although she was a good woman. We went our own ways, and were not quite as friendly after that. 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 heart of my story.

At that time, 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 a lot called "Buddies in the Saddle." Their lead singer is still my friend and I see her on this Facebook blog. Hi Lorna! Anyway, on this Wednesday night in March of 1971, way up at the front of the club by the stage was a big wide table, sort of reserved for the locals; at least that's where all my friends and I would sit. It was set up 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 use of alcohol was an on and off thing. I never drank all that much and when I did, I was usually sorry. Anyway, I knew most, but not all, of the people at our table that night, and certainly not the dark-haired woman sitting across from me to my right and perched on the closed keyboard of an old upright piano. But she apparently had noticed my orange juice and made a point of calling me out on it, and loudly at that, in front of everyone. After all, this was Wine Night!

"Drinking orange juice? What are you, some kind of pansy?" That word was still common back then. 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. Apparently, I made her squirm a bit and perhaps 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 once or twice in my lifetime.

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, it seemed I was somewhere out of my body and I heard my own words ringing in my head and took them in as if someone else had said them, yet also almost like some kind of cosmic message. "What was that all about?" I thought, and then dropped it. Nothing much else happened that night, but it was an odd exchange.

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 partially under that stage was a long booth, one that could seat a bunch of people, but you could have trouble getting in or out of it because of the length.

Anyway, I was sitting in Floods having a beer with a group of friends. And I was kind of wedged in that booth, toward the back of the table, but all was good until the woman I had been having that relationship with walked in. Now, as I mentioned earlier, we were not exactly getting along all that well and I could tell from the look she gave me as she came through the door (and spied me sitting there) that she knew she had me cornered. Worse, there I was, stuck at the far end of the booth and surrounded by friends. She had me in the perfect spot to perhaps give me a piece of

her mind in public, which I assumed she was about to do. And she quickly sat down at the end of the booth 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 saying hello), 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 an embarrassing scene. However, as I looked around, I could see that all the tables were full and the only open seats were a few single 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 lady," to remind her who I was and what she had tried to do to me the week before. She just 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, it came back to me. 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 on that day,

sitting on some low steps at an inset side-entrance to the church was this same young lady. That night at the bar, I remembered that when our eyes met that day by the church, my heart went out to her and perhaps that feeling was even returned. I don't know. It was just something a little magical that had happened in passing some time ago. As you know, 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 in an instant. And when I realized who she was, I looked into her eyes more intensely to see who she was, and one of the most profound moments in my life just spontaneously arose. And this, my friends, is what is called a "realization," and nothing less. In a flash, I was suddenly looking through and beyond her personality and deep within her mind (or my 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. I could see through that.

She seemed so completely vulnerable and open to me. Then, to my utter surprise, I was overcome with this feeling I had never had before. All I wanted to do was to endlessly care for and love this woman (someone I didn't even know!), and protect her from the sorrows and sufferings of what I knew life can bring to us all. I had never felt this way about anyone before, nothing even close to this. I just loved her!

At the same time that I was overcome with feelings of wanting to care for this woman I had just met, I also had a metaphysical or spiritual revelation, as I am prone to. I am always having these insights and visions, but this one was huge, life-changing. 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. Now, this next part is a little hard to explain, so please hear me out.

There, in that lucid moment at the bar, I realized for the very first time that in all the world that there was no other "One," not anywhere, but as the Greek philosopher Parmenides had pointed out so long ago: "Being alone is." I realized right there on the spot that there has never been two, but all along, only One "Being." My idea of "alone" (and being alone for so long), which I had held close all those years, morphed on-the-spot into a new concept for me, that of "all-One," almost the same word, but so different. Somehow, in that instant, as I gazed into Margaret's eyes, I just finally got it.

I am explaining it here in concepts, but in that instant, there were no concepts, just this realization. It became clear to me that there was no independent being, "Me," over here, and then another independent being in "Her" over there. Yes, of course there were two persons, independent beings (lower-case), but only one "Being" in the larger sense. Being alone is! Well, being alone was all I had ever known, but this being "All-One" was new to me and more than just welcome. And, in that moment, for me, right there in that smoky bar, my idea of two separate Beings collapsed and became one. I am sure that with Buddhist enlightenment, all dualities resolve into one, sooner or later. Anyway, I resolved that life-long duality right there on the spot.

I can't expect to be fully 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 at once, and without thinking. I write it here

in words, but in reality it just naturally arose. I finally understood that this idea of two Beings that I had for years imagined, including the woman I was looking for, were already "One" and always had been so. There is only one Being in the universe, not two. And, it was Margaret's person through whom I realized this eternal truth.

And to take a note from the movie "Jerry McGuire," this woman I had just met 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," anywhere. It was a logical impossibility. There is just the One. But there 'was' Margaret and it was she through whom I first realized this. I took this as a good sign and just naturally responded to her. It was like all the famous poems and literature. Lights went on and bells rang, etc.

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

And 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 up to that point with other relationships) and just leave her there to take care of herself. Not possible. It was already too late for that. For the first time, I felt personally responsible (I responded!) for another human being and, as mentioned, I was more

concerned with caring for her than I was for my own comfort. And that indeed for me 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 perhaps she didn't know it yet, or did she? She must have. In truth, I was as married as I have ever been from that moment (and night) on, and not just three months later when we held the public ceremony. Marriage, at least for me, was a realization more than a ceremony.

Anyway, later that evening Margaret and I left the bar together and have never been separated since. As mentioned, we got married a few months later and have remained so for going on 47 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 too; 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 just 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 some eight grandchildren.

[Here are some shots of Margaret from around the time we were married, the two on the right are from a video when the two of us ran a greenhouse in the middle of winter in Ewart Michigan. Isn't she lovely? Also, from that night forward, when I would play music Monday nights, I would wear a largish pin that read "Beautiful Margaret" on it.]



Beautiful Margaret



CROSSING-OVER

July 21, 2017

Things change, and they also turn, sometimes 180-degrees. That “turning point” is something that, as dharma students, we should all be aware of or at least understand. There are all kinds of ways to measure the turning point, especially with using our practice. It all revolves around how we get things done.

How DO we get things done? This can be a little bit subtle, so do give it a little time to sink in. We are brought up to get things done by, of course, doing them. For example, if we have to think things through, that takes effort and force of will. Most of us, when we face a problem, have a sit-down with ourselves and think the problem through. We think about it. This is quite natural.

When we give a problem a good “think,” it does not occur to us that the process of thinking could itself obscure what we are thinking about. Yet, similar to the famous Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle (which points out that observables are not independent of the observer), the effort and concentration it takes to drill down on something intellectually (Thinking!) simultaneously excludes just as it clarifies. Let me approach this from another point of view.

When we are learning to meditate (or do anything, for that matter), it can take effort and will to get it done. That’s how we are trained to do things. We focus and concentrate. However, in dharma training, as much as effort and will are important in the beginning, there comes a time in our training when, instead of concentrating, we have to do the opposite, which is to relax and let go.

It's reminds me of tightly closing our fist and then releasing our grip, opening our hand. That is the gesture I'm pointing out here. Of course, that is what our heart does all the time, or our lungs, open and close, open and close. This is common and natural.

There is, however, a point reached in our dharma training where we need to stop trying so hard to focus and make things happen and, instead, start letting things just happen and start to come to us. It is a change in our mode of operation, a change not for a minute or a day, but permanently, from that point onward. It is not something we can just do by force of will, but rather it happens quite naturally. What we can do is be aware that this point I am elaborating will come, recognize it when it does, and not fight it, but work with it.

This idea that we can just always think things through is itself wishful thinking (no pun intended), a kind of adolescent imagining. Yes, when we are coming up, we can develop our ability to forcibly think things out, and we do. Yet, that is not a long-term strategy. Just as what goes up, comes down, so does what is concentrated (and drilled down on), eventually has to open up and release. It is simple physics.

So, what I am saying is that there is a bridge we cross in life, a point of no-return, after which we cannot achieve by forcing ourselves mentally or physically any longer, try as we will. And this is a point that is not only intrinsic, but crucial for every dharma practitioner. It is not a small point, either, but a major event in dharma training and it is a blessing to know about it in advance. Otherwise, we beat our heads against a wall to no avail.

Habitually focusing our mind to concentrate fades and no longer works. It gradually gives way to opening our mind up a bit to the elements, the sun and the rain, and eventually letting the winds of change blow through the house of our mind as they will. Instead of grasping to achieve, grabbing at what we can, we begin to learn to open up and receive gratefully (and gracefully) what we can.

This is especially true in the more advanced forms of meditation like Vipassana and Mahamudra meditation, where willpower and brute force will get us precisely nowhere. That approach has to be abandoned and, in its place, a much more flexible and “receiving” state of mind is born and allowed to flourish.

However, this turn-around is not something that normally can take place in a day. Our lifelong habit of grasping, forcing, and “Thinking” has to give way to reflecting and receiving. Over time, we become more receptive to the universe and respond to what it has to offer us.

The takeaway here, IMO, is that if we are still “thinking things out” in a concentrated fashion, we either have not yet reached the turning point that I am referring to here or we may have reached it, but not realized it. We could be still pushing the mind (and getting nowhere), when by letting go and relaxing, we could be very much more in touch with ourselves and reality. It’s called responsibility.

THE DHARMA TRAIN

July 22, 2017

What do we think we are doing when we practice dharma? Why are we practicing? What do we want to get out of our practice? What is our goal?

This is not a rant, but it may sound like one. Dharma practice is not just a subway or train we get on and then hope for the best. There is nothing automatic about practicing dharma, such that we can set a timer, sit back, and then wait for results. It is exactly the opposite of that approach. Dharma practice is increasingly demanding and it ultimately requires all 100% of us. It is not something to be trifled with and then abandoned, unless we want to continue on exactly as we now are. It requires perseverance, but of a heartfelt kind.

Even the traditional dharma boot camp, called Ngondro, where we do 100,000 of this and 100,000 of that, has no guarantee. You can't measure the results of dharma practice by either numbers performed or time spent doing it. It's but a rough guess that doing a lot of practice or doing it for a long time is sure to result in something attained. It does not work that way. I should know.

When, after years of quite diligent effort, practicing both in the morning and the evening at Ngondro, Rinpoche's response, when I finally finished and asked him what I should do next, was: "Do you want to know what I would do if I were you, Michael?" I said yes, I want to know. Of course. "I would do another Ngondro." And, I did. That's how it is. Actual dharma results are measured by spiritual progress, not by numbers or by time.

As I like to say to myself, there is no backdoor to the dharma, no VIP status, no grandfather clause, and no side-stepping realization as to the nature of the mind. Like a switch, we either have had a glimpse of realization or we have not. That's the reality. We each have to face that reality.

It can take a long time to grasp that WE (with all our talents and good intent) may not be serious or dedicated enough, even though we are going through the motions daily, paying our dues (we think), and doing everything right that we know of. I can tell you from experience: that may not be enough, my dharma friends. We are talking about transformation here. And we know when we are transformed or not. Check your own transformometer.

In other words, we not only have to do the practices; we have also to do them correctly and "WITH HEART!" With dharma practice, aside perhaps from just learning the ropes (beginning techniques), we have to be, as they say, "All-In." The myriads of Buddhist texts explicitly state that the more advanced forms of meditation (like Vipassana, Mahamudra, and Dzogchen) are all-encompassing. There is no one watching, no part of ourselves hanging back and taking notes. There is nothing tentative about realization. It requires temerity and complete extension. It is a case of "To Be or Not to Be."

If this sounds too fire-and-brimstone-like, I apologize. That is not the intent. The intent is to make sure we don't spend weeks, months, years, and decades imagining (or wondering if) we are getting somewhere, when we may not even be off the ground yet, much less progressing.

And, yes I know, “It’s all good,” as they say and “No wine before it’s time,” “No effort is wasted,” etc. That’s all fine, provided there is no urgency to really learn dharma in this particular life. Maybe, next time.

However, if we do feel some urgency to prepare in this life for our next life, then we can’t trust our own hopes and fears to set us straight or guide us. Hardly!

There are many approaches to Buddhism, each with its particular path and journey. Some paths take untold number of kalpas to complete. A kalpa is said to take 306,720,000 years. I am part of a lineage that has shown that realization can be achieved in this lifetime and enlightenment in some smaller number of lifetimes than a kalpa.

So, my point is that if you feel you are just treading water with your dharma practice, I suggest that you consider seeking out an authentic dharma teacher, someone with true experience, one whom you respect and can learn from, and work with them, including seeking their suggestions on your practice. We can blindly push on forever (and obviously have), but with a little actual guidance we actually progress. The dharma is the greatest tool for transformation I have ever come across.

LOCAL SPACE (RELOCATING)

July 22, 2017

In the early 1970s, using 4-function and later programmable calculators (and much later, computers), I developed an astrological technique based on the local horizon system of azimuth and altitude. I termed this technique “Local Space” and shared it with my close astrological friend Charles A. Jayne, who published it in his journal at the time. I also released it as part of Matrix Software.

Local Space is a powerful relocation technique and it is easy to understand. Just imagine that at the moment of your birth your father picked you up and walked outside. As he looked around the landscape, he could perhaps see the Sun in one compass direction, the Moon in another, and (if it was an evening birth) perhaps Venus, Jupiter, and Mars were in the night sky in still other directions.

Local Space is about charting the position of the planets as they appear at the moment of our birth, not only as they are in the sky, but also as plotted on the local horizon of Earth. A line drawn from our place of birth not only extends in the direction of Jupiter in the sky, but describes a path in a compass direction across the map of the earth in the same direction, one that runs through a series of cities on Earth.

I called this the Local Space into which we are born. Although azimuth and altitude, of course, always existed, the particular technique I developed was created and made popular through the advent of programmable calculators and later, home computers. This was the early 1970s. Today, Local Space is

available in most astrology computer programs; I am seldom credited for creating it, but that's life.

Just as we have the standard natal chart for our birth moment, which I call the Karma Chart, and the heliocentric natal chart for that same moment, which I call the Dharma Chart, we also have the Local Space chart, again for the same moment, same planets, but from a more local perspective. Here is a flavor of what the Local Space chart is about.

The Local Space chart is not just some heavenly orientation, but equally traces out lines on the surface of the Earth, lines along which we can travel and walk. With the Local Space chart, this was 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 toward, write letters to, or get up and travel into, for instance, our seventh house: and what is perhaps more important, we do this all the time!

THE WORLD OF DON JUAN

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.

A CHECKERBOARD WORLD

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 (in the true sense of that word) astrological system, where the obvious is enthroned and the subtle unnecessary.

At this link is free e-book that describes Local Space in much greater detail:

LOCAL SPACE: RELOCATION ASTROLOGY

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/The-Astrology-of-Local-Space.pdf>

If you want to watch a series of three videos on Local Space, here is the first:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gumwoOvNWjo&t=5s>

You can also get your own personal Local Space report at this link. I no longer own this company, so I am not trying to up-sell you on this, but some of you may want to check it out.

<http://www.astrologysoftware.com/webservices/mwrs/LocalSpace.aspx>

BEEN THERE, DONE THAT

July 23, 2017

A number of you have contacted me about offering more information on some of my astrological techniques, suggesting that I make some of these concepts into videos. It's the same with dharma explanations. Well, I have already done that a long time ago and they all are on YouTube, iTunes, Libsyn, SCRIBD, and other places.

Here are a variety of astrological and dharma techniques as free videos on YouTube. This page has a few main links, but the images give you the titles for about 200 videos I put together. Just note the title from the images and enter that title in YouTube and there you are. Enjoy.

Relocation Astrology: The Astrology of Local Space:
Part 1

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gumwoOvNWjo&t=644s>

Relocation Astrology: The Astrology of Local Space:
Part 2

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9gjoXVVyC_c&t=7s

Relocation Astrology: The Astrology of Local Space:
Part 3

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v-FoCmuQqSw&t=6s>

Astrology: Circles or Cycles, Centers, and
Circulation <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Tlilxycr40&t=28s>

The Astrology of Space:
Deep-Space Astrophysics: Part
1 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T_j7I39qGxo

The Astrology of Space:
Deep-Space Astrophysics: Part 2
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mBeqp2CrMLA&t=5s>

The Astrology of Space:
Deep-Space Astrophysics: Part 3
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p_WvI7xT2bw&t=7s

Astrology: Full-Phase Aspects: Part 1
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=34dCA9P2in8&t=641s>

Astrology: Full-Phase Aspects: Part 2
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=850DtqB9toM&t=18s>

Astrology: Full-Phase Aspects: Part 3
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gShEGpO9_Vo&t=20s

Astrology: Burn Rate - The Retrograde Phenomenon
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=njBq8J2qQMs&t=3624s>

Astrology: The Karma Chart and the Dharma Chart
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3YyhMQx8s3g&t=382s>

The Difference Between Realization and Spiritual
Experience - Part 1
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ULWpuB-JEy8&t=2s>

The Difference Between Realization and Spiritual Experience - Part 2

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1cu6yu1nkRQ>

The Andrew Teachings Part-1

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uMDbN8CG-ys>

The Andrew Teachings Part-2

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=32iw_dAwM-M

The Andrew Teachings Part-3

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vUXqUN5hljg>

Photography Tutorials (24 Videos_

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INNER GYROSCOPE

July 23, 2017

There are forces at work within me that are beyond just my attachments and fixations, tsunami-like waves of change, but moving in very, very slow motion. Like tidal waves, they overtake me, but so slowly that I hardly notice them, until I do (like now), but always retrospectively, behind the curve.

I don't believe these slow-moving changes are simply karma tendering its resignation, but then I don't know that much about karmic conclusions. IMO, these glacial changes might be part of a vast pendulum-like swing that is carrying me beyond what I now know into new territory, into what is for me a strange land, but the range here is on the order of many years, rather than just months and years.

Of course, this interests me, because in this case I can feel (or discover) the change affecting me and perhaps I am waking up sooner than I otherwise might to their effects. My point here is that these slow-movers, by definition, signal changes at the core, rather than on the periphery. Something around me is not what is changing; I am changing. I hate it when I don't know what is happening to me, but something is.

I guess what I mean is not that "I," as I know me, is changing, but rather that "I" as I have never known me is shifting into view. My core, as stable as I thought I was or am, also changes. And apparently what I call "I" change with it. That is a little unsettling, but I must admit refreshing.

I'm usually waiting around for something to happen or something to happen more quickly, but in this kind of core-change, I am (lock, stock, and barrel) being delivered to a future I have not really even imagined or thought much about. It reminds me of watching a sun-dial, only much, much slower.

Anyway, I'm not complaining, but perhaps explaining a story in progress, but one for me without an end, yet. I can't say I know where I'm going, only that I'm going. And I don't mean passing on, or even passing through. That's the point. The world around me is NOT changing; I'm changing.

And it's all so subtle that I'm not sure I can even describe it yet. About the best I can do is to tell myself that this could be the result of dharma practice. I don't know how, but perhaps, somewhere, deep in there, the dharma has set in motion transformational-level change that, like continent shift, literally is reorienting me, only so gradually that I can't quite catch it, but I do. It is just like a great space-lab might slowly reorient itself to the Sun. Imagine that.

It gives new meaning to the old phrase "Wait and SEE!"

IDENTIFICATION “IS” CIRCULATION

July 24, 2017

[This concept is part of a short series of articles that require careful reading, but can be transformational and empowering, at least it was for me.]

I have been working with the structure of deep-space astrology for nearly 45 years. My good friend Charles Jayne and I were about the only astrologers I am aware of who were interested in the subject back in the early 1970s. Of course, there was Theodor Landscheidt, whose every word on the subject is worth reading. And also my friend Charles Harvey (from Great Britain) had an interest in the galactic center. And there are others who came along later.

In 1976, I published the book “Astrophysical Directions,” the result of years of research, which even today is still the only detailed book on the astrology of deep space. Here is that free e-book, under its more recent title:

THE ASTROLOGY OF SPACE

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/The-Astrology-of-Space.pdf>

Many astrologers have asked me what the meaning of points like the galactic and super galactic centers is. Of course, I could rattle off their coordinates and a few other particulars. However, if you are actually interested in understanding the nature of cosmic structure from an astrological point of view, you need to grasp the context in which they appear. See if you can get through the following. Take it slowly and think it through.

CENTERS

A central idea for understanding recent cosmological research is the use (and value) of various astrological coordinate systems (geo, helio, galactic, etc.) as best representing the different levels of our life experience. Each coordinate system has a center (and a domain), plus the word "Center" can mean both the same and yet something different to different individuals. Take our own Self-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, yet externally, as fixations go, we are all different. 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 (and value) of center is inviolate, although the outward form of what we take for our lifeline to the center constantly is changing. This highlights the concept of "impermanence" of the outer world, an important point.

The different kinds of life's "center" may be most 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, inquiry, or level being considered at the moment. Thus, for a study of the personal differences, 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 (samsara) involve consideration from the center of the Earth,

what is called geocentric astrology. This traditional astrology chart I call the "Karma Chart," because it maps the circumstances and life situation into which we are born (and must live) in this world.

However, 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 heliocentric coordinate system, we can examine the archetypes of life and consciousness (our tribe), and in general questions traditionally referred to religion, perhaps more recently also considered by some as spiritual or psychological. I call the heliocentric chart the "Dharma Chart," because it describes the dharma or path we will take.

In like manner, galactocentric and super-galactocentric coordinates are appropriate for dynamical studies of the larger or more cosmic structure of our reality. Yes, this is above our pay grade, so to speak, but for each of us, there are moments and even days when our awareness is truly of (or at least in-synch with) cosmic dimensions. We may or may not even be aware of it.

My point here is that there are different levels of truth or reality that we live, call at the same time. What is essential as the kernel of truth (the center of life) to one may appear to another as but one example among many of a larger ordering or structure. Where we may see only what we consider "the center," someone with more wisdom may see a series of centers like ours that form a line or are part of a group.

When we each refer to our center, that around which we appear to 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 these many different centers simply points out the lack of our ability to "Identity" that these seemingly different levels or centers (in fact) form a continuum -- a continuing experience or process of cosmic identification. Consider it our cosmic bloodstream. The following may help to clarify this:

All of these systems larger than Earth, such as the solar system, the galaxy, and so forth include us within their reaches like a mother holds a child within her womb. Of course, we are the children and particular representatives of the earth (we know that), but also we are children of the solar system, and of the galaxy and beyond. It is like a nested set of Matryoshka dolls. With all of these nested systems, their nature, identity, and self is Identical with our own, just increasingly more comprehensive. Still, we share (in a very real way) with these inclusive systems, and their realization, including in the awareness of them, which we can develop. In fact, we have come through this "outer space," through all the time there is (and has been) to BE HERE NOW ourselves. We are not some lonely outpost at the edge of the Milky Way, but a 100% integral and natural part of the cosmos.

Our day-to-day consciousness continually circulates from our particular mundane awareness to more "cosmic" awareness and then back again, and on around. We do this all the time. From an astrological perspective, the exercise of various astrological coordinate systems (and charting them), like exercising our muscles, can serve to remind us that ALL reference to centers (all referral in fact) indicates

but an attempt to achieve the circulation (circle or cycle) of identity of which we are, i.e. to RE-MEMBER, put back together, and remind ourselves of who we already are and have always been. There is this ongoing attempt to be coherent, otherwise we would not be.

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

Life, Spirit, 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! Instead, it is WE who will change, first our attitude and then gradually our entire approach to this creation. We will, in time, see things differently.

And these changes in attitude, this reorientation in our approach to what is unchanging or everlasting in life (even if only to change itself), represent the specific areas where the exercise and use of various astrological coordinate systems of understanding our life become important to present day astrologers.

To discover our own orientation and inclination -- that we are already a perfect representatives of all space and all time, acting out here on Earth (and in detail)

through our persons, events of a so called "cosmic" nature that occur in space at remote distances and times. We already are at remote distance and time.

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 everyday experience. The goal of our study and inquiry into astrology is to re-present and re-veal the nature of ourselves and our intimate circulation and connection or identity in the heart of the earth, heart of the sun, heart of the galaxy, heart of the super galaxy, etc.

In a word:

ALL IDENTIFICATION IS CIRCULATION.

We are locked in a continuing cycle or circle, and all inquiry, questioning, and search on our parts 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, an attempt to remain coherent -- whole.

LOCAL ATTRACTION

July 24, 2017

[This concept is part of a short series of articles that, if grasped, are empowering. This one is essential to understand the role of authentic teachers in our life.]

As we gaze into the Sun during the course of a year and describe the qualities of those who are born in the various zodiac signs, we succeed in NOT defining the position of the Sun, but rather that of Earth in relation to the Sun. As astrologers, this should be second nature to us, but worth realizing consciously. And it illustrates an important axiom:

All inquiry into greater centers (teachers) does not reveal the nature of that center (as it is in itself), but rather reveals our relationship to that center.

In other words: greater (wiser) centers ONLY 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 any discussion as to the qualities of the higher centers, like the Sun, the galaxy, and the super galaxy, we can understand, for example, 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 Milky Way Galaxy, etc. Again, the idea presented here is that it is the very nature of higher

centers (authentic teachers) to reflect and respond to more particular or local centers -- students.

At this point another very significant axiom emerges:

The experience of physical attraction (traction = to draw across or toward) or gravity is primarily a local (or peer) phenomenon.

For instance, we directly respond to the attraction we call the 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 generally aware of the pull of the Sun on the entire Earth, or to say this again: "attraction" (to be attracted to) or gravity is a sign of a purely local phenomenon. Think about this carefully, because if we realize it, transformation takes place. This perhaps will make more sense in our practical affairs if I put it this way:

A sign of our communication with higher or more "vast" centers ("Spirit," life-teachers) is not a physical gravity (sense of graveness or attraction), but always an ENLIGHTEN-MENT, a releasing and the accepting of the nature of the particular terms (terminals) of our own existence -- acceptance. Every counseling astrologer knows that the crux (turning-point) of most readings is when the client stops struggling and accepts their current conditions (where they in fact are at), as the means to move forward in life to change their situation. We can't change something without first accepting it as it is.

Knowledge of the so-called inner (higher) planes exhibits itself to us through a process of reflection or mirroring of our self (just as we are), rather than through the presentation to us of something new, beyond, or "other." Mirroring means that we see not the nature of the entity mirroring us, but OUR own

essential nature. This is what is so wonderful! The traditional word is “reflection.” We see our reflection in the mirror of the teacher and our life then changes or transforms.

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 with 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, but more like peers. True life-teachers affect us with their presence by reflecting, causing us to realize our own intrinsic attractiveness and essential nature, i.e. that we are OK, just as we are.

So, in other words, inquiry into higher centers reveals to us our own essential sense of attractiveness, not theirs. In fact, it is the nature of higher centers to be non-material or non-physical in their effect, by definition. Our inquiry into this realm of higher centers is limited only by our fear (or reluctance) to see our self in their long-gone mirror, and seeing through the back of the mirror has always been a sign of Initiation.

To sum this up: greater (higher) centers mirror or reflect our own self and nature, revealing to us our own essential identity as already a part of a larger whole, and enlightening us of (or from) our own “grave-ness” (gravity) and the burden of an apparent (mistaken) loneliness or separation from that whole. In their reflection, we see ourselves exactly for what we are (warts and all), and react accordingly.

With this idea in mind, let's resume our investigation as to the nature of the Galactic (27 degrees Sagittarius) and Super-Galactic (1 degrees Libra) Centers. We can expect the Galactic Center to exercise considerably greater physical attraction on us than that of the local Super-Galactic center, because it is very much closer. In fact, one of the identifying features of the Galactic Center (GC) at work as revealed in chart analysis (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."

Another way to put this is the great ability and power of the Galactic Center (GC) as represented (when strongly aspected in the natal chart) to move and attract others -- charisma. 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 then contrast this "macho-like" quality found in the GC to the qualities that indicate the presence of Super-Galactic Center at 1-degree Tropical Libra (SGC) in natal charts. Here we look to the traditional qualities of late Virgo and early Libra -- that of care, service, reflection, and love. Perhaps the best representative of the Super-Galactic nature occurs in Eastern 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 (attractive) and moving as we do the GC. In the West, the traditional "god" figures are more fierce and full of the "fire and brimstone" approach than that of the endless care and service as typified in some of the Eastern traditions, like Buddhism.

In fact, only in these times in which 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 apparent in the Galactic Center Idea.

In the Bible it repeatedly says, "This came to pass; that came to pass." The "passive" genius, not active in the "doing of things," but rather active in the "undoing of things" is that of helping things to pass from this world.

This is a non-material or spiritual task and genius (SGC), equally to be valued along with the more active one-who-does-things or brings-things-to-be in this world (GC). And these two vast planes are essentially are right angles in the heavens to one another (86-degrees). We see these two 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 is an example of how to view some of these larger cosmic centers. To give you an example of the reflective ability of teachers or great beings, I offer this from my own experience.

When in 1997 I met His Holiness the 17th Karmapa (Ogyen Trinley Dorje) at some 15,000 feet, high in the mountains of Tibet. I didn't know what to expect, but I was prepared to meet a powerful being. Yet, when I entered into his presence, I did not see this most powerful being. Instead, when in his presence all that I could think of and realized was that I, me, was at heart a deeply compassionate being, a realization that had never occurred to me before. That experience is what I mean when I say authentic teachers reflect not themselves, but rather us, so that we can see ourselves as we are at heart. That is real power.

SO INCLINED...

July 25, 2017

[This concept is part of a short series of articles that, if understood, is empowering. Here is one about astronomical (thus astrological) orientation – our inclinations and disinclinations.]

"As Above, So Below ... but After another Manner," familiar as an occult maxim, might be the perfect description of what is involved in the various astrological coordinate systems and their transformations. It is easy to communicate the concept of "wheels within wheels" (larger systems containing, nested within themselves, smaller systems), 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 more inclusive of the preceding level.

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 (nested 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 – our inclination. This merits our attention.

So, there is not only an expansion in perspective when we move to a larger (more inclusive) coordinate

system, but also a reordering of our sense of direction, a different inclination or angle. This is what makes it so difficult for us to see beyond our present dimension and get a feel for what is perhaps our inevitable future. There exists what are termed "event horizons," beyond which WE cannot understand how life can go on.

Examples of some event horizons are: realization, 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 future events in terms of our present line (linear) of thought being extended. However, to pass through these event horizons involves total change, including reorientation. We do not watch our own change, for we are in fact in transition or change. It is WE who are changing. And mostly we are changing our inclination. We are no longer inclined as we once were. As all counseling astrologers know, we may not be able to change our current situation, but we CAN change our inclination or approach to that situation.

The idea presented here should be obvious: the crossing of a chakra or event horizon also involves simple reorientation on our part, call it a change of approach or attitude. The new dimension or sphere we enter turns out (after our adjustment or change) to reveal our previous or past life in a new light. 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 realization.

What has changed perhaps most is our **INCLINATION**. We no longer want the same things we wanted, or we want them in a different manner. In

other words, we are no longer INCLINED such that we feel the way we used to. Our life now revolves around not only a different center than before -- a wife or child, the dharma, for instance, but our inclinations also have changed.

Many of these principles are graphically revealed through the study (and exercise) of the various astrological coordinate systems. For instance: what appears in one system as isolated and a singular entity, when viewed in the perspective of another coordinate system, may be common and define the basic shape of the new system itself. How often in our lives does some singularity appear as an “other” (and foreign entity), only later, when we have experienced several of this type in our life, to be understood as representatives of a kind or group at first unfamiliar to us? This same event, when repeated, becomes recognizable to us and loses its threatening or “singularity” quality.

This is what astrology is good for, even best at. I cannot 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. They offer an insight into different areas of life (chakras) and each can be charted astrologically and interpreted.

COSMIC SYSTEMS AND THEIR CENTERS – A List

1. Earth/Moon System: center of the Earth.
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 one 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-deg/340 and located in Orion-Cygnus spiral arm. The centroid of the Local System is in Virgo at about 15-deg 25', with nodes to the Ecliptic at 10-deg 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, our 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 are about 27-degree of Sagittarius in relation to the ecliptic. Our 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, revolving around a common center of mass roughly in the direction of 27-degree in the Tropical 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.

If you tell me, well, we only live here on Earth, not on the Sun, much less the Galaxy, I would suggest you are missing the telescope effect, the fact that we are

children of all more inclusive systems. And, by that fact, we not only share in the consciousness of all these nested systems, but we ARE that consciousness, the eyeball that is looking at the nature of our own mind.

[Note: all centers/planes listed here are using the Tropical Zodiac.]

THE DHARMA OF ASTROLOGY

July 26, 2017

[How astrology and the Dharma fit and work together is the topic here.]

Samsara is the Buddhist word for this unenlightened world (and dualistic state of mind) most of us live in. Resolving Samsara is not attained by understanding, experience, concepts, or thinking (which would take virtually forever), but by more fully immersing ourselves in the realization of the true nature of our mind. How to do that?

In my experience, there are (or so it seems) an almost endless number of astrological techniques, books, and articles to help us get around in this Samsaric world using an astrological framework, but none that even begin (using astrology) to realize the true nature of Samsara and the nature of the mind itself.

I'm sure some of you are tired of hearing this analogy, but it is apt. Imagine Earth as a sphere covered with water on which is a sailboat. Astrology, as a relative truth, can advise and instruct us how to reorient and set our sails to travel away from where we are now, to what for us may be a better place to live and be. The sphere is Samsara, this world of ups and downs in which we tirelessly live. Yet, no matter how far we sail or how much astrology we use, we will never get beyond the globe's surface of appearances.

On the other hand, the Dharma, which is what is called an absolute truth, can take us directly to the center of the sphere, from where we can realize the entire surface periphery. That's the analogy.

I well know how to meaningfully use astrology, and often do, if only to take a swim, so to speak. Astrology is not something to believe “IN,” but something to USE; it is either useful or not at any particular time.

And, of course, astrology can serve as a guide (or even a “guru”) to a more successful life in this Samsaric world of ups and downs that most of us live in. After all, that’s what astrology is good for, to help negotiate the hills and valleys of life. Yet, should we, instead, wish to go beyond Samsara by resolving Samsara’s components through realization, astrology alone cannot do that. Only the Dharma can.

As a serious astrologer, this was explained to me very directly by my Tibetan Buddhist teacher of some 34 years, when he said:

“Astrology is one of the limbs of the yoga, but not the root. Dharma is the root.”

It took me a while to grasp what Rinpoche was pointing out, but I eventually managed it. Astrology is indeed useful, but it is what is called a “relative” truth. In other words, astrology is “true enough,” but that “truth” relates only to this relative world of dualistic appearances. Since that’s the world most of us know and live in, astrology can therefore be useful. And it is.

A rough analogy might be that astrology can show us how to get around (all the good moves) within a big city, but if we don’t want to live in a big city, astrology cannot guide us how to get out of the big city and go live in the country. In this analogy, the big city is Samsara and the countryside would be Nirvana. The fact that Nirvana and Samsara are considered “connate” (two sides or poles of the same coin) by the Tibetan Buddhists complicates this analogy. Of

course, if we like living in the big city, then the question is moot.

It was, at first, difficult for me to accept, much less to realize, that astrology was not the be-all-and-end-all that I assumed it was. At that point in my life, astrology was to my mind the complete system that I wanted it to be, even if I had to pinch-hit for it. Why should I learn anything else, with all the effort that could involve? My point is that at first the Dharma (especially the effort to practice it) was not an easy sell. It took me a while to get on board.

And the Buddhists are very good about having you kick the tires of what they offer, and kick I did, and hard. I had more or less mastered the discipline of astrology (at least to my satisfaction) and had my “ticket to ride,” so to speak. I didn’t feel that I needed anything thing more than astrology to get me through this life. Why start all over learning something else (another language and philosophy) from scratch? It took time for life to convince me that I was mistaken in that assumption. I had to work very hard to extract from astrology anything close to what Dharma offers.

And the frightening (at first to me) was that I gradually realized that I was more interested in Dharma than in astrology. It’s not that I do not love astrology. I do and always will. To use the crude analogy, that of rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic (which equates to trying to get comfortable in Samsara) was something I realized I no longer wanted to do. For one, I never did get all that comfortable, which is the nature of Samsara. When I finally realized and could admit that to myself, the path of the Dharma became more and more attractive. I really had no choice.

At the same time, I was at least dimly aware that my astrological life-philosophy was a bit of a patchwork quilt, something I more-or-less had cobbled together, and an unfinished one at that. There were a lot of holes in my understanding that I had assumed astrology would eventually fill, but the fact was it had not, at least not entirely. Philosophically, I was still trying to make the ends meet.

And what little Dharma I was able to pick up on and vet was very convincing. Plus, I had the extreme good fortune to meet (in person) two of the greatest Dharma teachers in the world at that time, the 16th Gyalwa Karmapa (H.H. Rangjung Rigpe Dorje) and the siddha, the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa. And they took no prisoners. As far as getting my attention, they were walking exclamation marks!

So, little by little and bit by bit, I overcame my resistance to learning a whole other life-approach system, that being Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism and its practice. It was a little like sticking my big toe in the swimming pool, but it was not that long before I decided to jump in. Of course, I had to learn how to swim and that was, for me, not all that easy. I hate practicing anything!

It took me a very long time (decades) to get my Dharma skills up to something similar to my astrological skills, much less to cross over and put astrology and the Dharma into their natural hierarchical positions in relation to one another, where (as Rinpoche pointed out) Dharma is the parent and astrology the child. At that point, I was still much better at being the child than the parent. LOL.

And so, my point here is that by attempting to master the Dharma, oddly enough, I automatically completed

mastery of astrology to my satisfaction, and what I had perceived for many years as missing pieces in my astrological quilt, just seamlessly got filled in. That was a surprise. Of course, the price I paid for that “completeness” was surrendering my belief that astrology was the be-all-and-end-all of life philosophies and allowing it to take its natural place as a relative truth and not the absolute truth I once believed it was and insisted it had to be. That place belongs to the Dharma.

So there, I have just given you the basic logic, at least my logic, as to why I was persuaded to let go of my death grip on astrology and open my arms to something even more inclusive, the Dharma. Of course, that was decades ago, but it was, for sure, the most intelligent thing I have ever done. And, of course, at the same time that I embraced the Dharma, my astrology improved to 100%. I had finally gotten my priorities straight. The shoe fit.

THE OUTBREATH

(Recursive-Meditation)

July 27, 2017

Practicing dharma is not supposed to be drudgery. If it is, we make it that way. And we do so only because (like learning any technique from scratch) the traditional way of learning Tranquility Meditation (Shamata) requires some concentration. Yet, so does learning to type, play guitar, and any number of other techniques that require at least some muscle memory. So, why do we not just skip that rote-learning part and move on to something else? And that's the problem, or one of them, anyway.

Just thinking and reading about the dharma can go on forever, without ever getting any actual hands-on experience with meditation. And dharma practice is just that, practice. The dharma by its nature is immersive; it is a life path that we must walk and live, not a conceptual abstract. And for most of us in the beginning, we first have to learn how to walk, which in this analogy is basic sitting in what is called tranquility meditation. Why do this first? Why not wait until later, when we are more used to dharma?

The answer to this is that without concentrating, there is nothing to let go of and it is important to understand that meditation is a process, not just a state of mind. In fact, meditation is like breathing (or our heartbeat), where we first have to breathe air in before we can let go and breathe air out. In breathing, for example, it is not just about having breathed in or having breathed out, but rather about the process of breathing in and

breathing out – and keeping it going. It's the same with meditation.

We have to first stabilize the mind before we can see it clearly. Stabilizing the mind is called tranquility meditation (Shamata in Sanskrit and Shiné in Tibetan) and seeing with clear insight is called insight meditation (Vipassana in Sanskrit and Lhaktong in Tibetan). And, to indicate how they can relate to one another, I like this analogy: if we wish to thread a very small needle but have shaky hands, then tranquility meditation removes the shakiness in the hands, so that we can see to thread the needle (insight meditation). But tranquility is not just what we use to get started and take off. In the more advanced forms of meditation, like Mahamudra, tranquility is an equal partner with Insight Meditation.

The two kinds of meditation (tranquility and insight) go together like breathing in and breathing out. They are part of the process of meditational-breathing, rather than two separate disciplines. Like the heart beating, with its cycle of in and out or the lungs breathing, so it is with meditation. We can't just go out, without first going in, and vice-versa.

In this samsaric, dualistic, relative world, everything is cyclic; otherwise it does not show up on our radar screen. Cyclic processes (like the heartbeat, and breath) must ceaselessly define the edge or reality, much like a pendulum swings to its extremes, but also reveal the center as it briefly passes by. When it comes to perception, edges are everything, and that is why in the all-white of a snowstorm, we can't make out much of anything. No edges.

Just as each newborn baby must take that first breath, so in meditation we have to start the process

of meditational-breathing somewhere. And like calisthenics, we best start out slowly; it is the same with learning meditation. The point is not to force ourselves to concentrate, but rather to kind of ante-in with it and start the cyclic meditational process going. Concentrate, relax. Concentrate, relax.

EXCHANGING ONE BREATH FOR ANOTHER

We know that what goes up, comes down and what goes in, comes out. We somehow have to start the process of meditation (breathing) by making some effort, at least a gesture. And perhaps you now can see why in the most advanced practice of Mahamudra Meditation, both tranquility meditation and insight meditation are required and integral. And they work in tandem and are connected, much like our breath going in and out is connected by the PROCESS of breathing itself.

Mahamudra Meditation is not just being tranquil or having insight, but rather the process of how the two forms (or phases) of meditation work together to sustain meditation. Meditation is a living, breathing process, and if we want to live a dharmic life, we have to meditatively breathe, in and out.

And so, if we are just beginning meditation practice, I hope you can see why it is so important to establish our concentration ability through tranquility meditation, so that we can then relax and jumpstart the process of meditational breathing, by invoking Insight Meditation. Like the newborn baby, it may take a slap on our butt to get us breathing.

1967: THE SUMMER OF LOVE

July 27, 2017

I was interviewed this morning for an article on “The Summer of Love” (1967) in the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco. Why? Because I was there for that summer. So, while it is still on my mind, might as well share with my Facebook friends my memories from that time.

Back in the early summer of 1967 my band, “The Prime Movers Blues Band” (all five of us), piled into our 1966 Dodge van, with our suitcases, plus all our amplifiers and equipment and headed for San Francisco, not quite a walk-in-the-park drive. I remember waking up as we crossed over the Continental Divide to find our van surrounded by sheep and shepherds.

It’s not like we had any money or even a place to stay. We just had to go; that’s all. The 1960s were like that. Luckily, our friend Michael Bloomfield, the former lead guitarist for the Paul Butterfield Blues Band, at that time the leader of the Electric Flag, found us a place we could stay for free. And that was the heliport in Sausalito, California, where many bands practiced.

We could sleep on the cement floor there and, since we had no money, we ended up playing at Mr. Lees Rib House just a couple of blocks away for meals. After all, we had to eat.

Other than that, we played and auditioned at clubs all over San Francisco, including The Matrix, The Straight Theater, Avalon Ballroom, and the Haight A, not to mention the New Orleans House (a folk club) in

Berkeley. But the most memorable gig we played was at the Fillmore Auditorium, when Michael Bloomfield asked us to fill in for the Electric Flag when they could not make the gig. This was in August of 1967 and we opened for Cream, I believe in their first gig on the west coast.

In fact I watched Eric Clapton shoot up speed in the green room before the show. And so it went. The interviewer asked me a number of interesting questions, so I will list a few of my answers, while I have them in mind.

For one, I pointed out that the Hippie Movement or whatever we want to call the 1960s, while perhaps peaking in popularity in 1967 (to the masses) was already starting to fade. The bloom was off the rose, so to speak, but there we were nevertheless, celebrating that era.

When asked what was the most important thing to come out of the 1960s (aside from ourselves), I pointed to the Internet. It was the 1960s folks that more-or-less put the Internet together, IMO. And the funny thing was that the academics and businessmen of that time (those in power) never saw it coming. In fact, the residue of the hippies just walked right in the back door and took over, with nary a blink from those in charge. That has to be funny, in retrospect. We just took over.

And the Internet has changed the world more than any single thing I can think of, and people like me helped that to happen. I had email in 1979 for example, and was fielding major web sites (music) before the World-Wide Web even existed. We had what are called Gopher Sites way back then.

Another question I got was what was for me the driving force of the 1960s and I have to, in all honesty, at least for me, say it was LSD and the changes it wrought. I took acid in May of 1964, when it was legal and the only acid around was the original Sandoz, imported from Switzerland.

Back then, LSD was virtually unknown, but a mystique already surrounded it, nevertheless. It was said that LSD could alter your mind permanently. That, my friends, was scary, but we took it anyway, if only because trying to emerge from the straight-laced 1950s mentality was just way too slow. Anything but that looked good.

And acid did alter the mind permanently, but not as we feared. What LSD did was to cause us to see into the nature of how the mind worked to a greater degree than we had ever imagined, and THAT altered not our mind, but our perception of reality... forever. I am grateful for that!

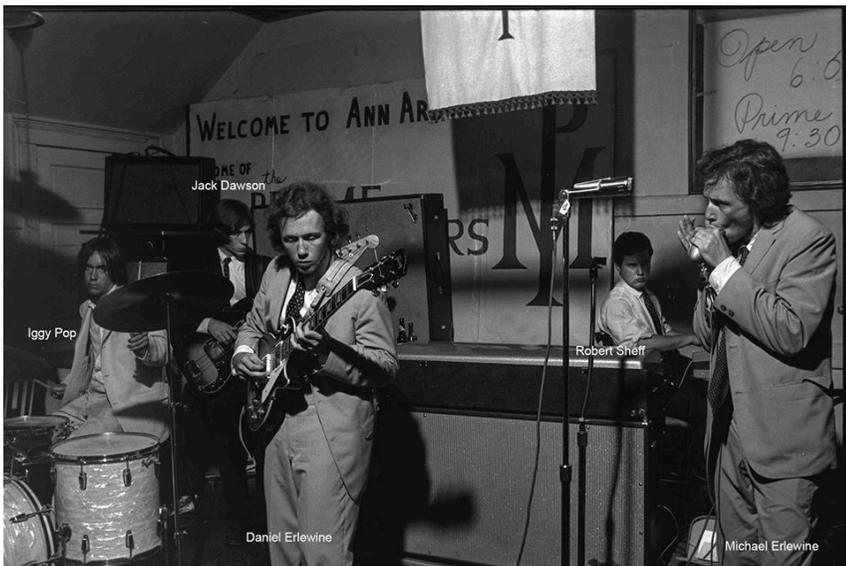
What I realized on acid, and never before, was that what up to that night I first dropped acid I thought of as reality and the “real” world was, to a great degree, very much my just own biases and prejudices magnified and projected onto the outside world. And I, like the deer in the headlights, was transfixed watching my own projected movie, mesmerized. From that moment I begin to change my own mind, a thought at a time. That was a revelation!

I also pointed out to the interviewer, something my friend the poet John Sinclair pointed out to me, that those my (and his) age were not “hippies,” but rather pre-hippies or post-Beats. We had wanted to be Beats and had learned all of the liberal arts from them, poetry, music, literature, etc., something the emerging hippies knew nothing of.

And we ended up introducing the hippies to all of the arts that we had learned, even though the Beat Movement was dying out and almost gone. We had missed that boat.

And so, there is a little stroll down memory lane, back in The Summer of Love. Hope you liked it. Here is a photo of my band earlier than 1967, because I don't have any from the Summer of Love.

That's me singing and playing the amplified harmonic (like a trumpet), my brother Dan on lead guitar, Jack Dawson on Bass, Robert Sheff on keyboards, and no less that Iggy Pop on drums. In fact, we gave Iggy the name "Iggy," but that is another story.



DAILY DOES IT

July 28, 2017

I want to share with you something that has stood by me for many decades and serves as a way for me to measure where I am at each day. We are all in the midst of what we could call the sea of life, yet unfortunately, like the ancient mariner, there is “water, water, everywhere, nor any drop to drink.”

In this world of water that is called samsara, a small bit of dharma each day may be the only dry land around, that is, if we will take the time to use it. Our global samsaric situation highlights the importance of some kind of daily dharma practice (however brief, even five minutes) to measure where we are at, and I will explain why.

I am reminded of one of my favorite jazz tunes, “Compared to What?” by Les McCann and Eddie Harris. If we have nothing to compare life to, where are we? Here is that tune, for those who have never heard it.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4qNJfVXxrQU>

And that is why some (even a little bit of) daily practice is essential, if only to serve as a touchstone to reality, a thermometer as to where we are in our mind each day. If I didn’t have a dharma practice (or something like it), I would have to invent one to serve as a measuring stick as to where things are with me on any given day. I depend on it.

Of course, each day is different and we can wake up in who-knows-what state of mind. Are we up, down, or we don’t know where? Often, we can’t figure out how we feel before we are already knee-deep in the day.

And this is where a daily bit of dharma practice (even just “some”) early in the day is instructive to me, showing me just where I’m at as far as mental stability and frame of mind. I use it every day, without fail, and it helps a lot. I am talking about just sitting down quietly for five minutes and seeing how it is with me that day.

Even a few minutes of tranquility-meditation practice early in the day, just sitting on the cushion for a short while, can tell me unequivocally which end is up or whether I am feeling down. And the day has barely begun, but with that short practice I can see which way the wind is blowing. Like reaching out to touch the wall in a dark hallway to steady ourselves, some daily dharma practice can show us in a jiffy the state of our union within ourselves. At least it does so for me.

Many times, over the years, sitting even for a short time early in the morning I can see if I am upset, whether from dreams, conditions, or what-have-you. In the past, knowing that, I have postponed meetings, calls, etc. for a time or perhaps for that entire day, just because I know I might get carried away or be too emotional. Sitting quietly for a time as a way of starting my day has been very instructive and always helpful. I also can tell if I am in a stable or “good” mood that morning. Again: some sitting practice is the best thermometer I have. Otherwise, I’m just at sea without a paddle.

In my life, it is hard for me to do anything for which I do not receive some reward or at least see some light at the end of the tunnel. “Pie in the sky when I die” just does not work for me. Putting it crudely and quoting from the movie “Jerry Maguire,” “Show me the

money!” For all of my mystical tendencies, I am at heart very pragmatic.

So, my point here is that some kind of sitting quietly with oneself, like doing tranquility meditation, even for a few minutes, will show us very clearly what shape our mind is in.

DHARMA IMPRINTS

July 28, 2017

It's not brain surgery, but IMO something even more important, the shaping or imprinting of our basic orientation, what is called our life-path or "dharma." Who do we trust to adjust our attitude and gently set our life course? The Tibetan Buddhists have a nice analogy that they use to express this, that of a statue-mold, out of which comes a finished statue. They point out that the quality of the mold, the "fineness" of it, determines how fine the statue that comes out is, and so on. And they go on to say that the authentic quality of our dharma teacher, like the mold itself, determines how we, as students, are shaped.

And if we say "I will just do it all myself!," well, we've been there and done that for all the time up to now, and where did that get us? In the Tibetan Buddhist lineage I practice, working closely with an authentic teacher is not optional but required. There are other methods from other lineages, but none as direct. And no, it's not a law that we must work with a teacher, but as the great Mahasiddhas have declared, without help and instruction from an authentic guru, it is practically impossible for us to recognize the nature of our own mind. That statement is not trivial, but something that really has to sink in if we want to get serious about this.

Books, articles, and a conceptual approach are fine, and this is true for any ensuing experience, but they can only take us so far, perhaps to the brink of recognizing the actual nature of our mind. But beyond the brink, it takes a specialist, an instructor with authentic realization (of their own) to guide (and

tweak) us into the right frame of mind (and orientation) to receive the more advanced teachings, i.e. to actually “get it.”

And so, the above analogy, that of finding the right mold to properly orient us, is very much to the point, and by the “right mold,” I mean that our teacher or guide must have authentic recognition themselves in order to know how to guide us to that same state. It is that simple or difficult.

So, how do we know (if we do not know) whether a teacher is authentic or not is the question? And, thankfully, the answer is pretty simple. We know if a teacher is authentic for us if we actually get what it is that they are pointing out to us. In my over 40 years of exposure to dharma teachers of all kinds, there have been many fine, even great, lamas that I have met and taken teachings from, but that does not mean that those teachings reached out and grabbed hold of me. Not all of them did. Sure, I may have understood a particular teaching, but it did not grab me, as they say, by the short hairs.

We need to be engaged with our dharma teacher in a form of yoga (union or bond) called Samaya, in dialog and in-synch, so that they have our complete attention enough for us to realize the dharma personally. It has to deeply register or come home to us. That’s the idea. Anything else is just lip service, however pleasant it may be.

For example, I met the Dalai Lama decades ago, before he was so popular, and he was as nice as he appears. Wonderful! And I even had the opportunity to offer him a white scarf in a group of just a few people, you know, up close and personal. However, that contact did not grab me in the gut, not like

meeting the Rinpoche I have worked with for the last 34 years did (and still does). Go figure! That's just the way it is. It is said that there are 84,000 dharmas, and probably 84,000 types of teachers, and 84,000 types of students.

We will carry the imprint and emerge from the mold of our authentic dharma teacher, one that we can actually learn from, even if he or she is not officially any kind of well-known teacher. Before I met the Tibetan teachers, my teachers were the great Blues masters whom I interviewed in person like Howlin' Wolf, Magic Sam, Roosevelt Sykes, Arthur "Big Boy" Crudup, Big Mama Thornton, and many others.

When the Tibetan lamas came into my life, I got even closer. We learn from whom we can and we know this because we find ourselves actually learning! That's the test of a teacher, whether we can learn from them at the heart level.

CONCEPTUAL WIND

July 29, 2017

Intellectualizing the dharma is fine and there is a long history of the conceptualization of Buddhist concepts, debates, proofs, and arguments, but as a practice or dharma-path it is said that such a conceptual approach would take untold kalpas (eons) to realize. I doubt that I want to spend that kind of time if I can help it. LOL.

Still, we all encounter intellectualization, if only in our efforts to understand the Buddhist principles. The Buddhists lay out several different levels that we can pass through, starting with the common understanding of what is being said. We all have to do that.

Beyond simple understanding is what they call “experience,” meaning experiencing what we have managed to understand. However dharma experience is just that “experience” and not the realization that the dharma is pointing to. And experience can be endless, with its ups and downs and wandering arounds, etc. The great Mahasiddhas state that “In the midst of experience, realization can arise.” And that’s what we require, realization, as in realizing not only what we understand, realizing what we are experiencing, but mainly realizing the true nature of the mind.

How do we know we are realizing and not just really understanding or (more commonly) mistaking spiritual experiences for realization? Well, it’s easy to say that we just somehow know, but I am surprised at how many folks, so it seems, think they have realization, when they are still conceptualizing or having a strong

spiritual experience. I don't know how many times I have told Rinpoche about a strong spiritual experience and he just waves it off as an experience. "Just keep practicing," he would say.

I know, that is a dangerous thing for me to say about other people, because it puts me in the position of judging, so I will water it down a bit and just say that to me this appears true. And we are all somewhere betwixt and between understanding and realization, but "realization" is like a drop-off point in a lake. You will know when it happens.

I do understand that there are different strokes for different folks, that there is "no wine before its time," and of course that dharma takes practice, so what's the hurry? There is no hurry, IMO, other than my having wasted a lot of time caught up in one or another dharma misunderstandings (like for decades). I don't wish that on anyone else.

So, if we are busy being conceptual, we would have to let our intellectual wind die down and let spiritual experiences just be what they are, in order for any realization to take place. And the most important point, IMO, is that while we unequivocally know when realization takes place, we can't ourselves precipitate realization of the true nature of the mind on our own. And this is not true because I say it. It's true because almost all of the Mahasiddhas say this is true.

The upshot of this is that if we do get serious about practicing the dharma, at least the Vajrayana dharma I practice, then we might want to make a greater effort to find an authentic teacher, someone who has recognized the nature of the mind and who is willing to work with us one-to-one.

That's what I did when I finally realized that I was not cutting it on my own. I had a hodgepodge of things that made sense to me, but far too many more that did not. It is an historical tradition (and requirement in our lineage) that at critical stages in our dharma practice it takes an authentic teacher to help guide us and to perhaps micro-adjust our orientation, pointing out this way or that. In my experience, this has been the case.

MY PHOTOGRAPHY CHANGES AS I DO

July 30, 2017

[This is a long story and it's about photography, so you may want to come back later when you have the time.]

I remember the Virginia Slims cigarettes advertising slogan (I didn't smoke them) "You've come a long way, baby" and I feel something similar goes with me and my photography. We can dispense with the "baby" part, because I'm all grown up and even old, like I'm 76.

But that doesn't stop me from every once in a while looking back to see how far I've come from that summer of 1956 when my amateur photographer dad loaned me is Kodak Retina 2a, a light meter, close-up lenses, and a tripod, when I went on a 3,000 bus ride across America, into Mexico, and through Canada with a bunch of kids my age. I was fourteen years old.

Anyway, my dad was shocked at how good my photos were when I returned, perhaps the only time I ever really impressed him. He was a businessman, a Republican, and very conservative, while I was a Democrat, a liberal, and only later in my life any kind of a businessman.

So, from 1956 onward I was always interested in photography, but seldom could afford the film and developing expense. More discouraging yet for me was the inability to see what I was getting until days, weeks, or months later. That was a photo-killer for me.

Of course, when digital cameras came along, I was right there and had been doing digital movies for a

while before that. But I had an early Nikon Coolpix and a D1X (at \$5K a pop) when they first came out. Using the D1X, I photographed more than 30,000 rare rock concert-posters and had to build my own vacuum table for that.

But all of my early years, from around six-years old onward, I was a committed naturalist, with little better to do (until I discovered girls in my teens) than collect and document natural history. In fact, I became so interested (and skilled) in herpetology (especially frogs and salamanders) that I was given a little office-desk in the herpetology department, way back in the stack of preserved specimens at the University of Michigan Museums building.

In those years I captured, measured, and released thousands of specimens, mainly Michigan salamanders, in which I was interested. So, when I hear about photographers who brag about their hiking and roughing it, I have to chuckle, because I did that in spades, but in the Midwest and all across Texas, suffering everything from heatstroke (in Enchanted Rock State Natural Area) to being eaten alive by mosquitoes in Michigan and Florida swamps, and so on.

When I mention that I have taken many hundreds of thousands of nature photos, I've been called a liar, but I'm not. Photography can be a lonesome thing, in that my extended family might like to see perhaps 10 or so of my photos at a time, but after that their eyes start to roll. I have stopped asking if anyone wants to see what I'm doing photographically, unless it's photos of my grandkids. That's just the way it is. I am sure other serious photographers feel the same way. Not only is there not much of a market for photos, there is not even anything but a passing interest in

looking at them for most people. LOL. That's a little background and its leading up to the reason I am writing this account, which is:

I thought I would talk, not about my interest in photography per-se or techniques, but rather about how that interest has changed over the years, because I see all of the different phases I have gone through being echoed and acted out by various photographers on the online photo forums. And they don't all get along, but I believe they will (if they live long enough) come to understand one another.

As mentioned, I was a naturalist, and a dedicated one at that. My life was filled with nature collecting, documenting, journals, measuring and, as I got older, photographing. I lived and breathed nature study and that for many years. Even after I discovered that women were as interesting as nature, I still did a lot of nature work and collecting. Did I hike? You bet and lots of it, carrying as little as I could, and going as far as I could.

As someone who was interested in bogs, there was not only carrying a tripod, camera, lenses, diffusers, and what-not, it was doing it in hip boots, and whatever protected me from the cold or sun. Bogs are also (or can be) dangerous places to be, dangers to our health due to sinking through them (not to mention poison oak, etc.), but dangerous always to the bogs themselves. Bogs are a very fragile environment.

And climbing, well I did my climbing during two trips to Tibet, so blisters I know. Living in the flatlands of Michigan, there is not much to climb, but plenty to muck around in, because it's all wetlands. It's the

same with lower Florida and the Everglades, a place I have been to many times.

As for how my photography morphed, I am getting to that. Originally (and especially) I was interested in field-guide quality nature photos, perhaps at first as regards identification, but later I wanted field-guide quality photos that were good photographs technically, too. However, I did not want artsy-fartsy and whatever so-called “attractive” compositions resulted from my work were more by accident than design. But this too changed.

As time went by, yes I wanted to “capture” that photo and for it to look good too, but over time I found that I also wanted the specimen to “be in context,” so I wanted more and more of the surrounding habitat to be in the photos too. Ultimately, this was just a back-door way to introduce composition and its art. It took me quite a while to admit to myself that I was starting to like not just the context of the photo, but for it to have perhaps a little mood too. And that, my friends, is a slippery slope for a naturalist.

I was getting arty, but something else happened that was even more “horrific,” and that was that I was losing my taste for hunting specimens, either critters or plants. Now this was a serious segue indeed, because it meant that instead of planning this or that nature trip to find this or that critter or plant, I was becoming more interested in what might be called “found” photos.

I never liked sneaking up on a lizard or frog all that much, but I did it with skill and consistency. I was good at it too. I was once told that I had contributed the largest collection ever given to the university

museum I worked with. I have no way of knowing if that's true, but it was large enough.

And now I was finding that I didn't care for the "hunt" on principle. The whole idea of "gotcha" photographing was beginning to fade or to even become repulsive. That really turned me around from where I came from.

Instead, this whole idea of found photography (photographing what I found beautiful or moving) took up more and more of my time, until that is all the photographing I felt like doing. No longer did I chase a damselfly, a Giant Swallowtail, or a frog or lizard through the fields and swamps. I couldn't do that to them, anymore than I would like to be hunted.

Instead of fielding a mini-expedition hundreds or even tens of miles away, I found myself circling ever more near where I live. Of course, I also was getting older and less happy carrying a backpack or a lot of gear. I had gotten my gear down to a 10" messenger bag in which I carried two diffusers, a tiny flowerpod tripod, various clips, polarizers and neutral filters, a shower-cap for rain, and any other lenses I wanted to have. I always (or usually) walked with my camera/lens fixed to my tripod head, which I know is supposedly a "no-no," but I have never had a single problem in all these years, knock-on-wood.

My lens journey would take an article in itself, but suffice it to say that I had collected well over 100 really great lenses, but after a while I began to sell off some, those that were perhaps considered legendary, keeping those that were fast, sharp, and highly-corrected for the various aberrations, etc. And I found myself getting into more and more of the so-called

“exotic” lenses, enlarger lenses, scanner lenses, large and medium format lenses, and so on.

And since for a good half of the year Michigan is too cold to do much outside, I began to do more over those months in a little studio I put together right in my house. I had a large studio about one block away but, although I loved the space, I liked better to be able to slip away in a half-a-minute to my tiny studio and photograph, especially in winter.

And I found, to my surprise, that working in the studio, more slowly and carefully, did good things to my photos and was fun. I became increasingly interested in composition and before long photographers online were telling me that they could recognize one of my photos at a glance. I didn't realize that I had a style, but upon thinking about it, obviously what I had been trying to arrive at myself was what other photographers were calling my style.

So, here I sit as the summer of 2017 begins to wane, looking toward winter and having to be inside. It is OK, since I seem to do more with a little than when I have a lot... of subjects. I have tried some serious hikes this summer, with boots, knee-pads, not to mention mosquitoes and horse flies. I have to say that I don't enjoy it as much as I used to, forging through waist-high grass, shrubs, shaking off bugs galore, and the like. And my eyes for distant subjects are not what they used to be.

I do enjoy more carefully setting up and taking photos, either indoors in my tiny studio or outdoors along the edge of the wilds, cemeteries, gardens, parks, trails, and so forth. And I have found that my earlier hunt-for-the-right-specimen has telescoped down to finding

totally attractive ways to photograph what is right around me at the time. Imagine that!

As you can see, not only cameras and lenses change, but we change over time. Of course, I can relate to nature photos, field-guide photos, compositions, and even abstracts. I have been there, done that, or am still doing that.

Here is a photo I took this morning. I went out in the fields and took some photos, but ended up back in my tiny studio photographing some Hibiscus flowers. To me, the moral of all this is to do what completes us, what makes us happy at the time and the heck with those who don't like it or only like what they themselves do. For me, I can like many different kinds of photography (if it is good), not just my own, and I do. But of course, like all photographers, I like what I do and to me that is photography.

“I WANT TO BE IN THAT NUMBER, WHEN THE SAINTS GO MARCHING IN ...”

July 31, 2017

Every once in a while I talk about the Self, how it works and that we can put it to better use than as a foil for our particular fixations. Blaming ourselves, not only is not helpful, it's not fair. What we call the Self and selfishness is the result, not the cause. The cause, if we want to go there, is our own needy graspingness, not the fixations and attachments that result.

Anyway, hitchhiking on the ego is part of my makeup. Why let such a selfish thing go to waste when, with a little kindness, the Self is quite happy to work for or with us, and not only against us? I have always been of the inclination to be kind to dumb animals, and that includes my Self, which is similar.

The Tibetan lamas point out that the animal realm contains myriads of beings that are, basically, bewildered. And goodness knows I have spent enough years studying and loving animals of all kinds. I am ashamed to say that I find animals much easier to love than humans, although I am working on that. And what could be more bewildered (most of the time) than our own Self (most of the time), although the Self can also be quite cunning?

Yet, as a young man I was a herpetologist and have handled poisonous snakes since I was a teenager, including large rattlesnakes well over five feet long and as big around in girth as a man's arm. And then there's the fact that trying to stamp out, suppress, deny, fight the Self, or even ignore it, not only does

not work, it only makes the Self stronger. So, what CAN we do with ourselves and “selfishness?”

I only know what I do, as if you don’t already know from reading my blogs. As I like to say, I put my Self out to pasture like an old cow, years ago, let it roam and have all the sunshine and grass it likes, within reason. It is so much better to like and care for ourselves than to attempt to block or deny its needs. And, impermanence is one thing the Self is used to so; like the old game of Pick-Up-Sticks, we can carefully remove our fixations from the Self, and upgrade our attachments to healthier involvements.

Let’s face it, the Self is a function of living, not unlike a personal secretary that keeps us on schedule, but it was never designed to take over and give us orders. It is the dummy (our own dummy), rather than the ventriloquist. We should not be passive with our Self. We are the boss, not it.

When the Buddhists say things like, “The Self does not exist” or “There is no Self,” they don’t mean there IS no Self, but rather that what we call the Self has no permanent existence. Like our persona or personality, it is left behind in a heap when we exit this world. However, the “graspingness that creates our fixations (or Self) is shuttled to our next life,” so say the Buddhists, to do it all over again. In other words, the Self is an artifact of our fixations and subsequent attachments, which if removed leave the Self (as a function) increasingly transparent. And that helps.

Also, for the record, what does EXIT this world when we die, as mentioned, is a bundle of karmic traces which, while they persist, don’t amount to the eternal “Soul” we might like to imagine we are, but that would be another topic. Anyway, the above description

accords with the Buddhist teachings as I understand them.

I am not one for self-denial, much less beating myself up, because that only seems to make things worse. I believe, since we all have an operational Self (whether we like it or not) and its function is not about to go away any time soon, I say let's bring it along for the ride... and make the best of ourselves as we can. Folks who do not like themselves, IMO, are suspicious. "Render unto Caesar..." and all of that. We all have a selfish component, like it or not. I say: be kind to your Self.

In other words, I believe it is far easier to learn to care for and tend to our Self than it is to deny, suppress, or pretend we are not all selfish to some degree. True self-less-ness (detachment) comes with a lot of other grand qualities than just that. Someone who claims to be unselfish, but has loads of other bad qualities is just suppressing their Self, probably for show, and, to me, that's a walking time bomb.

I could go on and on, but hopefully you get the idea. Our Self, with its clinging-ness, its ever-changing fixations and attachments, is not about to just dry up and blow away. Why? Because, as the Tibetan Buddhists point out, in each rebirth and life, we create a new Self, based on the basic (unfinished) graspingness of our karma that has not yet ripened; it gets pushed before us much like when swimming after an inner tube, our own swimming motion pushes the tube beyond our reach. Our unfinished karma does that to us.

And that same unfinished "graspingness" or karma gets tangled up in any situation into which we are reborn, fixates, and we fashion a new Self all over

again. In other words, our Self is not the cause of our problems, but only the sign or result of our graspingness and need to feel substantial or "real." We are what we are, even if it is permanently impermanent.

ASK FOR ANSWERS

August 1, 2017

If we do not ask, how can we possibly expect a response or answer? It's that simple. And it is not just the question or the answer that is in focus here, but also the process, the conversation and the physical exchange. IMO, it is through the dialog process between an authentic teacher and a student that the most is learned, the going back and forth – real contact and concern.

We can listen, listen, listen and hear, hear, hear, yet still not learn anything. However, when it is brought home to us through direct exchange, we can usually be much more present and involved. And that's just natural. As we know, our stream of consciousness flows by, but when it is underlined through meaningful dialog, it has a better chance of sinking in. We remember that which touches us.

Yet, it's not like picking up a dictionary and asking about each word, one by one, from A to Z. We have to have real questions from inside us, from the heart, if we expect real answers. I have learned, over a long time period (many decades) that If I ask from true interest, from deep within me, the universe will answer, whether through the words of my precious teacher or just from within my own mind. The mind itself is the ultimate oracle. It can answer!

After all, every invention and idea in the world, not to mention every thought, word, and deed in history comes from the within the mind itself. I have sat through many hundreds of Q&A sessions with Rinpoche and his students, so I have kind of heard it all, everything from endless rote and meaningless

questions to heartfelt questions that brought a tear to the eyes of everyone present. And, as with the intent and sincerity of the questions, so go the answers.

No matter how inane I might feel the questions are, Rinpoche always carefully answers them, one by one. I can still remember one time when Rinpoche was speaking to a group of students at our local university and several students thought it was funny to ask him what they thought were funny, rude, and embarrassing questions, like this one: “What’s your sex life like,” and Rinpoche, without blinking, responded “What, an old fat man, like me?” That quieted the students down.

My point is that with any teacher that we care enough about to sincerely ask life questions to, and not just book-learning questions, it is a case of “nothing ventured, nothing gained.” We actually have to ask what is really on our mind, not just make small talk. We can ask the universe from deep within our own mind, but we can also ask someone who knows the dharma. They too are part of our own mind. They are like an oracle.

Our “asking” also may enable the teacher to deliver the answer we need. The teacher-student bond works both ways; I’m sure that I can’t say just how.

Apparently, not everyone wants to have a dharma teacher in this world or can afford one. We have to be ready to have a live physical teacher. It is not a given or a right, but something earned, a sign of progress when, within our life a teacher that we can learn from appears in the flesh. How remarkable! What a rare and valuable thing to have, which is why the Tibetan word “Rinpoche,” translates to “Precious One.” Indeed.

I am not ashamed to ask questions and never have been. I have learned to ask those who can teach me the questions I most am concerned about, and I have received answers! I need all the help I can get.

THE ETERNITY IN TIME

August 2, 2017

We have little choice but to respond to the demands that time gradually puts on us and they increase with age. Perhaps our main defense against time is whatever personal dances or rituals we manage to put together and successfully perform. These little daily rituals, when acted out properly, serve as islands in time, clarifying agents, and they could be almost anything, but one thing they share is a certain amount of exact repetition and skillful execution. We repeat them because they free up moments of timelessness within time itself.

It could be almost anything we do that helps us to relax and allow clarity to occur, rather than to further obscure this moment; we learn to see through and beyond time, whether it is by washing the dishes, looking at flowers, seeing beauty in something, knitting, reading the paper, sitting on a cushion and meditating, playing cards, and so on. Or, perhaps (in my case), using Tibetan Buddhist techniques, I can go there by just typing this sentence.

I am talking about those actions (or special times) we repeat each day that are more like windows in time rather than walls. Life goes on and each day brings its chores, the things we have to do, but there are also the things we like to do, like these moments, and by doing we get release and rest.

As mentioned, here I am referring to those repetition-based actions, the doing of which bring clarity rather than just more clouds to the moment. I believe the Zen Buddhists are really good at pointing out this sort of thing. I'm reminded of the word "execute" and point

to that series of repetitive actions that, if executed properly, offer us release, as mentioned, a window in time that all of time's lock-step marshalling cannot prevent. It's literally an escape to life.

And I'm not speaking of some freedom or realization at the end of the line, not pie in the sky, like heaven often is predicted to be – somewhere way down the road, perhaps at the end. Instead, I am talking about right here and now, on the spot. And apparently that does not happen, at least for most of us, without some “means” or technique, something that we do. Dharma practice (or some such repetitive technique that we have personally found) provides that means, our little daily rituals that are freeing.

Reciting mantras (or prayers) can also enable this kind of clarity. It is all in the doing of these various techniques or actions, as mentioned, in their “execution;” they must be done just so. In a short article like this, I can't describe all that need be said, but perhaps I can point to where we already are doing this now on our own. We have to be or else we would go crazy.

None of us can escape time's eventual crush, that terrible crystal (as the poets say), so the freedom or realization I am speaking of here has to take place inside or within the clock-ticking seconds of right now and not somehow saving up for a reward at time's end. It's the things we do each day that SAVE our life that I'm referring to here. And not all things save life; many things take our life little by little and bit by bit. We all know this and eventually we are literally worn out by time. Some daily release like what I am describing here seems to be inevitable. We need the rest.

However, in the meantime, in the middle of the time that we are each now living, there are gaps or windows in time that themselves are timeless -- gateways. This freight train we call "time" has windows, ones that we not only can see out of, but through which we can extend out from and be in that inter-time timeless space – time outs. There perhaps IS no light at the end of the proverbial tunnel, but there can be light as we travel through it. In the end, it is the "process" of life (and living) that is important. Time is elastic.

We can stretch or extend time and literally squeeze or pass between the seconds of the clock to be here now, free and released. And we do this through ritual, through the ritual execution of acts that kill time and make it, at least for that moment, as if it did not exist - - timeless. Throughout history, this has been possible through things like the insistent beating of a drum, the playing of music, the singing of songs, the dancing of dance, poetry, or just the art of living clearly.

Time is like a river in which we are swept along; unless, we can by our skillful means (rituals) create a dam to hold time back. We articulate, by skillful means and precise actions, what it takes to kill time and make it none, at least for the moment. And in that moment, in that freedom from time, we live and share this life with one another.

Of course, the Tibetan Buddhists have a very special technique that exquisitely performs this technique called Vipassana (Insight Meditation), which is well worth making the effort to learn.

Eternity can be found just in time. How amazing!

HOW REAL ARE WE?

August 3, 2017

We don't have to pretend to be real; we already are as real as we can be, if we are not being unrealistic. And I say this because reality may be less than we have cracked it up to be. Not to put too fine a point on it, but how real in fact are we or could we be? As the lyrics in the old round of "Row, Row, Row Your Boat" point out, "Life is but a dream."

As Shakespeare put it:

"We are such stuff
As dreams are made on;
And our little life
Is rounded with a sleep."

In other words, we don't have to act out reality. It's already real as it is and also "dreamy" enough, a full-feature movie and we're in it. As my first dharma teacher used to say to me, regularly: "My God is no beggar. We don't have to make the ends meet; the ends, they already meet."

The point here is that we don't have to pinch-hit or patch up the creation, aside perhaps from repairing whatever damage we do along the way. And, we don't have to act the part, either. And which part would that be?

I am not a fan of putting on a happy face and acting happy, sad, or anything else, for that matter. I do have a sense of humor, but I don't laugh a lot, unless, of course, there is something that I find funny. Why pretend otherwise? Why force a smile if we don't feel like it. I tend not to do that. And there is a story here.

Fairly early-on in my dharma training I met the 16th Karmapa (Rangjung Rigpe Dorje), the head of the Karma Kagyu lineage. The Dalai Lama is the 14th in his line, and the Karmapa today is the 17th, so the Karmapas have been around a long time. When I met the 16th Karmapa, it was 1974. And, over time, I met and took empowerments from all four of the Karmapa's heart sons (the four regents), commonly called "The Eminences," receiving from each the particular empowerment for which they are considered the emanation.

Anyway, I noticed that one of the four heart-sons of the Karmapa, His Eminence Goshir Gyaltsab Rinpoche (said to be the emanation of Vajrapani, the power and activity aspect of the Dharma) did not really laugh much. He was just, well, right there. Take him or leave him. He "was" nice, but he did not make nice just for show. He did not paint on a happy face.

Anyway, I identified totally with His Eminence and how he reacted in public (like, not much) and I spent a number of years studying the bodhisattva Vajrapani, of which he is considered an emanation, because I am, by nature, naturally also very active. And I requested the Rinpoche I have worked with for 34 years to please give the Vajrapani empowerment (which he did for the first time at our center), and I practiced this wrathful form of Vajrapani (Dorje Tumpo). I did the practice for years and even was asked by Rinpoche to teach others how to do it in the main shrine room at our monastery.

I also had written to His Eminence Gyaltsab Rinpoche in India a number of times and he answered, including explaining that he had no plans to come to the U.S. anytime soon. Hearing that he would not be "stopping by," I traveled all the way to India to his monastery at

Ralang in Sikkim and requested of him in-person the Vajrapani empowerment called "Dorje Tumpo," and he gave it to me (along with my wife and son) the following morning. This was VERY kind of him.

I think it is good to be polite and I consider myself friendly; I don't intentionally make waves, but neither do I have a smile painted on my face, just to be nice. To me, nice is just that, nice, smile or no-smile. I probably could blend in easier if I had gone Zen. LOL.

I feel badly that it is assumed we are not normal unless we continually "make nice," have a smile on our face and laugh a lot. I know I am in the minority in this regard, but I do have a sense of humor.

For instance, I find it ironic (and I guess funny) that apparently we are such ephemeral creatures that we feel we have to continually pinch ourselves in an attempt to reify and make this life more real than we apparently think it is. We don't like the "emptiness," although it is our reality. And the humorous part is that the dharma suggests that we do just exactly the opposite, i.e. that we should NOT continue our futile attempt to reify our existence, but instead simply realize how empty appearances naturally are. In other words, appearances are not only empty, they are the emptiness arising! And the Buddha points this out, but we somehow manage to ignore it – ignorance. Go figure!

PERMANENTLY IMPERMANENT

August 3, 2017

What is it that we call “insecurity” and where does it come from? What does it take for us to feel secure? What if there is no such thing as real security, if only because life itself is insecure and impermanent? How can we feel secure if we are by our very nature impermanent? These are questions that I have.

Yet, here we are, very much alive and the dharma teachings suggest we have been here (in this insecure state) for a very, very long time. What do we make of that? Apparently we are permanently impermanent, which itself is a kind of permanency.

And no, this life may not secure for us the immortal “soul” that we apparently yearn for, guaranteed permanency, yet what is it in fact that we are? As mentioned, we are not the immortal soul that flits from lifetime to lifetime through the ages, making notes, but rather a certain tangle of desire and karma that takes rebirth after rebirth, without remembering who and how we were in our previous lives. However, so it appears, with each new birth we have to both create and then discover a new self (and see through it!) lifetime after lifetime, if we are to believe what the Rinpoches tell us.

I have never been one for puzzles; life is puzzle enough, but it seems we each have to puzzle out who we are in our lifetime, without having the Cliff-notes we might have written from lifetimes before. Yet, as mentioned earlier, here we come again. And, if we are to believe the history of the dharma (and its teachers), some individuals (even if they can’t reincarnate as their same self) apparently do appear in improved

form from lifetime to lifetime. Incarnate lamas (tulkus) seem to do this to some degree. So, there is such a thing as progress from life to life.

As for me, I don't have any memories of who I was or what I did before I was me, myself and I in this life. However, I have had dreams. Most of us have had very powerful dreams from time to time. And more convincing yet, I have had a few times in this life (in the waking state) during which it seems I was aware of two lifelines going on at the same time, and I could somehow identify with them both. What was that all about?

When this happened, I was even momentarily confused as to just who it is I am but, like two trains passing one another, that alternative life gradually faded into the past again and I settled back into this life here. I don't know what to think of such an experience and the alternate life just kind of arose into the mind very vividly for a short time and then sank into oblivion, where it no doubt came from. It's no wonder that Sigmund Freud had a field day with the human psyche.

So, here I am, as it were, riding this train of life and perhaps even looking out the windows. The only security I have is what the dharma has taught me, which is to kind of be secure in my insecurity. But that is certainly better than what I had before the dharma was available to me, when I was insecure in my insecurity.

I am sure I am raising more questions than offering answers, but that's just the obvious place to begin. I am reminded of a song that my daughter May Erlewine wrote and sang years ago. It's called "Barely

There” and although it may not exactly fit here, it’s a wonderful listen. Here it is:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V20v1zjniY4>

TIME OUT

August 4, 2017

I remember the Atlantic Ocean and walking in the hard-wet sand along the beaches of New England in the cold of winter, like after a storm and when the tide is out. There was this strong wind in my face and the skies threatened cloudy-grey. The salt smell was all in the air.

There was a quality during those times which stands outside the moment and marks time itself as timeless. We all have them, these timeless moments.

I feel the same thing when I listen to Joan Baez singing "Diamonds and Rust," a song about her love affair with Bob Dylan. If you have never heard this song, here it is:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tQd0XOsvhHU>

"Well, you burst on the scene
Already a legend
The unwashed phenomenon
The original vagabond
You strayed into my arms.

"And there you stayed
Temporarily lost at sea
The Madonna was yours for free
Yes, the girl on the half-shell
Would keep you unharmed.

"Now, I see you standing
With brown leaves falling around
And snow in your hair.
Now you're smiling out the window

Of that crummy hotel
Over Washington Square.

“Our breath comes out white clouds
Mingles and hangs in the air
Speaking strictly for me
We both could have died then and there. “

I am particularly aware of the line:

“Speaking strictly for me, I think we both could have
died then and there.”

We spend much more time out-of-the-body than most
of us are aware. Time is so exacting and inexorable
that we forget its elasticity, just how much it can be
stretched. And stretch it we do, our life beyond time.

In the last couple of blogs I have been highlighting the
ephemerality of this life we live, the idea that
expecting a core-certainty (“soul”) or permanent
ground for our existence apparently is just wishful
thinking. If being itself is “empty” and we have
eternally been insecure and without what we could
call a permanent soul or “being” (as the Buddhists
point out), where does our insecurity and obsession
with reification come from, our trying to make reality
more real than it actually is? One would think that we
should be used to impermanence by now.

Is it just this culture or do all humans share this desire
for a permanency that by definition does not exist,
and has never existed? If we are by nature without a
permanent soul, you would think we would have
relaxed and realized by now that life goes on
nevertheless (somehow).

This makes me wonder if culturally we could, as a
group, come to feel more secure in our permanent
insecurity. And, by so doing, dispense with all the fear

and our need to constantly reify ourselves, desperately trying to make ourselves more real than we are. It would seem that if there is no permanent ground or “soul,” that we could realize and just come to terms with that fact. Apparently we are uncomfortable with this very legitimate sense of emptiness we feel. Or perhaps we don’t recognize our own emptiness, because we are afraid or choose to ignore it. Yet, how did we get this way, doubting ourselves?

And because of that doubt, resolving Samsara into Nirvana is not a slam-dunk kind of thing, but is more like the old game of Pick-Up-Sticks, where we must very carefully remove what is obscuring or frightening us, one piece at a time, until nothing remains but clarity. I’m still working on that one. It’s a long journey indeed, but there is a flash point, where, as the poem goes:

“The dewdrop slips into the shining sea.”

FISH OR CUT BAIT

August 6, 2017

Something that concerns me, especially as I get older (but it should concern all of us), is whether to concentrate on attempting to find dharma realization in this life or concentrate on getting ready for my next life. I know. This is probably not the most popular topic or what you want to read on a Sunday morning, so don't read it.

The Tibetan Buddhist lineage in which I practice is Vajrayana Buddhism, said to be a very fast path to recognition of the true nature of the mind and realization... and in this life we are living now.

There are many styles of Buddhism, some of which take innumerable lifetimes to reach enlightenment and even recognition. The philosophy there must be "What's the hurry?" or "Why Me Worry," but worry I do nevertheless. Again, that's probably why I am practicing the Vajrayana approach to Buddhism.

And what I am describing here as two separate approaches can certainly be combined, but like uncrossing my eyes, my dualistic tendencies in general having me looking at one, then the other, and back again.

I have been doing my daily dharma practice for many years, in fact for decades and that is coming along. But, as you might imagine, it is increasingly clear to me (and to others around me, LOL) that I am not about to wrap all this up in this lifetime and just become enlightened. So, while my "eyes are on the prize" (enlightenment), as they say, and have been, there is this little matter of getting old enough to die

someday. Like the old saying, I'm too old to die young. What about that?

It's not like it's time to pack my bags for the next life, because there is no carry-on personal baggage when we pass on, only our residual karma and its traces that is said be randomly stored in the Alaya Consciousness. And it does not have our name on it, because from it we create a new persona (and get named anew) in each life.

So, here I sit fiddling my fingers, so to speak, eyeing the clock, and doing my regular dharma practice. Yet, I wonder if there is more I should be doing to get ready for the bardo and all of that. It's not like that is about to go away -- quite the contrary.

Let me add some perspective here. If I knew that I was going to die tomorrow (and one day that will be true, but I won't probably know), how would I act or live differently? Of course, I would enjoy life more, however that is done. It's kind of an oxymoron to tell myself that I have to enjoy life more. I should have been there and done that long ago.

So, perhaps you see my (somewhat made-up) dilemma, to get either down on my knees and get real or continue on as if I am going to live forever, doing my best from day to day. It seems I always choose the later, to continue on as I am, but to where? Well, we just discussed that. The day of our passing will come to each of us, personally, soon enough.

It seems to me that I have to combine these two approaches into a single view (and path of action), so that I stop being so dualistic about it all. It's like eating your cake and having it too. There is a disconnect here and I know it, but I seem unwilling (or unable) to do much about it. I don't want to live in a desperate

state of mind about dying and, at the same time, I hate whistling in the dark as if this life is going to go on forever. I hope you see the problem, which I understand is all mine.

I know that these two views must converge and I believe I am working on it. But getting desperate about it all is not a solution, IMO. I don't want to, as Dylan Thomas said, "Rage, rage against the dying of the light" or struggle so about the end. Sure, I would like to calmly pass through the "passing on" with confidence and calmness. However, knowing me, death will be a big deal. That's just the way I am and I know it.

So, no solution here in this blog, just the posing of the question or problem, if it is one. And for me it is. I need to wake up from thinking my life will go on forever just as it has. I don't want to be told that I have to smell the roses, especially if I tell myself. That is not helpful. And I don't like to hurry up and relax about all this. That's a real Catch-22.

The best I've come up with is that it would help if I could continue becoming more aware of each moment. Then these two paths or views would have to merge, I'm sure.

I can't just stop doing all the things I have to do each day to maintain life and most of them assume a linear line or trajectory into the future. We are all on the same train, waiting to get off, but we don't know at which station. At the same time, it is foolish for me to keep kicking the can down the road and just whistling in the dark.

Sorry to end this blog with no resolution, but that's where I'm at, torn between the devil and the deep-blue sea, as they say. So, yes, the only answer that

makes sense, as I said, is to become increasingly aware of the whole thing. Like uncrossing my eyes, the two paths will then become one and, anyway, I'm sure that I'm already on target for that! It just takes time.

THE THREAD OF REALIZATION

August 7, 2017

Like threads woven together to make a rope or cord, where each short piece overlaps with the others just enough to maintain linearity, so it seems that dharma lineage is a series of overlapping lives, each touching the next, so that the line of the lineage is continually extended and realization can continue to flow.

This is why perhaps every Vajrayana teaching, at least in the Karma Kagyu lineage in which I practice, points out that everything comes from the guru, and not from anywhere else. It is the authentic teacher whose blessing is essential. This is not a side-bar comment, but mainline dharma and it is crucial to realize what this statement is pointing out.

And this is why, in our Lineage Prayer, perhaps the most important text recited every day by practitioners, it clearly states, using the analogy of the body, that the lama or guru is the “head” of meditation. As important as the head is to our body, so is the lama to the dharma. Again, there is this emphasis on the guru or authentic teacher.

Americans not only do not get it, they do not want to get it because their cultural fear of foreign “spirituality” (like Buddhism) finds the whole idea of a “guru” strange or un-American and perhaps even repulsive. But these are all just words until we can understand them, manage to experience them for ourselves, and perhaps someday to actually realize their import.

Just as blood flows through our system for us to stay alive, the entire universe apparently communicates with itself through the circulation of information. That

is how we (or large-scale systems like our galaxy) remain coherent, rather than just lapse and fall apart. Information is the lifeblood and it flows through channels.

Over the years, I have played many small roles at our monastery, including even being the fundraiser once in a while, and I was always trying to find ways for the monastery to prosper. Yet, I was amazed (and somewhat dismayed) at how little interest there was on the part of the Tibetan lamas in growing these funds, at least back then.

I would point out that just down the road was an Indian ashram that had great outreach, with money rolling in, hand over fist. But there was no reaction, much less a change of course on the part of the lamas. So, I finally had to ask myself: what is it that they are doing that I don't understand? It took me years to figure it out, but I finally did.

And what it was is that the lamas did not care that much about money per se, because their mind is on something more important than money. Above all, what concerns them is the integrity of the lineage, the purity of the line of lamas and realization. I finally understood that without a pure lineage, a pure conduit, nothing else mattered. We could have all the money in the world, but if we lost the dharma and the flow of the lineage realization, we would just be ordinary and stuck (as we are now) in Samsara forever.

Rinpoche was not asking us to raise funds (although we did) or create circulars (which we did) or anything else, etc. What he was asking us (and I am part of the "us") was to practice, to ourselves achieve recognition

and realization, and eventually attain enlightenment. That alone seems to please my precious teacher.

Here I was, showing Rinpoche all of what I could do or had accomplished in this external world, but Rinpoche never blinked. He was asking for something much, much more difficult than that, which was for me to personally enter the dharma path and gain actual realization for myself, so that I could share it with (and benefit) others. At first, I preferred to do things for the monastery, rather than do what it takes myself to become realized. The effort to go for realization was of a whole different order and I was not sure I could do it.

Only then could I become a living part of the lineage and help to carry it on. It took me many years to grasp this, more years to internalize it, and even more years yet to actually enter the path. Dharma takes time, and to modify that old saying, “The Wheels of the Dharma grind slowly, but they grind exceedingly fine.” This is so true.

It took me years to get in line, to get my contacts lined up, mostly because I am naturally lazy and rebellious. But Rinpoche did not so much want me to “line up” but rather to align myself with the conduit which is the lineage of dharma that he represents. You know, get in synch with the program! Such an alignment, when accomplished, allows the realization of the lineage to flow through us naturally and thus extend itself in time.

I realize this now and am doing my best.

THE TELLTALE MIRROR

August 8, 2017

I'm a bit at loose ends these days, so this is just an arbitrary blog about how my passions have changed over time. It seems to me that the trajectory of my life-interests, if looked at, must create some kind of curve; I'm not sure what the shape of that curve would be, but I'd bet it is not a straight line. For example, if I take one of my interests you all know, like the photography I post here, over the years, the photographs themselves are a revealing story about yours truly.

Looking back to when I first starting taking photos, in the late spring of 1956 (I was 14), I was just trying to "take photos" as best as I could. Over the years, however, at the encouragement of my dad, those first attempts at photography morphed into a lifelong habit of taking nature photos. And my nature photography gradually began to segue beyond simple photos into wanting to have better nature photos, photos the quality of field-guide I tirelessly read. So far, that progress was more or less what we might imagine, straight forward. Yet, sometime after that, my photography definitely began to resemble some kind of curve rather than remain as a straight line.

If my memory suits me right, it probably began with wanting to put my nature-photo subjects in a little more context, you know: there is a salamander and I wanted to show folks a little of its habitat, so you can see it in its "home," so to speak. That's how it began, but that was not the end of it.

Adding more and more context to my nature subjects was a slippery-slope compared to just adding a touch. Pretty soon, I wanted the context or habitat to be as

nice as the subject itself. In fact, I wanted the whole photo to be a “nice” photo.

And this notion sort of opened the floodgates to upgrading, well, everything, the camera of course, but especially lenses. I gradually morphed from being a nature-photographer to being a photographer who takes nature photos. There is a real difference.

My subjects, critters and plants, never changed, but the photography (and the photographer) did and, as they say around here, I changed “big time.” Pretty soon I was investing more and more time (and money) into the process of taking photographs, and not just their subjects. And that stage went on for some time, years.

But there was another twist in the wind, one that I had not reckoned on, which involved a change of view. After a while, as my photos began to shape up and look better to me. Somewhere in there, inside myself, I realized that all photographs are not “reality,” but rather impressions of reality, a form of impressionism. And, correlate of that was that I also began to realize that my photos amounted to a perfect mirroring of myself.

Once I realized that through my photos I was revealing myself, I began to be aware of how I saw the world. And part of me wanted to express these impressions as to what life is like for me. And there were no hard and fast rules, much less a line that we cannot cross about how each of us is impressed. Those of us who photograph are all impressionists, whether we know it or not. And that included me, perhaps especially me, since I am rather easily impressed by the beauty (or lack thereof) in this world.

If I add in my long-standing interest in all things spiritual (except perhaps organized religion), we have my own special recipe for what amounted to a perfect storm at combining nature photography and spiritual experience. I have written about this many times.

Very gradually I was finding that, not only did I want some context to go with my subjects, but I also wanted a little “mood” thrown in there as well. And with that thought, perhaps I really did cross an unspoken line about mixing the personal with the impersonal. To me, they were already mixed and it was all personal. Photography was a mirror for my moods and particularly for how life had impressed me thus far. And I didn’t mind sharing my photo impression with others, but perhaps most of all I wanted that mirror to look hard into it myself.

For some time, years I believe, I took photos, but other than to look at them myself, I never finished them or printed them out. I didn’t do photography to show it to others (at least not back then). Instead, I used photography as sort of my own rear-view mirror to better see myself, who it is I am, and to perhaps learn from that how better to take the future.

Just as we look at ourselves in the bathroom mirror at times to see the state of the union of our body and soul, in a similar way I looked at (and learned about) myself in through the mirror of the photographic images that I produced. And I learned a lot!

I had always had this impression that I was (and others concurred!) perhaps, as they say, a little too tightly wrapped. I could accept that, because I tend to be very focused and, as some say, perhaps a little intense. Yet, what I was learning from my reflections

in my own photographs was that the connection of my body and my mind was anything but too tight.

In fact, it seemed to me that I spend as much (or more) time out of my body as in it. Aside from my fairly rigorous training as a naturalist, I ended up, not working in a museum or lab somewhere, but oddly enough (really odd!) as an astrologer, about as kookie a vocation as there is, certainly nothing I would have imagined for me as a young adult.

But if you read all the signs (which I do!) and add up my lack of interest in being taught by anyone except someone I have profound respect for, not to mention that I do not like to work at anything (or for anyone) other than exactly on what I am interested in at the time, then something like astrology begins to make a little more sense.

So, back in 1972 when in the course of things, my wife and I found that we were pregnant, and at the time I had no job, when I reached up into the ether of my mind for a handle and a job, I came out being an astrologer. As they say, "Who woulda' thunk it."

And the cherry on top, the icing on the cake, was when, in the course of things, due to some massive layoffs, I found myself without a job entirely, I wandered into nature photography just to take my mind off what I didn't want to think about. And I brought along with me (by force of habit) my dharma practice of some 44 years and that practice (without my realizing it) got mixed with the nature photography.

And from that mixing came what I imagine will be the final twist of fate and direction of my life's curve, that of realizing dharma through photography, without ever intending to. That lack of expectation is a key

ingredient in the recipe of what it took to shake me free from “trying” to practice meditation and into actual meditation. It finally just happened that way.

So, to summarize, my photography is a direct reflection of not only how life has impressed me, but it has been a true mirror for me into what I’m really like to myself.

No one could be more surprised that I was to see that, rather than produce photos with cool abstraction or something like that, I’m (and my photos) are just the other way round, warm, fuzzy, and (I’m afraid to say it) almost “romantic!” It’s no wonder that one of my favorite movies of all time is “Moonstruck.” LOL.

ASTROLOGY: CYCLIC PERSISTENCE

August 9, 2017

Things that only happen once go in one ear and out the other (so to speak) and thus we have little to remember them by. To persist in our world, things have to repeat or cycle – endlessly.

Astrology is all about interpreting astronomical cycles. Of course I UNDERSTOOD intellectually that astrology was, above all, the study of cycles. That was obvious. But then, some many years ago now I had a revelation. I REALIZED that astrology WAS the study of cycles and did I really know all that much about cycles and their structure? As it turned out, I had to admit that I did not know all that much. We all think we know what a cycle is, but do we? When it got right down there to where the rubber meets the road, I had not thought about it that much and yet everything astrological that I did was based on cycles.

So, I took a few years off from whatever I was routinely studying at the time and turned my attention to cycles, and not just astrological cycles, but any and all kind of cycles. For example, I sought out the Foundation for the Study of Cycles, contacted Richard Mogey, its director, met him personally, and began to really consider, for the first time, what cycles were actually about. I mean, I really thought about cycles in depth.

And of course, I realized that this world we live in is all about cycles. In fact, if something does not cycle (i.e. return), we really don't know much about it or consider it, because it just passes through our life and vanishes. It is only those things that cycle that persist (that return again and again) that we remember

because that is what remembering is all about, returns and re-positing.

So, at first as a sidebar, I decided to look at the structures of cycles a little more closely. However, it was more like going into the pantry and never coming out, for when I started really getting into the structure of cycles, I fell down the rabbit hole and never came out. It was then that I realized that astrology WAS the study of cycles and what did I really know about them. And, just as in dharma training for Lhaktong (Insight Meditation) we discover that realizing the nature of one thought is like realizing the nature of all thoughts. So, realizing the structure of one cycle is simultaneously realizing the structure of any and all cycles, large or small.

And my previous conception that a cycle was a cycle amounted to about nothing. What I really needed to do was to examine and study the nature of cycles, all cycles, and in minute detail. And so I examined hundreds of cycles to see if in fact they share a common structure. And they did.

I even programmed and made available a very exhaustive and complex program called Time Cycles that included everything from the history of the Dow Jones and other markets, to hundreds of natural cycles, but few appreciated it.

As mentioned earlier, there are only cycles in this world to be aware of. What does not cycle, does not exist for us. We have the cycle of the Moon, the day, the breath, the heartbeat, and atomic cycles. It's all cycles, so understanding in great detail the phases of a cycle is not just required reading, but crucial to understand in depth.

And the nitty-gritty of it all is that there is a huge difference between the waxing half of a cycle and the waning half, just like there is a difference from being young and being old or between push and pull. And since cycles can be divided in half (waxing & waning, external and internal), into four quarters, into 12 or 36 parts or even individual 360-degrees, yet all cycles share the same structure and can be interpreted similarly. For an astrologer, this is like interpretation heaven.

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF LOVE

August 10, 2017

Responsibility is the ability to respond. In the process of dharma training, we become increasingly responsible. As a recovering teenager, that may not sound so good. But as a dharma practitioner, the ability to respond (and embrace) instead of just react is wonderful.

The dawning of responsibility is like a single drop of water that falls into the center of a still pond. It spreads equally outward in all directions, with each expanding circle being more inclusive of the ones that come behind them. It's like loving babies and children.

In time, we respond not less, but more, and gradually to all situations, to everything, and everyone. If we lack the flexibility to respond, we are frozen in time, a slave to our own knee-jerk reactions. Both the Common and the Extraordinary Preliminary Vajrayana dharma practices loosen us up so that we CAN begin to respond; it frees our arms to embrace what is.

Responsibility, which is something that I hated as a kid, when authorities told me I had to do something, yet later, with some training, it overtook any resistance I could offer. Like a flower, which is no longer just a bud, organic responsibility opens, increasingly receptive to the world. Responsibility is our antenna. Without it, we have no feeling.

This is why the lotus blossom is so often used in connection with Buddhism. With its roots firmly in the mud, it opens and responds fully to the Sun. Total responsibility is unconditional love.

SEEING THE EDGE

August 11, 2017

This is just a little vignette. Edges to me mean being “on the verge,” and I guess it does not matter much the edge of what or the beginning of what else, for edges always mark change and transition. Since it seems that I’m forever changing, does that mean I’m edgy? Perhaps, a little.

Without edges, we would always be in the total white of a blizzard, unable to make anything out. Another operative word for “edges” in my vocabulary is “borders” and borderlines. Boundaries liberate.

“Crossing over” means many things, but our eyes cross and re-cross over any boundaries, constantly seeking out the edges. That’s how we see, by the differences in an otherwise white snowstorm.

In photography, of which I do a lot, edges determine everything, including contrast and micro-contrast. And when it comes to Dharma, another word for edges is “gaps,” the opportunities to glimpse the nature of the mind through chinks in the armor of Samsara. In other words, we are blind except for the edges and gaps that prove otherwise. It’s no wonder that we seek out and learn to use them.

In the more advanced forms of meditation, like Insight Meditation (Vipassana), thoughts themselves become more than something to follow and think on (as we usually do), but are spontaneous fresh-events, literally windows through which we can gaze and learn to rest in the actual nature of the mind. Otherwise we don’t rest.

Riding the train of time, like we all do, from birth to death down a linear life-track, yet gazing out the windows of time at the nature of the mind itself (by using our own thoughts), who or what do we identify with?

Are we only this life-bound traveler, forever caught in the march of time or can we gradually identify more and more with the nature of the mind that we first discovered through these thought-windows (or gaps) in time? Transmigration is not just an otherworldly concept, but a fact in this life we are living now. As we re-identify who it is we are, we begin transmigration.

We have we always habitually identified with time's inexorable freight train, but by gazing from the windows of the train (looking right through "thinking" to the nature of thoughts as they arise is Insight Meditation) begin to identify more with the nature of the mind itself, which has been there even before time began. We can decide just who we are.

In a nutshell, do we want to identify with a sinking ship or with the ocean of mind in which it floats?

THE POINT OF THE SATURN RETURN

August 12, 2017

Just where is the point in life where we stop pushing and start pulling? Is it the prime-of-life, the tip of the top of our physical peak? I like to use the analogy of pushing a bobsled, where we push like hell and then jump on and ride, but that analogy is flawed. Yes, we push or try like mad, but we don't just hop on and ride. Instead, we do the opposite of pushing, which is pulling or receiving. "Receiving" is the better word. We stop giving and start taking, becoming more receptive, being on the receiving end of things. It's like the Social Security System.

My first dharma teacher used to say to me, "When does ice melt?" and the answer was 33 degrees. "When did Christ die?" Again, 33. And there is the old saying "Never trust anyone over 30." As astrologers, we note when the planet Saturn (the physical) first returns in our natal chart in its journey around the Sun, and the answer is at 29.4 years of age.

This concept may seem abstract, because it's gradual, but don't mistake slowness for abstraction, because it's not. It just may take us a while to pick up on it. Anyway, there are certain events in our lifeline that are called climacteric, pivotal or crucial and we would do well to be aware of them. I don't believe most people know about these climacteric events, except obliquely, under the radar and perhaps through osmosis of subtext.

I had the good fortune to meet and be trained by a great esoteric teacher who had been a traveling Rosicrucian initiator for many years. His name was Andrew Gunn McIver and he was born in Glasgow

Scotland. I met him one day (many decades ago) on the campus of the University of Michigan in what is called "The Diag," a kind of central place where many paths crisscross. He was already an old man at the time (in his eighties), and he looked for all the world like George Bernard Shaw. He spent his days meeting and talking to young people like me. I won't go into his story right here, but this one and here is the link for those who want to follow up on this.

<http://michaelerlewine.com/viewtopic.php...>

It was Andrew who introduced me to the Saturn Return, which happens to each of us at roughly 30 years of age and pointed out its esoteric impact. And this was no abstract discussion, but an empowerment that took many months into one of life's greatest initiations. And I received this initiation while I was still in my late twenties and BEFORE I personally experienced my own Saturn Return. This made a huge difference, because it meant that I got to go through my Saturn Return with my eyes open, experiencing it first hand while it happened, rather than piece together what happened (as most folks do) only many years later.

Anyway, our Saturn Return at around 30 years of age is the turning point I was mentioning earlier in this article. This is where we flip from pushing to pulling, from giving to taking, from sowing to reaping. We become more receptive. And this is a change enacted in super slow motion, but change we do. And, as mentioned, most folks take years to become aware that they are changing, if they ever become aware of it at all.

And this is not just another abstract metaphysical or philosophical concept, but one with very, very real

consequences, that if not understood can affect us deeply. In this short articles I can only briefly describe and point out this life-changing event, but when I was young and full of vinegar I wrote an entire book about this called “Astrology of the Heart,” which is a free download here for those who don’t mind a little purple prose. Just scroll down until you find that title:

<http://spiritgrooves.net/e-Books.aspx>

As they say, there is a season for all things; and with the esoteric meaning of the Saturn Return, there is a season in life to give (before we turn thirty) and a season to take (from thirty and beyond). If we want to look for a physical indicator, we could simply say that when we are young, we are building our body, which reaches a physical peak or prime, sustains for a while, and then goes into a gradual decline, like any trajectory.

We call this the “life cycle” and, like all cycles, it has a waxing half (younger than 30) and a waning half (older than thirty). Now, while the physical facts are something we all share as for where the peak is, the metaphysical change, a change in our attitude that results from this initiation is rarely simultaneous with our actual transition, but usually occurs later, more often much later, as the consequences of old age and physical decline set in and reveal themselves to us. A look in the mirror can tell us that.

This Saturn Return and its accompanying rite-of-passage are certain, but our awareness of it is not. I believe the Christians call the process of becoming aware of what I am pointing at here, being “Born Again,” and there is a lot to be said for that description. However, I am not fond of it because it carries with it so much not-so-Christian-like baggage.

Certain deep, climacteric events or life passages are part of our birthright. They should not be ignored or passed over without some celebration. It is very helpful (and confirming) to become aware of and to celebrate this epochal event in our lives, the return of Saturn at about 30 years of age. We celebrate birthdays, anniversaries, and all manner of other occasions. This event is worth celebrating and I am sorry that I cannot go into more detail in this short piece, but as mentioned (above), I wrote a whole book on this life initiation.

And for the really esoteric-minded, here is a poem I wrote some years ago that presents this mystery quite clearly, although I have been told it is hard to understand. The difficulty does not come from my words alone, but from how difficult it is to grasp (realize) this and related concepts.

<http://michaelerlewine.com/viewtopic.php...>

BEYOND TIME: OUR SATURN RETURNS

August 13, 2017

I received some questions about the impact of that first Saturn Return on our life and requests for more information. And what about the second Saturn return and the third? So, let's continue.

What my esoteric teacher taught me back in the middle and late 1960s is that, whether we are aware of it or not, there is something like a spiritual-ballet being acted out within us, all in slow motion. This can be described by the spiritual transition or cosmic mudra or "gesture" initiated by the Saturn Return. And it is a complete 180.

As we age, we go from looking forward and pushing with the effort of youth, the desire to become older and reach adulthood (and be looked up to), to just the opposite. It is like being born, with the first thirty years of life as the birth canal.

My first dharma teacher, Andrew McIver, described our first thirty years as a rocket being launched into space, with us as the space capsule. Getting off the ground takes a huge effort, but once we are launched, and free-floating in orbit (at thirty), our physical vehicle cannot be changed. We LAST or endure for as long as our space capsule was carefully made when we were young.

In other words, HOW we live our life as a young adult before the age of 30 (before our Saturn Return) makes a difference in how we hold together beyond the age of thirty. If it helps, we can consider just our physical body and how it ages as a convenient example, yet I am referring here to the spiritual or

metaphysical counterpart of aging – what happens spiritually after 30 years of age.

Once over thirty years of age, we are born free of the birth process, out of the womb, so to speak. This is called in the esoteric tradition “Entering the Silence,” because Saturn’s noisy engine turns off at the age of thirty years.

After thirty, we are just out there and, instead of always looking forward (as we did since youth), we gradually wake up to the fact that we are already starting to look back. We have crossed over one of life’s key markers, the Saturn Return, and probably without knowing exactly when we did so. Nevertheless, we have.

Eventually, our bathroom mirror will tell us, but when the transition first takes place (at thirty) we are in our prime, so it is too early for the effects to be seen, but they are already at work. So, what’s the big deal about this particular rite of passage?

In a word, the “big deal” is that we gradually do an about-face, over time a full 180-degrees and in slow-motion at too. Well, it’s obvious that we are growing older, but what are the implications? And here is the point of all this.

This inner reversal is just that, a complete flip of our original orientation and approach. And the practical implication is that our *modus operandi*, the way we are used to getting things done no longer works the way it used to. As a younger person, the way to accomplish something was to put our head down, our heart into it, and push forward with all our might. Yet, our method of doing things changes after that first Saturn Return around the age of thirty.

From thirty years of age onward, we no longer push linearly ahead by sheer force of will. If we do, we will eventually suffer the consequences and ram our head into a wall. Pushing against the tides of life only strains us and drains our energy. Instead of blindly pushing, as we age, we instead have to learn to become an enabler, someone who helps things happen, instead of trying to “make” them happen as we did when we were younger. Where before, the way to solve things was to give our best effort; however, from 30-years of age onward, any progress we make will be more by facilitating, working with the tides of life, and in particular facilitating others, i.e. being receptive.

Just as the baby in the womb, with mother’s help, has to push his head forward, once we are out (after thirty years of age), there is no need for that pushing anymore. We also no longer have the force of the “mother” birthing us. Saturn in astrology is the law, and we are only protected by the law until Saturn returns. In fact, if we are beyond thirty years of age and still keep on pushing just as we did when we did when younger, we will only strain ourselves. Straining, when there is no longer anything to strain against, only injures us. In other words, we have to learn to be careful how we do things after the age of thirty. We become, by necessity, facilitators rather than the facilitated.

In the martial arts, we might contrast Karate (offensive) with Aikido (defensive). We can give it, but can we take it? That’s what we find out as we age. We have to completely reverse course and start to find out if we can receive and handle what others younger than us now keep giving out, just as we once did. Again: can we also take it? Can we be receptive?

Can we receive? Yes, we can still “give,” but here giving becomes more like “giving in,” receiving, working with, enabling, etc.

You might say, well, this is all obvious? And I would say, right you are. But the most esoteric and secret things are always hidden in plain sight, just too close for us to see them. Realizing this grand rite-of-passage in full is a great gift, real power.

When I was being trained in all of this, my teacher would say that we spend the first thirty years of life being born, building our physical vehicle and getting out of the womb of time (at 30). Then we spend the next thirty years (30-60) repairing the damage we made getting out (we are launched), and for the third Saturn Return (60-90), if we live so long, we can consciously participate in the actual creation of life... as a co-creator. Think about that for a bit. I have, for the last fifty years.

There is so much more to all of this, but hopefully you have by now at least the basic idea. The concept is universal and affects everything and everyone, with no exceptions. It is so near (and dear) to us that we don't speak of it or can't, but it's the elephant in the room. It's the implication of the “prime” of life.

The important takeaway from all this is that if we are over thirty years of age and still pushing our personal agenda of trying to become an adult and reach our majority, we need to take a deep breath and carefully consider our approach. We are already beyond the point of no return. We not only will not have the same drive we once had, but more important we will find that we now have that “drive” very differently if we plan to succeed.

I have seen too many older folks who are still trying to “make things happen,” accomplish things by their force of will, and I have watched the forces of time defeat them time and again. This is a change of attitude that takes place at our first Saturn return, but we have to REALIZE this.

Working WITH the forces that “be” (after the age of 30), rather than bucking through them as we used to be able to do, is now in order. Listening, being more receptive, accepting, and co-operative is now the way to get things done. Ignoring this approach is just asking for an early exit or serious problems. To me, all of this is appropriately symbolized by the Saturn Return.

I have an entire book that I wrote in the 1960s called “Astrology of the Heart,” which is a free download here for those who don’t mind that I was young at the time. Just scroll down until you find that title:

<http://spiritgrooves.net/e-Books.aspx>

DON'T ALTER THE PRESENT

August 14, 2017

The great Mahasiddha Tilopa said, “Don’t alter the present.” He did not say, “Be the present” or “Be Here Now,” unless we mean by that to accept the present just as it is. Most important, as mentioned, is to accept things just as they are for us, rather than wish that things were different or try and put lipstick on it. My first dharma teacher would say, “My god is no beggar. He does not need me to make the ends meet. The ends already meet.” That is a similar sentiment.

In my experience, one of the hardest concepts to grasp in learning meditation is to fully accept our own mood, however it is. We cannot change what we refuse to accept. I can well remember cutting many a meditation period short by telling myself that I just don’t feel like it today or that I’m too upset or that something or other is not just right, i.e. tomorrow will be better. That kind of approach misses the point and is never helpful. Wishing for things to be different only makes it worse.

Tilopa also said, “Relax, as it is,” which also means to accept our situation just as it is, warts and all, rather than hold out for a better time or place. “This is it!” as my first teacher would say. The word “meditation,” as translated from the Tibetan, is said to mean “to become familiar with,” as in to become familiar with our mind... just as it is, not how we wish it were.

Waiting for everything to be copasetic in order to practice is an exercise in futility. The whole point in learning to meditate is to get to know our own mind in the situation in which we happen to find ourselves now. So, starting where we are, good, bad, or

indifferent is what is required. And while we are at it, here are more of the original “Words of Advice” as they came from the Mahasiddha Tilopa:

“Don’t prolong the past.

Don’t invite the future.

Don’t alter the present.

Relax, as it is.”

If we are looking for directions on how to set the sails of our meditation attitude, how to aerodynamically best take the winds of change that life brings, then these four slogans are the gist of it. They are meant to be taken in, absorbed, and implemented, and not just to go in one ear and out the other. These are, IMO, very precious words of advice for those of us who would meditate. These are not just platitudes or addenda.

It is said that the extant written teachings of Buddhism are larger in quantity by an order of magnitude than for any other religion. Yet, in all those books and writings, few (if any) are as concise, what the Tibetans call “pithy,” than the above slogans. Of course, each of these slogans can be unpacked and expanded almost infinitely, but these ARE the pith instructions we need. You will probably never find any better than these. I never have.

Therefore, we can read, read, read and boil down what we read to something that we can perhaps remember and put into practice. But these five lines provide all that we need to develop dharma correctly, at least IMO. I have looked and listened!

And these slogans are easy to understand. The first two are obvious, don’t get lost in thinking about the past (water already over the dam) and don’t speculate

or expect about what has not yet come to pass. The third one, “Don’t alter the present” I have mentioned above, i.e. don’t monkey with the present moment, whether it is good, bad, or indifferent. Let it be exactly what it is, because it was permitted to arise in our circumstances. Work with it; embrace it. Change our attitude rather than complain about the moment. Accepting what is, just as it is, without embellishment is fundamental dharma.

And finally, “Relax, as it is” suggests that accepting what IS (just as it is) as the only place to begin, without attempting to alter it or have it be different is just good common sense. Any counselor can tell you that.

DHARMA FUSION

August 15, 2017

Like many disciplines, learning to practice dharma has one very obvious speed bump in starting out and that is to get to the point where we are getting enough results that it keeps our interest. And the key to that is keeping it real and constantly present in our mind. For those interested, here is my suggestion.

One of the best (if not “the” best) internal dharma-thermometers is to become aware of our own reactions. How and when we react to our ever-changing external conditions is immediate, very much in the present. Can we handle and respond properly to what life throws at us or do we become reactionary? Do our reactions define us?

We can learn to be aware of and monitor our reactions, gradually toning them back. The beauty of monitoring our reactions is that there is no question whose they are and no sane case for blaming them on anyone else.

And I’m not talking about responding to what arises; we have no alternative but to respond in this life. I am talking about when, instead of responding, we find ourselves with all these knee-jerk reactions on our part. If we are looking for ways to keep it real and absolutely fresh and in the present, then our own involuntary reactions and prejudices are the ticket.

It’s like having a built-in pager or reminder as to when we get off-track. And, by definition, our involuntary reactions are never boring because they are split-second surprises that cause us to wince. Something very alive in us is present in our reactions. So, it’s

very simple. We need to be aware of what is causing us to react involuntarily, when we do.

Our reactions are, as mentioned, literally a built-in guide as to exactly where we are in our practice and in our life. We would never let another person monitor us as closely as we can witness our own reactions, moment by moment. They keep us hopping, like fat in a frying pan and like the value that pain is to our body, reactions warn and inform us of exactly what in us needs attention.

Once we begin to identify our reactions, we can realize what causes them and start to tone them down, until they are at the level of natural responses that we would expect. I have to laugh, because everywhere I see folks struggling with their meditation, trying to keep it real, when all this time our knee-jerk reactions are absolutely real, as fresh as this moment. All we have to do is become aware of when we react and take note of the specific reactions we are having. No other action is required. We can do this silently, on-the-run, and everywhere we go. This practice is totally portable and we can do it all long.

Simply becoming aware of our reactions is enough to begin neutralizing them and toning them back. No hand-wringing, apologies, and sorrow as to what's causing us to react are required. Just the awareness that they do occur and what causes us to react. That's enough to set in motion the process of desensitizing whatever we are reacting to. The results of reaction toning are very rapid. And there is no passing off any blame on anyone else. Reactions are something we have to own. We can't control what life throws at us, but we can learn to respond appropriately and not just mindlessly and involuntarily react.

I have pointed out reaction-toning to many people over the years and some have been able to pick up on it and use it to drive their dharma practice until it kicks in on its own. We can read books, listen to teachings and so on, but nothing is so much with us (and obvious) as our own reactions. They are, by definition, as fresh as this present moment is and if we will become aware of them can keep us involved.

For those of you who would like to check this out, I have written some material about working with our personal reactions as a dharma practice. Here are some links:

Tong-Len: The Alchemy of Reaction

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

A Series of Articles on Reaction Training

<http://michaelerlewine.com/viewforum.php...>

Let me know if you have any questions, please.

LIVES BEYOND DEATH

August 16, 2017

Although I was raised as a Roman Catholic, went to Catholic School, church on Sundays, was an altar boy, rang the bells, etc., for some reason I never picked up on the Catholic idea of heaven. It just didn't synch with me or stick. I blame it on my many years of nature study which offered me Mother's Nature's take on things and she was not about pie in the sky. Nature was, to me, only too real.

Be that as it may, what I came away with from all that Sunday going-to-church (which I hated) as regards what happens after death was more like the old Schlitz Beer commercial slogan, "You Only Go Around Once." You live and then you die and then "nada." I can't recall when I started thinking that way, but there it was nevertheless.

As I moved from being a teenager into young adulthood, I found myself feeling around for any other scenarios than that beer commercial's take on things. I don't even think I was aware that I was doing this, so it was a kind of blind search. Without knowing it, I was looking for an alternative. And as an astrologer who often went to New Age conferences and spoke, I rubbed shoulders with all kinds of psychics and what-have-you. And I have been to my share of séances, message services, Ouija boards, etc., and early on I fell in love with oracles of all kinds. I loved the tarot, the I-Ching, numerology, and even my old Magic 8-Ball.

I was also exposed fairly early-on to the Hindu epics like the Bhagavad Gita, in particular Sir Edwin

Arnold's translation of it called the "Song Celestial," where it is written what Krishna said to Arjuna:

"Never the spirit was born;
The spirit shall cease to be never;
Never was time it was not;
End and Beginning are dreams!

Birthless and deathless and changeless remaineth
the spirit for ever;
Death hath not touched it at all,
Dead though the house of it seems!
Who knoweth it exhaustless, self-sustained, Immortal,
indestructible,--shall such Say,
"I have killed a man, or caused to kill?"

"Nay, but as when one layeth
His worn-out robes away,
And taking new ones, sayeth,
"These will I wear to-day!"
So putteth by the spirit
Lightly its garb of flesh,
And passeth to inherit
A residence afresh.

The above quote did not escape me for a second. It was a ray of hope that sent me scouring the books that touched upon cosmic consciousness and anything that about living more than once. I'm not talking about books that were best sellers, but rather books on the very edge of literature that were hard to find and often harder to understand. I remember reading the books by the Theosophist Alice Bailey, such as "Esoteric Astrology," which, to my mind, was almost impossible read.

And I went on to study in depth the Theosophical movement, the works of Blavatsky, and even became the Vice President of the Michigan Theosophical

Society and was married in the Liberal Catholic Church, which says something, a church which I saw as somewhat liberated... but sadly, still a church.

Anyway, I was all about anything that pointed beyond just dropping dead at the end of this life. It's not that I did not give Christianity a shout-out. When I was in my own bit of agony about all of this, I sought out the Catholic group of priests that I most respected, the Jesuits for counsel. To my shock and sorrow, all I got back were platitudes. Good grief, even I knew more about the other worlds than what they were selling me, which was a re-run of what I was fed in Catholic school. Thanks, but no thanks guys! The image of the Pearly Gates was lost on me.

Somewhere around this time I started to log Tibetan Buddhist teachings. I started out with Zen Buddhism, with its sitting practice, and I loved the rice-paper doors, the pristine sand gardens, the haikus, and any film by Akira Kurosawa, still even today my favorite movie director.

And the psychology of the Tibetans was right up my alley. When I heard that Chögyam Trungpa took LSD and remarked "Nothing happened," that was enough for me. It told me that his mind was already crystal clear. Of course, serving as Trungpa's chauffeur for a weekend, spending time with him alone (where he taught me meditation) was the icing on the cake. These Tibetans knew everything I cared about and at deeper levels than I had ever reached. They were like a dream come true.

I offer a little history here so you know where I came from in all of this. In my next blog (or soon), I will get more into rebirth -- lives beyond death -- and how I got into that.

FEELING THE EMPTINESS

August 15, 2017

“Trying to make it real, compared to what?” This quote from one of my favorite jazz tunes makes me laugh. I apologize for often riffing on emptiness and our seeming inability to fill that empty feeling in our psyche. And related to this, I’ve come to realize that the whole problem of “reification” is important for us to understand. The word “reify” means to make something more real and concrete. In the case of the reality that we each are already living, that reality is as real as it gets for us. We can’t make life more real than reality itself; in other words, we can’t salt the salt and there is no point in trying to gild the lily, so to speak.

I blog about this because I’m aware of it and have been for some years. I’m sure I will move on, but as for now, here I am. It seems that many people are desperately trying (and hoping) to make life more real than it is, instead of allowing themselves to see life, like the mystics say, as the grand illusion that in fact it is -- a magical theater. As Shakespeare said “All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players.” I guess that would be us playing at life (pretending), which I see no point in doing. Let’s see it for what this emptiness actually is.

As mentioned, it is troubling to see so many of us struggling to cover our imagined “nakedness,” this emptiness we feel inside that we are afraid to admit is there. Meanwhile, the Tibetan Buddhist teachings all point in just the opposite direction, not toward the futility of trying to reify ourselves (to seem more real than we are), but rather, as mentioned, to let go and

experience or recognize life as the magical illusion that the dharma teachings point out that it is. And there is the old round “Row, Row, Row Your Boat” and the line “Life is but a dream.” In other words, according to the teachings, most of us are going the wrong way. How in the world did that happen?

And the reason, so the teachings point out, is that we have never (not ever) had anything other than our own impermanency to realize, which should be totally obvious. We often feel empty and we all know that our life situation is not permanent; we die.

Nor do the Buddhists agree with the Hindu religions when they claim that we each have an immortal soul that flits from lifetime to lifetime like a hummingbird to flowers. The Buddhists do not find that “kind” of permanency (“immortal” soul) to be the case. Instead, Buddhists claim that rather than have a single eternal soul that transmigrates, our desires and karma drive us create a new (but temporary) “soul” with each rebirth. We are not the same person in the next life that we are in this life, but something within us endures and is reborn, driven by our karma and desires.

And to me, it’s obvious that this impermanence that we feel, this emptiness of any permanent existence that we take so personally (but which has always been there), causes us suffering, the suffering of this apparent emptiness. And what I don’t fully understand is how we managed to get into this predicament in the first place? It has to be some sort of simple misunderstanding, because whatever we are, we have been this way for a very, very long time. If we sense an emptiness, you would think that we would be used to it by now, yet the Buddhist position, I believe, is not that we once knew and forgot, but

rather that we never knew. We have yet to figure it out.

It seems that somehow we have it just backward. Instead of realizing that we are now and have always been permanently impermanent (yet nevertheless are still right here and now), it seems that we experience this, our impermanence, as a lack (something missing) on our part, an emptiness that we feel we must fill up somehow. And that's the point; this universe we live in lacks that certain something (call it permanence) and always has. The dream quality of reality is not our imagination. And the result is this insatiable habit of reification on our part, trying to make it real when it already is a real as it gets. We just can't seem to scratch that itch. This endless reification is a hopeless gesture on our part. And the Buddhists point out that this emptiness we sense and fear is just our natural state! We have never been any different.

So, what might we do instead? Well, obviously, we could always realize our emptiness and act accordingly, instead of denying, ignoring, and trying to cover it up. So, what's the first step? Well, friends, that is just what I am trying to figure out for myself. Before I can get too far, I have to finish playing this real-life game of Pick-Up-Sticks, where I carefully remove, one by one, whatever obscurations I have that are clouding or blocking my realization as to seeing the nature of my own mind. This removing of obscurations is what the Tibetan Buddhist term the "Preliminary Practices" and they are all about clearing away what clouds our mind. Well, I'm working on that.

At least, so I tell myself, if this is not our first lifetime (as the Buddhists say), then this problem of impermanence and emptiness should be no surprise.

We have been like this for a long, long time, perhaps forever. I am imagining, and this is just speculation on my part, that as I gradually clarify my mind, I will realize the nature of this emptiness to be as natural as the Sun in the sky. I will then, hopefully, as Tilopa put it: "Relax, as it is."

HOPE FOR A HUMAN REBIRTH

August 17, 2017

What training I have in life-after-death states, the bardo, and rebirth comes from Tibetan Buddhism, in particular the Karma Kagyu Lineage, in which I have studied and practiced for going on 44 years. Somewhere back there in time, perhaps because meditation training was taking me what seemed like a very long time to learn, I slowly realized that at the rate I was going, I would be dead before I became enlightened. LOL.

That's probably when I began to think more earnestly about the concept of rebirth. After all, I needed more time and this life was going to be too short to get everything done that I needed to do with my Dharma practice. Sure, I would keep practicing in my own fumbling way, but was there anything that I could do to insure that at least I got another human birth to continue on, rather than rebirth as an animal or other type of being? So, as they say, I had two trains running. Also, I should add that, over time, I became less fumbling in my dharma practice, especially when was instructed in Mahamudra practice.

In other words, I continued on with my daily dharma practice, but at the same time I felt perhaps I should spend some time and effort on not losing the chance of another, as the Tibetans put it, "precious human birth." I wanted to keep my foot in the door to be reborn again as a human, if I could. According to the Tibetan tradition, there are several things that can happen to us after we die and enter what they call the after-death bardo.

Most likely, we simply take rebirth in one of the six realms of existence, just as apparently we have in this life. From the teachings, a human birth is the best type of rebirth for mastering dharma. The other five realms of being are not so good for dharma practice.

Next, and not necessarily too likely, I could possibly be born in what are called the Pure Realms, in which case I would stop taking births altogether and remain in a semi-enlightened state benefiting people in various ways. That's what the teachings say.

Considering my current history in this life and all the mistakes I have made, that did not seem particularly likely. And third, and very much the least likely possibility, is that somewhere along the way from now until after death I could become enlightened. That would be nice work if I could get it, but that happening to any of us reading this is probably rarer than hen's teeth, as they say.

Anyway, I was still at the point where the idea of any kind of rebirth seemed better than just fading out to oblivion as many Americans believe is what happens when we die. As mentioned, the idea of going to heaven that my Catholic upbringing taught me just didn't take. I'm not sure how I managed to slip through the cracks of the Catholic heaven, but slip I did and woke up, as mentioned, in that Schlitz Beer commercial, where we are going around once in life and that's it. This was, and I'm not alone, a bummer.

And so, after I started to get to know the Tibetan lamas up-close and personal, I could see that they never blinked when it came to discussing continuing lives and rebirth after death. To them, rebirth was a fact and not just some wishful thinking. How do I get on that train with the Tibetan was about all I could

think? The Tibetan lamas were the most convincing human beings I had ever met. Whatever I learned from the lamas about life and truth, which they always encouraged me to test and vet, turned out to be accurate, more accurate than the little truth-log I had maintained all my life in the back of my head.

And here were these same lamas talking about rebirth as a fact, not as something to hope for as I did. For me, this was a case of “in for a nickel, in for a dime.” Everything that I had been told about the dharma by the lamas had turned out to be true to the degree that I was able to test it. And here was something I had no way to test until I died, so was I going to trust that the lamas were right, that rebirth is not just something to hope was true, but rather rebirth was (for all of us) inevitable. My Tibetan dharma teacher, a high lama, is perhaps the most pure and truthful person I have ever met; I trusted him implicitly already, so I was totally willing to trust him on this question of rebirth.

Yet, having confidence in the Tibetan lamas about death, the bardo, and rebirth was not the same as actually sorting out in real-time the details of all this, not just in my mind, but in my day-to-day life. Intellectual or conceptual confidence is a long, long way from realizing for myself the truth of rebirth. I had much to learn and will continue with that tomorrow.

WHAT REMAINS AFTER LIFE?

August 18, 2017

As I became interested in what happens after we die, one of the first hurdles was figuring out what part of us transmigrates and is reborn. The Tibetan teachers are quick to point out that what is reborn is not the “immortal soul” of the Hindu religions, not what is technically called a “reincarnation,” which would be the same person being reborn in another body. Some very high lamas are said to do that, but not people at my level, whatever level that is. So, “me, myself, and I” will not be going anywhere when I pass on and that is kind of unsettling. I’ve become attached to myself, or more correctly my Self is a sum total of my attachments, the glue that holds the Self together.

According to the Tibetans, what we call our “Self,” which the Tibetans keep telling us has no permanent existence, is left behind when we exit this world. Well, if “I’m” left behind, what the heck takes rebirth and how? That was something that I needed to understand. I can’t understand why everyone else is not seriously interested in this question.

And while I searched, read, and asked lamas and practitioners everywhere I could, the answer, one that made sense to me, finally came in a Buddhist philosophy (and tradition) called Yogacara. They had an explanation I could actually get behind. And, as mentioned, I read whatever I could, even wrote to some of the authors, and finally found what was (to me) the best introduction to Yogacara in a very high lama (and brilliant man), the Ven. Traleg Kyabgon Rinpoche. And I had to good fortune to have had Traleg Rinpoche as a guest at our dharma center and

also met with him (in 2004) another time high in the mountains of Tibet at Thrangu Monastery, his ancestral home, where he is the resident tulku and has been for generations. Traleg Rinpoche had returned to Thrangu Monastery from the West to oversee the blessing of a new main shrine room. I had been invited to travel with my Rinpoche (and a group of his students) to the celebration.

Traleg Rinpoche, unfortunately, passed on at a fairly early age, but in his last book, “Karma: What It Is, What It Isn’t, Why It Matters,” published after he died, I found what I was looking for, an understandable explanation of what part of us is reborn. The Yogacara teachings point out the existence of what is called the Alayavijnana, commonly called the “Storehouse Consciousness” or sometimes just the “Alaya.” And it is in the Alayavijnana that what remains of our previous life is stored. Yet, if it is not the “us” that we know (our “Self”), what is it that survives and is stored?

According to the Yogacarans, what is stored in the Alaya consciousness (Alayavijnana) is what drives us and always has: our desires and our karma. And these are not stored like in a one big lump that we could recognize as ourselves, someone we know, but somehow more like a database of our actions and reactions. And it is these stored desires, graspingness, and karma that take hold of us when we are reborn and reconstitutes itself by creating an entirely new Self out of our new life-circumstances, yet one fashioned at the root from the same old desires and karma that resulted and remains from our last life. That brief description is the best that I have been able to come up with from my studies.

So, we don't get to be "reincarnated," which would mean that our last "Self" becomes the same Self in a new body, but instead, we are reconstituted by all that we have put into motion through our hopes, desires, dreams, and especially actions. As we arise and are reborn, all of this material from the Alayavijnana, like metal filings to a magnet, swirl and cling around us and (using the stuff of the life-situation we are just born into) take form as a new Self and our life continues. That's the idea as I understand it.

It is also written that our Alayavijnana is not just what we have compiled in our previous life. No, no, no, but like a vast barge slowly moving upstream, our karma has been dragged through all time from innumerable past lives as stored in the Alayavijnana. And this Alaya consciousness will endure, persist, and last until our desires are all worked out and our karma completed, at which time it will be, so the teachings point out, totally empty. And we will be realized, if not enlightened.

So that, my Facebook friends, is what I understood and it gave me a lot to think about, and I have been. What are your thoughts?

I will continue this next blog.

“WHAT DREAMS MAY COME...”

August 19, 2017

The Buddhists point out that if we had an unchanging immortal soul like some of the Indian philosophies suggest, it would be just that, unchanging and unable to experience anything or be moved emotionally, much less be transformed by it. Perhaps, it would be comforting to know that when I wake up in a new life, a rebirth, that I have all my favorite thoughts, habits, prejudices, values, etc. with me. And then, on the other hand, maybe I would just as soon not have to be responsible for the mess I have created in this life, but would rather start over with a clean slate. Either way, I will be driven by my same basic desires, and of course by karma. That is the Buddhist Yogacara view as I understand it. And anyway, there seems to be no choice. We are reborn, not reincarnated. I don't remember a thing from a previous life. I have had inklings of another scenario running in the background, but that is about it.

Anyway, to me that is all academic thinking. The fact is that we do not remember our past lives and don't seem to have any Self other than the one we create right here and now. Of course, the unknown can be scary, and as Shakespeare put it in Hamlet”

“For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause: there's the respect
That makes calamity of so long life;

I don't look forward to losing consciousness at death, only to wake up with no memory of who I am now and have to create a new Self all over again, but there you have it. At least I won't know that I don't know, any

more than I do now. Anyway, apparently we have done this innumerable times in the past, so we are no stranger to the process, even if what I remember is only what I put together in each new life.

That is what I understand the Buddhists teachers are pointing out that “rebirth” is all about. We do go on; we are reborn, but it looks like we have to put together a Self all over again based on our desires and karma. My first dharma teacher used to say the following to me many times, and perhaps only now am I understanding what he was pointing out.

He had one slightly crooked finger, a pinkie, that he would hold up and show me, while he said that this imperfect finger was perhaps the only thing keeping him here on Earth. Of course, I took this in, but had no idea what the heck he was talking about, but now I feel I do. What perhaps he was saying is that our imperfections, our karma that has not yet been resolved, are what are keeping us in this world of rebirth. When that is used up, there is no reason to remain here. But there was this subtext that I osmotically absorbed, that great teachers like Andrew still need something physical (or karmic) to ground and keep them here. This is just my thought. I have not read it anywhere, but that seems to be what he was explaining.

I CAN say that his mind was like a window into eternity and, for those who understand this, he had no shadow. I don't mean that he did not cast a physical shadow, but he was purified to such a degree that he cast no shadow on others, only light. And, this aside from the fact that he could be very wrathful or righteous. But wrath and anger are two very different things. I will share with you this story. Many times I would find Andrew McIver, my first dharma teacher,

somewhere on The Diag of the University of Michigan campus, the place where all the many sidewalks cross.

And I was not always in the best mood and he knew it the moment I would appear. He often would say what a beautiful day it was, just to alert me to myself, but the message to me was to drop my sad or worried looks and acknowledge the day. Sometimes I could and sometimes I could not let go of my bad mood. And when I could not, he would then do something very fascinating. He would be making a point (much like “watch the birdie” in old-time photography) and he would pick up the newspaper he was always carrying and, before I knew it, bring it sharply down on his hand or a flat surface. Crack! And in that split second that the sound rang out, my bad mood would vanish, just like that. Gone! This happened very often and always to my amazement. And suddenly, I could see that it was in fact a beautiful day.

Meeting Andrew McIver, who was a retired traveling Rosicrucian initiator, proved to me in the flesh that the exotic (but fascinating) worlds of Don Juan and Carlos Castaneda were not unreal stories, but precisely real. Teachers like this exist if we are ready for them. In my case, Andrew was the first human being that I had met in life (aside from my parents) that I felt cared more for me than I knew how to care for myself. That’s a sign of a spiritual teacher. They actually care about you.

Well, as for the whole death and rebirth scenario, despite the unreality of our impermanent supposed magical illusory existence, it seems real enough to me. LOL.

“I WANT TO BE THERE WHEN I DIE”

August 20, 2017

The above is the title of a song that one of my songwriting daughters, Michael Anne, wrote that I really like. When I was experiencing severe health problems a year and a half ago and was trying to get my mind right to have heart surgery and other things, I came as close as I have to death, close enough to at least observe my mind as I peered into that void. And what I saw was that I was not afraid of death as much as I was interested in seeing what it was all about. Don't get me wrong, I was in no hurry to leave this world and I did not want “not-to-be-there” for my family, but aside from that I saw that possibly dying was not so scary. As stupid as this sounds, I was comforted by the idea that I would be aware and was going with me when I died, funny as that sounds. LOL.

And I feel that I have the blessing and support of my Tibetan dharma teacher always with me. That alone is like a torch of certainty, a connection that will always be there. Knowing someone like Rinpoche (who knows so much more than I do), who has no fear of death himself is a great blessing for all who have come to know him. Where else do we find that? Since death is something every last one of us will have to face and go through, it is helpful for me to learn what I can about it now and do my best to get over what fears I have of dying. Mostly, death is an unknown to us and, like all unknowns, we don't know what it is.

Aside from whatever fears we have, we each must be curious about what happens when we die. Our society is pretty mum about all this and appears to be massively ignorant as to matters of rebirth or reincarnation. Go to your nearest priest or pastor (I did) and ask them about dying and what happens to us after we die, aside from being buried. You won't learn much; at least I didn't. Is it a secret or do folks just not know? It must be the latter.

My first insight into death came when I met the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa in 1974 and served as his chauffeur for a short time. Almost from the moment I met him, as soon as we got back from the airport and were alone, Trungpa Rinpoche took me into a little office room, sat me down on a chair, and proceeded to teach me Tranquility Meditation (his particular version), although he did not tell me what he was doing or give it any name. He just began to give me instructions.

And in that instruction, when he came to the out-breath, letting go, he was not happy with how tentative I was about breathing out, so he told me to let my breath go out more. And there I was nervously trying to do just that, when he emphasized "Let it go all the way out; don't worry, it will come back."

And with that phrase "It will come back," in that split second, all of my fear of death arose within me like a dark cloud and passed out. My fears of death and dying have never returned to that degree again. This is what happened on the spot and I had no idea what

was going on. Trungpa Rinpoche, IMO, was a siddha, a highly realized being and meeting him was a pivotal moment for me.

The Tibetan lineage that I practice in goes back at least 17 generations (the 17 Karmapas), and before that there was Milarepa, Marpa, Naropa, and Tilopa. That's quite a line of realized dharma masters. In the 1980s, mostly due to the diaspora in Tibet, with all of the great lamas who made it out of Tibet alive suddenly appearing in India, Nepal, and the West, for a short time we had unprecedented access to the great dharma masters of our lineage. And here in America we have no idea of how rare an opportunity that was.

In Tibet, where I have witnessed this, when a great dharma teacher visits a local monastery, people travel from hundreds of miles just to catch a glimpse of these teachers. I watched lines of people stretching back for miles along a road leading to Thrangu Monastery in Kham to see the return (for a visit) of the monastery's main tulku (reincarnate lama), the Ven. Kyabgon Traleg Rinpoche, who came to bless the opening of a new temple.

I was there with Rinpoche (and some of his students) and watched thousands of people coming from all over to see this great rinpoche. The car Traleg Rinpoche rode in could only drive 50 or 100 feet at a time because the amount of white scarves piled on top of the car (and windshield) by folks made seeing to drive impossible. The scarves had to be repeatedly

taken off, large piles of them. This went on for a very long time.

Yet, in America Traleg Rinpoche visited our center and we had dinner and talked about philosophy and literature around the table. In Tibet, this would be unheard of. Such a comparison is humbling to me. And we had access to many of the great lamas of the Karma Kagyu lineage in those years, up close and personal. One of the four Heart Sons of the Karmapa stayed at our center for a week and he gave Mahamudra transmission to local people just off the street. During that transmission the walls of our shrine room just became transparent with white light, and filled with energy. It was like that.

Today, all those precious rinpoches have found homes, monasteries, retreats, and so on. In these years now, it is we who have to go and visit them, wherever they are teaching. That unique time period, when they were looking to visit us, has passed, and the seeds they planted back then are hopefully starting to sprout.

What a shock it was to me, some years ago now, when Rinpoche was asked about how the lineage will fare in America, as far as learning or saying our dharma practice in Tibetan, as we do now, and he responded that the future of the dharma in America will belong to the home-grown American dharma students, people like us who will become realized and write our own texts and sadhanas. Hmmm. I had

never thought of that, although of course that has to happen. Yet, it makes perfect sense.

For that to take place, we Americans will have to first learn and understand the dharma, eventually experience it first-hand, and finally realize what it is all about and then put it in our own words and actions.

WHERE DOES FEELING EMPTY COME FROM?

August 20, 2017

“If you lack the faculty, you can’t see the phenomenon” is an old chestnut that bears repeating. And the reverse is also true, that if we can see the phenomenon, we have the faculty. That’s another way of saying that “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder,” if that helps. Both of these lead me back to a question that gnaws at me: if we are impermanent (which obviously we are) and lack permanence existence (in other words, we have this permanent emptiness due to never having had a permanent existence), how did we ever come up with the idea of emptiness in the sense that therefore we somehow are lacking something? In other words, if we have always lacked something (i.e. permanent existence), how do we know we lack something that we have never known? Perhaps we don’t know.

If we each are “temps,” living temporary lives that end at death, then our Self (who we like to think we are) is some kind of laminate made of our own attachments, which has a shelf-life, good for this life only. In that case, emptiness of permanent existence is not something added on to us, but rather is connate, part and parcel of our basic existence. Our existence is not permanent and we are not an eternal “Soul.”

If there is an illusory (temporary) quality to existence by its very nature, then it never has been more real

than the empty illusion that it is. So, where did we get this habit of reifying our impermanent existence, trying to make ourselves more real than we, in fact, are? Why are we not going in the opposite direction, that of accepting our impermanence as a starting point to who we are?

The Tibetan lamas are always saying that we should learn to view our life as a magical illusion. I have even been told this directly by a lama as a practice I should do. OK, but why? Finding this, our illusory nature, should be like coming home (or something similar), because there is no (and never has been) any kind of existence other than one that is empty of permanent existence. Thus this permanent feeling of emptiness is natural to us -- organic.

If we are (to use a metaphor) walking holograms, why are we always dreaming or yearning for a “realer” reality that we already are? Is this not real enough? It’s like Pinocchio wanting to be a real boy. Or, if we are like some kind of android, where did we ever get this desire to be real? If it takes one to know one and if there is only “One” anyway, then where does this other “one” come from who feels or decides that we are empty?

I know. I’m out on a limb here and probably sawing it off too, but some of you reading this must have had related thoughts, no? If our existence has an illusory (an impermanent) quality to it, why are we fighting it, rather than embracing it? How do we “de-reify” our habit of reification, of trying to make everything realer

than it is? Why not just be the “unreal” entity that we apparently are?

In summary, how do we get comfortable with our own impermanence, since it appears that we always have been impermanent, yet in the midst of that impermanence, we persist (and exist as something) anyway. It's like being a living oxymoron, a persistent impermanence. That's life. And isn't there some humor in all this? I would think so. Maybe that's what Shakespeare was saying with his play “Much Ado about Nothing.”

NATURAL CONCENTRATION

August 22, 2017

Something I often think about is how I learned to concentrate as part of beginning meditation, and there is a story here that has some humor in it; either that or it's a bit tragic. Or both.

The type of beginning meditation in most traditions that is most commonly taught is Tranquility Meditation, calming the mind. In Sanskrit it is called Shamata and in Tibetan, Shiné. By any name, however, it has to do with learning to concentrate and focus, but the question is to concentrate on what? And there we have the thread of this story.

In the lineage of Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism that I practice in, usually tranquility meditation is where we begin, although in Tibet learning to meditate was usually done AFTER all the preliminaries are completed, but here in America (for some reasons I won't detail here), tranquility is taught before we even do The Preliminaries. And, in learning tranquility meditation, we are free to choose what object we want to concentrate ON, and most often it's usually focusing on the breath and breathing, i.e. following the breath in and out. I'm not sure why this is so, but perhaps that is just because focusing on breathing is convenient. We never leave home without it, sort of thing.

But other popular objects to focus on are a pebble, a stick, or even a spot on the wall. And I understand we can get extra-credit for focusing on a sacred object, such as an image of the Buddha, but that is not a requirement. And since I am a recovering Christian, I tend not to like that kind of suggestion, to be told that only religious objects are special. I have tried them all and I prefer natural objects.

And when I say that I'm a "recovering Christian," I want to be clear that I am not anti-Christian and have never turned my back on Christ or any holy being. I just couldn't find a method or a path that I was comfortable with in Christianity. Do you think that might be because the nuns used to punish us and slap our knuckles with a ruler or the local priest would gather all the boys before the altar and proceed to scare the bejesus out of us by saying that if we ever touched ourselves or masturbated, we are going to hell?

That kind of treatment did nothing other than propel us away from the church. I can't forget the group of eight-grade boys I was part of, giving each other sideways looks as the priest threatened us before Jesus hanging there on a crucifix. Who did they think they were talking to, anyway? They were destroying their own future by threatening us in that way. It has to be funny, sometime, but I'm still not laughing yet. Anyway... I digress.

What I'm interested in discussing here is just what it is we SHOULD focus on when we learn to meditate.

And, along the way, I want to share my own tragedy-comedy as to what happened with me while learning tranquility meditation, because a few of you might be in a similar-enough situation to appreciate it. I wish I had known then what I am going to share with you here.

As I have mentioned many times in this blog, my first meditation instructor (at least that I responded to) was no less than the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, perhaps the most influential Tibetan Buddhist so far to appear in America. And, down the road, other teachers chimed in or added to my instructions as well. I was never all that comfortable using my breathing as a focus for meditation, probably because to me it was a whole other (and cyclic) phenomenon to be aware of. I preferred to use something simpler, a small pebble, stick, or anything around wherever I was sitting at the time.

And I tried very hard to learn to meditate. In fact, I tried and I tried and I tried. But like a chicken sitting on a billiard ball, that "egg" never hatched and nothing ever came of it. I am embarrassed to say that I tried to learn tranquility meditation for almost 32 years. I sat and I sat and I sat. Of course, I did other practices that did progress, but as for sitting tranquility meditation, nothing happened that I am aware of. Imagine my discouragement? Why did I have so much trouble?

Well, there probably are several reasons, but the main reason was (and this is where the humor is

supposed to come in) because apparently I ALREADY knew how to concentrate, so what I was doing all those years was trying to salt the salt and, as we all know, we can't do that. We can't prime a pump that is already primed. And I was not loose-enough to use my own common sense and figure that out, but was just following instructions. Anyway, it was like that and I will explain why, which is a little personal, so I hope you can put up with it. I have to relate some of what I did that WAS focused or "concentration" oriented. And I had done a bunch.

To begin with, I am a system programmer, founding (according to an article done for Red Herring Magazine) the 2nd oldest software company still on the Internet, the first being Microsoft. I programmed scores of astrology (and related oracles) and was the first person to program astrology and share those programs openly with the astrological community in 1977. And, for those who don't know this, programming is extremely detailed and focused. A single misplaced letter or comma and the entire program won't work.

And later, I went on to create the All-Music Guide (AllMusic.com), the largest collection of music data (albums, bios, discographies, tracks, etc.) in the world and still the largest today, although I no longer own or run it. I also created the All-Movie Guide (AllMovie.com), one of the two largest movie and film databases in existence, with cast and characters for all films. This too is still going. All of this was extreme detail.

These guides were founded and built by me and then with the help of a growing staff of 150 full-time workers and a freelance writing staff of over 700 writers.

I also, single-handedly (with a little part-time help) created ClassicPosters.com (still going) and created the largest single database of important rock concert posters in the world, with photographs of some 33,000 poster images, most of which I photographed myself and also measured, rated, described, etc. I also wrote some 300 articles on posters. All that data is being used in the new non-profit “Haight Street Art Center” in San Francisco, to which I donated a complete database set for rock posters. Etc. I could go on with other collections, but I will spare you that. Here is a link to the new poster center.

<https://haightstreetart.org/>

The takeaway is that it took a very great amount of concentration and diligence to do all of the above, so I had mastered concentration-101 early-on. And here is the caveat. However, for me concentration was always tied to something I was very passionate about, and focusing on a stick or a stone was just not that interesting to me. And, I didn't realize how focused I already was, yet here I was trying to focus on something I was not really very interested in.

You would think that I would have taken to tranquility meditation like a duck to water, but I never put two and two together. I just followed the meditation instructions that I had been given and labored away trying to put a square peg into a round hole, sort of thing. And, even after all those years of “trying” to meditate, I just happened to luck into figuring out how to actually learn meditation, quite by accident.

When I finally managed to mix my native concentration ability with dharma practice, all kinds of good things suddenly happened, just as they should. So, I put this thought out there for those of you who might be having difficulty mastering tranquility meditation. Perhaps you already know how to focus and concentrate, using something you naturally have a great interest in and mastery of, no matter what that is.

If so, try mixing that natural ability to concentrate on what you love doing that you already have with tranquility meditation instructions. In other words, practice meditation while doing something you love and already are focused on. Instead of a pebble or a stick, use that. That’s what I finally stumbled into and it made a huge difference, like: it worked.

Learning meditation by pure rote-effort obviously must work for many people, because that kind of is the way mediation is taught. But for me, I was turning the crank, to use an analogy, but the engine never started. I will try to point out why that was so, but fill in the blanks using your own situation.

Although the technique required to practice Tranquility Meditation is just that, a technique, apparently, for some folks, learning it by rote just does not work. I was one of those folks. All my life, I associated intense concentration and focus with whatever I was interested in at the time, as a kid, it was natural science and, later, all kinds of things. But the one common thread that united all my interests was love and devotion to doing them. However, I did not find that in beginning meditation. I was just trying to learn the technique to get it done, so to speak, focusing on a stick or a pebble and apparently that was not enough in my case. No one ever pointed out to me what I am pointing out here.

So the moral of this story (and the takeaway) is that it might be easier to learn meditation doing something that requires concentration and focus that you already know (and love) than focusing on a stone or a spot on the wall etc. Looking back, it is clear to me that meditation is not what I thought it was, just something quiet, calm, peaceful, and so on. It is vibrant, active, and requires the passion of loving to do it, that any of our hobbies or loves require.

In other words, we have to be moved to do it and I don't mean moved to physically go through the motions, but moved from our heart to put all of us into the effort. I didn't know what meditation was, much less how to love doing it. I just did what I was told to do and looked to the results to clue me in as to why

and how I was doing it. Usually, in life, we have some idea as what the results of our actions will be.

For example, if I want to learn the guitar, I have to learn all kinds of technique, to begin with, by rote. And if along the road to learning the technique, I wonder why I am learning all these chords and fingerings, I can put on a CD of the music of what I would like to sound like when I learn to play and listen.

Yet, with spiritual awareness of any kind, by definition, it is not something we already have (i.e. that awareness), so our results (until we get the actual awareness) are just what we imagine they should be and mostly conceptual. We have no idea of what greater awareness will be like.

There is no CD or DVD we can play to get a feel for what meditation and increased awareness will be like. In fact, we are blind to the results, aside from our own concepts, until they have been accumulated.

So... there is nothing sacred about focusing on a pebble or your breath. And nothing sacred about learning this on a cushion. It is traditional, but not required. Find something in which you have already mastered and use that. Concentrate as you normally do, but monitor your mindfulness, so that you stay on target. Yet, prior to this, using something you already love, you stayed on target because of your love and interest in what you were doing. That is what you have to do here, as well.

Practicing in this way, you can refine our mindfulness technique the same way that you would sitting on a cushion and focusing on a pebble. Trying this approach may help you break out of “rote” and get the hang of what meditation is all about.

Any questions?

BUDDHIST PUNDITS & SCHOLARS

August 22, 2017

I'm sorry, but I'm not a Buddhist scholar and perhaps never will be. God knows that I've tried. I only go there when I absolutely need to understand something more about a topic, but for me it's a thicket of abstract concepts, and one not without thorns. It helps for me to remember that Buddhism has more written documents, texts, and teachings than any other religion, and by an order of magnitude or two. I like to joke that it's all the caffeine in the tea the Buddhists drink.

And this is NOT a rant against Buddhist scholars, although, aside from a whole class of writers who are Buddhist scholars, there are also academicians that are not even Buddhists or are not practicing Buddhists. So, I find that I have to be careful where I step. I'm usually in over my head in the first paragraph of these scholarly documents and then find it hard-going from there. Each Buddhist term not only has to be defined and understood, much less experienced, and is not likely to have been realized (even by the writers!), and when these concepts are placed side-by-side to fill a page (with few other known words), I find the whole thing basically impenetrable, at least for me. I hang in there as best I can and try to get the gist of it or at least a whiff.

Yet, I see other folks sailing through these texts, discussing them vigorously, and certainly somehow

understanding it all, but I have my respectful doubts that all of them “know” what they are talking about, as for realizing these terms. So, through my own lack of familiarity with a more scholarly approach to dharma, I am left outside with my own ignorance, peering in the windows as to what it all means.

As a practitioner, and not a scholar, I am dependent on what I actually am able to experience through meditation practice and any trickle of realization that seeps through. I know some Tibetan and have learned to read Tibetan script, but I don't know Sanskrit and most of the terms are in that ancient language. If I were younger, I might try to learn either or both of those languages. However, even then they might not be the first items on my list.

So, the long and the short of it is that when I experience or realize some little thing, of course I want to know all about it. And since I don't live near my dharma teacher, I have no one to ask aside from these scholarly writings and they don't register easily with me. Worse than that, the answers I need are not even in plain English, but rather hidden in an ancient language, the meaning of which depends on who is translating and (I imagine) what personal experience or realization they have. Talk about secret teachings!

So, although I usually manage to locate the particular teachings in question (the documents), it is still like driving through deep snow, I get stuck pretty much right out of the chute. Obviously, we have a scarcity of realized dharma teachers in America. And while they

were around in the 1970s and 1980s, most of them are aging or settled elsewhere by now and hard to reach. And while I did make hay while the sun shined, and accessed them back then, I probably did not know enough to even ask the right questions and the need for dharma “handling” is perennial.

And I won't even mention that the answers we get depend on the questions we ask and who knows if I am even asking the right questions. My experience and realization may be beneath their radar, even if I could contact them. So, here I am, living in the tiny town of Big Rapids, on the banks of the mighty Muskegon River, at the edge of a 900,000 acre national forest, and fifty miles from the nearest large city, so who knows how far I am from anyone who might know the answers I seek, at least 800 miles.

I am not complaining, but rather explaining how it is with dharma in America in the late summer of 2017. Talking about Americans having to realize the dharma for ourselves; we basically have no choice. LOL.

For me, perhaps the one good thing that comes out of this is that I have been forced to be on my own and learn to put two and two together by myself, lacking any nearby teacher. I have had lots of instruction, of course, but ultimately the only use of that is to realize what all this is about on my own.

There are thousands of books, articles, and teachings on Buddhism, some too simple to be helpful (other

than nod our heads) and some too abstract for us to grasp (over our heads). I can't tell any one of you which would be good for you, since I don't know where you are at and I only know a certain part.

KEN HOLMES DHARMA STUDY COURSE

If you want to study Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism and are looking for a general course in English done by a native English speaker, I would recommend the very thorough course by Ken Holmes, who has lived and worked closely with the Tibetans at Karma Samye Ling in Scotland. Holmes knows Tibetan, has helped to translate many important texts, spent six months traveling with His Holiness the 16th Karmapa (Rangjung Rigpe Dorje). etc. Holmes is currently the director of studies at Kagyu Samye Ling in Scotland. I have known him for many years, because he is also an astrologer.

Ken Holmes has put together an extensive Home Study Dharma Course that is quite thorough and worth your time to study, if you are looking for a solid overview and perhaps don't have a personal teacher at this point. The course is scholarly, but scholarly with people like us in mind, so it is much more approachable than the overly-technical "scholarly" tomes mentioned above.

I can't say I have had time to read the entire course, but I have read in areas that I know something about and this course is very well done. I also can't say that

I understand all of it, because some of it is over my head, but I can say that all of it is a consistent approach that I have appreciated and learned from. I know this material will not lead you astray, but only be helpful. It does cost money, but its money well spent, IMO. Here is a link where you can read more about the course.

<http://calm-and-clear.eu/nangiintro.html>

I am enjoying it myself, but as a rule, I don't read much of anything anymore.

“IF YOU’RE TELLIN’ THE TRUTH”

August 24, 2017

My daughter May Erlewine, who is a well-known singer/songwriter here in the Midwest has a new album coming out. It is very personal and deep. In one of the tunes on this wonderful album is the song “Shake the World,” with this particular line that I can’t get out of my mind:

“If you’re tellin’ the truth, then there’s room in my heart to receive it.”

The line stuck me deep and is obviously so true! There must always be room in our heart to receive the truth because it’s the truth. Perhaps that’s how we know what we hear is true? Well, as May pointed out, truth has a certain ring to it. Like they used to bite coins to see if they were gold or not, Buddhist teachers encourage us to test out and vet any instructions they offer us, to see if they work for us or not. We may hear instructions that are true, but that we are not ready for yet. I have done that many times and that can be embarrassing as I well know. I will tell one story.

Years ago, one of the four Heart-Sons (four regents) of the Karmapa was trying to give me the pointing-out instructions as to the true nature of the mind. I won’t say which one, as that might not be cool. Anyway, His

Eminence took me into a room and closed the door. He sat me down in a chair and sat on another chair in front of me. And he leaned in close and began to give me pointing-out instructions. Aside from words, he moved his hands around my head, and worked at this for some time. Meanwhile I tried very hard to take it all in, to get it.

But no, try as I might (and try as he might), I was just not ready. I could not get it, so His Eminence finally gave up. It was embarrassing to say the least. But that is a perfect example of the instructions being true, but the student not yet being ready to receive them. And this has happened to me a number of times with the pointing-out instructions. There they were, the pointing-out instructions, right in front of me, but I could not yet grasp them. I just didn't get it, but I wanted to.

With dharma, we are like fruit that ripens gradually. We are too hard-headed in the beginning and unable to receive the dharma, yet we may hear in it the ring of truth, but cannot yet receive it. But with dharma practice, we soften, become more flexible and can begin to move (like dancing) with the beauty of the truth. As the Rinpoche's say, our bowl is turned upside-down. And that is what the preliminary dharma practices are all about, helping us, like the lotus flower opening, to turn our bowl right-side up so that we can hold or contain the dharma. This takes time.

Beginning dharma practices are not the result, but they can determine that result. In my particular case, I

was so focused on the result that I did not take time to do some of the preliminary practices properly, with heart, and ended up having to do them all over again. My point is that wherever we are right now with our practice is the key to getting to where we think we want to go. And the ironic (if not sad) part is that, when it comes to spiritual awareness and realization, we have no (and can have no) idea of what that result is until we actually have the realization.

However, we do have our current dharma practice precisely where it now is, good, bad, or indifferent. If we will slow down, love and treasure the practice we have now, like a blossom it will begin to bloom... and will do so all the way along.

I had to learn this the hard way and that was no fun.

THE SPECIFIC GRAVITY OF ILLUSION

August 25, 2017

You may have to humor me, because I want to revisit one of my favorite haunts and that is the concept that there is a specific gravity of life that we are most comfortable with. I have mentioned in previous blogs in this series that I have had a number of Tibetan dharma teachers tell me that I should “practice” considering that everything around me is a magical illusion. It’s ironical that we should need practice. LOL.

And that’s not so easy to do, because my tendency is to reify anything when life starts to get a little thin for my taste. Perhaps, I just want to keep up appearances, rather than let appearances be what they are. I don’t know, but I like to keep things “real” according to what I think how things should be. And I sure don’t appreciate it when, at gatherings or what-not, things get too plastic or phony, but that is not what the lamas mean here by illusion. In fact, that’s just the opposite.

I believe what the lamas were addressing is perhaps my fear of emptiness, my fear of not being real enough, what I joke to myself is the Pinocchio syndrome. I sometimes mistakenly mix my need to keep it “real” (reification) with the truth, which is not a good idea. For example, it can be TRUE that we are to some degree unreal and living in a magical illusion. At the same time, I don’t want to live just what I call a

cartoon existence. So, if we have to have some sense of gravity to us, what is the specific density of realness that I am happy with? It reminds me of astronauts creating artificial gravity on space stations so that they can feel normal. We all do this, but what are we comfortable with to feel normal? How much illusion (or emptiness) can we stand? When life gets thin, what do we find ourselves doing?

I know that in my past, as a younger person, I could never seem to get serious enough, and my words and “meaning” did not seem “heavy” enough so that I felt they represented me and communicated my “gravitas,” so to speak. And, as a young adult, I wanted to be taken seriously, for I considered myself a “serious” person. Young folks like to take on gravity to help them descend into the experience of life, a bit of the grave, so to speak.

And maybe this all ties together with the magical illusoriness of it all. Perhaps this is why laughter is such an in-demand quality to have around. As the great poet William Blake put it “You never know what is enough unless you know what is more than enough.” What if we just don’t have (and never have had) enough gravity? What if we are all space men and women, wrapped in our walking holograms, where we are trying to adjust our sense of specific gravity to whatever we believe feels right for us or how we want to appear to others. Yet, at heart, we are all lightweights, wrapped in but an illusion of reality.

Early-on, I realized the specific gravity of language, and that by arranging words together in various ways, a sense of either balance or gravitas was possible. Like a hot-air balloon, we can rise or fall by adjusting the weight of our words. However, I was quite late to grasp that language, however we spell it, remains what is called by the Buddhists a “relative truth,” meaning that language belongs to and is owned by Samsara, this cyclic-world existence that we apparently all subscribe to, a subscription that is on auto-renew and we can’t turn it off.

Putting it another way, as relative truth language can but point beyond itself to an experience that we can take or refuse. And, experience is something totally immersive, illuminated only by the clarity of mind we happen to have and are able to maintain. Like a torch in the dark, we either have that clarity of mind or we are looking to attain it. And the Upadesha (pith dharma teachings) say that in the midst of our life experience, realization may arise. And that, my friends, is what we are looking to happen and why we practice dharma.

Tranquility Meditation (Shamata) is essential for dharma students to master, but it alone is not enough. Tranquility meditation provides the stable basis on which we can begin to practice Insight Meditation (Vipassana). And together, these two types of meditation combine to make Mahamudra Meditation possible.

And like breathing, tranquility meditation is something that has to be maintained constantly, as opposed to mastering it and then moving on. In fact, mastering tranquility practice involves it becoming automatic, as in constantly having it with us and operative at all times. Yes, it does become automatic, but it never ceases any more than our lungs stop breathing air. Just as long as we live, we breathe, in dharma that stability of mind is required. That is the idea here.

So, the best we can hope for (living in Samsara as we do) is to use our words and concepts, not as something we can live or “be” in (because we can’t), but rather to point beyond themselves to the torch of certainty that Insight Meditation (Vipassana) guarantees us. And here is the caveat: it’s not like dharma concepts and language are pointing to another world that we can go to from here. That is a common mistake. There is nothing beyond Samsara other than enough clarity and luminosity to be able to resolve the Samsara we find ourselves in to the Nirvana that it inherently also is. This is because Samsara and Nirvana are what are called “connate,” two sides of one and the same whole. And that complicates (or simplifies) things, depending on how you look at it.

So, we go beyond Samsara (figuratively) so that we can embrace it more fully and realize it for what it in fact is, Nirvana. And that we when we wake up. As mentioned, Samsara (this world of cyclic ups and down) and Nirvana (enlightenment) are what are called connate, two sides of the same coin that are (like uncrossing our eyes) ultimately resolved as one,

the true nature of the mind. The old macrobiotic foods slogan “The bigger the front, the bigger the back” illustrates “connate,” in that Samsara is the front and Nirvana is the back of what “IS.”

In summary, there are indeed many ways to learn dharma, but to do any of the more advanced practices, we have to first calm and stabilize our mind enough to see straight. If our consciousness and focus is shaky, everything else will shake with us. This is why most dharma paths involve quieting the mind down enough until it becomes a stable platform or base from which we can then learn Insight Meditation.

I know. Some Buddhist approaches teach Tranquility and Insight meditation at the same time, side-by-side, but that does not change the fact that we require a stable base in order to effect Insight Meditation. However, if we already have the ability to focus, concentrate, and be mindful, then we have essentially mastered Tranquility Meditation (whether through meditation practice or some other object of focus) and thus may be interested (and able) to go about learning Insight Meditation straight away. And as important as it is to take all this in and assimilate it, it is equally important to be mindful when our mind begins to give rise to questions, and ask them. Like breathing, questions and answers are reciprocal. Their product is the process of being one.

THE TIDES OF THE PRESENT

August 25, 2017

We all must have a bit of the Twilight Zone in our DNA, because there are days or parts of days when we drift out of our conventional sense of time and find ourselves a little bit a sea. I believe that perhaps I have been more prone to this than the average bear in this regard. It is my belief that time is like an ocean, and like an ocean, it has tides that ebb and flow.

And I'm talking about the future and the past, plus the fact that, in my mind, they actually flow in and out of the present. In some respects, the past has never fully passed and the future is more than only in the future. In other words, the waters of the past (and future) lap on the shore of the present, going in and out like ocean tides.

And I believe there are greater tides than the one I'm pointing to above. Earlier in my life, on several occasions, I was able to witness this for myself. Not only do the tides of my personal past and future ebb and flow, but history itself includes tidal phenomena. Not only events, but especially people, figures of state and notoriety, also go in and out of fashion in a tide-like manner. For example, a composer like Mozart may come in and out of prominence like waves of the past resurging. As the past resurfaces or promotes one author or musician over another, we run to document it. And here is the point: the needs of the present find us rehearsing those areas of the past that

were presages of what we now need. We exhume them time and again as they relate to what the “now” demands. Memory to a significant degree is of our own making.

It’s the same with the future; it can start to come down and be present and then flicker for a time, fade out, and almost vanish from the present, only to come back some time later, but ever stronger. And, like the tide coming in, the future continues to approach, just as the past ever recedes, although the past has a wash-back that can resurge.

And those of us here now are like the boat that the tides of the past and future endlessly rock, the cradle of the present. The past and the future are not stable, if only because we endlessly embroider them to our own imagination and desires. Memory of the past is as fickle as our expectations of the future. The past and the future are vast areas of our mind that we can but peer into and guess at. We are all victims of the tidal effects of time.

And to perhaps put too fine a point on it for most readers to credit, I can attest from my experience, that in the swirls and shifts of time, every once in a while in my life, several perfect storms of time have brought me into contact with the impossible. I have no idea how or why, but I have had (and not on drugs) experiences of meeting the essence of individuals who had passed on years before. In particular, I felt I was with Billie Holiday (perhaps my favorite singer) and at another time with Frank Lloyd Wright, the

architect. I can't explain it and I have no reason to lie, plus I'm too old to care if folks think I'm crazy. But there you have it. The orb of influential persons in our life also seems to ebb and flow.

IMO, to a great degree, time is a social convention lived by the majority — a consensus. We don't always remain within that convention, but in odd moments, days, and hours of our lives, we may wander into more unusual (altered) states of mind and time.

Eternity does not somehow just exist at the end of history or linear time. Eternity exists now, deep within (or without) time. And time does not extend to some end down the road. Individuals extend time and we endure for that length. We last until then and in-between, we stretch time, make time. We extend ourselves.

In moments of great vision, we leap between the seconds (beyond time) to the day of creation itself. We each have and develop our own sense of time and sometimes we are pushed beyond conventional time and into altered states of time that we cannot control, which is the sign of the shaman. I have spent years of my life in that time warp.

INTENTION

August 27, 2017

In the accumulation of karma, our intention is key. Intent is the controller of karma, perhaps not the whole thing, but it's like the arbiter. As for examining our intent, my dharma teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche had this to say at one teaching.

If we examine carefully, very carefully, our every thought, they can be divided into two groups by their intent, thoughts that are beneficent and thoughts that are maleficent. That is, if we trace down any given thought we have, no matter how humorous it may be, it is either a well-intentioned thought or one that is not well-intentioned. Is it, at heart, a beneficent or a maleficent thought?

Either way, good intent or bad, the thought is recorded as karma and stored in the Alayavijnana, the Storehouse Consciousness. And each kind of thought (beneficent or maleficent) may be repeated, which means that thought is underscored and stored, each repetition digging an ever deeper groove in our karma. So, if we obsess for days about something that someone says to us (and feel anger, etc.), each occurrence of that thought further underlines that anger until it becomes a much deeper track in our mind, one with a karmic future for us, and a not so good one at that.

Multiply this by all the thoughts we have each day (and night) and the sum total of this “micro-karma” is greater than many much worse actions that are just one-offs. Think about that for a moment, and even thinking about that creates a track and so on, ad infinitum. So it’s not “pay me now or pay me later,” because it is said that karma burns twice, so it’s “Pay me now and also pay me later” and that’s a problem.

So, indeed, “intent” is the real karma-maker, one that we should consider very, very carefully. It’s not so much just the mechanical actions we make, but especially our intent in making them. The karmic actions themselves may be relatively soon to subside, but apparently the intent can last longer and is carried over as karma that will appear later in our life or, more commonly (as they teach), our intent leapfrogs this life and occurs in our next life or many lives later. Intent is some sticky stuff.

And to correct this, practicing the dharma has what are called the Preliminary Practices, which basically are purification practices, mostly about removing whatever has been obscuring our internal clarity. And removing obscurations brings clarity and with clarity we can better see why it is not to our best interests to allow ourselves to accumulate “bad” intent, which stains our consciousness.

I know that most Americans don’t like the idea of being too “Goody-Goody” and many even like to have a little hair-of-the-dog in the mix. However, if you notice, as these folks get older (and all of us do if we

are lucky), we tend to straighten out that wrinkle of bad intent a bit, if not entirely. I'm reminded of the phrase in the New Testament:

“Straight is the gate, and narrow is the gate, and broad is the way that leadeth to destruction...”

I know. That's some fire and brimstone, which I don't encourage, but if you look around you, there is a bit of fire and brimstone to this life. Mother Nature has lots of fire and brimstone. And my point here in this article is that minding our intent can be revealing of where we mindlessly may be continually adding a little insult to the injury of karma in our life, without being aware of it.

No, I don't want to spoil the fun of life, but when I bother to trace some of my own thoughts and comments down to that dividing line Rinpoche pointed out, I am surprised how many of them have, however faint, a little maleficence tucked away in there. Do I really even mean that? When I think about it, the answer is “no,” but for humor or fun's sake, I sometimes gravitate there, without intending to cause harm. Yet, harm is mostly caused to myself when I do that.

So, which is it? If I didn't intend to be mean, but managed it anyway, how much karma am I recording? I don't know how to estimate that, but probably more than I need. So, I have begun to sort this out a bit. After examining a bunch of thoughts,

some of them just trying to be funny, I acknowledged that they weren't really all that funny. It's more like a bad habit than something I intend, but they still don't add up to anything useful or positive. And trying to break that habit is not all that easy either, because, obviously, it's a habit. And who is laughing? No one I know, unless it's me, and I'm obviously kind of oblivious to what's going on in that regard, although it's my responsibility. So, go figure.

Does dharma purification extend this far, to analyzing the intent of our thoughts? It seems like it does and every little bit of clarity helps, in my opinion. An interview I did with the great blues singer Howlin' Wolf comes to mind, in which he said:

"I didn't think I had no right to be out there trying to push and scrap. I didn't think I had no right to be out there tryin' to push and scrap up no few nickels, you know, which I needed... never get too many of them."

Here is the whole interview for those music lovers:

<http://michaelerlewine.com/viewtopic.php?f=353&t=3319&sid=30b0ab7c0d76137e3e99c91b3b31274f>

Anyway, just as the Wolf said that he never got too many nickels, I feel that way about good acts and intents. I have been bad enough in my life that I don't think I should be turning away good thoughts and intents. I don't have too many of them either. And

thoughts and actions that are to some degree maleficent are of no good use. In fact, it's just the other way around. They accumulate bad intent, even if it is trivial. It all adds up.

So..... I have no excuse but to clean up my act a bit, which I am working on. And I share these thoughts because when I looked at my own thoughts in terms of beneficence and maleficent, I was shocked at how many of them were not helping anyone or that funny either.

Check it out for yourself and let me know.

WHAT ARE WE PERMITTED?

August 27, 2017

A thought that I play with once in a while has to do with what is permitted to happen (allowed to occur) in our lives. Obviously, it's not simply anything or everything, since each of us only experiences particular events. For example, not all of us were presidents of our senior high-school class; I know I wasn't, because I never even graduated. LOL.

But there are more ephemeral things than that, which possible for some, may not be possible for us; at least they have never happened to many of us. It could be as simple as falling in love for real. Or, to take that one level deeper, even if we succeed in falling in love, how long will it last? Is marriage "permitted" for us in this life and, again, for how long?

There seems to be a general assumption that all things are possible for everyone, and that the world is a grab bag or like bobbing for apples. In my experience, those analogies don't stand up. Yes, I believe everything is possible, but I also believe that some things, while theoretically possible, cannot happen without either destiny or at least some preparation on our part. In other words, this world is not a free lunch or smorgasbord.

In that category I would include finding a life partner, having a lasting marriage, and the theme of this article, finding a real-life dharma teacher. How rare it is to find a dharma teacher with whom we can not only relate, but actually learn from? And it's not quite like finding a needle in a haystack, but it could be. Those odds are high, but they can be reduced exponentially with a little preparation on our part, which is why I write. And I will relate how I learned this.

Back when I was in my mid-twenties, I seemingly by accident met my first true dharma teacher. I had met spiritual teachers before, but apparently they were not for me because nothing happened; we just did not click. And then suddenly it did and it was with this particular dharma teacher. And with that connection (and bond) my entire world began to turn around and reverse itself. Like the proverbial snake shedding its skin, everything gradually turned inside out. What had always been on the outside (and seemingly impossible) began to appear (and arise) on the inside, as part of my actual life.

Looked at another way, what was up to that point only an outside and theoretical wish or dream on my part (to have a real-life teacher) began to materialize in the immediate present that I lived in. And with it, the expanding circles of what I identified as "real" or possible now included a teacher. As they say, it was "permitted" that a living, breathing dharma teacher could appear in my life and personally teach me. How wonderful is that! And especially for "me," up to then

pretty much unteachable. Now, how did that happen, when it had never before happened?

I can't say that I know exactly, but I can say that I had hoped and dreamed and wished that I could find a teacher. It reminds me of the story of Pinocchio wanting to be a real boy, only here I hoped for a real life teacher with whom to act out on this planet what had only been a dream that I had, something I hoped for. Yet, ultimately, it was something that I apparently needed. And suddenly, there it was, being acted out in real life. It changed my life forever.

I can remember trying to explain this to other folks my age, that I had found a life-teacher, but their reaction was not always positive. There was one fellow in particular who ridiculed me, and his point was that I was weak to need a teacher and that he could (and was on his way) to doing it all himself. He didn't need a life teacher.

I must say that this guy was generally a contrarian, and with a touch of viciousness at that. But what I got out of his reaction (including my response to him) was what I pointed out earlier in this article, that not all of us are ready for a living dharma teacher. My take on this was that not all of us have the karma to "afford" to have a teacher. In my own case, I had been living on fumes, so to speak, conceptually, with perhaps just the barest of thoughts, but unable to realize what I wished for in my real life. That's what I mean by not being able to afford a teacher... or a wife or husband... or a marriage, and what-have-you. And,

I'm not saying that all of us even want such things, but I know that I did.

For those of us with dreams, our dreams must be made to matter, and by that I mean that the dreams we have want to be made real and come into existence on the physical plane and be acted out. My point is that first we actually have to want that dream to become physical, for it to reach reality. My cynical friend had not even reached the point of wanting a teacher, much less allowing for one to appear in his life, and had never even thought of doing what might have to be done on his part to prepare to make that happen.

We first have to desire and want (have a need for) something like a teacher in order for that teacher to actually appear in our life, i.e. before it could happen. And only then could we act out in real-time such a relationship. My negative friend hadn't yet even turned the corner on that idea, much less cleared the landing strip for it to happen. That is what I learned back then.

It's not as simple as one day we say, "OK, I give up, sign me up for a life-teacher. I'll have one." It's not like that. Yes, as mentioned, we would have to turn the corner from not wanting (or not caring) to wanting one, but that is not the end of it. A teacher probably won't suddenly appear at our doorstep. There is no Amazon Prime for realizing teachers in our life. Once we stop "not-wanting" a teacher, that is just the first step. At that point, we have to determine how to go

about preparing ourselves for a teacher. And we have to learn how to invoke a teacher from the vast universe of our mind into this physical plane we call life. And this is REAL magic.

We all know the old adage “When the student is ready, the teacher will come,” and we might add “... and not a moment before.” So, what are those preparations that have to be made for a real teacher in our life to be “permitted,” to deserve a teacher in the flesh, so to speak? My thoughts on this are that it varies with the individual. One recipe does not fit all. But there is a general approach that I am certain works.

In dharma practice, what are called “The Preliminaries” (used to prepare us to learn meditation properly) are the same kind of preparation that we might make to invoke a life teacher into our lives. In a word, “The Preliminaries” are purification practices of one kind or another. And by “purification,” it is meant that they work to remove that which obscures our inner vision or clarity, plain and simple. Can we figure out how to do this ourselves? Perhaps, but chances are what we come up with will be spotty, getting it half-right, but not knowing how to remove the remaining obscurations.

One thing the Buddhists are good at is being thorough, so when they give us what they call preliminary practices, you can be sure that all levels of our life are going to be exercised, the physical, the psychological (and emotional) and the “spiritual,”

whatever that may involve. The word “Buddha” basically points to greater awareness and that comes from removing what obscures our basic natural inner-clarity. That’s all it is, removing the blinds to let the light that is within us shine out.

So, what is “permitted” for any one of us to realize in life is not just based on chance or the luck of the draw, although that too figures into it. Much of it depends on our preparation and attitude, how we take the wind, so to speak. The Preliminaries in Buddhist practice are all about getting us aerodynamically oriented to the winds of change that life brings, so that we can fly.

The Tibetan lamas and their practice-methods, as difficult as they can be, are about orienting us properly, so that we can actually realize the true nature of the mind for the first time. And that same kind of purification opens up vast avenues of life possibilities, including true relationships, families, and so on. We might ask ourselves what can we afford? What is permitted for us?

THE UPSIDE-DOWN BOWL

August 28, 2017

We Americans are nothing else, if not somewhat independent. I feel that I am one of the worst cases, because even as a young child I did not take to advice, instruction, and direction unless I had great confidence in the teacher. I was a problem for the educational system from the word “go.” In fact, once I started grade school, so I am told (I don’t remember), the school called my parents in and asked if they could give me a series of tests to see if I had learning difficulties, because I was not responding well to direction.

Well, after the tests, instead of having a sub-par IQ, it turned out I had just the opposite, a high IQ. And the problem apparently was boredom on my part, a not lack of native ability. I didn’t like being confined or channeled. After considering this early episode for years, the best I can come up with, which I have mentioned here before, is that being raised far out in the country (I was also the oldest child and was always on my own), my main interest (and guide) was Mother Nature. I became a confirmed naturalist early-on and found the teachers at public school not as interesting (or truthful) as nature itself, so I just tuned out and ignored them, and thought about what I would do when school let out for that day. I did this for something like eleven years!

I feel, as mentioned, that we Americans (in general) are somewhat independent. We (at least I) don't like to take things from anyone on spec, just because they say so. I have to test out whatever I am told by my elders for myself, to see if it actually works for me. If it does, then I can accept it. And, so it seemed to me, there was so much rote learning in education that I tended not to enjoy or trust schooling. It was boring and I knew from my study of nature for myself what learning could be and it was not what school offered. In fact, when I had a family, Margaret and I home-schooled some of our kids. Of course, I met my match in dharma training, because, if that is done correctly and checked-out, it actually works every time.

And this attitude of my not taking direction that I did not care for, unfortunately, lasted until I was in my twenties and happened to meet my first true dharma teacher, Andrew Gunn Mclver, who I have mentioned here many times. For me, he was a perfect teacher. He commanded my respect by his attitude and the way he acted. And he tamed and trained me in a kind and natural manner. I began to respond out of respect and devotion.

Something that stands out from those years before I met Andrew Mclver is that I had this (unconscious on my part) attitude that, because most teachers were so boring, they were not worthy of my respect, somehow. It was only later (much later) that the thought occurred to me that I might not be prepared enough to be open to them. In fact, it was the dharma (and its practice) that made me realize that perhaps I was a hard nut to crack and I am not alone in this. IMO, Americans, in

general, resist being influenced by anyone not in their family (or familiar) circle. And family, of course, has its own problems.

It seemed that I was not able to learn from just anyone I met, although I am sure at this point in my life that I must have something to learn from everyone. Back then, I had to be softened up, become more malleable, and the road of hard knocks helped with that, but was very slow since I came from a middle-class family with no great deprivations. This is where the dharma came in, because the dharma preliminaries are tailor-made for softening up our hard spots and making us more able to receive, rather than to only dish it out.

As mentioned here before, the Buddhists use the analogy of the begging bowl, traditionally used by lamas in asking for food. With some (and I was one), if I did not respect you, that bowl was firmly held upside-down, so nothing was accumulated. Before I could receive anything, I had to understand that with me the bowl was reversed, and I had to be shown how to turn it right-side up so that I could receive and why I should do that.

It took me quite some time to grasp what the standard Preliminary Practices in Tibetan Buddhism were all about, because, of course, I wanted to get right to the enlightenment part of it all. Only slowly was I able to understand (and then admit) that in some cases it was me who was not ready to receive. THAT'S what the preliminary dharma practices (like "The Ngondro")

are all about and why they are “preliminary.” If our bowl is upside down or we also have a chip on our shoulder, we can’t receive much of anything.

As dharma practitioners, we know from the major texts that recognizing the true nature of our own mind is difficult-to-impossible without help from an authentic teacher. However, even recognizing and accepting ourselves right now as we actually are is not that easy. It too is difficult. Like so many things in this life, unless we can recognize and accept where we are right now, warts and all, we can’t change or begin to move forward. In dharma, realization itself IS that move forward; and for those of us just living life, it’s much the same with the need to finally recognize and accept where we are right now, so that we can work it forward.

As they say, when the student is ready, the teacher will appear. I get that the teacher is prepared for the student, but the question is how do we prepare the student for the teachings? That is what in dharma practice “The Preliminaries” are all about.

HELPING OTHERS WITH DHARMA

August 29, 2017

The subject of helping others with dharma teachings... is touchy, yet it is very important to understand. We know that Buddhism, including Tibetan Buddhism, is all about being kind and helping others, and even putting others ahead of ourselves. Yet, just how are we to do that? Should we let them have our place in line at a restaurant? Should we give money to the poor? And then there is the subject of this blog: how can we help folks with the dharma that we learn?

In other words, how can we best help others to also receive the blessings of the dharma? It took me some time, like perhaps years, to understand how the Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhists that I work with view this question. Of course, Buddhists believe that we should always do what we can to physically help other beings, human and otherwise. However, what I'm focusing on here is not what physical help we can give, being generous, and so forth, but rather our wish to help others by sharing dharma instructions.

In a word (and in general), the Tibetan Buddhists that I have known suggest we don't initially try to help others by sharing whatever dharma teachings we have received so far, but instead work on ourselves. First, we must REALIZE the dharma for ourselves and only then try to help others. As a 1960s person, I found this, at first puzzling, because I believe in

sharing what I know as best I can... as I learn and go along.

And I'm sure that different types of Buddhism have different understandings and views on this, so I can only share what I have personally learned. The view I was taught is that a little dharma knowledge, unrealized, can cause more harm than good, especially if we go off half-cocked and try on the role of teaching dharma to others when we have not realized it ourselves. Instead, it was made very clear to me, early-on, that if I wanted to enlighten someone, I should start with me, myself, and I, and then go on from there.

The natural tendency, at least for me, was to learn a little dharma and do my best to pass it on, while I continued to try to learn more myself. I am such an enthusiast that I usually can't wait to share what I find wonderful. Yet, I soon found out that I was never encouraged to do this. Sure, I was given permission to teach the basic technique of Tranquility Meditation fairly early-on, and I did explain the technique to many, but I did not feel I had mastered basic meditation myself enough to venture too far beyond that. And I was not encouraged to do so, either.

At every opportunity to share my dharma training, I was turned back and encouraged to first work on myself rather than to try and share the dharma with others. Let the lamas do that. This was the teaching. A good rule of thumb is to first ask your dharma teacher if you can share or teach your knowledge of a

practice to others. They will tell you if you are ready to do that.

The reason for this, as I understand it, is that half-knowledge of dharma is like the blind trying to lead the blind. In general, in our tradition, one does not attempt to teach advanced dharma practices to others until we have ourselves recognized the actual nature of our own mind. Yet, there are some teachings we can share, so let me lay it out for you a little more clearly.

Dharma practices, in general, can be separated into two very distinct categories, divided from one another by a very clear line. On the one hand, there are the Preliminary Practices like “The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind toward the Dharma,” Lojong teachings, and “The Ngondro.” These are all what are called the relative truths (or dualistic) teachings, as they involved a subject and an object. These are the teachings that belong to Samsara, this world of cyclic ups and downs that we find ourselves in.

Beyond that, there is a second category of NON-dualistic practices including Insight Meditation and Mahamudra (also Dzogchen) practices. And the dividing line between these two kinds of practices is called “Recognition” and this involves actually recognizing for ourselves (with the help of an authentic teacher) the true nature of the mind.

In general, in the 40-some years of my experience with dharma practices in the Karma Kagyu lineage, once we learn how for ourselves, we can give (with permission from our teacher) the basic meditation technique needed to learn Tranquility Meditation (Shamata). In addition, we can share the Four Thoughts teachings and perhaps the Lojong teachings (Tong-Len, etc.), if we have permission. As for The Ngondro, this requires permission from your lama to do it, and it is usually taught by a lama.

However, we can't teach (or explain) anything beyond that, UNLESS we have recognized the nature of the mind, and had that acknowledged by our teacher. Why, because we cannot teach realization without having had it ourselves, plain and simple. "Recognition" is a form of realization, so it belongs to the non-dual (absolute) practices like Insight Meditation and Mahamudra.

Of course, there is a temptation to share dharma when we only "understand" it conceptually ourselves. We may THINK we know what it is, but we don't until we have realization.

Once we have achieved valid "Recognition" through having the actual nature of the mind pointed out to us by an authentic lama, then we can see if our lama feels we have sufficient realization to perhaps work with others on these more advanced teachings. But don't count on it.

At some point AFTER we have attained Recognition, we may be given permission by our own dharma teacher to teach others. Otherwise, the person we continue to teach is ourselves. Recognizing the true nature of our own mind, which is (as mentioned) termed "Recognition," is not the same as enlightenment; far from it. It is, however, a form of realization, the point where we are able to resolve our habitual dualistic view of things through Insight Meditation and can see clearly. Removing our dualistic habit, to use an analogy, is like finally uncrossing our eyes.

As for me, I have been told by my dharma teacher of 34 years that I have grasped the teachings and that Rinpoche has confidence in my presenting the dharma in whatever way I find comfortable. Even so, I do not consider myself a dharma teacher, but rather someone who shares the dharma with others to the best of my ability. I see myself more as a "John the Baptist" type. In other words, by sharing and explaining my own experience with the dharma, perhaps I can help a few others to become familiar with the dharma and its techniques. Americans first have to hear about the dharma before they can decide to practice it.

So, I try to be a decent person, work with my kids and grandkids, and share as much dharma-related material as I can. I believe that we have to hear about the dharma again and again and again for it to begin to sink in. One pass through our ears is not near enough, which is why I am so repetitive in my blogs, trying to go over and over basic concepts from

different angles. I like the old saying “Tell them what you’re gonna’ tell them; then tell them, and then tell them what you told them.” In my own case, it has taken many years of repeatedly hearing the dharma for me to take it in.

DRAW LIGHTNING FROM THE MIND

August 30, 2017

I read very, very few books these years, aside from pith dharma texts. However, after being repeatedly urged, I have been reading a remarkable book by Lama Ken McLeod called “A Trackless Path,” a commentary on the Dzogchen teachings in a poem by the Tibetan mystic Jigmé Lingpa called “Revelations of Kuntuzangpo” (ever-present good),” from “The Great Vastness Heart-Drop Cycle.” And, for me it was a good sign when I found myself turning to the end of this book and reading from back to front, chapter by chapter. In the best books, at least in my experience, I usually find myself searching through the book to find a section that I can immediately identify with, a juicy part, where I can realize that I’m on the same page as the author in some distinct way

If that happens, then I can usually (and gradually) work backward (or forward) from there, taking in more and more of what the book has to offer (bit by bit) as I go. McLeod’s “A Trackless Path” is like that for me and, as I mentioned, a very good sign for a very fine book.

Ken McLeod visited our dharma center here in Big Rapids many years ago for a weekend. I can remember sitting around with him translating, I believe it was either a Chenresik sadhana or perhaps an update of his early book “Great Path of Awakening,”

which is a Lojong text called “The Seven Points of Mind Training” by Chekawa Dorje, a 12th Century master of the Kadampa lineage of Tibetan Buddhism, with commentary by Jamgon Kongtrul the Great, a realized 19th Century Tibetan scholar. McLeod was doing the translating and I was helping find the right English words and phrases (to the degree I could) to express it.

Anyway, in McLeod’s commentary on the dharma poem in this current book I’m reading, he speaks of having a deep yearning for what I might call the ineffable nature of the dharma. He also speaks of the awareness or “knowing” that comes with the non-dual dharma practices like Insight Meditation, Mahamudra, and Dzogchen. I believe I know what McLeod is pointing to here.

For myself, I don’t have what I would call a yearning, at least I have never thought of it that way. For me, it is more an inner need to rest and immerse myself in the clarity and luminosity that is the Karma Kagyu form of Vipassana (Insight Meditation), and perhaps a need on my part to express and celebrate the inexpressible (an appreciation for the ineffable) that somehow just rises up within me. I believe this is similar (to some degree) to what Ken McLeod is describing and must be the same general kind of thing.

For me, I sometimes feel it’s like pulling wool to make thread; I want to pull down to this material plane the clarity of dharma thought out of the raw mind-stuff that

I feel all around me. More technically speaking, as mentioned, I want to go and immerse myself in what is called Insight Meditation, because of the extreme clarity and lucidity it provides. It seems that for the last many years I am never happier than when I'm doing just that. Ken McLeod's "A Trackless Path" is for those interested in the non-dual practices like Insight Meditation, Mahamudra, Maha-Ati, and Dzogchen.

Oddly enough, for me Insight Meditation did not come through a particular dharma practice; however, the pointing-out instructions given by my dharma teacher (Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche) inspired me to free myself of conceptualization, to let go enough so that true Insight Meditation could arise. Although, I first tasted this many years ago now, Insight Meditation has become (for me) totally addictive, but in a healthy way.

It's all I want to do most days and I keep finding my way back into it through one process or another during the day. It's where I am most totally involved and yet completely free. And I'm increasingly uncomfortable reverting to my ordinary conceptual mind and thinking too much, so I usually busy myself with Insight Meditation, not sitting on the cushion, but through a variety of ordinary tasks (like writing this) in a very Zen-like fashion.

As an aside, I once read in Mircea Eliade's books, I don't remember which book, that in some tribes, every spring the spirit yearns and tries to leave the body and they have a practice that helps to hold the

spirit fast in the body to prevent this. That's a little how I feel, but not just in the spring, but quite often, regularly.

It's not like an itch that I feel needs scratching, but more like a dance in me that needs dancing or a song I feel that wants singing, yet in my case, instead, using Insight Meditation, I precipitate or crystalize clear prose from intuiting dharma treasures in the mind itself. After all, the mind is where every last thought, idea, and invention came from -- A wish-fulfilling gem.

Like Eliade points out, in me, the spirit also arises, yet it's not trying to leave the body, but is more like a need to pull from the ether the essence or meaning of dharma simply for the joy of its increased clarity and lucidity. As mentioned, I'm never as happy as when I am engaged with Insight Meditation.

For me, dharma realization has to be brought hom and be made to matter in this life I'm living; I find that it can be drawn out of the inner cosmos of mind and into this Samsaric life, yet it requires a port of entry, so to speak. Or, put another way, my consciousness or psyche rises up to meet the sky of the mind like a kite-with-a-steel-key attached and draws down the lighting of insight.

Of course, I am celebrating here Insight Meditation (one of the more advanced non-dual practices) in all its clarity. When I look around as to where to put my

restless mind, more and more of the time it's there, in Insight Meditation. And Insight Meditation is not just a state, but a process and path, a way of living.

So, if you would like to read a book by an American dharma practitioner that is about these non-dual practices and that contains a translation of a great dharma text, then by all means pick up a copy of "A Trackless Path" by Ken McLeod. And, IMO, McLeod's commentary shines and is an example of what the dharma poem he translates is all about. To me, his amazing commentary reflects the exquisite nature of the poem itself. Wonderful!

REALIZATION AS A PROCESS

August 31, 2017

This is another of those blogs that perhaps I am writing just for my own clarity, so I'm not so sure how interested anyone else will be. However, while these first paragraphs are not exclusively about dharma, the second part is. And, of course, if this resonates with anyone, I'd like to hear about it.

Something that has kind of dogged me throughout my life is the inability to exhaust or realize certain topics or subjects of interest through writing about them, and this may be difficult to describe. Most ideas that come to me can be grasped and expressed in words, yet there always have been a few topics the I really want to get down, but every time I do, I only seem to be able to, at best, describe the context surrounding the idea and the main idea I started out to describe kind of escapes; it lives on to confound me another day, so to speak. It never got described and I have not realized it.

And the odd thing, is that while I am writing, I feel I am getting hold of the idea (or coming close), but when all is said and done, everything I have written turns out to be a kind of preview or introduction to the actual subject I set out to write about. Yet, that subject just remains as untouchable and mysterious as ever.

Now, I'm talking about spiritual ideas, but perhaps not formal dharma topics. Anyway, to me it's all dharma.

Perhaps, it is because with these particular topics, I don't understand them well enough, which is usually the reason why I want to write about them in the first place. Yet, each time I think I am writing these topics down, and I write and I write and I write, they stretch out longer and longer, so when I finally stop and look at what I've said, the point I really wanted to get into words never got said. I'm still writing prologue. It seems that the more I write, the more my actual writing pushes the main point off and into the future. Somehow, the idea is just not yet ripe for me. I never get it.

And a number of these mysterious topics I have come back to, over and over again. It seems like every few years, I take a whack at writing about them and come up empty. It's like when we have grabbed at something and are sure we have it, yet when we open our hand, it's still not there. That's my first point.

A second (and perhaps related) detail comes out of what I was writing about yesterday, and some things said by Ken McLeod in his book "A Trackless Path," in which he speaks of some Buddhists teachings that "They awoke a feeling and a yearning that I could not put into words" and a little farther down he writes:

“... was a resonance with a certain kind of awareness – a knowing that was vitally important to me, more important than what I did with my life.”

This is what reminded me of what I wrote about above, my inability to satisfy by writing about certain topics.

The “yearning” McLeod writes of, I perhaps recognize, but to me, it’s more like something that regenerates itself, like a fountain of youth, the gift that just keeps giving. And, as mentioned, no matter how I attempt to express, document or write about it, what results is simply the cast-off, like the snake shedding its skin, and the snake moves on; perhaps I somehow kick the can down the road myself.

Another way to “analogize” this is that anything I can or manage to say about this “yearning” never pinpoints or fully describes it, but the feeling or longing just sequesters off in a new direction and moves on. After all, nothing is static. And I relate this to the non-dual dharma practices like Insight Meditation, Mahamudra, Dzogchen, and so on, so a few comments are in order. “Non-dual” simply means there is no observer and observed; we are, so to speak, all in.

I guess my point here is that it is common (or perhaps just easier) to say that the non-dual realizations (and practices) are ineffable and cannot be captured by words and let it go at that. However, for me, the reality

is that endless words indeed can be written about the ineffable, which words are all true and useful as far as they go, but they can never go quite far enough, because the essence of these practices apparently is a process, and one that always extends farther and cannot be captured, not because it is simply beyond reach, but because our very effort to capture it (like trying to swim after an inner tube in a lake) pushes or extends the reality beyond our reach from where it has been up to now (long sentence). This signifies to me that we are looking at a “process,” a stream that we can enter, yet perhaps not anything we ever will arrive at – like a static state.

Just as in any dharma “realization,” the eye cannot see itself (much less look beyond itself), we CAN see (or witness) the “Seeing” taking place, so to speak, meaning, while we cannot objectify (by definition) a non-dual state, we can fully extend or immerse ourselves and rest within in it, thus, as mentioned, we can see (or experience) the “Seeing,” without objectifying it.

And When Ken McLeod writes later in his book:

“... hope often springs up, hope for some kind of insight or transcendent experience,” my view is that hoping for a snapshot or a “state” is, well, hopeless, because the “yearning” we have may be for a process (and path) and not for a state or a solution. Does that make any sense?

In other words, what we may yearn for is greater engagement (immersion) in the process of realization that the dharma offers us, rather than to arrive at some stage or state where we feel complete. Isn't that what "entering the stream" is all about? Perhaps enlightenment itself is better conceived as a process and not a state.