

Dharma Blogs

2018 Spring



by Michael Erlewine

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2018 SPRING

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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. These blogs were from the Spring of 2018 posted on Facebook and Google+.

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WHEN NOT-ENOUGH IS ENOUGH

March 9, 2018

“Enough or too much,” a familiar quote from mystic-poet William Blake in his “The Marriage of Heaven or Hell,” a poem I devoutly read in my early twenties. These days, what sticks in my mind is more like “When what’s not enough is enough.” How is that so?

It reminds me of the old story of the soup of the soup of the soup. Each day, the soup was further watered down. Sometimes I feel that in this human race through time, each successive generation is weaker than the last. My point in bringing this up is that we may be surprised at what we, as just normal folks, can accomplish by working with our own lives; it’s more than I had imagined.

And it is easy to fall into believing that we as individuals are just a snowflake in a worldwide blizzard and what we do will never be noticed, much less be meaningful, even to us. It’s tantamount to the old image of Earth being a lonely speck in an alien universe, when we are, if nothing else, a normal example of the intelligence in the cosmos -- children of the stars. We can think of ourselves as just one in a million, but if we are a “1” in a million zeros, we may be all there is and that is enough to actually count.

I would bet that many (or most) of us struggle (as I do) to make progress with what weighs us down and to be free of what obscures us. Years ago, when I had a meeting with the famous economist Kenneth E. Boulding (and we read poems to each other), he had one line that most stuck in my mind. “Michael,” he said, “We each must learn to fail successfully.”

Fail we all do, at least physically, yet we can learn to fail successfully. That is one of my daily mantras. Although we may think that we fail in what we set out or hoped to do, the progress we do make can be significant. My first dharma teacher, Andrew Gunn McIver, a Scottish initiator for a Rosicrucian order, used to say to me (and many times), "Touch one, touch all." And by this, he meant if we can touch or move ourselves, deeply, that is felt by all humanity and throughout all time.

Not all battles are won on the battlefield of some far-off foreign war. What we do right here in our daily mundane-struggles right now can be as significant as anywhere else if it exists in the world as opposed to not existing at all. This is especially true in spiritual efforts, where any actual realization gained is irrevocable and can never be walked back.

The point of this blog is that while we may feel that what we have attained is not near enough, it may indeed be enough to make a difference. For all we know, it could be all the difference in the world, the "1" in front of a million of zeros. Let's not discredit what credit we may have, however little it may seem. Looking back, it may make all the difference. At least that's how I look at it.

FORCED INTO AWAKENING

March 9, 2018

I'm aware of virtuous activity and don't consciously avoid it. Unfortunately, I am not always guided by what is best for me; just the opposite. I am more often guided by trouble that I want to stay out of and by little else. For someone who is halfway intelligent, I am as dumb as a stone when it comes to preventative action. It is no more obvious than with my health. I have to get sick or develop symptoms before I will do anything in my body's behalf. How ridiculous is that? I am working on it these years with exercise and food, but my history of health is a sad state of affairs as far as preventative or remedial action is concerned. However, I am learning.

Basically, I like to do nothing, at least nothing but what I want to do. However, life does not offer that option à la carte, but has its own requirements and, in my experience, apparently they are unavoidable. At least I have been unable to avoid them, although I have tried and always at my own peril. Sooner or later life's little warnings add up and accumulate into something that interferes with my doing nothing; I have to stop doing nothing and deal with them. It definitely curbs my enthusiasm.

If I look back, awakening for me started out with my not wanting to be disturbed in my sleep of distractions, what I was into. "Do Not Bother Me" was my motto. Yet, disturbed I was and over and over. It was like dreaming at night when sometimes I have to get up and take a pee. Over and over I dream of being in some large building, searching for a

bathroom that is not occupied or a toilet that is working. Finally, I just wake up and go to the bathroom.

Awakening to greater awareness is very similar. There I am, distracting-along, avoiding many things I have to do (but don't feel like doing), but never quite successfully. The things I have to do (that I may not feel like doing) keep intruding on my distractions and bugging me. As for me, I kept putting them off. Finally, like the symptoms of health problems that just won't go away no matter what we do, I had to stop my dreaming, wake up enough to respond to the demands on my attention, and then go back to sleep in my distractions (as soon as possible), doing the things I think I want to do.

As life progressed and I got past youth, those demands increased rather than lessened, until the amount of day-dreamy "sleep" I got was less and less. And finally, I gave up sleeping and turned to taking care of whatever these demands required of me. My response was more like "Now what do you want?"

That may not be the preferred way to wake up, but it is common. We agree to put off what we find so hard to respond to, simply: responsibility itself. For me, it was the increasing demands on my attention by the simple facts of life and my day-to-day responsibilities that goaded me into waking up enough to deal with them and finally I had to give up sleeping entirely and (instead) accept my increasing awareness and all its attendant responsibilities. With awareness comes responsibility, the ability to respond. That does not mean I don't still get distracted; Of course I do.

Anyway, the laws of nature and the responsibilities of life gradually directed me toward the straight and the narrow, and I had to forget about my penchant for

wandering off course. We don't break nature's laws; they break us.

So, if I wanted to just cruise and do nothing but what I want to do, I had to first take care of a lot of things and not just on a one-time basis. Rather, care is an ongoing and unending process that requires my attention and in remarkable detail, like it or not.

In fact, perpetual care and attention is the price of doing nothing; so how's that for self-containment or a useful haiku? However, doing what we have to do so that we can sleep is not a permanent solution. Sooner or later we are forced to wake up to our innate responsibilities and that, my friends, is a full-time gig, a process and never a static state that we reach and then can forget.

The dharma texts state, in no uncertain terms, that "unwavering attention" makes up the main body of meditation training. It's all-aware all the time and not take-a-peek and then sleep. We have to keep our eye on the road.

"Awakening" or enlightenment is the process of awakening and not some final static state we reach. Or, in other words, the state of being enlightened is itself a process that continues -- a continuous process. We are aware of the process of being aware all the time. As we all know, getting to that point takes some serious doing.

LIBERATION THROUGH SEEING

March 10, 2018

Unfortunately, perhaps through a lack of authentic teachers of the dharma in America, many of us are left with little choice but to read about the dharma, unless of course we are brave enough simply to practice. Heaven forbid! LOL.

There is nothing wrong with reading dharma texts; I do it all the time. However, one caution if we exclusively do so is a tendency to fall into the habit of assuming that dharma is realized through reading words and language. This point deserves some serious consideration.

Most of us have heard of the Bardo Thödol, “Liberation through Hearing,” commonly called the “Tibetan Book of the Dead,” so reading is not the only way. We can also hear the dharma, but again, we are listening to words. Yet, there are many ways to realization other than words. And most important, we may be more susceptible to hearing than reading or to seeing than hearing, etc.

Fewer have heard of “Thongdrol,” “Liberation through Sight.” Thongdrol is a Tibetan word most commonly used as a term for the display of immense thangkas (Tibetan sacred paintings), where the cloth paintings (or embroideries) are so large that unrolled they cover an entire hillside. They are said to alter the mind just upon seeing, thus “Liberation Through Seeing.” Aside from those few, there is a broad range of subjects that, when discovered, may help to empower us.

All of my life I have been very sensitive to sight, more I believe than most folks. In fact, when I once went to

be measured for contact lenses, the optometrist told me that from his tests he determined that my eye-movements were as fast as those of animals and not normal. As it turns out, I could not tolerate contact lenses in my eyes. Anyway, what I see has always deeply affected me.

In fact, my only real breakthrough in dharma did not come while sitting on a cushion (which I had done for some 32 years), but while I was out in the meadows and fields with a camera peering through ultra-fine lenses at the macro-worlds of tiny creatures. I have written about this many times. So, for better or for worse, apparently I respond to seeing and sight as one way of realization.

I am sure, from the many photos I post here, you can see that I am wedded to photography and the products of sight. I don't just see a subject and photograph it; I rest in the "Seeing" itself, regardless of the subject, and it is in that zone of "Seeing" that I take my photos, if that make sense to you. And perhaps the resulting photos hold some imprint or trace of the "Seeing" I speak of here.

My point is that each of us might experiment with different stimuli, something other than just the written word. There obviously is liberation through hearing and seeing, but also through music, dance, art, graphics, and what-have-you? What works for you?

Anything can be a cause for some degree of liberation. However, we have each to find what in life we are sensitive to. And since we are already sensitive whatever form that is, there is nothing to develop from scratch. We have it and are sensitive now, so we just have to find and take note of it.

So, look around, dig around, and feel around through your life. It should not be hard to find because, as mentioned, we are already piqued by it. It naturally energizes us on contact (as with me, on sight), so we may want to note it and further develop that approach as a form of dharma practice. Yes, it's OK to do that. LOL.

And I am not saying our sensitivities are exclusive. I am very sensitive to sight, but also have spent much of my life developing my sensitivity to sound. Only, my liberation through hearing was not just with the formal dharma, but through hearing music (of all kinds) very finely. After all, I created the largest collection of music data (discographies, biographies, albums, tracks, and sound bytes) on the planet, the "All-Music Guide (AllMusic.com). And I played music professionally for many years.

What each of finds liberating will differ, but the liberating aspects of what works for us will be similar. Some time ago, I found this incredible short video (five minutes) of H.H. the 17th Karmapa (and others) talking about liberation through art and seeing. It is worth a look. Watching this brief video was liberating for me. Here is the link, so do yourself a favor and experience what I did on seeing it, if you can.

<https://vimeo.com/106809581>

And let me say something about what liberation is and sounds like. We can't expect ultimate liberation or full awakening just right off the bat. If you can, bless you. I'm perhaps speaking here of micro-realization, whatever we find enlightening, opening us up, and delighting us! I can be a popular tune, a photo, a gesture or mudra, a dance, etc. You name it. Every little bit helps, so IMO it's useful to find what works to delight us and expand on that. We do have affinities

and if we stop and think, they are easy to find.
Affinities do not have to be attachments.

Yes, for me, visual art and anything visual can spark and help me to expand beyond clock-ticking time into a more expanded consciousness, if only for a nanosecond. However, repeatedly invoking these expanded moments can help to open and prepare us for larger realizations. At any rate, that is what I have found to be true for myself.

DHARMA PRACTICE AND BOREDOM

March 10, 2018

Practicing anything can be tedious, if not boring. The whole idea of practice suggests something required of us before we get the result of that practice, which is what we are after. And this is not just a Catch-22 for those of us doing dharma practice; it goes for almost any kind of practice and is thus an obstacle for many as to realizing any results. Most of us balk at tedium.

It's only too easy to look back after we have mastered a practice and see a thread or path through the thickets of practice to the realization of that practice. However, pointing out that thread of interest that would keep us at it to others is more difficult, in fact a lot more difficult.

IMO, the problem is that when we start out to learn something new for us that requires practice, we assume that we know nothing (or not much) about it. This may be true, but it is too easy to consign or resign ourselves to a new practice much like we resign ourselves when we board an airplane, take a seat, and take off. The airplane owns us in some way. There is nothing we can do about it. That's not how to practice.

My point is that it is NOT helpful to entrust ourselves to practice entirely as if we know nothing. We don't have to give up the common sense that is telling us when we are bored or are simply finding a process tedious. Just as pain in our body is a symptom telling us that something needs to be remedied, so ramming our heads against the walls of tedium is seldom very helpful.

Perhaps we are stone-dumb as to the subject that we are practicing, but we are not helpless in all the other ways we live and should pay attention to those warning signs of boredom. They can stain our practice to the point that we abandon it entirely. As mentioned, like the body's symptoms of pain, we should heed boredom and tedium when they arise and not just try to bulldoze or put up with them.

And it's up to us to find the thread of interest that winds through the practice and live on that to keep us going. I totally understand that what I write here is easier said than done and few have met tedium head on as much as I have. To example that, just consider that I (and eventually a staff) tackled documenting ALL recorded music, all recorded film, all important rock concert posters, all extant books on astrology (in English), and so on. There was plenty of tedium in that.

I know only too well how daunting a seemingly infinite amount of data can be to organize and the strength and ingenuity it takes to wade through it. I have done that for some forty years at least. Yet, that kind of work cannot just be put on automatic. At least with data (and later with programming and video-editing) complete attention must be maintained because a single misplaced number or letter can throw the whole thing out of whack. That my friends, as mundane as it may be, is no mean trick. How then do we do it?

Of course, as with any practice, we can hold up the eventual sought-for result as the pie-in-the-sky we are after. It can help keep us going; no harm in that. I do it all the time. However, IMO, that alone is not enough for most of us to ensure our eventual success (if we make it). As the prayer goes "Give us this day our daily bread," we have to have some "per diem"

encouragement as well. This means that we need some sign of progress each day as we go along in order to keep going. This, my friends, I find is harder to get and that's what we are looking at here.

About the only indicator we can trust is that part of us that feels bored and admit to ourselves when what we are doing gets tedious. Those signs, the symptoms of the practical pain of boredom, are the only light in the tunnel of practice that I know of and we should pay close attention to them. I am reminded of the many times I sat in the dentist's chair and was probed with a sharpish instrument around a tooth, the dentist saying "Does this hurt?" or "Now, does this hurt?" For sure, I would let him know what hurt and he would back away.

We have to do the same thing with boredom and tedium in dharma practice (or any practice), pay attention to the degree of pain we are experiencing and back off and approach again. There is a way through tedium because folks do it and manage to find a way to master a practice. However, not too much is written about just how that is done.

One thing that is for sure is that pushing the pain of boredom beyond what we feel like is a sure way to stain our practice. And it does not take too many excursions like that to permanently mar a practice until we just stop doing it altogether. Pain is a warning sign. We can contaminate our practice to the point where we abandon it and fixing that contamination requires first removing those stains and only then continuing with our work, giving us two practices to accomplish. Many folks just give up. Check your own history.

Now, how do we know if our avoidance of boredom is because we are being a wuss or if we have just found

a sore spot and should back off a bit and more gently try again. Only we can know how to answer that question and trying to figure this out is the point where many folks throw in the towel.

As they say, “Rome wasn’t built in a day” and when it comes to dharma practice we literally cannot be in a hurry. We have to do it and with feeling. I know this only too well as I energetically stepped through the very extensive Ngondro practice (which took years) only to have my teacher gently suggest that I do it all over again, which I did. That was the reward for my “hurry.” We can’t afford to hurry.

My dharma teacher told us a story many years ago. It was about a small group of practitioners who set out to complete the traditional 3-year closed retreat together in a bungalow-style building. They had no sooner locked themselves in and begun to practice when the main roof-beam collapsed and brought much of the house down upon them. No one was hurt, but it was enough to stymie the retreatants and they gave up, leaving the retreat. Rinpoche’s message to us was that once we have vowed such an endeavor, nothing should dissuade us from completing it. We just have to figure out how to do it without staining it as we go.

IMO, boredom is a major (and common) problem, one that needs to be carefully negotiated. Perhaps more on this with another blog.

EQUINOX CRACKS: TASERS FROM THE SUN

March 12, 2018

Scientists are already seeing what are called “Equinox Cracks,” although the vernal equinox is still some ten days away. These so-called cracks are openings in Earth’s magnetic field. It has been known for many years that around the two equinoxes fissures begin to form in the earth’s magnetosphere, through which the solar wind can pour creating brilliant displays of Arctic lights. There was a big one March 9th and this photo was taken by Kristin Berg in Norway. Incredible!

An energetic puff of solar wind from the sun is enough to interact with Earth’s magnetic field and bleed through. Technically, this is known as the Russell-McPherron Effect. As mentioned, these cracks or fissures are opened by the solar wind, when opposing magnetic forces cancel each other out, thus weakening Earth’s magnetic shield and leaving an opening for this effect, which is strongest around the two equinoxes. March has been found to be the most geomagnetically effective month of the year, thus the “equinox cracks.” It’s happening right now.

Nasa spacecraft have detected these cracks, some the size of California and others wider than our entire planet. When these cracks are open, the magnetic fields here on Earth are directly connected to those on the sun like a taser. Scientists say that it would be possible to follow a magnetic field line around Earth and trace it all the way to the sun’s surface. It’s like an electronic taser, an electroshock extending all the way from the solar disk right into Earth’s magnetosphere.

This effect is thought to be harmless as long as the atmosphere protects us, blocking or dampening this stream of particles, whose afterglow is called the Aurora Borealis. I can't help but wonder if these cracks can mess with the electrical connections in our heart, causing heart palpitations and other anomalies.

I have paraphrased this article from SpaceWeather.com, which is a good resource and will send you bulletins if you sign up.

THE FLAME AND THE SELFIE

March 12, 2018

The Self we love (but are supposed to loathe) is perhaps something like a hologram, the tip-of-the-top of the living end of it all. The Self is also a sign and it's waving at us, but a sign of what? It is a clear sign as to what is driving us from our deep karmic traces. Dazzled perhaps, we are fascinated by the very apparition of our Self, which Self can only go nowhere beyond this life. As mentioned, the Self is the living end of karma that is ripening. And so, perhaps we are looking in the wrong way and in the wrong direction. It is not the outer appearance or persona that lasts, but the inner heart and basis of the Self's cause, the deep karmic traces, that is important and most telling, the Storehouse Consciousness from where all personalities and selves come from in the first place.

The sum of our all our attachments is the glue that holds the Self together and makes it cohere. Such a coherent fringe that is right up front draws upon (and is based on) all our deep karmic desires that currently make enough sense to rise up.

However, our Self is but the tip of the flame, not the oil that is burnt to create it. That is important to realize. We, each person, are an eternal phoenix (what has been called the Terrible Crystal), which is always burning and yet we are ever arising from our own ashes. We don't see this because we are habituated to always looking outward instead of in.

Meanwhile, that mass of our desires and attachments, our karmic traces, lumbers through space like a great ship in the night of time. It is easier to see the froth of the surface waves than the deep well of water from

which every wave comes. Either way, both are the same: water.

The question is: how can what is our focus look at the focuser when the focuser is busy focusing? That's the mystery each of us has to solve or work through.

That which makes up our particular Self is ephemeral and perhaps considered even trivial. It is abandoned at the end of this lifetime, but the karma-machine causing the Self to arise is anything but that.

Apparently, this is as close to eternal as we get. And while our personal self is cast off at death (and lost), our collective karmic traces, the Storehouse Consciousness (our Pandora's Box), persists beyond personal memories and continues on to create all future selves and personas. No, the Storehouse Consciousness is not eternal, but neither is the Sun in the firmament, yet it shines long enough to embrace all recorded history, so the Storehouse Consciousness is not just nothing either.

And so, while the Self may appear as a lowly thing of not much worth to society, yet it is the key result of our combined karma and this accumulation can serve to unlock the mystery of us ever since recorded time through all of our supposedly innumerable rebirths.

The Self is indicative, a sign. And, as the texts state, perhaps our karmic carriage (the Storehouse Consciousness) is anonymous, but not when it fashions persona-masks which we put on and wear rebirth after rebirth. We are not only one, but many.

Who we will be in the future depends very much on who we are karmically right now and, to a significant degree, that karma can (and will be) be unpacked in each persona based on not only who we are now, but who we have already already been. At heart, we're a movable feast of desire that exists to exhaust itself in

living until we realize the process and become enlightened.

How about them apples? LOL.

DHARMA'S COLD COMFORT

March 13, 2018

In my opinion, our desire to help others best follows our ability to directly help. There is no point in trying to help if we are not yet able to even help ourselves. Usually our dharma teacher tells us when we are ready to benefit others (or at least not harm them) by representing the dharma.

Of course, we all wish to benefit beings, but an intellectual wish to do so (which we all probably have) does not mean that we are yet capable of being very useful. In fact, in the lineage I work with I have not seen students being told to help or teach students dharma other than, of course, practically and physically, with kindness and what compassion we can.

I'm not an expert, but I feel that until a student has reached what is called recognition of the true nature of the mind, which event marks the beginning of the realization practices, we would be unable to help others because until that point we cannot even help ourselves. It would be like being lost without a compass or the Pole Star. As emphasized earlier, I am not talking about doing what we can for all beings physically and with kindness. Of course, we all try to do that.

IMO, there is a hard stop at the dharma event traditionally called "Recognition," which (as mentioned above) unless we have that realization, it would be like the blind leading the blind, however well-intentioned we may be. And this is so because until we have found the ground of meditation by

recognizing the actual nature of our mind, we are still very much in a state of freefall.

“Recognition” (termed Kensho in the Rinzai Zen tradition) is a major turning point in any dharma practice, the first of what we could call actual “realizations,” which is still not anything close to enlightenment. “Recognition” actually marks the beginning and first step on the long journey toward enlightenment, the first visible weigh-station on the path, as I understand it.

All of what are called “The Preliminaries,” both the Common Preliminaries (The Four Thoughts that Turn the Mind) and the Extraordinary Preliminaries (Ngondro), including Lojong practice, are designed to prepare us to, with the help of an authentic teacher, recognize the true nature of the mind. In other words it’s all about “Recognition.”

Once we have attained “recognition” and stabilized that realization, then we might begin to benefit others through sharing dharma and interaction. Still, IMO, it is traditional for the teacher to personally signal permission before we begin to work with others using the teachings, i.e. are able to teach.

To repeat, my point here is that before we can help others with learning dharma, we have to help ourselves to the same. As an analogy, before Recognition, we are like a comet in an unbound orbit just passing through life or hurtling along like a shooting star. With Recognition, we suddenly become grounded and go into a bound orbit around the Dharma. That, IMO, makes all the difference. And that cannot be done without an authentic teacher pointing out to us the true nature of the mind and our being ready to receive and actually get it.

And, to be clear, an authentic teacher is someone who has already recognized the true nature of their own mind and thus can help us do the same, IF we are unobscured enough and ready to have it pointed out to us. And that's a big "if." Earlier-on I had the pointing-out instructions a number of times and completely missed the point. You know I tried! LOL.

Anyway, that IMO is the flow chart of how the dharma practices fit together, one, two, and three. First there are the preliminary purification practices, there is then Recognition, after which (if successful) there are the realization practices.

I don't want to make anyone uncomfortable here, yet the truth is that recognition of the true nature of the mind requires the pointing-out instructions by an authentic teacher and our successfully receiving those instructions, so that our teacher acknowledges the fact that we have received them. We can't do it with books or at home alone by ourselves. The above steps have to be there, all three.

I say this so strongly not to be discouraging, but to make sure we don't rationalize ourselves into believing we have realized something we have not, be these words cold comfort or appreciated.

DHARMA: BEYOND THE TURNING POINT

March 14, 2018

When it comes to practicing dharma and we encounter boredom we must tread carefully. If we push our practice to the point of tedium we can stain that practice with an approach/avoidance syndrome and basically sidetrack the entire practice into a battle with combatting boredom. That's not the intention of practice.

It's up to us to keep our practice real and vital, even if it means going very slowly or putting it off until we really want to do it. We can gently probe our practice to figure all of this out, but slamming ahead despite the pain and boredom just underscores those qualities in our mindstream. And that is what stains a practice. We may not be ready for such a practice, which is why certain practices like The Ngondro require permission from an authentic teacher to even do them. They are not for everybody. Or better put, they are not for everybody until we are ready.

It is helpful to keep in mind that The Ngondro is done at our request and not put upon us from above; we have to ask for it, so to speak. We seek out these profound practices (although they are tough) when we decide that what we currently are doing is not going anywhere, and this is usually due to our own thick obscurations.

We come around to this view after trying to just sail through meditation and it doesn't work. We come up empty. In the long run, it is easier to take a breather, a sidetrack, and do The Ngondro than it is to push on going nowhere. I was one of those folks, but it took me a while to realize that there was no back door to

practice and we can't go through the front door except with heart. We can't just do it; we have to do it with heart.

I admit that it is a big decision to take a break from whatever dharma practice we are doing and go back to the drawing board by undertaking The Ngondro. Not everyone wants to do it (or can do it), for that matter. These are basically (or primarily) purification practices that are meant to thin out our obscurations and get us in shape to actually meditate. In other words, it is up to us. And, as mentioned, we have to ask for it.

As for me, I asked for it perhaps too early and Rinpoche said no and gave me another practice to do instead. Then, quite a bit later, I was given permission to do Ngondro and did it. I worked hard on it and it took years. I was working harder on finishing it than I was on doing it. I wanted to get through it and move on to the more advanced practices that I had read and heard about. The realization practices seemed a lot more interesting than Ngonro and its 500,000 repetitions.

Anyway, when I finally did finish Ngondro, I was really ready for those advanced practices and so I asked Rinpoche what practice I should do next. His response was: "Would you like to know what I would do if I were you?" and I said yes. And he said "I would do another Ngondro." That got my attention, and so I did. My wife Margaret did so as well. The above story should explain or tell you that HOW we do these practices is more important than how quickly we do them or so I found out.

And so, battling with tedium and boredom is not something I would suggest. Instead, take your time and find out for yourself what each of the five

practices that make up Ngondro are all about. Get into them and do them carefully and don't worry about how long it is going to take you to finish because if you don't do them just right (and with heart), any of the more advanced practices will not work either. And, as I found out, hurrying is not important if you just have to do the whole practice all over again. LOL.

Purification practices like Ngondro are just that; they purifying our mindstream until we can see clearly enough to do the realization practices. However, I feel it can be difficult doing Ngondro without some direction and support, if only because it's a long haul and we can get confused or sometimes lose our way. And it is tedious. An authentic teacher is preferable, but those who have successfully done Ngondro will also work in a pinch, someone we can ask for guidance.

There comes a point when the dharma (and its practice) is no longer just a hobby or a fling we are having. That point is when we realize that we can't go much farther in life without the dharma, so there is no turning back; yet we still have the question of how to progress in our practice. We have taken a bite of the apple and eventually are humbled enough to take direction or at least suggestions. Indeed, that may well be the time to consider doing Ngondro or as much of it as we are capable of.

An intellectual practitioner, one who only reads and thinks may seem possible, but at heart that combination is an oxymoron. Sooner or later, the rubber has to meet the road and we have to physically (and with heart) commit to something. Either we do or we don't commit. If we don't, well, OK. That's our choice. However, if we do commit to

practice something like the Ngondro, we take the plunge and run the risk of not succeeding, etc.

To me, there are two guiding lights that can insure our success; one depends on our ability to engage with the practice sensibly, with all our senses, feeling our way along by heart, and NOT staining the practice with rote effort. And the other light, which is also important, is to find someone who knows the path from experience and who is willing to put up with and guide us along the way. IMO, both are necessary.

To repeat, the pivot or turning point is when WE decide that (to whatever degree) we are just spinning our wheels and are ready to trust an authentic teacher to assist us. That is huge, but also IMO this is a mandatory ingredient for a successful purification practice. A teacher and student work together in what is a very delicate process. Having someone to ask questions to can save an enormous amount of confusion, not to mention all the attendant suffering and worry. Yet, it's more than that.

Even if we could finish Ngondro without any support or guidance, immediately beyond that are the realization practices which are nothing but (at least in Vajrayana Buddhism) working infinitely close with an authentic teacher. So, the sooner we can get used to that (working with an authentic teacher), the better, IMO.

BEING ALONE: "I'M JUST A LONELY BOY"

March 15, 2018

[This blog is a little bit serious and a little bit funny, so hang on please.]

This whole lonely thing has been a puzzle to me. I was raised back in the 1950s when not only were people lonely (as some always are) but modern science back then painted Earth (and everyone on it) as a lonely outpost at the far edge of the galaxy, a warm anomaly in an otherwise cold and alien universe. Brrrr. That's how we, as kids, grew up thinking about loneliness, so what we had was loneliness squared.

Aside from being programmed by society to feel isolated, how lonely are we by nature and when do we feel it the most? I know that I have felt lonely in a crowd, so that's not it. And I guess it's traditional to feel lonely alone at Christmas, but I have never experienced that due to wife, children, and grandkids. So, when do we feel lonely and why is that?

And then there is the thought that perhaps Buddhists (as non-theists) are supposed to feel lonelier than Christians since we don't have god to keep us company. We dharma practitioners do not have a friendly god to converse with. We could conjure up an image of the lonely Buddhist all alone in a godless world. Instead of a god to help us out, with the dharma it is very much a do-it-yourself project and I guess we should know that coming in.

And I can't forget the famous slogan of the Greek philosopher Parmenides "Being Alone Is" as literally indicative of our state if we read it that way. LOL. Being alone for all of us is just a fact of life. Whatever

we are, we have been that way (so they say) for countless lifetimes. And certainly, we can all be alone together, if that's much help.

In the Christian environment in which I was raised, we were encouraged to call on God's help and hopefully he would help us. I don't remember getting any feedback from above although I did have some luck. In Buddhism, there is no one for us to call out. We would be just talking to ourselves. And most of us are not used to relying on ourselves at the level that god represents. And that last comment should be considered by all dharma practitioners. Confidence is increasingly important as the dharma progresses. Who are we Buddhists to pray to, if it is not to god?

In Buddhism, great lamas and Mahasiddhas die as we all do, but the teachings say they continue on in their enlightened state in some form beyond death. It is common to invoke or pray to them, not to mention mixing our mind with theirs, wherever they are and whatever form they are now in. We do that.

When I stop and consider the differences between Buddhism and how I was raised in Christianity, the dharma is very much more of a do-it-yourself sort of affair. The onus as to whether we progress in our practice is very much on us. It is said that even if the Buddha were in the same room with us, he could not just reach out, touch our third eye, give us a zap, and we would be enlightened.

What the Buddha COULD do is show us how we could enlighten ourselves, but we have to do it. Those instructions are called the dharma and we pretty much have most of what the Buddha taught written down and commented on. Like most other things in life, it comes down to us, what WE feel like doing for ourselves. And, as most of us know, we can be fickle

and not feel like doing much at all. That can be a problem all its own.

My first dharma teacher, who took words apart all the time, said that the word “Alone” could also be read as “All-One.” Learning to be alone with ourselves (which we each already are and have always been) should be nothing new. We have never been anything but individually alone and apparently that has been true forever, through any and all of our rebirths.

It seems to me that feeling alone and lonely is not natural to us, but just another bad habit that we picked up along that way and that can be let go of. Am I ever lonely? Sure, but my response to that is that those times are suspect. I could say the obvious tautology that I don’t feel alone when I don’t feel alone, which is almost all of the time. When I do feel lonely, left out, or excluded, I am learning to look more carefully at that state of mind. I find that most of the time when that happens I am just feeling sorry for myself or something like that. That’s not real loneliness, IMO.

And I’m not talking about being lonely in love. That’s a whole other kind of loneliness which can seem mighty real. After all, I grew up with the following tune: LOL.

Paul Anka’s “I’m Just a Lonely Boy”

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

What kind of loneliness are you familiar with?

KARMA: THOSE DEEP DOWN STUBBORN STAINS

March 16, 2018

The term and concept of karma has pretty-much found its way into our vocabulary. There is something important about karma that I feel is essential to grasp, so I will try to emphasize it here. Years ago, my first dharma teacher (who for me was impeccable) told me this. It was a little trick he did with string and his fingers (which I don't remember), but the secret or solution was that you could always solve the problem by adding on more string, but you never could solve it by taking any string away. Of course, he was teaching me something and I imagine you get the point as I eventually did. We can give more, but we can't take back what has already been given.

“Positivity” is like a fountain expressing water outward and negativity is just the reverse, draining us. Sometimes I think being positive is just like the solar wind, whose pressure (aside from the sun's own influence on us) keeps Earth protected from alien radiation like cosmic rays. Or there is the old phrase that a good offence is the best defense, and thus the idea of making effort, putting out, pouring forth.

I feel this is especially true with negative thoughts or worries. I note them, but don't (unless they are about not paying my light bill) spend time worrying about them, since that worry itself underscores itself and leaves deep karmic traces in our mindstream. All worries do. See what I am getting at?

There is a natural kind of protection from a positive flow or attitude which is not the same as an inability to let go of the past, what happened. In other words, it is

not a question of simply ignoring the negative, but rather of noting it, but not dwelling on it. It might help to understand that one of the principle principles in Buddhism, in fact the very first word of advice from the great Mahasiddha Tilopa, was “Don’t Prolong the Past.”

By that, I understand this to mean don’t throw good money after bad or don’t add insult to the injury of negative “whatever” by dwelling on what happened, no matter how embarrassing or horrible it was. Tilopa says don’t prolong it; he did not say not to take note of it. Take note and keep walking (forward) and do what you can to remedy any mistakes as you walk along. Yet, don’t stop moving forward, must less go backward trying to rejigger the past and make it alright in your head. What happened is just what it is or was.

The dharma is pretty straightforward in this regard. And it stems, IMO, from the principle that what is done is done and thus is water over the dam. You can’t get the toothpaste back in the tube. And above all, this extends to karma, which point is very important to understand. When karma is recorded, it is done and delivered to our mindstream. Voila! Going back and trying to carry the water that has gone over the dam back to where it used to be is futile. It is literally a waste of time. Mostly, it does not work.

Instead, as I understand it, the easiest way to launder our karma is not to touch it what we have done, but to instead purify ourselves of the attachments that caused the karma in the first place. Stop creating it. Karma that is recorded will always ripen. There is very little that we can do about removing it. Instead, learn how not to record it in the first place. That is the way to remove it; prevent it.

Instead, we work now (in the present) to remove our obscurations so that we don't record any more of that karma, rather than trying to erase or repair the karma we did record. Imagine what the tip of our eraser would look like. LOL.

And that is the basic dharma principle I'm trying to communicate, which is to change the present so that any new past we create does not need laundering or clean-up. As I look around at so many different therapies, mostly all I see is clean-up going on, folks trying to get out (as they used to say) those deep-down stubborn stains. I am not saying that there is no good in the therapy of trying to rework the past, but rather that it is more often like the tar baby in the Uncle Remus stories, where the more you punched the tar baby, the more you were stuck in it. Trying to launder and re-launder the past is like that, IMO.

The past that we create now in the present has the potential to be as pure as we can be pure; just not all the many dharma purification practices -- preventative maintenance.

THE STOREHOUSE CONSCIOUSNESS: KARMA CHAMELEON

March 17, 2018

The Alayavijnana is more commonly called the “Storehouse Consciousness” or sometimes just the “Alaya.” As defined by its originator, Yogacara Buddhism (pronounced: yoga-car-an), there are eight consciousnesses: Alayavijnana is the eighth consciousness, the other seven being the five sense consciousnesses (eye, ear, nose, taste, and tactile), the mental sense consciousness (6th), and the egoic-mind consciousness (7th). The Yogacarans introduced the seventh and the eighth consciousnesses. Most mainline types of Buddhism only recognize six consciousnesses.

I prefer the term Alayavijnana to the term “Storehouse Consciousness” because like all Sanskrit terms, their very sound carries a certain essential meaning, but I know Sanskrit can be off-putting to some. For those who have no fear, the word is easy to pronounce: AH-LIE-AH VISZ-NAH-NAH, where the syllable “VISZ” is like the “Vis” in the word “visual.”

The Alayavijnana (sometimes called the causal mind or subconscious) is a vast storehouse where every memory that we have had (now or in past lives) is stored, along with all manner of karmic traces and latent tendencies called vasanas, which are often defined as “wishes” or “desires,” which term comes from a Sanskrit root that means “to dwell.” By “dwell,” it is meant that vasanas are traditionally described like a smell that clings to us after something smelly comes near or contacts us. For instance, if we put a dead fish in a box with some clean clothes and later

remove the fish, that smell will cling to the box (and clothes) long afterward. In a similar way, vasanas are said to be like the “smells” from our previous births that arise from the Alayavijnana and cling to us as desires.

For some, this may be a new concept to grasp, but the idea is that a vasana or desire is stored and emerges from the Alayavijnana (like all karma), where it has been stored from our past lives. It arises as a restless urge within us that will not cease until it is realized, until the object of the vasana is enjoyed and experienced. We can't help but do or experience it. We want to.

This may be hard to define, but we all experience and know exactly what is being said here. A vasana is an irresistible desire to enjoy or experience whatever drives it, a restlessness that we cannot suppress. This is the nature of karma and the Alayavijnana contains all the karma of ours there is.

I find the Alayavijnana (Storehouse Consciousness) fascinating and seldom considered, at least here in the West where we are mostly focused on our Self (our persona in this world), which persona is nothing but the specific result or reflection of (and from) the Alayavijnana. Our current Self, which is the result of this lifetime, is just one of many, perhaps innumerable, personas that have been “us” through our endless rebirths. And in every one of them, that which creates our persona (the Alayavijnana) goes unheralded and perhaps unknown.

Could it be the fact that the Storehouse Consciousness is just that, literally a storehouse which like a makeup kit has no observable or determinate form of its own? Yet, from it, all of our many selves or personas have arisen through our

rebirths and been painted or will be painted using our attachments to create what we call our Self.

Talk about working behind the scenes, I trust that you get the idea that this Self-creator (this Alayavijnana), like a movie producer, is ever in the background, yet from it comes all of our personalities, the outer visible veneer that we know as us. And we have no way to turn around and just shine a light on it because while potent, it is as of yet indeterminate. Its determination is effected in our Self and our many selves from countless rebirths, or so the teachings state.

The Yogachara teachings say that the Alayavijnana is finally exhausted of its content and only ends at our enlightenment, but until that time it is passed through time from rebirth to rebirth and represents our particular karmic traces. Other commentaries point out that the Alayavijnana is emptied not by physically exhausting it (like water down a drain), but rather by a change in our attitude or view, how we see it, so that what was experienced as karmic traces for perhaps millennia, with enlightenment, is seen for what it is and becomes null or inert as far as karma. We realize and see things differently.

In other words, our view is transformed and karmic traces are no longer perceived as an obstacle. I have seen this concept expressed both ways. The second approach is more sophisticated and in synch with the advanced dharma teachings, what are called the pith texts. As for me, I couldn't say. I study this only to better understand the nature of my own mind and the situation I find myself in. The Yogacara philosophy helps; it seems natural to me.

Not able to read Sanskrit, I can't read the most scholarly papers on the Storehouse Consciousness, although from what I gather many of the authors are

not really practitioners, but scholars. The clearest statements IMO on this topic come from the Ven. Traleg Kyabgon Rinpoche, in his brilliant book “Karma: What It Is, What It Isn’t, Why It Matters” as well as scattered through his other books and writings. I am sure there may be other authors in English, but I have not found them.

This subject may sound pretty conceptual and flighty to some, but the results that arise for us from the Storehouse Consciousness are anything but abstract, like our persona and Self. We have had centuries of focus on the Self and the persona, but almost zero concern about the mother of the Self, all our attachments as stored in the Alayavijnana.

Vasanas, like homeopathy, are rarified dilutions of our own actions that nevertheless are effective scaffoldings from which to rebuild and continue a particular karmic trace or desire, like potent holograms. Rather than consult our memories to decide whether something is good or bad for us, a vasana that is strengthened and underscored by repetition, instead of being just a memory for reference, becomes a desire that wants to be reinforced until it takes over managing the mind. The vasanas or desires demand to be satisfied. They become an active desire rather than a passive memory to reference.

Vasanas are Pavlovian. The problem is that they are not simple experiences or memories for recall, but when repeated and underscored, they breed attachment and become active desires that relentlessly seek satisfaction. So, when accessed in our next birth, vasanas that have risen to the strength of desires, arise as such. What might be a penchant for sweets may have become, through repetition, an

active desire such that that we seek them out. That's attachment at work.

To me, this is how I find that I belong to a particular tribe or philosophy, because I am attracted to it. It is clear that I am a Yogacaran at heart. This fascination with the Alayavijnana is more than just an idle interest on my part. For me, it is more like identifying with it myself, personally, a matter of discovering who I am and where I come from. Every once in a while we discover something that just clicks with us. That's how I feel about the Yogacara philosophy. I feel that it's already (and has always been) a part of me

WHEN IN DOUBT, RIDE THE MOON CYCLE

March 18, 2018

There are all kinds of cycles and rhythms, as we know, impossible long cycles like the solar system orbiting the Galaxy center (230 million years) and nano-cycles that are too small to mention. But then there are convenient cycles, cycles that are just long enough for us to keep them in mind and perhaps even develop an awareness of them and follow. The monthly lunar cycle is one of those and like Goldilocks and the baby bear, the Moon cycle is not too long and not too short, but just right. And like a train or a bus, it comes around every thirty days or so: 29 days, 12 hours, 44 minutes, and 2.8 seconds in a synodic month.

My personal ups and down or cycles happen regularly, whether I like it or not. No matter what kind of trip I get on, it doesn't last that long, but fluctuates. One day I am riding high and a few days later it's like I've been dropped off at some remote outpost. There I am once again, as Dylan said "...with no direction known." As mentioned earlier, it's like I'm waiting for the bus all over again. It is seldom that bad, but it happens.

Another way to say this is that everything fresh gets stale sooner or later and usually too soon for me. We are cyclic-beings traveling in what the Buddhists call Samsara, this world of cycles -- up, down, and around. After all, the word moon comes from the Latin "metiri," which means "to measure." The moon has been used to measure time like forever.

My point here is that when things go south and we wind up on life's highway with our thumb out again,

for me that's a good time to note where I am in the monthly lunar cycle and get back in rhythm or synch with it. Or, as they say, "Get with the program."

I am not one of those astrologers who lives by the astrological calendar, planning my life out by the stars. Quite the contrary, I just live my life and when I run aground is when I check out what's happening in the heavens. Most often I run dry get disoriented, so to speak, in those last three days just before the New Moon. There I am, wide awake at three o'clock in the morning and figuratively staring at the ceiling. Often it is my wife Margaret who points out to me that it's almost New Moon time again. Therefore, take how I feel with a grain of salt.

And that always makes sense to me, because those three days before a New Moon, which time used to be called the Devil Days in medieval times and is in Tibetan Buddhist astrology called the Dharma Protector Days. The lunar cycle is all about changes and perhaps the most obvious change is the one at New Moon, heralded by those prior three days, when things tend to go flat.

My wife says something like "its New Moon tomorrow," and there I am, busy twisting in the wind. And that always explains it and I just relax, try to go with the flow, and I'm alright again. It seems I almost never remember until I do. As mentioned, I am not a rule-ridden kind of guy. With my natal Moon conjunct Saturn conjunct Uranus in Taurus, all three bodies within a few degrees of one another in the zodiac (and within less than half a minute in azimuth), it is Uranus that wins out and is in exact focus, at least where I live here in Big Rapids, Michigan. And so, "I like me some freedom," as they say. I don't want to live by a bus schedule.

Just as our heart beats every second, so does the monthly moon cycle have beats and ones that we march too more than we know. And just as the Full moon is the peak of expansion, so the New Moon is the most inner or contracted time of the month. And like a breath, the First and Second Quarters of the Moon are when we inspire or breath it all in and the Third and Fourth Quarters of the Moon are when we expire and let it all out. Working against the lunar cycle never turns out well for me.

And here in the West, we are kind of crude with our four monthly divisions of the lunar cycle. In India, Tibet, and China the lunar cycle is divided into thirty separate lunar days, each with its own particular meaning and articulation of the cycle. For those particular die-hards like myself, I wrote a whole book on the moon that has about all the detail you could ever want about the lunar cycle and how to use it, all 453 pages of it. The book is a free download here and includes interpretations:

“Mother Moon”

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/MotherMoon.pdf>

FORCING FACTS: ASTROLOGY IS CULTURAL ASTRONOMY

March 19, 2018

I love it. Years ago when I first programmed astrology on calculators and later on home computers and shared my programs with my fellow astrologers, they loved to think of me (and said so!) as technical, the Geek, but “wink, wink” they had a margin on interpretation. I seldom said anything, but little did they know that I am an interpreter just as much as they are, just one more in touch with the astronomical facts.

I did not start out as the “technical guy” they liked to imagine me as (and limit me to), but rather a full-blown dreamer just like them. LOL. I learned about astronomy because I wanted more and clearer facts to help me interpret, not because I was a nerd. When I was young, the word “nerd” did not yet exist.

A lot is made about astrology being cultural astronomy. It sounds right, doesn't it, that astrology is the interpretation of astronomical events? I think so. But what does that mean to astrologers? Do we actually pay much attention to the astronomy upon which our astrology is based? And what would that mean?

It would mean, as it should, that we astrologers take our cue from the astronomers. In other words, we interpret the facts of astronomy and nothing more. Adding psychism or using astrology as an oracle is fine, but that's not technically astrology. In other words, astrology can be an oracle, but so can anything else in the world – whatever floats your boat.

“To each his own, said the lady as she kissed the pig!”

If we want to learn more about astrology, we are limited to the astronomical facts and they are always available to us, if we will just dig a little. After all, astrologers intend to tell us what all the astronomical facts mean. I guess my point is that in order to do that, we would have to know something about the facts, because, when all is said and done, the facts have it. They are what we, as astrologers, interpret. Anything else is beside the point.

I have made a habit of looking into the facts on which astrology is based, and in many ways. I won't try to reference all of them here, but let's take one example, our mother Moon.

We could write books about the moon; I have even done that. But here, for this brief article, let's explore some lunar facts and see if any of them set off some synapses in your brain. It's a safe and sure way to develop astrology. Here, we will talk about the radial and tractive force of the moon. Most of us are familiar with the radial force (moon-up and moon-down), but I would bet few astrologers know about the moon's horizontal or tractive force. That is one point.

Another is to example the relationship of the sun, earth, and moon in the monthly cycle. For that, I drew some little diagrams that I find thought provoking. Perhaps you will too. Here are some facts to feed on:

THE PULL OF THE MOON

The Moon's pull is strongest when it is nearest us and that happens when it is straight up or overhead (Moon Up). This point is called the zenith.

A second strong point occurs when the Moon is at the opposite point or beneath us at a point called the

nadir (Moon Down). The Moon is weakest in radial upward force when it is on either horizon, rising or setting. At these times the radial force is directed downwards toward the center of the Earth.

When the Moon is at the zenith (overhead), gravitational force is at its strongest and it pulls us up, ever so slightly. When the Moon is at the nadir (on the other side of the Earth from us), a special form of centrifugal force, stronger than gravity, pushes us out or away from the surface of the Earth. In other words, the effect of the Moon at zenith or nadir is to lift us up or away from the surface of the Earth, but for different reasons.

The two points during the day when the Moon is up or down are when the radial lunar force is at a maximum. However, sometimes the pull of Moon Up is greater than that for Moon Down, and vice versa. This variation depends upon what is called the diurnal inequality, which varies during the course of a month. This diurnal inequality is responsible for the difference in the height of successive high tides and depends upon which part of the ecliptic the Moon is located.

Using the Tropical Zodiac, when the Moon is in the equinoctial signs (Aries and Libra), the pull of Moon Up is the same as that of Moon Down for a given day. However, when the Moon is in the solstitial signs (Cancer and Capricorn), the pull is unequal. When the Moon is above the equator and in the sign Cancer, the pull at Moon Up is always stronger than the pull at Moon Down. When the Moon is below the equator and in the sign Capricorn, the pull at Moon Down is always stronger than the pull at Moon Up.

Your geographic latitude will affect how unequal the Moon Up and down can be. For example, if I am here in Big Rapids at almost 44 degrees of latitude North

and the Moon has a declination of minus 28 degrees (which it can reach), then at Moon up, the angle between my zenith (Moon up) and the Moon is some 72 degrees.

However, some 12 hours later, when the Moon is at my nadir (Moon down), the angle between my nadir's latitude (40 degrees South) and the declination of the Moon at -28 degrees is only some 16 degrees. At this time, the Moon Down pull will be much stronger than the Moon Up pull.

The Moon is weakest, as mentioned, when it is on the horizon, either rising or setting, each day. However, this too varies during the month depending on the declination of the Moon. The closer the Moon comes to your own geographic latitude, the stronger the effect. Therefore, if you are residing in northern latitudes, the Moon will be closer to you in the ecliptic sign Cancer and this will cause the Moon to be somewhat stronger at moonrise and set.

Both the Sun and Moon exert a gravitational pull on the Earth. Although the Sun is much more massive, its greater distance results in the gravitational pull of the Moon being almost twice that of the Sun. In any case, we experience their combined effect rather than each singly. This effect varies with the monthly lunar cycle.

At New and Full Moons, the combined pull of the Sun and the Moon is greatest. This pull is weakest at the lunar quarters. Therefore, this pull waxes and wanes with the month. It is strongest at New Moon, grows weaker at First Quarter, is strong again at the Full Moon and then weak at Fourth Quarter, and on around. At New and Full Moon, the Moon's tidal effect is, in effect, added to the solar effect and the resultant tractive force is increased in the ratio 3:2, the tide-

generating force of the Sun being one half that of the Moon. During the First and Last Quarters, when the Moon and Sun are some 90 degrees apart, the resultant tractive force is roughly one half of the lunar force alone.

This combined solar/lunar force is subject to some variation (other than that already pointed out) due to the fact that the Moon can have latitude above or below the ecliptic. The Moon's orbit can reach some 5 degrees above or below the plane of the Earth's orbit, the ecliptic. Where the Moon crosses the ecliptic are what are called the ascending and descending nodes of the Moon. At these points (twice a month), the combined force of the Sun and Moon is greatest. Eclipses emphasize this even more.

TIDAL VECTOR

So far, we have discussed something of the effects of the Moon as it transits overhead or beneath our feet each day. Yet it is the combined vector force of the Sun and Moon that produces the strongest pull that we feel during any 24 hour period. Keeping track of this vector force is a little complicated and that is where the "Natural Cycles" program I wrote (no longer available) can be a real lifesaver. It does it for us. In fact the program will keep track of the Sun and Moon singly or their combined vector. In any case, here are the various components that the program calculated and graphed:

RADIAL COMPONENT

This is the tidal component that lifts us away from the face of the Earth at zenith and nadir passage. You will note that there are two periods each day (zenith & nadir) when this component reaches a maximum value and that, depending on your geographic

latitude, these are often unequal in magnitude. At the rising and setting points of the moon in the daily cycle, the effect is to push us down towards the center of the Earth. At ALL other points, aside from the above mentioned four, the effect is transverse or horizontal. And these horizontal (tractive) forces are seldom mentioned, but just as important:

HORIZONTAL COMPONENT

In addition to the vertical or radial tidal components, there are horizontal or transverse forces that push and pull us across the surface of the Earth in various directions. The earth's rotation produces semidiurnal changes in the tide-generating forces both in direction and magnitude.

EAST/WEST HORIZONTAL COMPONENT

These forces reach zero values at zenith, nadir, rising, and setting times and become strongest at the intermediate times (45 degree points) between the above four events. These horizontal components vary depending upon the geographic latitude. In a 24 hour period, the effect of the horizontal component is as follows:

Starting from Moon up, the transverse pull grows stronger to the West, reaches maximum magnitude some 45 degrees (3 hours) after Moon Up, and fades until we reach the point at which the Moon is setting at which time the horizontal force has again dropped to zero.

After this we are pulled to the East, dropping off again at Moon Down. At this point, a Westerly pull is again felt, diminishing to zero at Moonrise. After Moonrise, we experience an Easterly pull, reaching a peak some three hours (45 degrees) before the Moon is at our zenith, and dropping to zero at the zenith point.

NORTH/SOUTH HORIZONTAL COMPONENT

These force also have a North South component that varies on a 24 hour basis. It is much like the East/West component, and functions as follows.

There is no North/South component for places located along the equator. In other latitudes, the force vector describes an ellipse. At Moon up and Moon down, it is directed toward the South, while at Moonrise and Moonset it is directed toward the North. The North/South component is of the same order of magnitude as the East/West component.

DECLINATION CYCLE

The monthly cycle (tropical month of 27.32 days) of lunar declination contributes to the overall tidal effects. The closer the Moon comes to being overhead, the more powerful are its effects. If we live in the northern hemisphere, then when the Moon rides high above the celestial equator, when it is in the sign Cancer, it will comes closest to our own geographic latitude, and to being overhead. This effect can further be enhanced when the latitude of the Moon reaches its maximum value of some 5 degrees. Thus the total declination of the Moon can reach some 28 1/2 degrees above and below the ecliptic. This happens (North or South) once in about 18.6 years.

PERIGEE/APOGEE

These are the points when the Moon, due to its non-circular orbit, is closest and furthest (respectively) to the Earth. The Moon moves at its greatest speed when it is at perigee and at its slowest when furthest from the Earth at apogee. The gravitational pull of the Moon is much stronger at perigee than at apogee.

The apogee/perigee points (the line of apsides that connects them) are not fixed along the ecliptic, but move slowly forward along the ecliptic over a nine year period.

LUNAR SPEED

In addition, this line of apsides also fluctuates backwards and forwards in the ecliptic slightly with a period of 31.81 days. This is due to the eccentricity of the Moon's orbit, and this fluctuation is called evection. The resulting effect is that the Moon speeds up and slows down at different rates in the four weeks from one perigee to the next.

The Moon's speed is also affected by the lunar phases, since the Sun's pull on the Moon is different in the various lunar quadrants. The Moon moves faster from the Last Quarter to the New Moon, and slower from the New Moon to the First Quarter. It also speeds up from the First Quarter to the Full Moon, and slows down from the Full Moon to the Last Quarter.

NODALCYCLE

The greatest possible astronomical tide-generating force occurs when, at the same time, the Sun is at perigee, the Sun and Moon are at Full or New Moon, and both the Sun and Moon have zero declination. This happens about once in 1600 years, 250 B.C., 1400 A.D, and it will happen around 3300 A.D.

MAJOR TIDE-RELATED PHENOMENA

SEM-DIURNAL (12 hr., 25 min.) Time between Moon up and Moon down caused by the rotation of the Earth.

DIURNAL (24 hr., 50 min.), time between succeeding upper and lower transits of the Moon caused by rotation of the Earth and declination of Sun and Moon.

INTERVAL BETWEEN SPRING TIDES (14.76 days average), time from New Moon to Full Moon or vice versa caused by the phase relation between the Sun and Moon.

LUNAR FORTNIGHTLY (13.66 days), time for moon to change declination from zero to maximum and back to zero caused by the varying declination of the Moon.

ANOMALISTIC MONTH (17.55 days), time for moon to go from perigee to perigee caused by the ellipticity of the Moon's orbit.

SOLAR SEMI-ANNUAL (182.6 days), time for Sun to change declination from zero to maximum and back to zero caused by the varying declination of the Sun.

ANOMALISTIC YEAR (365.26 days), time for the Earth to go from perigee to perigee caused by the ellipticity of the Earth's orbit.

PART TWO

That was just part one. Now let's see if you can make any sense out of some other astronomical facts. This can be a test if you want it to be, but I hope it will spark your insight into how facts can be unpacked into what they mean.

Here are diagrams I drew of the four quarters of the moon, showing the positions of the sun, moon, and the earth. Things I find interesting are whether the moon is within the orbit of the earth or outside of it, whether the moon is behind (in the zodiac) or ahead of the earth, whether it is going in the direction that the earth is traveling or going in the opposite direction

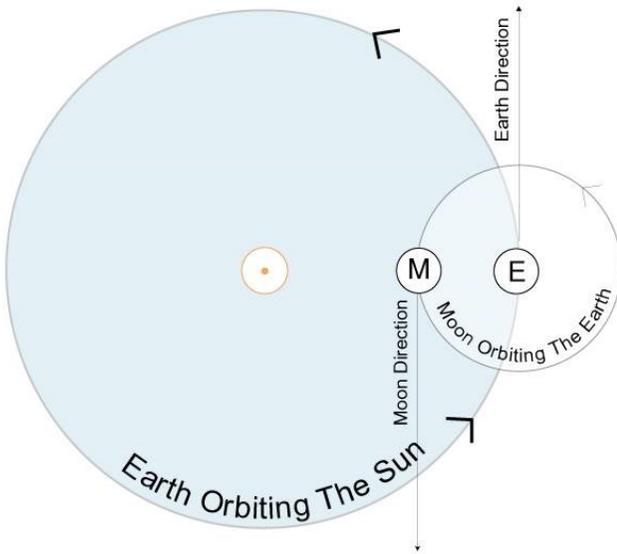
that the earth is going OR at right angles to the direction the earth is traveling, either heading inward or outward.

I find this kind of analysis fascinating. Do you? What are your thoughts?

[Diagrams by me.]

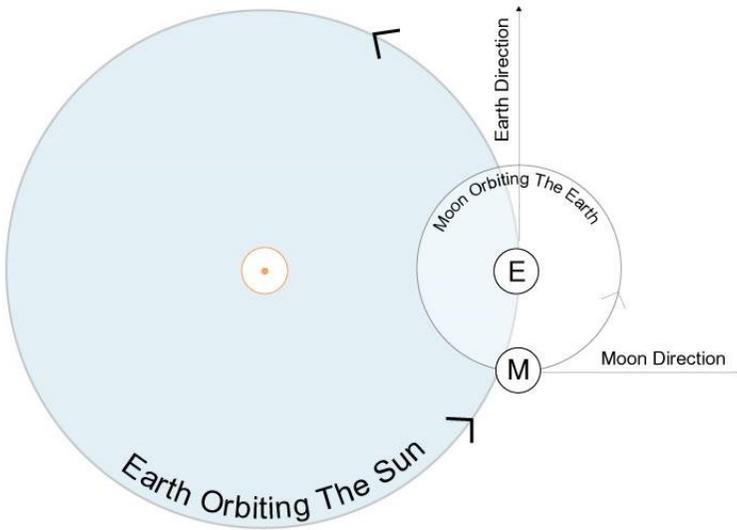
New Moon

- 1) Moon Closer To The Sun
- 2) Sun/Moon/Earth Alignment
- 3) Moon Heading Opposite Direction Earth
- 4) Moon Heading Into Earth's Wake/Past



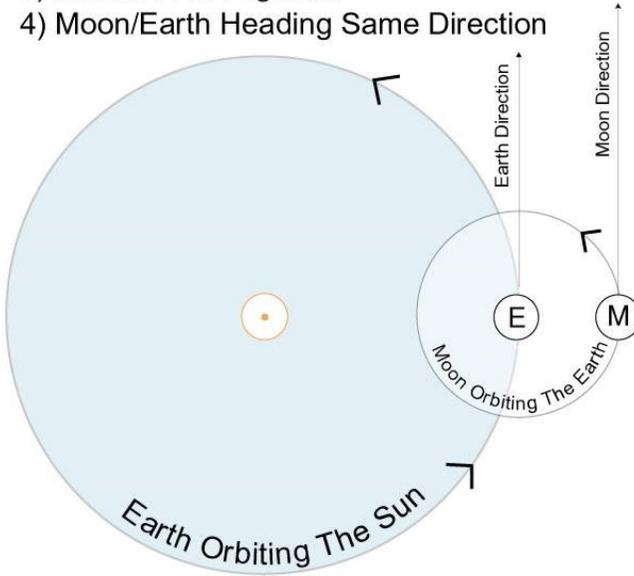
First Quarter Moon

- 1) Moon/Earth Equidistant the Sun
- 2) Moon in Wake of Earth
- 3) Moon Right Angles Earth
- 4) Moon Heading Outer Space



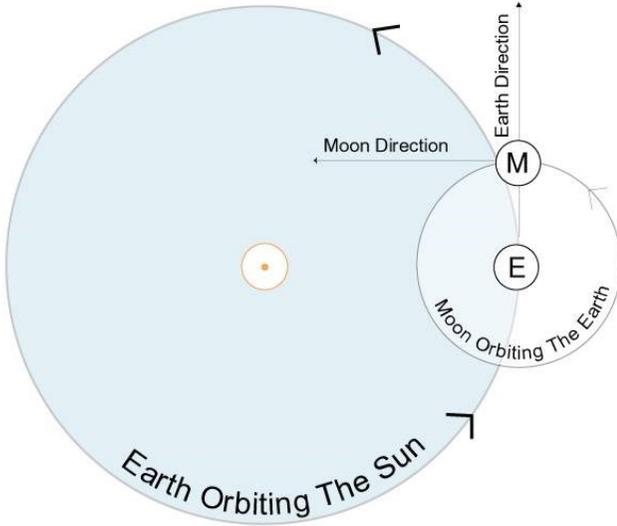
Full Moon

- 1) Moon Outside Earth's Orbit
- 2) Sun/Earth/Moon Alignment
- 3) Moon/Earth Together
- 4) Moon/Earth Heading Same Direction



Last Quarter Moon

- 1) Moon Ahead of Earth in Space
- 2) Moon Right Angle to Earth
- 3) Moon Heading Toward Sun
- 4) Moon/Earth Equidistant From Sun



SHADOW FACTS AND SEEING

March 20, 2018

Figuring out what something means or points at is a round-about way to knowing it. I consider the “meaning” of something as its shadow or track, much like photons leave their trajectories in space. Meanings are just pointers and their interpretation are literally beside the point, so to speak. Why not just get right to the point, to what meanings are all pointing at?

I am not saying that meanings are not valuable or useful; I use them all the time. What I question is how necessary they are in order for us to realize what the meaning refers to. Can't we see the nature of something even without knowing what it means, without help, so to speak? It would seem that we can.

As I like to say: if a meaning is the shadow of a fact, then Insight Meditation is realizing their nature directly through their own inherent luminosity... or something like that. I'm contrasting here the shadow-world of interpreting facts (their meaning), an unnecessary mental step, as opposed to the light of direct insight, i.e. with “Seeing” their actual nature.

I'm not a dharma scholar and don't really have time to become one. I am a practitioner who cannot follow the scholars all that well, perhaps because I do not read Sanskrit. Instead, I have to depend on my own experience and practice for much of what I realize. And while that is never extensive enough to please me, it is something real and immediate.

Replacing a lifetime of interpretation-techniques, which are many, varied, and themselves prone to interpretation, with the direct methods of Insight

Meditation only makes sense, but Insight Meditation takes actual work on our part. It is much easier to continue to refine (at a distance) our interpretive techniques, along with all the shadowiness and “meanings” they entail, than it is to master Insight Meditation to the point of actual realization and clarity.

In my experience, Insight Meditation totally trumps the decades of interpretive techniques I worked with using astrology. It’s similar to turning on a light in a shadowy room. Since these two techniques seem so dissimilar, how do they relate?

IMO, the difference is not so much to be found in the results of these two techniques (although they are totally different), as it is in what each does to the practitioner or interpreter. Instead of wasting time comparing results (which one certainly can only do to a degree), look instead at what they change and require of the interpreter/meditator. The interpretive techniques, no matter how sophisticated, do not alter what the Buddhists would call the “relative” (dualistic) nature of the mind of the interpreter, which remains entirely samsaric.

However, the results of Insight Meditation are themselves the actual result and they are only made possible after an initial transformation in the mind of the meditator, and this before Insight Meditation is even possible. And Insight Meditation is not considered a “relative” samsaric technique, but what is called by Buddhists an “absolute” or non-dualistic technique.

What this means in practical terms is that in Insight Meditation there is no relative (discursive) measuring by the mind (i.e. no conceptualization), but rather a direct experiencing or “Seeing” of the actual nature of

what is there to be seen. Insight Meditation is itself a realization and not an interpretive conceptualization.

Insight Meditation is like when we first learned to ride a two-wheel bike and said “Look Ma, no hands!”

Conceptualization is not necessary, because there is nothing to be explained or even considered.

Forgive me if this is a little hard to grasp, but that’s why Insight Meditation is said to be ineffable, beyond words, and beyond interpretation of any kind. My best advice is not to attempt understanding these differences conceptually, but just allow these ideas to be present and soak in. Understanding may come later and, in rare instances, realization may arise. That has been my experience.

And so, here I have contrasted my many, many years of interpretation-training through astrology with my not-as-many years of Insight Meditation training in dharma practice. I hoped to have communicated a sense of the differences and particularly to accent the extreme clarity of Insight Meditation.

INTERPRETATION: THE SHADOW OF FACTS

March 22, 2018

Years ago (and I'm talking about the mid-1960s), I wrote one of what I call my mantra poems. To me, a "mantra poem" is meant to be read aloud and carefully articulated. They push the edge of sense as close to non-sense as possible, yet (to me) still ring true. Since this poem is about "Faith," it may sound a little churchy, but it's not. That's just how far faith has fallen. The poem is about facts, the issuing of them, and (as the title says) that faith itself is a force.

FORCE OF FAITH

The form of force enforcing form,
Finds freedom from that form in fact.

And in fact forced is freed,
A form of force with faith in form that finds in fact:
Faith itself a force.

Thus, force finds itself in form on faith.

And force enforcing faith in form,
And form informing faith of force,

Faith is that force in form.
Faith is our form of force.

Aside from the word "faith," which is not popular these days, the poem is about sensitivity to facts. And in this article it's about the astronomical facts that exist. We astrologers are not making the facts, but rather following astronomer's research and reacting as to what these facts might mean or do mean to us. Astronomy has the luxury of (hopefully) hard facts (to the degree that anything is permanent), while as astrologers we are working with not even a soft-science, but trying to grasp what all of these emerging

facts “mean” or point to. It’s no wonder the public is skeptical as to astrology. Interpretation of any kind is not easy. That’s why we have interpreters.

And to be good at astrology, it takes a special set of qualities and, in my experience, those qualities have to be honed and honed for a long time. In essence, our job as astrologers is like describing a forest based on the trees.

It is clear that some astrologers are also “intuitives” or even psychics, but I don’t consider those qualities as purely astrological. Sure, intuition is key in astrology as it is in almost any vocation. I can’t stress enough how important intuition is to all of us, but that would be another blog. Astrology (more than most vocations) depends upon sensitivity to what can be very vague or ephemeral concepts. It may seem to some like measuring pixie dust or something.

We have to be able to trust our intuition and realize that the kind of tenuous interpretations we are working with are not always totally clear, even to us. And it can be hit or miss. I’m not saying that it’s like panning for gold, but it does remind me a bit of the Atlantis rising legend, but for us it would be an underwater swim where we feel out what is there in the landscape (and describe it) before time gets its paws on it.

This is where (and why) astrologers, by carefully following the astronomical research, kind of curb their imagination enough (through invoking the actual facts) that they avoid the wildest flights of fancy and don’t end up writing science-fiction. The truth I have found is, indeed, stranger than any fiction that I could come up with. The astronomical facts keep us in the ballpark of reality. And it is from there that we interpret.

And while the astronomical facts remain the fiducial, there is more to astrology than just the astronomical facts, although facts are, at least for me, the touchstone or home base. If I do my best to study and keep the facts in mind, juggling them as best I can, intuitively (or so it seems) I invoke and perhaps sense what the facts mean. And, out of the fog of the future emerges something eventually tangible-enough to make sense, although often obliquely. I then share that image with others and see if it registers with anyone. That, in my experience, is “interpretation” and the process of interpreting, at least creative interpretation.

As far as registering facts so that others understand us, well, that’s a mixed bag. With some interpretations, there’s an instant lock and general agreement, but with others we can be very much left twisting in the wind and entirely on our own. It very much seems that certain potential “facts” are like an Alka-Seltzer tablet dropped in a glass of water. They shed all kinds of fizz and always seem to scoot farther into the future. Yes, I garner something from them (and that accumulates), but the kernel of what could be a potential fact never quite appears. It still seems (and I sense) that something more important is still coming. I have some factoids that have remained just out of reach for decades. LOL.

The mother-load (the elephant in the room) of all discovery is the mind itself. I kid you not. Every thought, word, and idea since the beginning of time has come out of the mind and, like a cornucopia, it is never empty. The trouble and work it takes to learn to mind the mind, so to speak, is worth the effort beyond valuing. It’s like the mother of all Internets, filled with everything you or I could think of and even more that

we couldn't. From the mind will come all the future there is.

So, while early-on in my astrological journey, I found that the astronomical facts, when focused on, paid huge dividends as regards interpretation, in my later years, once I learned about Insight Meditation, an entirely new level of clarity and discovery was possible, something beyond simple interpretation.

IMO, astrological Interpretations are reflections, like a mirrored image of a fact or what is true. Or, we could say that in some sense interpretations are the shadows that facts cast. However, Insight Meditation is not reflection-based, but a matter of seeing the "fact" or idea (whatever) as it is in reality. There is a big difference, IMO.

Somewhere along in there, I switched from reading shadows to learning to see directly by the light that the truth of things emit in full clarity. It is totally addictive.

PAYING IT BACKWARD

There is a point in life where we stop paying it forward (at least personally) because for us “forward” could be tomorrow. And I don’t know of any common way to pay it backward, but here are some thoughts on that. Of course, we can pay it forward for our family and others, and do. In my case, by this point in life, “paying it forward” is a deeply ingrained habit, call it sublimation or whatever. Conceptually speaking, this idea we have of linearity (life as a timeline) is a temporary thing, perhaps simply a false impression, is it not? After all, personally we eventually just run right out of the line-of-time scenario into rebirth, which is cyclic.

Having lived almost 77 years, I realize that what I assumed all my life was a straight line of time is not linear at all. It is spherical or cyclical or helixical (if that is a word) and is, for all practical purposes, a hemisphere (at least consciously) at that. What I have always imagined as a straight line is in fact a curve. And, oddly enough, a sort of mantra I have played in the back of my mind since I don’t know when, is the phrase “The straighter the line, the finer the curve.” And, if that’s a haiku, I finally get it. Everything comes around.

As a young person, if not from birth, at least early-on, what I thought was a line to the future is just an ascent (more like an arc) to the prime-of-life. And what I assumed from there was that same straight line continuing into old age, is rather more like a descending arc (again, half-a-hemisphere) from the prime-of-life toward death, leaving an entire hidden or unconscious other hemisphere to handle the bardo and our eventual rebirth – a full circle or spiral.

So, gradually an image that formed in my mind was of a hemisphere of youths riding the ascending arc (from all 360-degree directions) to reach the prime-of-life and simultaneously a hemisphere of the aging descending from the prime-of-life into the bardo in the same 360-degree directions, a kind of revolving door.

Talk about “ships passing in the night,” that image grows on me. Years ago, back in the 1970s, I had a bit of a vision to the effect that the image of the Sun, with light rays emanating from its surface in all directions came to mind. And the punch in the vision was that each of the infinite sunrays only went so far out into space and no farther. The rays faded out into the darkness of deep space. Anyway, the upshot of the image, the impact of it all, was that as I realized that the sunrays did not extend out forever, my gaze gave up looking outward (linearly), reverted, and was naturally directed back at the Sun itself, this radiant being of light. It’s an all-Sun, so to speak.

So, the gesture was a simple turn-of-the-head, first from watching the sunrays going out into deep space, to ultimately having my attention directed back at the Sun itself. The famous photo of an astronaut on a tether in space looking back at Earth is similar. This gesture or mudra explained so much and so simply, at least to my mind at the time. And the result of that little insight or vision is that I titled my first astrology book “The Sun is Shining!” It was the first longer-range heliocentric ephemeris (400 years) for astrologers that I am aware of.

The point here, at least for me, is that the symbol of the Sun shining in the depths of space says it all or a lot of it all. Identifying with the center of the Sun and not just with the sunrays is ultimately inescapable, as each of us in life age and reach the point of no return

(just as the rays go out and fade) and that is the point where we turn around and identify with the Sun's center – looking back. Perhaps that's as close as we come to paying it backward.

The Sun in the firmament, endlessly throwing off light, fed from inside, radiating outward, is as permanent as we know permanent to be. Some years ago, I wrote this poem, which a good friend told me was not a very good poem, but I told him that I could care less. For me, a good poem is what speaks to me about what is. This poem better describes what I have been explaining above.

THE POINT OF NO RETURN

(A Poem for My Daughter Michael Anne)

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

That is the turning point.

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

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

And, in turning,
We begin to reflect.

In our reflection,
And rising into view,
Perhaps for the very first time,
The Sun.

Where before it was we who were seen,
And others seeing,

Now we are the mirror in which they see themselves,
And we can see our self in them.

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

That's it.

I understand this.

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

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

We never knew it.

In truth,
It never was.

IT NEVER WAS;
It never will be.

It is not now,
And still, it is.

It still is:

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

Feb 14, 2006 2-4 PM
Grand Sextile Helio

ASTROLOGY AND SAMSARA

March 23, 2018

I can remember, many years ago when a very high Rinpoche visited our center for a week. He was one of the four Heart Sons of the 16th Karmapa. Here in Big Rapids, Michigan, we are on the eastern edge of the Manistee National Forest, some 900,000 acres of wilderness. We took a drive with Rinpoche to a stand of virgin pines that are really quite impressive to visit. They are huge and branches don't even start until very high up. Rinpoche's comment was "Very pleasant Samsara."

Samsara, which usually always features its defects also has, as Rinpoche pointed out, positive features, good things about it. For example, I was surprised when my own teacher, also a high rinpoche, first explained to me that astrology is one of the relative truths. By "relative truth," it is meant that astrology is, although by its very nature dualistic, is one of the blessings of Samsara, an intrinsic part of this cyclic world we live in. Yet, by itself, astrology (being essentially dualistic in nature, as mentioned) is incapable of realizing the nature of Samsara as enlightenment, thus getting us out of or beyond Samsara's vicious cycles. Being an inveterate astrologer, that took me a while to assimilate. I had never thought about it that way.

This comment, about astrology being dualistic (and thus a relative truth), was not meant as a put-down, but that astrology (as a dualistic method) is designed (and works) within the confines of Samsara, which itself is dualistic. Simply put, astrology is samsaric, perhaps a means to better ourselves in this world, but

not designed to transcend Samsara by realization. On the positive side, astrology can help us improve our life situation so that it is more comfortable, which is exactly what most therapies have as their goal.

On the negative side, astrology (or any relative truth) is to some degree like rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic, the Titanic here being this Samsaric world we are caught up in. Astrology can only help us find a more comfortable deck chair, but not get us off the boat of Samsara.

The great dharma teachers go on to point out that only the dharma will help us realize the actual nature of Samsara and thus attain liberation. All relative-truths (like astrology) can be useful in helping us get more comfortable within Samsara, whatever our situation is. The Tibetan Buddhists, all that I have met (and that's a lot), use astrology to navigate their practice times and what-not. Astrology is very much valued in Tibet for what it is and can do.

By that same note, however, the Tibetan Buddhists also all know (as mentioned) that astrology is what is called a relative truth, good only for addressing our symptoms, just as taking an aspirin helps to ameliorate our pain symptoms, but not for curing our ills.

Astrology is valuable for symptomatic relief in this world and perhaps even for modifying our situation in that regard. The Tibetans also know that astrology cannot liberate us from Samsara. And this is not to slight astrology, but rather to communicate the Tibetans no-nonsense approach to realization and that path or method is the dharma.

Sure, when I was coming up in astrology, I did my level best to use astrology as both a guidance system

and (at the same time) tried to exact from it anything spiritual I could. And I tried real hard. Perhaps another way to phrase this is that astrology can help diagnose our situation within Samsara, but sooner or later to resolve or transform Samsara into Nirvana (Realization) will require a method such as the dharma as laid out by the historical Buddha.

Again: as my root lama explained to me: astrology is definitely one of the limbs of the yoga, but it is not the root. The dharma is root of the yoga. That made instant sense to me on first hearing and has ever since. As mentioned, to paraphrase using my own words, astrology can be an elegant guide to our life in Samsara, but not a way to realize Nirvana or enlightenment. The Dharma is the guide to realization and enlightenment, and astrology (at best) can be one of the relative means of assisting us to ready ourselves for the dharma.

You can be sure that, as lazy as I am, that I tried every which-way-but-loose to make astrology do both jobs, but in the end what Rinpoche explained to me held true. Astrology remains my main guide to making myself comfortable in Samsara (getting through life), but the dharma has been my way only path to realization and liberation, even if it is only a bit at a time.

Anyway, I pass on these thoughts that Rinpoche passed on to me to anyone who can realize them. As my first dharma teacher used to say to me “Michal, it’s not true because “I” say it; I say it because it’s true.”

DHARMA RELATIVITY: ONE FOR TWO

March 24, 2018

It is important to understand the Buddhist concept of what is called (or is translated as) relative and absolute truth. I never liked these terms because they sound so conceptual, but in reality (once you drill down) is very practical. Without a personal understanding of these terms (making them our own), I feel we are at a real disadvantage, so let's consider it here.

It can help to understand that the Buddhist concept of "relative truth" simply means "dualistic," i.e. a subject (me) and an object (you). Sound familiar? It should.

If I am looking at a flower, there is the subject "I" in here and the object "flower" out there. That is two parts and thus "dualistic," what the Buddhists call "relative truth." If there is no distinguishing between subject and object, that is non-dualistic and an example of what the Buddhists call "absolute truth." So we have relative (dualistic) and absolute (non-dualistic) truths.

In general, those of us in Samsara are involved with relative truths (subject and object) all of the time, at least consciously. If we naturally (somehow) slip into a non-dualistic state, we may experience it, but are unaware or only dimly aware of it, i.e. we are not even conscious that we are unaware.

The bottom line as to this whole idea is that the two (dualistic) become one (non-dualistic) through dharma practice. It's like we are cross-eye and are seeing two, when we should just be seeing as one. Now, making non-dualism a reality is a crude way of putting what is a very involved and subtle process.

As mentioned, I find that the words “relative” and “absolute” truth sound too conceptual (and off-putting) for my liking, as if it’s something to “think” about rather than experience. The words dualistic and non-dualistic make more sense to me to because all the thinking I have to do is as easy as two and one. Am I of two minds are on one mind? Hint: the answer is that we are two-minded most of the time. Is that some kind of schizophrenia? LOL.

It’s not that we don’t probably alternate between the two and the one in reality but, as mentioned, we have no awareness of it. Resolving dualistic thinking is analogically similar to focusing a pair of binoculars so that the dual image (out of focus) becomes one image.

And it’s not like there is a switch we can throw physically or in our mind that converts dualism into non-dualism. This is what dharma practices is designed to do and (at least from my perspective) it takes time and a long time at that.

The Tibetan Buddhists even divide dharma practice into two parts, one for dualistic practices (here to be called the Preliminaries) and another for the non-dualistic practices (here to be called the Realization Practices).

The preliminary dharma practices are ALL dualistic or relative in nature. They involved us (subjects) doing this or that (objects). And the Realization Practices are non-dualistic. They involve neither subject nor object, but just one single state, which can be called subjective, but not if you contrast it with objectivity. LOL.

Another way to look at all this is to say that the preliminary practices involve purifying our ingrained

habit of dualistic thinking of everything that is “I and them” and bringing our mind into a single focus, something like “I am them.” Through dharma practice, we remove the sense of “other” and become one with the world. As Sir Edwin Arnold put it “The dewdrop slips into the shining sea.” That idea.

So, aside from all this conceptual understanding, the practical end of it all boils down to unifying dualism and being one instead of two. To me, that makes more sense. The only question is how do we do this? How do we retire our ingrained habitual tendency to separate (and objectify) ourselves from everything around us conceptually and instead become one with what is? That, my friends, I find not so easy, but that is exactly what dharma training is there for.

NO HEAVEN IN THAT

March 25, 2018

I do a lot of photography, but not to produce photographs to print out or put on my wall. I have literally taken many hundreds of thousands of photos and never printed out one of them or put one on the wall. Why? Because that is not the point of photography for me. I like the photographing itself more than the resulting photos.

And, I am active on several photo forums, but gradually less so since the kind of close-up work I do is more and more specialized and few are interested. I have one friend, Klaus Schmitt, who lives in Germany. He is an expert in close-up and macro lenses and has an entire website devoted to them.

<http://www.macrolenses.de/>

Klaus is on a similar trajectory photo-wise and we talk once in a while, mostly about fine lenses and the nitty-gritty details about how to mount them. He knows a lot more than I do about close-up lenses, which is what interest me.

And I am always pushing the envelope, interested in testing out rare and unusual lenses if it looks like they might be useful for the kind of close-up nature work that I tend to do. Last night he asked me why I keep searching for finer and finer lenses, when I have so many already. He said to me, why continue to search for my kind of perfection when, as he put it “You are already there” in his opinion. By “there,” he meant that my photos are good enough, professional enough, or whatever. Why not just use what I now have and enjoy. Why search? I saw what his point was and my response to him was along the lines of what follows.

I don't believe that there is a "there" as in "getting there." To me, there is no peak or place to reach other than the ongoing process itself. And it's the same with dharma training and its enlightenment, which I hope to enable some lifetime or another. Enlightenment is not a "Heaven," not a state or some place to get to, but (IMO) rather a continuing process that, like breathing, we keep doing forever. Perfecting the process; that I can understand, because that's what I do.

And I'm not interested in playing musical chairs as I did when I was a kid and finally landing on that one chair, all by myself. That's not how it is. The ongoing process of photography or dharma practice is much more interesting than landing on "the" musical chair, so to speak, even if there was one. LOL.

Anyway, I don't like "me" when I think I have arrived somewhere as much as I like the "me" in transit, on the journey, and continually learning. But my friend's comment also makes sense to me; it got across. I have enough fine lenses, perhaps partially because there are not that many left out there worth worrying about that I don't already have. However, there are things about the lenses I already use that could be improved. Perhaps I am looking for that. However, my friend is right. There is no reason that I cannot amend my process more toward using what I have instead of always walking point, thinking that a better lens will work better, although certainly it will, could, and has! LOL.

And although I sometimes post photos that I take here on Facebook, just for folks to look at when what I write is not up their alley, that's not why I photograph. As mentioned, for me photography is a process that if done well can produce good results. It's not that I

don't like good resulting photos, but the result is not the goal. The process of photographing, of seeing through a lens something of beauty, and the state or "zone" I get into. That is why I photograph, and not vice-versa.

The same is true with dharma and its practice. As The Bard wrote in his song "Mr. Tambourine Man:"

"I'm not sleepy and there is no place I'm going to."

There is no place we are going to or will ever get to, other than perfecting the process of going itself. Years ago, back in the early and mid-1960s, in my youthful "darker" stage I wrote this small poem to myself:

"Look at yourself, first yet first,
No better and yet not worse.
Now, get yourself together in a bunch,
And call what carriage as you may, your hearse."

This says the same thing, just with a little more bite and "sturm und drang," so to speak. There is no place we are going to or will ever get to other than how we travel to get there, how we go about travelling. We are traveling to (or toward) traveling better or in an enlightened way. As mentioned earlier, it's like breathing. We are not trying to get to a place where we stop breathing.

Well, I just tried to put my glasses on and I am already wearing a pair, so it is time to stop. LOL.

“WHAT, ME WORRY?”

March 26, 2018

In my case, the short answer is “Yes, I worry” and probably more than most. If it’s not in my genes, it’s in my blood, a kind of family trait. For me, unavoidable or not, worry has been a major obscuration most of my life. It has taken several severe shocks to the system for me to learn how to override my tendency to worry over stuff. No, I have not had electric-shock treatments, but natural events served the same purpose. They forced me to either abandon worry or permanently ingrain it, which I am loathe to do. So, I am something of an expert on worry, but from the inside out and I am still not entirely out of it. LOL. However, I am getting there. I’m working on it.

Some of the Tibetan translators use the term “monkey mind” to describe the incessant mosquito-like buzzing that goes on in our minds, the endless chatter that worry enjoys. And, in my case, it does not take much to get the worry rolling. On the upside, I am very good at multi-tasking, which boils down to worrying about a lot of things at once. I can do it. I would make a superb movie director or producer and have shown my strength at worry (in a positive sense) by putting on several dozen conferences and events. Worry is quite happy there.

Yet the downside to worry is mostly what I am looking at in this blog and I know it well. Who knows where worry comes from; I only know it’s here, alive and well. Obviously, worry is a form of intense distraction and attachment to our worries is a habit and an addictive one at that. It’s a life sucker, so to speak.

Well, so much for the diagnosis. We all understand what worry is. How do we get rid of it? That is a lot more difficult, IMO. Yes, we all can whittle away at getting rid of worry. I do, but there are no pills for it that I would take. Prescription drugs would be trading bad habits for worse. When it comes to ridding myself of worry, there are only two primary ways that I know of that actually work and neither is a piece of cake.

The first way is really no fun; wait for fate to deliver us a blow that we can't ignore. I've had a few of those in my life and they work like a charm: shocks to the system. Immediately I am faced with the choice of devoting the rest of my life to pissing and moaning about what happened to me or deal with it. I have chosen to deal with it each time, which simply means: don't throw good money after bad; don't add insult to injury by deifying your injury with a whine-shrine. My choice is to just drop it. Damned if I am going to be hurt that deeply and then follow the pain to my grave complaining about it.

For me, it's a case of "Pick up your bed Lazarus and walk." That's exactly what I did, but it takes a pretty heavy blow to make me give up the worry or complaining. I take my worry neat.

The second way to rid ourselves of worry is not-time (or fate) dependent, but it also takes some time. And that is to undertake to purify ourselves using the classic Tibetan purification practices (as I did) and then learn (with the help of an authentic teacher) how to do Insight Meditation properly. Insight meditation, by definition, is a "worry-free" activity.

This second way (Insight Meditation) is very difficult, but you not only learn to drop worry, you also begin to realize the nature of your own mind, so this approach is doubly rewarding. As for me, I have done the

second method, but often propelled by several serious blows of fate from the first method.

Nothing in my life has been more rewarding than learning Insight Meditation as it is taught in the Mahamudra Meditation tradition by the Karma Kagyu Lineage. There are many kinds of Buddhist Insight Meditation and IMO they don't resemble one another, but I can only attest to this particular method. Other methods, to the degree I have looked into them, apparently take a very, very long time in comparison, like (so they say) many lifetimes.

I am too impatient for that. LOL.

DISTRACTING DISTRACTION: WORRY BEGONE

March 26, 2018

A lot of preliminary dharma practice is removing obscurations such as the endless mental chatter that many of us are subject to, what often is called “Monkey Mind.” I don’t like that term, but I instantly know what it means. LOL.

What I’m referring to here is whatever distracts us for no reason. It’s like what the old-time photographers used to do when they said “Watch the birdie” to distract us while they took our photo. As mentioned, the term Monkey Mind gets the job done, but how to remove or tone down that inner chatterbox?

Our major obscuration is probably distraction by our various attachments, our likes and dislikes. They keep us occupied, even busy, almost 24 hours a day. It’s hard to get a word in edgewise with all the mental chatter going on. That monkey likes to talk!

Yongey Mingyur Rinpoche, one of my favorite dharma teachers, has a cure for Monkey Mind. He says to simply give it a job, albeit a part-time job and I wholeheartedly agree. There is a business in many of us that just won’t quit. That monkey likes to be busy and is. Mingyur Rinpoche says that if we give it a task or job to do, then we become its boss, so to speak, instead of it bossing us around with its chatter. And he has his methods for this, etc., which I won’t try to detail here.

I was introduced to this same “cure” by my own teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, when one time at the end of a personal interview, he remarked. “You might want to use a mala.” Well, I already used a mala, but he meant something a little

different. He meant use a mala like many monks use a prayer wheel or like many use worry beads. I hadn't tried that.

Rinpoche never wastes words, so I knew he was telling me something important. I was not able (or interested) in hauling a prayer wheel around. It would attract too much attention and leave me with only one hand to do things. LOL.

But I did settle on a small wrist male, in my case one made of 27 sandalwood beads (shown here). I didn't wear it on my wrist either, but rather kept it in my left-hand pants pocket where I could reach it easily. The long and the short of it is that in very short order I was using it every time I was nervous or worried. I would say the classic six-syllable Mani mantra for the deity Chenresik (Avalokiteshvara), "Om Mani Padme Hum."

It became almost automatic within days and it will not surprise you, it kept my Monkey Mind busy whenever I needed it to. And while my chattering mind was busy fingering the beads and reciting the mantra, my awareness was clear and lucid. I could look around and see clearly.

So, as Mingyur Rinpoche suggested, give your Monkey Mind something to do, a part-time job when it wants to worry or chatter the most. Now, I'm not saying that worry beads are all that is needed when some giant worry emerges that demands our full attention, but for anything else, for me, it is a welcome relief from fidgeting and worrying as I used to do.

And it does not have to be worry beads, but anything repetitive that you can assign as a task to your inner fidgeter. You could recite a mantra without using beads, say a short prayer or slogan again and again, or what-have-you? You don't have to be a Buddhist to

try this. LOL. The point is to keep the worry-wart in you busy and free yourself to be aware rather than lost in the internal chatter.

I can assure you that my Monkey Mind loves it. No sooner than I introduced it but that little chatterer was addicted to it and I was not. My mind just zoned beyond it and remained clear as a bell. I was aware and Monkey Mind was too busy to distract me. Try it; you will like it.

Today I use the wrist mala all the time, often when I am in conversation or listening or waiting or what-not. It's just there in my pocket and I don't draw attention to it either by having it on my wrist announcing it to anyone I meet.

And so: Monkey-mind begone!

Wrist malas are all over Ebay and [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com) and they are inexpensive.

RESPONSE TO THE ANTI-ASTROLOGERS

March 27, 2018

After all these years, I still run into the old 1950's-Style scientists who want to make fun of astrology. I thought they all died off. LOL. My usual response is that I can accept that you don't accept my interpretations of the astronomical facts, but I don't accept that these astronomical facts (according to you) can have no interpretation. I may lack the sensitivity or words to interpret these astronomy facts well enough that they make sense to you, but you don't get to declare de-facto that there can be no interpretation. Everything means or points to something. Even "nothing" has a shadow. If you don't have a sense for interpretation, don't say "No one does." Just say "I don't have it."

I applaud astrologers for having the guts and sensitivity to attempt at interpreting something as grand as the solar system or even things as close to all of us as the phases of the Sun and Moon in which we are embedded. And no, I don't personally care for most astrological interpretations I read because I feel my own ability to interpret is better, at least for me because it is mine. LOL. I also accept that my fellow astrologers have their own interpretations and I respect that. They just may not make sense to me.

As for deeply or properly interpreting astronomical events culturally, which is what astrology is all about. I feel we astrologers have a long way to go. But it is IMO better than nothing to have a sense or feel for something than none at all. Astrology's critics don't offer anything of their own as to what the astronomical facts mean or portend; they only say that the

astronomy is meaningless and cannot have an interpretation as astrology suggests. How ignorant! To me, that's true nonsense – something making no sense at all, which it seems is what these critics are saying. Perhaps they can't feel these things, in which case I'm sorry for their lack of sensitivity, but I can and many others do too.

There is something larger than our little earthly two-step happening both in here on Earth and out there, something that is our common birthright, that we all are very much an equal part of. After all, here on Earth is out there in space! We are way out there right now. I grew up in the 1950s, which was all very scientific and crew cut. In the late 1950s and onward I began to tune into things like astrology, the I-Ching (other oracles), and so on. You can bet that I made a sharp turn away from all that as soon as I could realize how inanimate it was. It lacked sense.

I could feel that life was more than just linear and arid. To me, especially back then, it was fresh, young, and sensitive and so was I. To say that the Sun and Moon were just naked of meaning, something purely “scientific,” made no sense to me. I have to laugh when I think of the teeming millions of us here on Earth, each filled with “soul” and meaning, while out there the vast arrays of stars or the Sun and Moon are empty of meaning -- meaningless. Or, that the Sun is just a great ball of fiery gas and the Moon some kind of empty graveyard; it makes no sense at all. At the very least, we are all one with the universe, part of it, and we Earthlings are totally representative of intelligent life in the universe. We already are what we are looking for!

In other words, we humans ARE the intelligent life that “scientists” vainly look for in outer space, the

actual eyeball of the universe looking at itself. But like the Beatles tune "I'm Looking Through You," we are not just some nothing looking out of our little earth eyes, but rather we are the intelligent life of the universe, the galaxy, etc. looking through the solar system, through the Sun, and finally through and out of our very eyes. We are not looking out so much as the universe is looking in. IMO, we are bigger than just little. We are the whole universe looking in at itself through our eyes. But, maybe that's just me. LOL.

THE PHOTOGRAPHY STARGATE

March 28, 2018

I get emails and messages (almost daily) asking what camera and lenses I use and so on. I have tried to share my various links to photography at the end of each blog. To make it easy, here is a link to 28 free books on photography, and there are links to some 26 photography videos on [YouTube.com](https://www.youtube.com) at the end of this blog.

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

As for where I am with photography, here is a brief history as to what I have been up to in recent years. It may be a little technical for some, but there is a message in there, so just ignore what you don't understand and take it in. In my daily blogs, I believe I may start pointing out which camera and lenses I use for each photo, for those of you who care about photography. Photography has been part of my meditation practice for years, but I'm not dwelling on that in this article.

For me, to a great degree, it has been lenses that interest me, lenses that have been highly corrected for color. They are called apochromatic lenses or just APO lenses. It was very easy for me to fall into loving apochromatic lenses, as the old saying goes, like "The dewdrop slips into the shining sea." I had been looking to find sharper and sharper lenses and then I suddenly I found what to me was the ultimate sharpness, not through sheer acuity and resolution (as I had imagined), but through correcting color! It never occurred to me.

I went shouting this through the photography forums, but at that point only a few knew exactly what I was

talking about and, as you can imagine, on some of the more popular forums, I got a lot of razzing and hassle for mentioning it. It took me a while to stick to my guns as to what my eyes were showing me.

Sharpness is not just a result of acuity and resolution; it's corrected color that puts the cherry on the top.

Had I known better, I could just have gone and looked at the most expensive industrial lenses and found out the same thing, but I was still a bargain hunter back in those days. I did not recognize that there were bargains in lenses that cost a bundle. You only need one great lens and that's a bargain over 20 average (not interesting) lenses, which is why I have many APO lenses now. LOL.

However, because so many of these APO lenses are optimized to have sharpness wide open and I found myself trying to mix in with the microscope crowd or those who shoot well above the 1:1 reproduction ratio, there was an incompatibility here. These were nice, scientific folks, but not my tribe, because I wanted just the opposite, to go less than 1:1, what we call close-up photography. I didn't want to narrow in and see the compound eye of a honeybee (more than once or twice), but to step back and see more of the context in surrounding my subjects. So, with an interest in sharp, fast, wide-angle lenses, I found myself very much in the minority with the high magnification crowd.

There were very few photographers where I hung out that wanted true fast APO lenses to use wide open. And what separated me from the others (at the time) was that I stacked focus. Focus stacking back then was frowned on, just as HDR is frowned upon. It was as if stacking focus was not really photography, but some vulgar forbidden fruit that only an amateur

would play with. I didn't feel that way. My eyes told me different.

As a naturalist, for me, focus stacking was a way to better organize the small worlds and dioramas that I loved to look at through the lens. I could see more of what I cared about. In a word, with fast, wide-open, highly-corrected lenses, I could paint focus (thin layer by layer) like on a canvas just where I wanted it and have the background fall into lovely soft bokeh.

Of course, I did find myself transforming from taking field-guide nature photos to photos that were, well, "prettier." Heaven forbid! I was no longer taking snapshots of creatures on the go. Instead, I was composing my little dioramas almost like painting, painting with light and shadow. I felt a bit embarrassed, but I couldn't help liking the softer effects. After over 60 years of chasing down or sneaking up on critters, I lost my love of "Gotcha!"

Combine that with advancing age (and health problems), I segued from being a field photographer (I had been one from my teens) to being a still-life photographer who was happy in the studio or out in the meadows when there was no wind. However, in Michigan (which is flat, flat, flat) we have constant wind or breeze and taking a stacked image of a moving subject is an oxymoron.

I also recognized that, as much as I knew about mother nature (and the field and streams), it was her beauty that captivated me, not just her tooth and nail. And then, what we could call the crowning grace or the tip of the top, I began to realize that the beauty of nature was not just out there before me, but a product of my own mind. That was the clincher, what put me over the top, when I began to realize that it takes one to know one and that all the beauty I saw in nature

was a faculty within myself. In other words, if you lack the faculty, you can't see the phenomenon. And I was discovering the reverse, that if you can see the phenomenon, you have the faculty. And, in this case, that would be me, my ability to see beauty. And that marked a change, the real turning point.

From that point onward, I began more to compose shots, to take whatever time it took to get a shot so I liked it. I became more interested in the process of photographing than just the results. And with that approach, my whole idea of photography changed. There is more to it, but it would take a book (which I wrote) to properly explain it. From then on, photography became for me more of an art than a craft and it has been that way ever since.

As briefly mentioned earlier, I mixed my meditation practice with photography years ago and that was a key or pivotal event.

[Photo by me of an orb weaver with the Nikon D810 and the Zeiss Otus 55mm APO lens.]

THE DHARMA OF DISFLUENCIES

March 29, 2018

Much underestimated as to its value is the use of repetition and iteration in dharma practice. The role of a mala (rosary) or “worry beads” is just a common example that points out the value of immersing ourselves in some repetitive practice or other.

As mentioned, I have a wrist mala that I sic my monkey-mind on when it gets to chattering, but an even more involved version of this is my photographic technique and the iterative process of photographing I use. IMO, this is much more than just a plaything, but rather a conduit to seeing beyond the mindless chatter a certain clarity and lucidity that I otherwise lack. Of course, this is glorified (and justly so) in the dharma practice of Insight Meditation, but that is a relatively advanced practice and can take a great number of purification practices to reach. I believe that iteratin in one form or another can be very helpful as we move along through the purification practices preparing us for the realization practices like Insight Meditation.

In a sense, this kind of repetitive practice (worry beads, etc.) is like an inner strobe light, a form of micro-shock therapy that paralyzes (keeps busy) our inner chatterbox so that we can steady our mind and see beyond some of our obscurations at least for a time. Or, it’s like stuttering or a stuck record forcing us through its tick, tick, ticking to the verge and edge of an awareness we don’t normally have. As the brilliant Mingyur Rinpoche said “Give your monkey-mind a job, something to do.” Iteration is key.

Things like mantras, worry beads, prayer wheels, and the like are just that, busy-body tasks for our restless mind. We may not yet be able to master our inner chatter fulltime, but iteration, and especially alliteration, can freeze-frame our monkey-mind so that we can have a taste of clarity and get a little rest in the process.

To me, iteration of one kind of another (like worry beads) stutters our focus on the edge of nonsense and stymies our monkey-mind, freeing up awareness in us to see more clearly. It's not hypothetical and it's easy to check out. I use this technique all the time and to great effect. And I use this same technique, iteration, in photography through stacking focus. A typical detailed focus stack can run to 100-150 images, each carefully taken one after the other, thus the iterative effect.

Since we may be looking for ways to shortcut the long process of gradually exhausting our meaningless mental chatter, aside from years of practice, this iterative method looms large as (to use the stupid phrase) a "low-hanging fruit." This whole strobe-like concept of iteration is fascinating, at least to our inner chatterbox, who apparently endlessly likes and is distracted by it. Is it as simple as "Idle hands are the devil's workshop?" Keeping our monkey-mind out of trouble seems to be about the whole of it.

Or, it reminds me of celluloid movie film, where each frame busily stutters through the light-gate and by its busyness a movie is shown to us clear and luminous. It seems like that analogy (to me) fits the bill. We use worry beads (or whatever) iteratively as like a Stargate, which our mind walks through to reach dimensions other than that of our ordinary just-too-busy mind.

There ought to be a book about this phenomenon, but I don't know enough to write it. However, I do use it constantly to help maintain clarity. And I can say that this is the closest thing to emulating the results of Insight Meditation that I am aware of and anyone can use it. For example, I picked up on my rinpoche's suggestion to use a mala iteratively immediately. Within days, I was using it all the time. Anyone can do the same.

Hear, Hear!

LOONEY TUNES: “THAT’S ALL, FOLKS!”

March 29, 2018

These are some notes to the dharma dreamers among us, those who wonder what the realization practices (if we ever can accomplish them) might be like. Perhaps by using any of the iterative practices like mantra repetition, we can get a taste, get our feet wet so to speak. And they do work.

We all know that the goal of the preliminary dharma practices (Four Thoughts, Lojong, Ngnodro, etc.) are mainly for purification, trying to get the density of our obscurations whittled-down to at least a veil that we can dimly see through. But that kind of dharma practice takes real time and effort on our part. And the closest thing I know of that amounts to a preview of the advanced realization practices are these kind of stuttering-iterative practices that bind our chattering monkey-mind to a task, like repeating mantras, performing mandala offerings, doing prostrations, etc.

When our internal chatterer is kept busy doing some kind of recursive task that cancels-out or neutralizes our distractions, we actually have time to look around in the mind a bit. No, it’s not equivalent to Insight or Mahamudra practice, but it does free up our awareness from the static noise of our internal blabbermouth. How to remove that chatterbox permanently is more difficult, but even so, there is a confidence that comes from doing mantra (or any iterative practice) that really helps, a certain freedom to explore our mind without being so distracted. We get a taste of clarity.

By now, my little wrist mala, which I keep in a pocket, is second nature, especially when I am in company

where I have to be patient or I get nervous, etc. I'm often not even aware that I am saying mantras with the beads; that's how automatic it is with me. Yet, I am getting the benefits of putting my worrywart tendencies to work fingering beads and saying mantras. It does not have to be something dharma like a mala. Plain old worry beads work just fine too. LOL.

Worry beads are not like prescription drugs, but they do address (like many drugs do) the symptoms of distraction. And this is not cheating, but I do wonder (given my worry quotient) how long it would take me to remove such distractions using other ways. That is a foolish question because paralyzing distraction through mantras, etc. is a clear way to see beyond being distracted until we can learn to remove the cause of what is distracting us in the first place. My point is that that iterative practices can be a big help and IMO they grease the wheels for the more advanced dharma practices.

In my experience, there is a bit of mystic other-worldliness about these iterative practices (mantras, worry beads, offering mandalas, etc.) and spending time with them. It's where I find myself spending more and more of my time. We all remember the old images of folks hanging around the office water cooler.

Well, I feel there may be a lot of dharma students like myself who, through iteration practices, like to hang out in what we could call the "mantra zone." For me, mantra repetition (over and over) rubs up against the very edge of what makes sense, almost to the point of nonsense. It's hard to put into words, but I feel that when we go into recursive practices, time itself gets slippery around the edges.

I like hanging out iteratively just inside the edge of what makes sense, where time begins to be mistaken for eternity.

Most of you may be too young, but it reminds me of the old “Looney Tunes” cartoons when I was a kid, where at the end of the cartoon, Porky Pig sticks his head through a bass drum and stutters..”tha-tha-tha, tha-tha-tha, tha-tha... That’s all folks!”

Here is the original 8-second burst:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gBzJGckMYO4>

NATURAL HAIKU

March 30, 2018

There are many forms of Buddhism and I only know one of them, but I assume that all dharma roads lead to Rome, so to speak. However, I do (and always did, even early-on) feel a great affinity for the Japanese Zen approach to Buddhism. One of my astrology students (and friend) went on to become the Roshi at the Rochester Zen Center, succeeding Roshi Philip Kapleau. He is Roshi Bodhin Kyolhede and we have stayed in touch over the years.

A couple of years ago Bodhin and I had a good exchange about what the Zen Buddhists call “Kensho” and Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhists call “Recognition,” they being different words for the same dharma event, which is recognizing the true nature of the mind.

Roshi Kyolhede suggested that I might want to work through a set of koans with him. I thanked him, of course, but explained that the practice and lineage I am working in now has me totally involved. Yet, I am sure it would be interesting. Then again, I don’t like tests. LOL.

However, our exchange did start me thinking about what in my own practice, if any, resembles the koans method in Rinzai Zen. About the closest I could come up with were the questions that rinpoches ask their students when they give what are called the “Pointing Out Instructions,” where, as mentioned, “pointing out” means pointing out to us the true nature of the mind so that we get it.

During the pointing-out instructions in my lineage (Karma Kagyu), traditionally the rinpoche asks the student a series of direct questions, putting the

student on the spot, questions about their experience of the mind, and so forth. In Tibet, these questions would go on for some three months. This is similar in kind (yet different enough) to the exchange that a Roshi and a student have with Haiku.

And then I thought: what do those who do not have any formal dharma practice do in this regard? In my own experience, life has just naturally put me on the spot, offering me the equivalent of haiku time and again. I had to figure them out on my own as best I could and have taken (perhaps unnaturally) a long time to ponder them. LOL.

There are certain concepts that appear as questions that have imprinted me so that I spend years trying to unpack them. And they have nothing about them that are particularly dharmic or “spiritual,” other than the fact that they affect me. While the dharma indeed is sacred to me, it is not IMO “holy” in the sense of being limited to just religious matters, whatever THEY are. For me, the dharma is the whole enchilada, limited only by what is true or actual.

In my case, it can take me years to unpack and grasp the meaning of some comment from someone I respect. Take for example, Franz Kafka.

When I was young I read most all of his books, stories, and his diaries. Somewhere in his diary I can across the line (I will paraphrase it here) “Each line I write, it already has perfection.” That was a puzzler for me, but it did not go unnoticed. It sunk in and stuck there for years. To me, that was a koan I had to realize.

After many years of noodling it, I realized that what Kafka must have meant is that instead of working on his writing to become a better writer, he worked on his

mind so that anything he wrote (or did) already had perfection, because he did.” That realization deeply affected me and made me understand my own priorities. Trying to be this or do that well is the long-way around. Better to perfect our mind (and total ability), so that everything we do, as Kafa put it, “already has perfection.” That is an example of how I handle life’s koans.

I am not suggesting that solving my own little conundrums is in the same ballpark as either the koan questions surrounding Kensho or those surrounding the Tibetan “Recognition,” because they mark the advent of actual realization in our lives.

However, it all adds up and, in my case, at least early-on, I had no choice. There was no one to ask! LOL.

As I have grown up, I have had the extreme good fortune to meet and work with a number of incredible dharma teachers and there is no substitute IMO. I have worked with my current dharma teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche for 35 years.

I am sure that we all have these little spiritual time-capsules in life that only gradually release their meaning to us. I am still working on a bunch of them myself, and this has been going on many for decades.

And, as wonderful as it is to finally solve one or two of them, the motherload of intuition (IMO the watershed) comes with finishing the preliminary practices and establishing a successful Insight Meditation practice with the help of an authentic dharma teacher.

THE BODY OF AWARENESS

April 1, 2018

I guess I want to riff a little on the whole concept of awareness. It's important to remember that the word Buddha (Sange in Sanskrit) essentially means "awareness." So, awareness is the key to understanding Buddhism. And, unlike many forms of meditation, Buddhism is not about going into deep trance or reverie, but rather about waking up. It's not eyes closed, but eyes open.

In fact, in the seminal Mahamudra Lineage Prayer (which IMO encapsulates the essence of the path I am following), it points out that "unwavering awareness is the body of meditation." By saying that awareness is the "body" of meditation, it simply means that like our body, awareness is the basic vehicle of meditation; it's the main thing.

Of course, we have all read that the word "Buddha" is translated as awareness or the one who has awareness. It's clear that awareness IS crucial, so how do we get more awareness? By stating that unwavering awareness is the body of awareness, we can assume that if we practice dharma our future will include more and not less awareness. So, if we want to go back to sleep, good luck! It's not trending that way. Yet, trying to stay aware and awake, forcing it, can also be very painful!

So, here we sit, stuck between a rock and a hard place. We can't yet fully respond to life's demands

spiritually and yet we may not know how to become more aware so that we could.

The dharma path that the historical Buddha laid out for us is foreign to most Westerners. Translating Tibetan and Sanskrit is not just a problem of language, but of approach. As the wise Tibetan rinpoches have pointed out to us: forget about Tibetan texts and teachings.

Our future will be American Buddhism as people like you and me grasp the teachings and interpret them in a way that is natural to us. And then there is the little fact that it is said that Buddhism takes something like 300 years to come into a country. Here in America, we are around 100 years in if we count Japanese Zen Buddhism and much less if we go with Tibetan Buddhism, so it's best to sit back and take our time. LOL.

It often seems to me like the Buddhists teachings are just water off the back of Americans, in one ear and out the other. It's like some of the vitamin supplements that we can't absorb. They go right through us. In a similar way, we have no net or way to catch these teachings and register them in our consciousness. I have seen this for years, a lot right here on Facebook. We want to be more involved for a moment, but are soon distracted by something else we want.

I once had someone say, "But Michael, what you write is so often repetitive. Why not just write it out once and let it go at that." Well, to me learning dharma is like basting a turkey, as we used to do. You baste it over and over and over for it to come out right. Sorry for the image folks, but that's where I came from. I believe American Buddhists like myself are doing our very best to translate what we understand into words

and concepts that Westerners can understand and absorb. It's happening, but perhaps it's like watching a glacier melt.

Or, it's like then when snow falls on the lawn and melts away in the warmer grass. It falls and it falls and then, at some point, it sticks and stays and builds from there. The dharma in America is like that, but we have not yet reached the point where it sinks in.

These endless blogs are my struggle to say it as well as I can, for those few who can absorb and are interested in it. Who knows how many repetitions it will take before the dharma can become a path of action for each of us rather than mere conceptual understanding that we have with a cup of tea. It took me real time for it to sink in. We are all working together on this.

An American form of Buddhism is forming. In time, it will seem as natural to us as breathing, but right now it's a little hard to catch a breath. The dharma is an incredible gift to this land!

MUSINGS: SHIFTING GEAR

April 4, 2018

[Busy days, almost done with refinishing the floor of our little guest cottage. Should be done tomorrow, red-oak floor completely re-sanded and with four coats of low VOC varnish. A large snowstorm is blowing in as I write this, promising up to eight-inches of new snow. Can't say I'm glad to see it, but it's what's happening just now. No new astrology or dharma blog, but I do have another photography blog, this one on photo gear. I will post it here.]

I like to tell myself that my photography gear is convection based, constantly turning over like the topsoil of a garden. While there are a few lone gear survivors, everything else has its day and heads for Ebay or, if I am too lazy, into the storeroom.

My most volatile category is the lenses. One thing that all lenses share is that they take photos. Aside from that, there are a wide variety of lens types and quality, not to mention there being a myriad lenses out there. For my work, there are not that many "great" lenses.

I seem to gravitate toward highly-corrected lenses and never seem to have enough of them. I have been getting rid of those that I seldom use, with a few exceptions. I decided some time ago that I can't afford to be a lens museum and am moving away from that.

And I imagine that any photographer out there with more than a few lenses drifts toward collecting those lenses that make up his or her particular photography niche. I know I do. I'm usually bundled in with the macro photographers, but in reality I am a close-up photographer. I don't enjoy the confines of a limited view like 1:1. It makes me feel claustrophobic. I like to

breathe in a somewhat larger context. On the other hand, although I do some landscape photography, it is more context than I need. I am into little dioramas, micro-environments, what I call “small worlds.”

I have even sold many legendary macro lenses that I had just because I did not use them or “like” them that much. Examples would be the Nikkor 200mm Macro, the Zeiss 100mm Makro-Planar, and others. Nice, but I found I always preferred other lenses, so why keep them? Just to say I HAVE them is no longer interesting to me. I don’t have them, but I had them. That says it all.

Then, there are lenses that have great qualities, but are IMO otherwise flawed. For example, the legendary Coastal Optics 60mm Macro f/4 lens is very well corrected, even at the forensic level, except for a giant hot spot right in the macro range! However, the lens is poorly designed in other areas like focus throw (there is so little that I have to put the camera/lens on a focus rail!), plus no hood, cheap housing, etc. I still used that lens, but I finally protested the design flaws enough that I sold mine, shipping it out to somewhere in China. I sometimes miss it, but not often.

Which leaves me in the company of those types of lenses that I do use and dote on. These are not so much macro lenses as they do a variety of lenses that I can make work for me in close-up nature photography. And they are a rag-tag crew. Aside from the lordly Zeiss Otus series, I have a mess of industrial lenses, mostly from scanners, plus enlarger and large-format lenses. I love the little devils and use them on view cameras, which brings me to another point.

I had several view cameras, one of them very large and very heavy, but I sold them too. Who needs a

beast like that? I am down to the Cambo Actus Mini View Camera and the Novoflex BALPRO bellows system. That's enough, although I very much like tilt and sometimes some shift.

I also must have ten or twelve focus rails, most of which I am too lazy to sell, having settled on the Novoflex Castel-Q along with their Fine Adjustment Handle. That's what I use these days.

I won't even mention the scores of adapters, helicoids, step-up and step-down rings, and etc. that I have around here. In my case it seems that when it comes to photo equipment, more-than-enough is just enough. LOL. And I am always finding something I don't have!

I also have a trail of tripods that I still have or have given away, mostly old Gitzos, having settled on a couple of Really Right Stuff tripods for my regular use. And tripod heads? Don't even ask. I have lots of them, small, medium, and large, but all I tend to use are the Arca-Swiss C1 Cube, of which I have a couple.

I keep looking for the energy to sell off hundreds of photo items I don't need, but the amount of work to put them on Ebay and then box them up for shipment is just too much. I will wait until I need the money and then I will do the work. Anyway, I like to rummage through them all trying to adapt this or that lens for this or that purpose.

For some reason I am real fussy about quick-release clamps. I gave up on Manfrotto clamps years ago after they failed a couple of times! I have a drawer full of quick-release clamps, all of them Arca-Swiss. And I REALLY dislike lever-release clamps. What I love are the RRS screw-knob Arca clamps with the big fat

knobs. I like to be certain my camera is firmly attached and that does it. I even installed them on my two Arca Cubes because the ones that come with the Cube suck. They are too tiny and weak.

As for cameras, I love Nikon and I have had pretty much all of their DSLRs, but have sold them off over the years. I still have my first DSLR, the Nikon D1x, which cost \$5K and is worth today maybe \$100. It was all of 5.3 Mpx. Aside from nature, I took 33,000 photos of rare concert rock-n'-roll posters with the D1x using a vacuum table I built myself.

So, those are some of my equipment biases. I feel like a spinning coin on the table that has finally come to rest with the Nikon D850. It does what I need and always wanted. The rest is up to me.

Am I the Lone Ranger or do others have similar experiences?

HAPPY BIRTHDAY TO MY SON!

April 6, 2018

I want to take a moment here and wish my son Michael Andrew the very happiest birthday. It was thirty-two years ago tomorrow that Michael was born, right here in the house where we live today. Margaret and I did both home births and home schooling, which Michael was both. Of course, Margaret did the birthing and most of the home schooling. I'm not sure what I was good for, a fact that every dad realizes when he attends a birth. LOL.

As for the weather: the snowstorm swept in and dumped a pile of snow. The winds blew so hard it shook the house that so that I could not take any indoor photos because the whole studio-room was shaking. When the wind died down I took a little self-portrait with my friend the Calla Lilly, which I include here.

Anyway, Happy Birthday Michael! I am so very proud of you! You are everything a father could ask.



APO LENSES: PAINTING WITH LIGHT

April 6, 2018

The value of highly corrected (apochromatic or APO) lenses is gradually being understood by photographers outside of a small group. Sharpness is not just a matter of acutance and resolution. All of the purple and greenish fringing (chromatic aberration) caused by colors not focusing properly on the camera sensor totally affects what we call sharpness. IMO, proper color focus (APO) is what puts the “sharp” in the tip-of-the-top of photographic sharpness – the finishing touch.

The problem of juggling a group of lenses inside a lens barrel so that the colors are properly aligned and focused at the sensor is not trivial. It costs real money to get a pristine example of an apochromatic lens. And it’s not surprising that the APO lenses we do have didn’t originally come from satisfying mainstream photographers, but rather from industrial needs where they simply had to perform.

For example, the now classic Printing Nikkor lenses were designed for film scanners, mostly to make crystal-clear copies of our favorite movies back in the celluloid days. These lenses are said to have cost \$12,000 a pop. They turn up regularly on Ebay now for a couple or a few thousand dollars as the industry goes digital.

Even then, these specialized lenses are just that, specialized. They typically don’t go to infinity, but are geared to perform at their optimum quality in a very narrow magnification range. Not only that, but most are best used wide open (at full aperture), which is very unusual for your typical photography lens, where

optimum sharpness more usually is reached at something like $f/5.6$ or so.

So, those of us who collect and play around with these industrial lenses end up with a rag-tag crew of lenses, each with its own idiosyncrasies. No two are the same. And even more unorthodox are the mounts! These lenses are not made to be mounted on a camera flange, but instead on one kind or another industrial machine. It's no wonder that people like me have boxes and boxes of adapters, screw mounts, microscope mounts, and what-not. I still have lenses sitting around that I have been unable to find a mount for!

The "Why bother?" is because many of these lenses are so highly corrected that the photos they produce, even in their restricted reproduction-range, are often better than anything we can produce using the general quality of lenses on the market. This is (finally!) changing as in the last few years there has been a turn toward higher quality lenses for general use. One company who has led the charge is Zeiss with the remarkable Otus series of lenses and Sigma is now producing a series of what they call their "Art" lenses that also have higher quality.

And, as mentioned, these industrial lenses are much more difficult to use. They require special mounts and many only work well on a bellows system and, even then, only within a highly restricted magnification range. Not everyone wants to go through all that.

You don't just slap these industrial lenses on your camera for a number of reasons. For one, they have no focusing helicoid on them. They don't reach infinity. They don't tend to work, as mentioned, except in a very restricted working range, sometimes just inches!

Yet, as mentioned, if you can manage them, these industrial lenses are capable of producing some very fine images, which is why photographers like myself find ourselves using them. And, even then, the average photographer is not going to find much use for a lens that needs to be used wide-open. The depth of field for many of these lenses is razor thin, so unless you want to feature the pink nose of gnat, who would use it?

Well, the answer to that question is that those of us who stack focus would use them. By stacking many layers of thin focus, one on the other, we can create an image in high focus and with as large an area as we are willing to stack. With stacking focus, these oddball industrial lenses become magic wands that literally paint focus on a canvas of bokeh, those areas of an image that are attractively out-of-focus. Overlaid on a gentle bokeh is a crystal-clear image in perfect focus. In other words, by painting focus, the photographer decides where the eye goes rather than, as with a traditional photo, our eye goes to the plane and point of focus dictated by the focused lens.

Here is a photo taken with an industrial lens (Nikkor "O" CRT) that was designed for examining the curved surface of a computer CRT monitor. The lens is wicked fast wide open and what it does not focus on it easily renders out-of-focus as a gentle bokeh. As you can see in this photo, that drop of nectar at the tip of the Calla Lily is placed in high focus, leaving the rest nicely out-of-focus. This is what these industrial lenses can do, at least in the hands of those of us who stack focus.

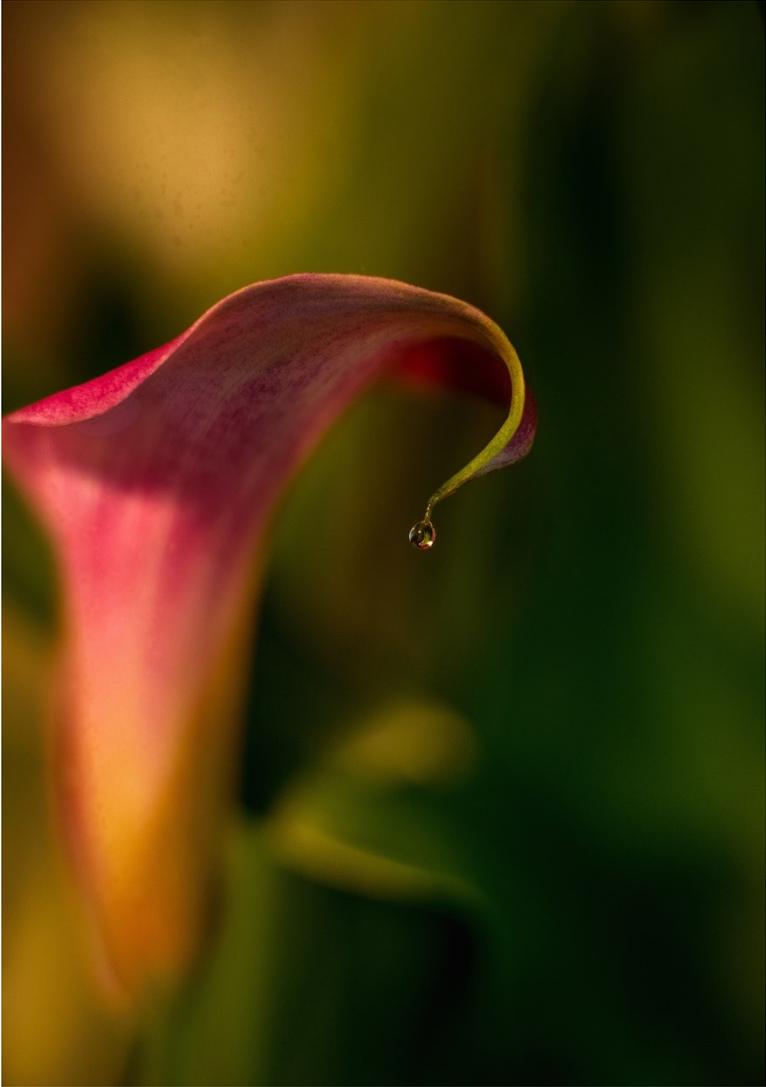
Where do we go from here? I can't see the qualities of these somewhat rare (and certainly expensive) industrial lenses making their way into the popular

photography market. They will continue appealing to a niche market as long as scanners, copy machines, and projectors need lenses.

There are some signs that the qualities of these scanning lenses are beginning to appear as industry lenses with a wider gamut. The Schneider Macro Varon APO f/4.5 lens is an example of an industry-able lens that has high quality over much wider magnification range. Perhaps lenses like the Macro Varon will begin to seep into close-up and macro photography or some company may choose to make such a lens just for general photography as opposed for industrial applications.

There is a sea change going on as regards the color excellence of lenses, trending toward better quality and more highly corrected lenses being available. It's about time! However, I'm still waiting for high tide.

[Photo by me using the Nikkor "O" CRT lens.]



THE TRUTH IS THE FUTURE

April 7, 2018

Snow and more snow here in Big Rapids, Michigan. Margaret and I are taking care of our four-year-old granddaughter Iris for a couple of days, which is fun.

As for me, I continue to be on a bit of a tear lately with photography, as in tearing through a veil of veneer to get at the reality underneath. It's hard to explain and another way to perhaps say this might be that my nostalgia for the crispness of the Zen approach to living in an ordinary way is giving way to the reality, which, as they say around here, "And that is a good thing."

The odd fundamentalist strain in me for the straight and the narrow (perhaps held out of fear) is giving way to the broader plain of acceptance and inclusion, the Mahayana. As William Blake, one of my favorite poets, said:

"After dinner I asked Isaiah to favor the world with his lost works. He said none of equal value was lost."

In the waterfall of time, not everything goes in one ear and out the other, although most does. Every once in a while, some thought or idea swings out of the current of the mindstream and snags my mind. It imprints and that imprint takes repeated viewing on my part to absorb what in the world it could mean. There is something in it meant for me and I can't get the imprint out of my mind until I absorb it.

I like to think about these imprints as something like sacred scrolls that have been placed deep enough in my consciousness that they won't fade without my first working with them for a while. Somehow, there is meaning there that has its own half-life. It takes time to exhaust; it won't just go away.

Or, it's like one of those popular radio songs that somehow my mind hears before I do; I can't get enough of it. The song "Happy" by Pharrell Williams was one of those for me. I first heard it while going for my daily "senior walk" up at the indoor track at 6 a.m. at our local university. For \$1 seniors can walk around the track in the mornings.

Anyway, I was walking the track each day and I heard these sounds, kind of in the back of my mind. Whenever that tune came on, I would sort-of wake up a bit to the music. Eventually, I heard some words like "A room without a roof" and sentences like that. After what must have been weeks I stopped at the monitor's desk and asked a young student. What is that song? They said it was "Happy" by Pharrell Williams.

I went home, found the song on YouTube, where it had been played a gazillion times and played it myself a bunch more. I have no idea why it caught in my attention as it did. Well, it IS a brilliant song. It took me months to wear it out until I did not need to listen to it any longer. I hate to say it, but it did make me happy. LOL. Anyway, you get the idea.

There are not just tunes that grab us in life, but also thoughts, words, and deeds that for some reason imprint our consciousness. They become fixed points in the mind, shining reference points or pole stars that we refer to again and again for some kind of meaning or perhaps guidance. At least I do. They are directional.

How are they exhausted? Well, it takes time and repeated viewings, bringing them to mind over and over and over again. I love the line by the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins "Suck any sense from that who can." That is how I react to these "imprints," gradually

pulling any sense out of them I can until I somehow have enough. There are some puzzles in my mind that have been going on for decades.

This whole idea of persistence, of “lasting,” the things that last, is fascinating. We all know that the truth lasts. It will be there after everything else has passed away. Like the fixed stars in the sky at night, we can live by and orient ourselves by the truth.

As I like to say, the truth is the future because it will last until then.

PHOTOGRAPHY: GIVE ME A LITTLE ROOM PLEASE

April 7, 2018

I sometimes get asked why I consider myself a close-up photographer and not simply a “macro” photographer. What’s the difference? Well, in the popular use of the term, there is no difference, but technically a macro photographer takes photos at a reproduction ratio of 1:1 (one-to-one) or higher, so that at 1:1 what you see in the viewfinder is the same size as the frame of the subject you are photographing.

And a close-up photographer takes a wider view, anything less than 1:1, but of course still close enough not to be considered a landscape photo. I know; it’s like counting the number of angels on the head of a pin, but for me there is a difference that has real meaning, which I will explain.

And it’s all about “context,” adding more space, thus giving the subjects a little more room, because it’s not all just about “who” they are. I’m not interested in only identifying the creature; that’s the province of nature field guides, which I used to subscribe to for many years when I wanted my photographs to look like those in field guides, but that changed.

To me now, it’s not so much only who or what species this is as much as it is the fact that here is someone (another sentient being) who wants to live and be happy just as to I do and avoid suffering just the same as me. We are very different, but in the end, not so different. Having respect for all kinds of beings is natural for me.

Because of this shifting viewpoint and my increasingly identifying with all creatures (all beings), focusing with the camera lens in on them too tightly became less important and less interesting to me. IMO, it blocks out too much of their life story from being told.

Yes, you philosophers out there, I know that no matter how close we get, even at 1:1 reproduction ratio and higher yet, it is possible to have a little context, but that “little” is too little for me. I want to tell much more of each being’s story than that and I’d like a little more space please. It’s my personal opinion. My way (not everyone’s, as I just pointed out) of telling stories and adding context is to move back just a little from what is called macro photography (1:1), back into close-up photography. Give me some more room please to set the scene, to add what I consider some context that better tells the story.

So, that is why I call myself a close-up photographer and not a macro photographer (although I do shoot macro sometimes) and I certainly am not what is known as a micro-photographer, working with subjects at the level of microscope magnification. To see the closeness that I’m looking for, I need to stand back, if that makes sense.

To sum this up, for me to be happy with my photos, everything has to have at least some context, but is it enough context for us to figure out questions like not only who they are (species) and where they are, but also perhaps how are they? Now, I realize that anthropomorphizing little beetles and bugs overmuch is just another form of vanity. I don’t like that either. However, I do like to give each being, however small, a little dignity, at least enough to communicate, as I said earlier that they too have a life and want to be

happy and they too don't want to suffer. IMO, all beings share this and show it.

And, I could add that they also sometimes enjoy living, perhaps as we do. They like looking around, breathing, and having a life. Although as a trained naturalist, I well know that many (if not most) wild animals live in constant fear of being killed and eaten, while at the same time having to relentlessly search for something to eat, often other beings.

And so, that's the reasoning behind my interest in close-up photography, not that we have to have a reason. I just happen to have one and that's it.



KARMA MIRROR

April 9, 2018

[What I am doing these days? Well, I went out to the small cottage where we refinished the floors and re-introduced furniture like a chest of drawers and a bedframe, etc. I was careful to put soft pads under all furniture feet. So, it is coming together. And I am down again in the studio, organizing stuff for a huge sale coming up at some point. It's slow going as I don't have a lot of help, but I'm working on it.]

"Tiptoeing through the tulips" I am not doing, since winter has not given much of an inch yet. But with karma, it's more like tiptoeing through the cow pasture that I find myself doing more of the time. It's a little vulgar, but the analogy that comes to mind is that life is like rushing into the cow pasture, only gradually realizing where we are, and then carefully tiptoeing out.

Or we could go with that old quote from the poet H.W. Longfellow:

"Though the mills of God grind slowly, yet they grind exceeding small; though with patience He stands waiting, with exactness grinds He all."

Karma is like that; it is much more exacting than we imagine. Someone once suggested that in a science article it said that the dance of ants on a hot place varied exactly with the heat of the plate. The higher the heat, the faster they danced. Karma is also like that. Or, what goes around, comes around. Another one I like is "Too soon old and too late smart." We could go on all day, but that's the idea.

Karma is as exacting as we are. I came up with an image that works for me. "As smart as I think I am,

even I can't sneak up on a mirror." That's how exacting karma is. We probably agree to forget what we find so hard to remember, because it's painful to have to keep in mind. As I suggested, karma is an exact mirror of our actions, every thought, word, and deed. That's my understanding.

ARE REALIZED BEINGS STILL HUMAN?

April 10, 2018

Over the years I have been asked if rinpoches (high lamas) suffer from things like depression and are upset, as Shakespeare said, by “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.” Or, are rinpoches like pole stars in the night sky, fixed forever in the firmament of our mind for guidance? Then again, are they people like us, just with much more realization? In other words, are rinpoches allowed to be human or do we prefer that they stay up on the pedestal where we are used to having them?

I can't say that I know the answer to those questions, but I have an inkling. I have not spent that much “personal time” with the many rinpoches I have been around all of these years. Well, I HAVE spent a fair amount of time, like traveling to China and Tibet, with my teacher, but he always seems the same no matter what happens or where we are. LOL.

I have also spent considerable time with various Buddhist monks and nuns, mostly monks and they all seem quite human to me, facing all of the various ups and downs, problems, conundrums, and so on that we all do. So, perhaps at some point in their development, like caterpillars turning into butterflies, a monk or nun turns into a rinpoche and flies away. Yet, I doubt it.

I can't say, but my guess is that what separates monks and nuns from rinpoches is realization of one kind or another. And by “realization” here I mean the realization that comes from practices like Mahamudra Meditation and the like. Throughout Buddhism,

“Realization” is what marks the students from the teachers.

I should mention that the key event called “Recognition” of the mind’s true nature is a defining moment where, if we want to see it that way, the caterpillar turns into the butterfly.

So, the question becomes: does realization make someone impervious to ups and downs and all of that flesh is heir to? Does it make rinpoches somehow more than just human? And again, my guess is that rinpoches are every bit as human as you or me; they are just able to manage it all better. Perhaps they realize something that you and I haven’t yet. After all, if “Realization” is the whole point of dharma practice, it must mean something. Something must be realized. What would that be?

Someone asked me if rinpoches (and the like) become depressed? I can’t say, because I’m not a rinpoche, but you can be sure that they are exposed to all the reasons that cause depression that we are. Keep in mind that Buddhism does not have a convenient heaven that we exit to. As my first dharma teacher used to say to me, over and over: “Michael, this is it!” And by that he meant the here and the now. Forget about looking elsewhere.

To my understanding, the heart and pith of all dharma teachings involves realizing that Samsara and Nirvana (enlightenment) are connate, which means they are two sides of the same coin. We don’t exit Samsara and then arrive at Nirvana, but rather Nirvana is the realization of the true nature of Samsara and not a separate place to get to. Enlightenment is not a place like heaven. To me, this concept of being connate is so profound that it’s hard

to even get my thinking-mind around it, much less to realize it.

So, I imagine that rinpoches have good days and bad days, just as we do. It's how they handle them that may be different. Certainly, rinpoches have grasped the essential teachings and thus realize how to handle depression or whatever contrary forces confront us. That does not mean that they don't have to actually handle them. I am sure they do, just like all of us.

I think of this as like breathing. We don't reach a point where we stop breathing until we die. As I understand it, realization is the same way. It's not a one-off. Realization is not just a state, but a process that, like breathing, we keep doing. We continue to realize; there is no choice.

So, I imagine that if I could sit down with a high rinpoche and just talk about life, we would be talking about the same thing. We would both be human. Only, the rinpoche would have more tools, more experience, and especially more realization as to how to handle whatever hits the fan.

That does not mean that stuff hitting the fan stops when you're a rinpoche. Not likely, because this is Samsara. Anyway, as far as I can tell, that fan is still getting plenty of action. LOL.

Anyway, I never thought rinpoches were more-than-human, but I do believe they are more human in the ways that I would like to be.

SIGNS OF DHARMA REALIZATION

April 11, 2018

Yesterday, my friend Ed Falis asked something like how would we differentiate ourselves from, for example, a rinpoche. I'm not sure exactly what he meant, but apparently he was asking that after we achieve what is called "Recognition" of the true nature of the mind (which is no small feat!), how would we differentiate ourselves from a rinpoche? We should all have that problem! LOL. Here are his exact words:

"Having passed through recognition, and gradually working realization, how can you differentiate from a rinpoche? Not saying that it not a reach, but what would you consider a sign? (And lest there be a misunderstanding, I do not feel I am anywhere near whatever that differentiating point is). "

OK. In trying to answer Ed, I have a couple of things to say. First, to my understanding, achieving "Recognition" is the first "real" realization a dharma student experiences after many years of working with the purification practices. It is only after recognition that we begin our actual path or road to enlightenment. And keep in mind that "Recognition" is not enlightenment, but as mentioned, just the basic ground of realization we need to work toward enlightenment in a progressive and successful way.

So, if we do achieve Recognition, then how would we differ from a rinpoche? The answer (to the best of my knowledge) is that we would differ by degree and by stability. Recognition is like crossing the bar, finally going through a mountain pass, or being pushed over the dam. We have passed a crucial event but still have to learn to stabilize ourselves enough to move

forward, but (or so the texts say) we no longer can fall backward to non-realization.

This, because that's what realization is, "realizing" something. Realization is non-temporal (just as an experience is temporal), but to use an analogy, with "Recognition" we realize for the first time both the forest and the trees. Recognition is a one-time threshold event in a dharma practice.

We could write or find books about this event known as Recognition (in Rinzai Zen Buddhism it is called "Kensho") and no amount of words would ever successfully describe it, so there is that little problem. If it could be described in words so that we could get it, everyone would have achieved recognition long ago. So, as they say, go fish.

My other comment to Ed is that it is not very useful to try and put the cart before the horse. I would not worry about what we will do AFTER we attain "Recognition" because recognition itself is in fact realizing what to do. Without recognition, we can't really do too much other than get ready for it though the purification practices.

Instead, I would be more concerned with how to recognize the true nature of the mind. That itself is confounding and the very concept mostly just precipitates more rationalization on our part, trying to convince ourselves that we have achieved Recognition or have not. I have many memories of trying to rationalize why I must have achieved Recognition, all of which were just wishful thinking.

If we have ANY question as to whether we have achieved recognition or not, then IMO we have not and that by definition of what realization is. Who are we trying to convince? LOL.

That last statement is a kind of ring-pass-not through which we can't pass without, well, passing through it, without realizing "Recognition," thus the pool of fish I mention below.

More useful IMO is looking into how we can achieve Recognition. Personally, I feel it is very difficult to achieve what is called "Recognition" of the true nature of the mind because a number of factors have to coincide in order for that to take place.

Before Recognition, after the Preliminary Practices have sufficiently purified our obscurations, we are like a pool of fish swimming around with one another, but unable to find the way farther upstream. We are waiting and go round and round, yet have no idea where we should go, what it would be like to realize, or how to manage it. In other words, before "Recognition," we are still just swimming around in that pool of pre-recognition with plenty of company, so to speak.

In the past, and it could be the distant past, perhaps it was easier to move forward out of the waiting-loop we are in and somehow graduate to achieve Recognition. I would like to believe that it is just a steady progression to an end and perhaps it is for some. However, from what little I know about it, there are real quantum leaps required and these don't grow on trees. Perhaps our very need gets desperate enough to eventually precipitate events in our life that are challenging or life-stopping enough to finally get our attention and invoke Recognition.

I believe that some energy leap or event is required to make the sudden transition to Recognition, to snap us out of our distractions. I am not an expert, but it is hard for me to believe that at this point in our practice it is still a matter of just continually putting one foot in

front of the other. I feel that we may have to be shaken out of our current stasis in order to eventuate realization. I wish I felt otherwise, but to the best of my knowledge that is the case.

However, it is my opinion that the degree or level of event required to precipitate such a quantum energy leap would be outside any foreseen events, at least for most of us. Which leaves us with the unforeseen or surprise events that life offers, events powerful enough to shake us out of our distractions long enough to, with the help of an authentic teacher, actually grasp the true nature of the mind. That is what I am talking about here.

In my own experience, such as it is, the level of energy-event apparently needed to get my attention requires a profound shock to the system, one not simply of business as usual. I can't see most of us volunteering for such an event, so perhaps we wait and wait and wait until life naturally delivers one to us in the form of an accident or an untoward event of one kind or another. When that event occurs, with the increased awareness that can accompany such events, we may get shook loose from our ordinary distractions, take advantage of this shock to our system and use it for the quantum energy leap we need.

You can't just tell someone to go out and get hit by a bus or have someone close to them die or lose their job or whatever. If you read the Buddhist texts, they usually describe three general types of students. There are those who just get it upon even hearing the instructions one time. No need to practice, but these types are very, very rare. None of us have probably ever seen one of this type.

Then there is a second type that gets it by fits and starts, goes up and down, in and out of it, but eventually settles down and achieves Recognition.

And third is a wider group of folks who just work away at it until, like the Sun comes up, it dawns on them. Most dharma texts are geared to this third type, very deliberately progressing, because that covers most of us.

For those of us in the second and third groups, by practicing and study, eventually we (hopefully) get into the general ballpark of Recognition, but still we are out of synch. We are right there, but still distracted by what we have traditionally been distracted by and therefore remain beside the point. We still miss the point even though it is right there in front of us all the time. Nothing new. We have done this, so rinpoches point out, for eternity up to now. LOL.

This is where the haiku come in and all the Zen stories of being banged on the head by our teacher's shoe or whatever. Something has to distract us from our distractions, jar us loose long enough for us to let go of our distractions and just recognize the nature of the mind that's right there. There are many, many stories of this kind. They make good reading, but I'm not sure how much they help.

One of these stories that my rinpoche told us (and I have heard different versions of it) was that of the young tulku (reincarnate lama), the head of his class and the incarnate lama for monastery, but he had yet to recognize the nature of his mind. I guess this was somewhat of an embarrassment for his monastery and sangha.

Anyway, so the story goes, one time he came into shrine hall for a puja that was about to begin and went

to take his elevated seat. As he sat down, quite by accident, he let out a huge fart that echoed through the room and was heard by everyone. In Tibet, farting is considered very uncool, at least in public. The young tulku was so totally shocked and embarrassed that in that moment he finally recognized the nature of his mind.

As I always used to joke with myself is that I was sure that I could manage the fart, but perhaps not the recognition. LOL. And unfortunately, I believe the kind of shock necessary in this day and age we are in now may be more serious than that story. Something has to shock us out of our everyday habitual distractions long enough that we don't just snap back into them. Instead, in that evacuation of our distractions, so to speak, we finally manage to identify or recognize the actual nature of our own mind. When that happens, we can't go back. Recognition, which is a realization, is forever. The toothpaste does not go back in the tube.

As a bit of encouragement, in the great many dharma teachings that I have attended over the last forty years or so, one comment that is ever repeated is that any sudden surprise or shock is a moment in which we could glimpse or recognize the true nature of the mind. So, it's not far away and only closed to us by our own habitual distractions.

What it takes to shock us out of our current state of distraction may be small or it may be great. I'm afraid that in this day and age it has to be great, at least greater than we might like to invite upon on ourselves. Sorry to drone on, but hopefully this discussion might be helpful.

Please do ask questions so that we can be clear.

DHARMA: OFF-WORLD DENIED

April 12, 2018

I have consistently tried to make it clear that dharma realization and enlightenment is not a state we escape to, but rather a process we perfect while very much still in this world of Samsara. As westerners, we are so ingrained with the concept of heaven as a place we go to that it can be frustrating to discover that we are not going anywhere other than here, even if we get enlightened. LOL.

Instead, it is our view of “here” that changes. We can forget about our ticket off-world to vacation on the planet Fhloston as in the movie “The Fifth Element.” Any enlightenment we are undergo will be done right here on the spot in dirty-old Samsara. No change of venue for us.

That little point took me a long time to take in, accept, and get my mind around. I certainly was all set, through my upbringing as a Catholic, to get out of here and take up my little cottage in heaven, if I warrant it. To suddenly have my off-world pass revoked by telling me that any enlightenment I might reach will be done right here and now was (for me) some tough love. I didn't know where to begin with that process.

After all, I had left a messy trail behind me by just the process of living, one that threatened to completely envelope and smother me. Cleaning that up so that it was livable (as opposed to leaving it in my wake) was more than I could imagine, much less bear. It was like a butterfly that was told that it could never leave its cocoon and fly away. LOL. The whole concept makes the idea of enlightenment more incredible,

enlightenment while “in situation,” standing in place, so to speak.

In other words, Buddhists do without heaven as an escape hatch from this very samsaric world. We are stuck where we are until we ourselves change it. As they say, “Who woulda’ thunk it?” My first dharma teacher used to repeat to me, almost daily, that “This is it!” Sometimes he would say “This is hell, but we each have to make our heaven in one little corner of it.”

Hear, hear!

Taking life “neat,” so to speak, was something I had never thought of. I first saw it in the Karma Kagyu Lineage Prayer (which I recite every day), where the following line is kind of the apex of the verses.

“Grant your blessings that the inseparability of samsara and nirvana be realized.”

What was that? Come again? Just what did that verse say? Pray for blessings that we realize that samsara and nirvana are inseparable? Are they inseparable? I never thought of that. Now, that IMO is some advanced dharma. It’s almost unfathomable, meaning hard to hear.

It was really a kick in the pants to realize that I had to clean up my act, there being no other act I was going to inherit, so I best be cleaning up the mess I made getting to where I am today. And I flash on something my first dharma teacher taught me about the 30-year Saturn Return. He said:

“We spend our first 30 years getting out of the womb, our second 30-years repairing the damage we made getting out, and the third 30-years, if we should live so long, taking an equal part in the creation of life itself.”

And so, the realization or enlightenment we yearn for will bring with it total responsibility, the ability to respond to anything and everything acutely. In fact, it is inescapable. Just as we have been a child of life, we become the mother of everyone and every being becomes our child that we embrace. Read that last sentence carefully.

DHARMA: SKIN IN THE GAME

April 13, 2018

We've all got skin in the game of life, at least our own. How much beyond that probably varies, but most of us would include our family and those we love. After that, who knows? We should.

For Buddhists, at least theoretically, ALL sentient beings deserve our care and love. Theory is a good idea (LOL), but that's just thinking about it; it's not having skin in the game. With beings like our kids and family, we each have some skin in that game. Whether we have thin or thick skin varies, but we all probably have some.

Does our "skin in the game" list extend to friends, neighbors, townspeople, and on and on? Where do we draw the line? Only you know.

I can remember when a very high rinpoche visited our center and we took him out to a lake cottage that we had at the time. That year the Gypsy Moths had taken over and almost devastated all the trees and greenery down by the lake's edge. It was terrible. But here was rinpoche down by the decimated trees (which were covered with worms) blessing all the caterpillars, touching and blowing on them. Hmmm, sentient beings; lots of them. That was a lesson right there.

To Buddhists, a sentient being is a sentient being, no matter how large or small they are. Here in America, we like to think of a hierarchy of beings from mankind on down to the lowliest worms and microbes. Thus a man and wife should get on Noah's ark before a dog before a fruit fly, etc. Yet, that is not how the Buddhists see it. And their concept takes a little getting used to.

The Buddhist view is that every being, large or small, is a consciousness (like us) that has been reborn, all relatively equal to one another. So, the consciousness of a beetle is the same as our consciousness, which goes against our western hierarchical view of a priority pass to getting into Noah's ark that I just mentioned.

Yet, the Buddhists point out that the consciousness of each "being" is of the same order. What differs (and the only difference to keep in mind) is the physical capabilities of a specific physical body. In other words, when we see a gnat, there but for karma, go you and I. Inside the gnat (like a puppet master pulling strings) is a complete consciousness like you and me, just working with the limitations of a gnat's physical body. There is a consciousness in there, but with the communication skills and appetites of a gnat. That idea.

I have to admit that this is a radical concept, at least I thought so when I first encountered it. In other words, the gnat is right there (a conscious being like us), but animating a gnat's body and capabilities. Some quirk of fate and karma ended in their being reborn as a gnat and living and dying a gnat's life. There is a complete being in that gnat looking out, but unable to do anything but "gnat" things. They can't wave hello, so to speak.

This is why, when I traveled in Tibet, I would see everyone very gently brushing mosquitoes off their arms or blowing them off with a puff of breath. To a Buddhist, each sentient being is sacred, at least as sacred as we are. And like us, every being wants to be happy and live and does not want to die or suffer.

To Americans, this is a very foreign take on beings. Sure, some of us love animals almost as much (or

more!) than human beings, so we are kind of half-way there, but we still don't have the correct view or attitude. It probably is too patronizing on our part. That attitude should be more one of equivalency, not simply kindness to animals, etc.

As I mentioned, for me this was a radical concept, one I had to kind of percolate with for quite a while before I could get my mind around it. If we do grasp this teaching, it changes how we treat every other sentient being.

I'm not a Christian, but this quote is worth considering when it comes to sentient beings: "There but for the grace of god go I."

NEW MOON: WHEN LIFE GETS THIN

April 15, 2018

[This blog is time sensitive due to the New Moon tomorrow night, so I should run it now.]

Life gets tenuous from time to time, but it gets thin most regularly around the time of and just before the New Moon each month. One of the more useful studies I ever made was of the monthly lunar cycle. I spent years studying cycles of all kinds and the Moon cycle is the mother of them all. I know it well. I still forget about it from time to time, but if I remember or Margaret reminds me, it explains so much. "Oh, it's New Moon!"

We're in one of those New Moon times right now. The New Moon is tomorrow, Sunday April 15, 2018 at 9:57 PM EST. I'm not going to explain the lunar cycle for the umpteenth time in this blog. I wrote a whole book about it here for those interested and it's a free download. If you care enough, you can read 447 pages worth here. I did my homework; you may have to do some too.

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/MotherMoon.pdf>

In this blog, I just want to focus on these three days before the New Moon we are in now, especially that 29th day, which we enter tonight. These are the hardest days for most folks, myself included. This is when life can get a little transparent or thin.

By thin, I mean that our resolve and forward motion can kind of just stall out and seem to evaporate. That thread of life that we habitually follow, the one that lures us on from moment to moment gets fragile, thins, and maybe just runs out for a time, usually until sometime after the New Moon takes place. Then, like

a heartbeat, we can hear it again and proceed to pick up on the lifeline of what may be just our habitual distractions.

Nevertheless, the time just before the New Moon (like now) is an opportunity to observe our mindstream each month. We can't avoid it, so we might as well just make it a feature and become aware of what it means for us.

As mentioned, most often New Moon can be a time when the thread of life that we follow so religiously just kind of runs out for a spell. As mentioned, reality gets thin to the point that we can perhaps almost see through it; we are not used to feeling so empty or looking emptiness in the face like this. My usual life is more solid or at least opaque. I can't see through it and I have no sense of reaching the end of any line or thread. Yet, before New Moon it can become more like a hologram -- transparent.

When I find myself running out of clock-ticking time and having trouble find the thread I have been following for weeks, that's often when I realize "Oh well. It's New Moon time again." That explains it. It's then that I take a deep breath, stop searching, stop insisting on anything solid, and just wait until the New Moon has passed and the wheel of life starts turning round again.

It's not long after the New Moon that I'm once again interweaving myself with the threads of my life and having a sense of linearity and moving forward once more. But for those few days each month (or whatever part of them I can become aware of), what I'm describing here, becomes a cul-de-sac or eddy in the river of time, a cove in my mindstream, like it or not.

I tend to find New Moon time just a little scary. Everything seems so empty, so devoid of meaning. For a short time, I'm out of the swing of linear time and washing up like a piece of driftwood on the shores of eternity or at least emptiness. My response, perhaps unfortunately, is just to wait it out, hoping for better times and for the New Moon to come around and move on so that I can pick up the threads of life again and busy myself saying the rosary of life.

Yet, the Buddhist teachings say that at New and Full Moon times our inner winds and channels are in the most perfect alignment. And, if it happens to be an eclipse of the moon or sun, that alignment is even more profound.

So, instead of hiding my head in the sand like an ostrich at New Moon times, it would be better to relax and take it all in and better acquaint myself with the mysteries of time or the lack thereof. When life gets a little thin and my direction-beacon fades out or gets faint, I should look around and try to understand what I'm experiencing. This too is part of life, its emptiness. There is something sacred going on at New Moon, if I can just relax and get to know it.

THE DARK OF THE MOON

April 15, 2018

I remember being wheeled into the operating room for some minor heart surgery. There I was surrounded by all these folks with green gowns and hair nets. Then I don't remember anything until I woke up. I lost consciousness, but I still was there, somehow conscious in the background. New Moon each month is something like that. We have to let go on some level long enough to start again, to take a new grip on it all. That's the New Moon.

This does not seem to happen on the other (and opposite) event, the Full Moon. Perhaps there is another form of letting go, but this time it is more like stepping on the accelerator. Full Moon is not a lacuna or void but a loss of consciousness by surfeit, overabundance.

The entire lunar cycle is, as they say, a cycle of phases we pass through, over and over again, each month. Sometimes I joke to myself that the monthly lunar cycle might better be called "The Fazes of the Moon." LOL. We go round and round.

I have noticed that many, if not most, people have little to no awareness of lunar phases, but I tend to feel that is like having no pulse or heartbeat or when the nurse can't find a vein for blood work.

Awareness of any kind is something we may have to develop. Buddhism, as I have repeatedly pointed out here, is all about awareness. Just as Shakespeare said "Ripeness is all," we could say "Awareness is all."

As an astrologer for many decades, I find it almost embarrassing that here in the West we have the four

lunar quarters each month, while in Asia they divide the lunar cycle into 30 lunar days, each with its own quality. That, my friends, is a testimony to our lack of awareness, is it not?

So, if the Full Moon is a mini-death by excess (a crush out), the New Moon, as mentioned, is one of loss or too little (the fade out.) And this Ferris wheel of lunar phases, like Samsara in general, is as close to an eternal cycle as we get. It never stops.

When I was younger, I used to see if I could go through the lunar month all the way without losing awareness of the moment. Good luck! I never really made it or made it with any dignity.

“A-Tisket, a-Tasket,
A green and yellow basket,
I wrote a letter to my mom
And on the way I dropped it.
I dropped it, I dropped it.”

This is what is so egalitarian about the Moon cycle; it's a circle and every degree of a circle is essential and has its day. What varies is our awareness of each moment and phase of the Moon. And some phases or lunar days are emphasized more than others, in particular the New and Full Moons, followed by the Quarter Moons, and on and on until each lunar day or even degree has its say.

But when all is said and done, it is the New Moon and those three days that precede it that apparently we know the least about. And this because, as mentioned, we kind of drift out for a moment, get too far from the shore of linearity to measure. We lose count.

And now I'm speaking to myself in particular. At almost 77 years of age it is time I stopped holding my

breath around the New Moon and waiting for it to pass. For all I know, all the mysteries of the world await me if I don't just stick my head in the sand at these times. LOL.

Certainly, the rinpoche I have worked with for decades made it a point to come to our center and give a teaching perhaps just for me, because he knows I am an astrologer. In that, he clearly pointed out that the New and Full of the moon were the two times each month that our inner winds and channels (think "chakras") are most perfectly aligned. It is on those days that it is best to set aside a little time for observation of our mindstream. And if the New or Full Moon is an eclipse, our alignment and sensitivity is multiplied many times over.

In Tibet, at least originally, they did not have weekends (Saturdays and Sundays) off. There was no artificial end of the week. Instead, they had certain days each month that were set aside for observation, when perhaps the best thing we can do is take a little time out because perhaps then we were "out of time," meaning outside of time for the moment. Chief among them were the New and Full Moon days.

Just as some of us say our rosary or mala, round after round, we all can say (or become aware of) the phases of the Moon and the lunar days, because we have no choice. For all we know, the richest and most fertile time each month may well be the New Moon, the time when we are naturally a bit too far from the shore of regularity.

The New Moon is tonight, Sunday April 15, 2018 at 9:57 PM EST.

If New Moon is somehow a time of loss (loss of time) or emptiness, instead of battering down the hatches,

perhaps we can learn to throw open the doors of
change and experience the emptiness itself arising.

This little poem-like occurred. Let's call it:

NEW MOON

At the dark of the Moon,
With rain and high winds outside,
Branches and the tops of trees,
Sway and dance against the skyline.

SOME IMPORTANT DHARMA CONCEPTS

April 16, 2018

If the main point of dharma practice is recognizing the true nature of the mind and the subsequent process of realization, it helps to have some idea of what realization is all about. There are several common terms used in the various dharma practices that are important to understand. They are:

In the PRELIMINARY PRACTICES

Understanding

Experience

In the ADVANCED PRACTICES

Recognition

Realization

Enlightenment.

UNDERSTANDING: Here in the West, “Understanding” is something we all know. This refers to intellectual and conceptual understanding. Conceptualization, intellectualization, and mentation depend on whether they make sense or not. And sense is a physical experience.

Just as words have to make sense in order to be understood, concepts in general have to make enough sense for us to experience or know what they “mean,” what they are pointing at in the world of experience. Intellectual understanding by itself seldom qualifies as experience, although many folks are confused about this, witness the pundits who don’t yet know what they are talking about, but talk about it anyway.

I get tons of emails and messages with questions (which sound more like declarations) that are as intellectual as they appear: devoid of any sense or

real experience. I hesitate to encourage pure intellection by having a conversation with them and it is difficult to just gently tell them that they do not know (have actual experience) with what they are talking about. As I understand it, we can't have realization without experience.

EXPERIENCE: "Experience," including spiritual experience, is real enough, but still is not realization. Experiences come and go. One day we have them, but a week later we don't anymore. They are not permanent. We should all know exactly what I am pointing at here. Many times, during an interview with Rinpoche, I would tell him of some powerful spiritual experiences that I have had and his comment always was "That was just an experience. It has no particular importance. Keep on practicing." The sense world we live in is the world of experience.

My first dharma teacher had this way of speaking about experiences, using a circus analogy. "If you spend all your time in the sideshow, the main tent will be gone." To me, that says it all.

RECOGNITION: "Recognition" (for most) is a one-time event that separates the preliminary purification practices from the more advanced practices. It refers to actually or finally recognizing the true nature of the mind as pointed out to us by an authentic teacher. "Recognition" is a realization, perhaps our first. We would have to go into a rather lengthy discussion to actually communicate about "Recognition," which is a example of a realization, rather than a general term.

REALIZATION: "Realization" is the sign (or successful result) of the advanced practices like Insight Meditation, Mahamudra Meditation, Dzogchen, and so on. Realization is non-dual, not dependent on time, and characterizes the process that eventually lead to

enlightenment. Realization is a “process” and not simply a “state” we arrive at. It’s not a place like “heaven” is said to be a place.

ENLIGHTENMENT: “Enlightenment” is the final result of realization as a perfected process. Enlightenment is not a place or state we reach but the perfect process of realization itself. Just as we don’t stop breathing to live, so we don’t stop realizing as enlightened beings.

DHARMA: “Dharma” is the method the historical Buddha taught that points out the path or method to recognition, realization, and enlightenment. The dharma exists to be used and has no particular value other than that.

If the above is interesting, I can go on in the next blog to discussing realization.

REALIZING DHARMA

April 17, 2018

Realization is central to the dharma as taught by the historical Buddha. I have mentioned it many times in my blogs, but what is realization? What is it to realize? I have pointed out that realization is a process and not a state, so that tells us something. And I have suggested that realization (in the dharma sense of this term) is non-dualistic and thus in some way not temporal or samsaric, although realization happens in our experience of time. As the great dharma pith-teachings state:

“In the midst of experience, realization can arise.”

We can distinguish between what we call awareness from what we call realization, although modern definitions are not fixed but quite fluid. In the dictionary definitions, realization can mean the act of becoming more aware of something, but also the fulfillment of something as in achieving completion. To me, these connotations are two sides of the same coin.

In dharma terms, awareness of something does not mean that we necessarily realize what we are aware of. Some state that realization can be gradual rather than sudden, but it seems to me that even with gradual realization there is the point where we realize that we are realizing and it is that point I am getting at here.

And while our experience of awareness can ebb and flow, “Realization” does not. Once we realize something, we always realize it. It clearly stays in our mind. And while we experience realization, “realization” is not just another experience that comes

and then goes. Dharmically speaking, realization has a very particular connotation in dharma terminology.

For one, “Realization” is non-dualistic, meaning it does not have a subject (me) in here and an object (you) out there. With realization we are entirely one with the moment and fully engaged or extended in the process of realizing. I’m sorry to offer a tautology (with its recursivity), but by definition we can’t use our usual dualisms of subject and object to properly describe realization.

If I show you how a light-switch turns on a lamp, you are experiencing my demonstration, but there is a moment when you realize how to turn on a light and never have to be shown how to again. That is realization. In other words, realization is instantaneous and permanent. Of course, realizing how to turn on a light is one thing, while realizing the true nature of the mind is quite another, but they are both realizations.

In the Tibetan dharma teachings, one analogy that is often used is that of recognizing someone in the midst of a crowd. We don’t later un-recognize them. “Recognition” of the true nature of the mind is a child or example of realization, often defined as the first global realization a dharma student has.

In another analogy, “experience” is like riding in a car, but realization is like driving the car you are riding in.

Another analogy is like those old figure/ground paintings where embedded in one image or painting is a hidden image, one that has to be pointed out to us in order to see it, but once seen can be seen at will from then on. Experience is the first painting and realization is like seeing the embedded image in the original image.

We realize things on the mundane level all the time, so it should not be difficult for us to understand what realization is. Globalizing realization as in “Spiritual realization,” where the whole enchilada is realized, is no different, only just way more encompassing.

Although realization occurs in our experience through time, in a sense it is timeless. We often realize things, although they are usually mundane realizations.

When we realize something as vast as the nature of our own mind once and for all, call it a “spiritual” realization, that too is permanent. It is also totally inclusive of everything (including our entire view) rather than just a mundane realization like turning on a lamp.

A spiritual realization (like recognizing the actual nature of our own mind) is permanent and its totality is persuasive, definitive, and liberating. We realize the nature of everything at once. It is an exclamation-mark after a lifetime of questions.

AMERICAN DHARMA

April 17, 2018

We American dharma students are like the 12 disciples waiting for an enlightened American to come along and, of course, doing our best in the meantime. I am one of many students here in North America that came up doing our practice in Tibetan and not in English. I even learned Tibetan script, but never really translated much without a lot of dictionaries and some help. LOL. Nevertheless, I made the effort.

And trying to get inside the Tibetan language and culture was part and parcel of our practice, although to quote one of my favorite lines from the poet William Butler Yeats:

“The grass cannot but keep the form where the mountain hair as lain.”

Which means, that doing our practice in Tibetan was a polite gesture of our sincerity, but nothing that will continue into the next generation. The spirit that was inherent in Tibetan Buddhism will transmigrate and develop anew here in the West, but using our culture and languages.

Many high rinpoches, including H.E. Tai Situ Rinpoche and my own teacher the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, have pointed out to me that practicing in Tibetan is like treading water while we wait for an enlightened American to come along and write out sadhanas for us in our own language and culture.

In other words, those westerners who currently practice in Tibetan is like putting one foot in the door of the future, while waiting for the other shoe to fall. LOL.

As for me, my history as an autodidact, one who teaches himself, has stood me in good stead with dharma training because under the direction of my Tibetan teacher I have done my best to make the most out of this opportunity to learn the dharma.

By my training in self-learning, I am naturally proactive and more than used to learning on my own and making the most of situations. In that regard, I am very skilled. Margaret and I have been blessed with meeting and learning from and with the highest teachers in the Karma Kagyu Lineage, a rare and precious opportunity that partly resulted from the diaspora in Tibet. For a short while, the high Rinpoches visiting North America were more than available and we could invite them to our center and they would just come. How incredible was that!

However, this is no longer the case, as many high rinpoches are old now or have settled into their own monasteries and so on. So, we American Buddhist are like fledglings in a nest, being cared for and fed by our Tibetan teachers while waiting for one of us to learn to fly and leave the nest. They say it takes something like 300 years for the dharma to come into a country, and we still are early yet here in the U.S.

I have not yet seen many Westerners who seem (to me) to have realization. One exception to this (I'm sure there are more that I am unaware of) is the Harvard psychologist and Tibetan translator Daniel P. Brown. Here are six short YouTube segments (parts of an interview) with Brown in which I believe I see that Brown has some realization. Just because I can learn from Dr. Brown, does not mean that you feel the same, but check him out for yourself.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qrBkn9fWD6Y&t=2s>

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

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YI_LJAilu8Y

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJwTT-6ox0I>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n3yimUJugbE>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iKpVqjfO9BQ>

DHARMA IN THE WEST

April 18, 2017

At this time in America and the West, the number of authentic dharma teachers is still relatively few and the number of practicing students is growing. This is aside from the fact that many practitioners are scattered all over the country. In my case, my dharma teacher lives some 800 miles from me. Years ago, Rinpoche would visit all the centers; he would come to us. Later, we have had to drive that distance and back so many times that it adds up to more than going twice around Earth's equator!

So, we dharma students spend most of our time (more than we might like) without a dharma teacher that we can see that often. Here we are, alone with the teachings, somewhere in America. LOL.

As we begin to realize ourselves through the dharma and its practice, I imagine we will draw around us (directly from the American culture and these times) practices tailored for and by ourselves. Better and better translations from the Tibetan is not what I am talking about, but practices born of this this land and culture – American Buddhism. This is what has happened in any land the dharma enters including, of course, Tibet. The dharma also entered Tibet from India a long time ago.

Yes, there will be (as there are now) mantras and such reaching back to the Sanskrit, yet thousands of American Buddhists will realize for themselves the nature of their own minds, not through the filter of Tibet or India or even just in dharma texts, but through the culture and times of the Americas. In the future, the references (and even the jokes) will be in

English and only too familiar. This is not a slight to the Tibetan dharma (for which I am forever grateful), but rather a sign that the dharma is working and very much alive in the West.

I am not enlightened, but I have enough experience (and even a taste of what realization actually is) to know that it is of this moment and that the dharma has no reason to prolong the past or look backward, other than to give gratitude to our teachers. IMO, the realization of the dharma as it arises is all-consuming and totally vital. That has to happen or there is no lineage. That vitality and freshness is a sign that the lineage is alive and well.

This is because realization in all its forms is (as its name suggests) the essence of what is real in this moment, more real than anything that is not as present and real. "Realization" is a recursive Catch-22 that is 100% in the present and zero percent in the past or the future. It's no wonder that dharma does not look back any more than we consider exhaled breath or even memories all that fresh. The immediacy of the present moment is like pure oxygen in an oxygen-starved world. And realization, if nothing else, is the essence of what is arising and present now, not then or when.

Of course, all this will take time (and perhaps a long time) to work off or work through the skin of the traditional Tibetan culture and its practice methods while we develop our own. And while American dharma may ultimately be very different in appearance from the Tibetan traditions, at heart (and in essence) they will be identical to the realization that occurred in Tibet and India. They have to be. And this is because the entire idea of lineage is to make sure

that no less than the same essence or realization is certain. That is lineage by definition.

My point here is that we American Buddhists will be finding the dharma true in our lives, moment by moment, and day by day. The dharma teachings are nothing in themselves but exist only as a map and method that points to how we can realize our experience of samsara. It is this realization of samsara that is the “why” of dharma.

And please don't mistake me. I'm not saying that the dharma is not valuable. Of course, it is more precious than gold. What I am saying is that the dharma as words alone will not enlighten us (or result in anything) unless we use and practice it.

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

SUPPLICATING THE LINEAGE

April 19, 2018

This blog is about supplication, asking for it. And finding and getting aligned with the lineage or tribe we belong to cannot be overemphasized. Many folks have never yet found their tribe and even less have experienced or know how to invoke it. In my case, the lineage that I most naturally respond to is the Karma Kagyu Lineage of Tibetan Buddhism as defined and led by H.H. the 17th Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje. It is also called the Karma Kamtsang Kagyu.

And an archivist, I must have 1,000 books on dharma. However, when it comes to what book or prayer I most use, for me the most precious teaching that I know of is the “Lineage Prayer;” some call it the “Kagyu Lineage Supplication.”

This lineage supplication was written centuries ago (circa 1400s) by the realized lama Bengar Jampal Sangpo (a disciple of the Sixth Gyalwa Karmapa, Tongwa Dönden) who spent 18 years on a tiny island in a large lake (Lake Namtso Thungmo) in Tibet, a lake that could only be reached in winter when the ice froze hard enough to cross to the island by foot, bringing food, etc. from the mainland. Some years (one time for three years) the ice never froze and some practitioners almost starved to death.

The “Lineage Prayer” (also called the Short Dorje Chang Lineage Prayer) was the result of these eighteen years of intense practice and realizations by Bengar Jampal Sangpo; it represents the sum total of what we need to know in order to practice Mahamudra Meditation. In other words, this is a pith text.

If I could take only one practice text to the mythical desert island, it would be the Mahamudra Lineage Prayer, which, as mentioned, was written on a remote island. LOL. The words in the Lineage Prayer are relatively few, but their import and meaning is vast and profound.

Here in concise form is everything I need to keep in mind in order to practice Mahamudra Meditation, provided that I can manage to unpack it with some realization on my part. I recite it aloud (and carefully) each morning; it's the first thing I do each day and I don't do it just casually. The lineage supplication contains everything I already know, need to know, and what I would like to keep in mind throughout the day.

The Kagyu Lineage Prayer contains in condensed (freeze-dried) form the perfect reminders needed to maintain and develop the practice of Mahamudra Meditation. I probably have it memorized, but I still read it from the text.

And I could write about it for hours, but in this short introduction I will have to be somewhat brief. I don't expect that many of you will just flash on it, but you never know. For me this is a pith teaching, a concise reminder in brilliant form. Here it is with some brief notes.

THE SUPPLICATION

Note: The lineage prayer starts out supplicating the line of great teachers that represent one of the main Mahamudra lineages. They are the Dharmakaya-Buddha (in Sambhogakaya form) "Vajradhara," followed by the Mahasiddhas Tilopa and Naropa, and then Marpa, Milarepa, and Lord Gampopa. These then are followed by the Karmapa (and the line of the

Karmapas) and the lineage holders of the four great and eight lesser schools. By reciting their names we make and remake a connection to these great masters and mix our mind with theirs.

Great Vajradhara, Tilopa, Naropa,
Marpa, Milarepa, and Lord of the Dharma, Gampopa,
Knower of the three times, omniscient Karmapa,
Lineage holders of the four great and eight lesser
schools:

Drikung, Taklung, Tsalpa (these three),
Glorious Drukpa and others;
Masters of the profound path of Mahamudra,
Unrivaled protectors of beings, the Dakpo Kagyu.

I supplicate you, the Kagyü lamas;
I hold your lineage.

Grant your blessings so that I may follow your
tradition and example.

THE FOOT OF MEDITATION

Note: After the supplication, this next verse addresses what are called the Preliminary Practices, which are largely purification-oriented. This verse points out that non-attachment, not being attached either positively or negatively to what we experience is the very “foot of meditation,” what we stand or depend on. As long as we are clinging to things, pro or con, we cannot see clearly, but are forced to peer through our biases as “through a glass darkly.”

As is taught, non-attachment is the foot of meditation.
To this meditator, who is not attached to food and
wealth,
Who gives up ties to this life,
Grant your blessings so that attachment to ownership
and honor cease.

THE HEAD OF MEDITATION

Note: The next verse refers to the Extraordinary Preliminaries, in particular to Guru Yoga, the process of mixing our mind with the realized mind of our guru. In Vajrayana Buddhism, what separates Vajrayana Buddhism from other forms is the profound bond (Samaya) between guru and disciple. Since an authentic teacher has some form of realization, he or she is in a position to guide us in our development, saving perhaps eons of time and innumerable rebirths. And much depends on the student's trust in and devotion to the wisdom of the guru.

As is taught, devotion is the head of meditation.
The lama opens the door to the profound oral teachings.

To the meditator who always turns to him,
Grant your blessings that uncontrived devotion be born within.

THE BODY OF MEDITATION

Note: This verse is IMO the heart or main body of the actual practice, what here is called unwavering attention. Based on having attained the stability of Shamata Meditation, this verse points at Insight Meditation and the realization practices, which are the practices we do in our progress toward enlightenment.

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

Whatever arises is the fresh nature of thought – the essence of realization.

To this meditator, who rests simply without altering it,
Grant your blessings that my meditation is free from intellectualization.

THE POINTING-OUT INSTRUCTIONS

Note: Here is a very short verse and version of the “Pointing-Out Instructions” as to the true nature of the mind (“Recognition”) and the ensuing realization practices that eventually result in the realization that Samsara and Nirvana are connate, two sides of the same coin.

As it is taught, the essence of thought is dharmakaya
-- nothing whatsoever,
Yet everything arises from it.

To this meditator, who reflects upon the unobstructed
play of the mind,
Grant your blessings that I realize the inseparability of
samsara and nirvana.

PROGRESS ON THE PATH

Note: And this last verse refers to our conduct and
progress toward enlightenment and the state of
Vajradhara.

Through all my births,
May I not be separated from the perfect Lama,
And so enjoy the glory of the dharma.
May I completely accomplish the qualities of the path
and stages
And quickly attain the state of Vajradhara.

So, there you have the Lineage Prayer and some
brief comments. May this be helpful to those who can
naturally respond. And may we find within us the wish
to become enlightened due to our natural sense of
compassion for all sentient beings, which is called
“Bodhicitta” as stated in this very famous prayer:

“As Bodhicitta is so precious,
May those without it now create it,

May those who have it not destroy it,
And may it ever grow and flourish.”

[Line drawing of Vajradhara by Sange Wangchuk. In assembling this translation, I took pieces from a variety of translations based on trying to remove confusion (in my mind) over different parts, so that I could recite without question what it meant. And this included pieces from the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa’s group the “Nalanda Translation Committee,” for which I am grateful.]

DHARMA CONFIDENCE

April 20, 2018

Often what I think is coming from someone else is in reality coming from me! I am disappointed in them when they don't care about what I feel is important, when instead I should realize that I DO care about what they don't seem to.

As they say, "it takes one to know one" or "If you perceive the phenomenon, then YOU have the faculty." We routinely underestimate ourselves. If we feel we have enough support, we never fear to walk point. In fact, we are glad to lead the way.

The reason I mention this is that confidence in ourselves is not only useful after we have succeeded in something, it often is necessary in order that we can succeed. If that's not a Catch-22, I don't know what is. LOL.

This is especially true when it comes to dharma and its practice. After all the talking is done, here we are alone, sitting on our cushion and working out our dharma practice for ourselves. But dharma practice is not as simple as follow the leader. Practically speaking, the dharma is a do-it-yourself project because no one else can do it for us. Being tentative does not work well with dharma practice, but at the same time we can't be a bull in the china shop, either.

The whole gist of dharma practice is discrimination and this is never more true than the lightness or heavy-handedness we employ. We can't just follow a rulebook or a set of instructions. Instead, we must make our own headway one day at a time because it is not going to be handed to us. If it's progression we look for, we have to progress step by step. In the

dharma, there is no savior who will rescue us. We alone can do that. And that's a tall order.

Now, I don't want to paint all of this as too bleak, because it's not that either. With dharma, it is always the middle way, avoiding the extremes, not too much and not too little, but just the right amount every time. That's what it takes.

So, at some point we have to just forget about being shy or tentative because as the Beatles song says "No one will be watching us..." And hesitation or too much caution on our part just gets in our way; it's another obscuration and serves no purpose.

So, like the turtle whose head comes out of its shell, sooner or later we find ourselves giving up with the hesitation because it only makes things worse. Instead, forget about being artificially polite or worrying or hesitating and just concentrate on what we are doing full-time. Again, no one is watching us!

I believe that, for many of us, it takes time for us to come out of our shell and just tend to business. There is no one who worries about us as we do and past a certain point, how much good is worry?

There is an epochal event in every dharma practitioner's practice life and that is called "Recognition," meaning when (with the help of an authentic teacher) we recognize the actual nature of the mind for the first time. It is after that when bells ring and the lights come on. "Recognition" marks the end of doubt and the beginning of true confidence, with no apologies to anyone. This perhaps is because with "Recognition" (which is a realization) it is finally clear that no one IS watching us, so we might just as well use that worrying or self-conscious energy to go ahead and just get things right.

The point of this article is not to sow fear or even just to shine a light on fear. Instead, it is to point out that to go all-the-way with full-steam-ahead we can't afford the energy and distraction of having too little confidence. We need all our energy in order to give 100% and giving 100% is what it takes to achieve "Recognition."

After all, the whole point of all the preliminary practices is mostly to purify and straighten out whatever kinks we have. We all know the old phrase "Straight is the gate and narrow is the way." Well, we can't pound a square peg into a round hole. All of the pith dharma texts point out ad nauseam that the tolerance required to recognize the true nature of the mind is very fine indeed. Otherwise, we would all be enlightened by now.

I think our rough edges of worry and doubt get rubbed off in the heat of life as, ultimately, they have no use or reason to remain. I believe that high rinpoches are extreme cases of this and act like beacons or lighthouses for the rest of us. They have worked off their rough edges and are like a rock washed smooth by water for a thousand years.

As my dharma teacher of 35 years pointed out to a group of us one year: "We are the stragglers, the ones who in all recorded time and all our rebirths have never yet been able to recognize the actual nature of our own mind." It takes more than just wishful thinking.

And last, but not least, I am speaking to no one here more than to my very self. LOL.

THE PROBLEM WITH REMINDER PRAYERS

April 22, 2018

This blog is kind of picky and probably seems like a fine point; yet, to me the following considerations have been important in my practice of the dharma. This may only interest a few of you, if that.

The Tibetan dharma teachings (the ones we can't read unless we know Tibetan) traditionally fill up 108 volumes for the sutra teachings (Kanjur) and around 225 volumes of commentaries on the sutras (Tengjur). That's a lot of reading, more than a blink and a nod.

So, it's no wonder that over the centuries practitioners have done their best to boil down these teachings into manageable size. There is an extensive history of commentaries that go with the original teachings (sutras) to the point that these more concise descriptions (commentaries) are today mostly all that is taught, at least in Vajrayana Buddhism. And this process of boiling down the Buddhist teachings continues today.

Not only are there hundreds of volumes of commentaries, but even those commentaries are then further condensed into what are called the pith texts and teachings. And then, finally, even these pith teachings are typically further reduced to some form of shorthand prayers for opening and closing whatever longer sadhanas we are currently practicing. And many of these short prayers are more than simply concise, amounting to almost bare lists of key points to keep in mind. And many of these very short prayers are meant more as reminders than actual teachings in themselves. We are supposed to have

already had a background in the Buddhist teachings and THEN read these reminders. However, that is not always the case, especially for beginners in North America where the dharma is still being introduced and rather rare.

Some of these traditional short prayers are a double-edge sword. As mentioned, I am mostly talking about the opening prayers rather than the actual sadhanas themselves. As a beginner, I recited these short prayers for decades, but they often went in one ear and out the other.

“Yes,” beginners can be exposed to these reminders, but “No” we should not be forced or force ourselves to recite them without realizing what they are. Why? Because these short prayers are the result, fruition, and residue of intense practice and realization by great practitioners. Because they were written by enlightened beings, of course they are great, but they also are very, very concise and are meant in many cases as just reminders and not as a substitute for the extensive teachings of which they are a synopsis. I hope you see the point.

In other words, these short opening (and closing) prayers are not sprawling texts that we meander through and learn from, but rather codified, concise, pith texts that are like freeze-dried food for the practitioner; just add understanding and some realization to unpack and expand them. And I understand why, even though we don't yet have that realization, it is probably not going to do us any harm to recite them religiously for decades on end. However, to me there seems to be one caveat.

If we have not been taught the basic teachings in their traditional longer form, we could find these prayers hard to understand or tedious, boring, and tiresome.

We may have not yet had the teachings they represent. And there may be little benefit if we stain our mind through forcing ourselves to recite them when we don't fully understand what they represent or would rather be doing or getting on with other things, like the main sadhana we are practicing.

How much better deserved are these concise reminders if we pull them out one fine day and insist on reciting them because they represent everything we need to keep in mind. Indeed, these concise prayers are treasures of the mind and are designed for the mind and for minding.

As mentioned, these prayers are like Cliff Notes, meant not so much to teach us the basics as to remind us of what is most important in what we already know. The "already knowing" is what years of Buddhist teachings are all about. And so, traditionally, we should have attended many years of teachings in which the subjects of these reminder-texts are taught to us extensively. Then, after that, we use these short texts as reminders of the important points in those longer teachings we have already been taught.

I don't believe that many of these concise prayers were ever meant to be instructional, but only provisional, providing us with reminders after we have thoroughly absorbed the actual teachings. In other words, these are condensed, almost tokens, lists of priorities, etc. to prompt us as to what is important so that we can keep them in mind. As mentioned, I'm not so sure they are meant to educate us; they are more like a crib sheet than a teaching in themselves. And that's not the way I would suggest we learn about basic Buddhist topics. However, they ARE great reminders, yet we may not yet know what we are

being reminded of. So, there you have it. At least we should be aware of this possible shortcoming.

As for me, I recited these shorter prayers for some forty years or so. Mostly they went in one ear and out the other. Perhaps they left behind some helpful residue, but perhaps not as much as you might think. I recited them mostly on the way to whatever main practice I was doing at the time and trying to get to. I didn't do these reminder texts as a main practice. They were almost in the way or at least I was usually anxious to get through them. And since they are so tightly wrapped and concise, I did not always have the patience, time, or basic knowledge to unpack these pith instructions. After all, because they are so important, they can be almost infinitely expanded!

However, many years later, as I actually began to realize for myself some of the dharma teachings, these prayers became (and have remained) of great importance in my practice. So, take what sense from that you can and consider how they are to best be used in your practice.

Yes, these short prayers were useful as reminders as I finally begin to understand a little about the teachings, but IMO they were too condensed for me to resolve them early on. And so, the sooner we can have enough general teachings (and deeply absorb them), then these short condensed prayers become more useful.

Yet, if these abbreviated prayers are ALL we have and use, then we could be shorting ourselves of what I would consider a more-full training and experience of the dharma. Cliff Notes, like the Classic Comics of famous books, do not an education make.

Another way to say this is that the technique that remains as residue from any enlightening experience of great lamas mostly makes sense for one who has actually had the experience or at least been given the instructions, the Lung, etc.

And so, I am not saying here that these concise reminders are not valuable or should not be recited. Of course not and I don't know enough to say something like that. What I am saying is to be sure to expand these condensed reminders and dwell on them on them a bit. Don't just hurry through them. And I am also saying that in my own experience, I find these short prayers much more useful AFTER realizing what some of these teachings are about.

And last, but not least, I find it much more useful to say in my own words and feelings the concepts that are in these same condensed prayers; they have more effect. In other words, rather than just recite them by rote, put them in our own words and say them from the heart that way.

However, there is nothing wrong with these prayers, which are classic. My point is that if there is a problem, it's with us, how we say them and how we don't realize what we are saying if it is just rote on our part.

So I suggest we unpack and expand these pith reminders (taking our time to do so each day) or say their equivalent with heart in our own words. If we are just rattling them off by rote, I question the value. It's like taking vitamin supplements that go right through us and can't be absorbed.

The point here is that these "reminder" prayers are not meant to themselves be the sources of what we are reminded of. LOL.

THE FOUR THOUGHTS THAT TURN THE MIND TO THE DHARMA

April 26, 2108

Below are links for laptop or printer of the traditional Tibetan prayer concerning the Four Thoughts that pretty-much marked my entrance into the dharma when I realized they mostly were just what I had already always been thinking. LOL. Here is my story of meeting the great Siddha the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche.]

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

I called the folks at the University of Michigan that were putting on his talk to find more details, discovered that they were really short-handed, so I ended up as Trungpa Rinpoche's chauffeur for the weekend plus I designed the poster for the event. I couldn't wait to go and pick him up at the airport. Can you imagine?

In my old beat-up ford wagon I headed for the Detroit Metropolitan Airport, where I waited breathlessly for Trungpa Rinpoche to deplane. And people poured out, but no Tibetans. I knew he was travelling with Larry

Mermelstein, who later headed up the Nalanda Translation Committee.

And finally after I had almost given up hope there was Trungpa, standing before me and looking directly at me. I was really close to him. I could see that his eyes looked very tired and somehow the whites were all yellow. Then Trungpa rolled his eyeballs upward toward the top of his head until I could hardly see the pupils, and when they came back, all the tiredness and yellowness were gone and I was staring into the eyes of perhaps the wildest human being I had ever encountered! It was an incredible moment. Suddenly, there HE was. Wow! No disappointment. Electrifying. I also met Larry Mermlestein for the very first time.

I drove them back to the professor's house where they were to stay, carried the bags in, and then probably should have left, but I kind of hung around the edges of the room hoping to get some more clues as to what this incredible man or being was all about.

And to my astonishment, suddenly everyone but Trungpa got up and left for a tour of the U. of M. campus. As I waited for them to file out and then turned to leave, Trungpa Rinpoche beckoned me to stay and then he led me into a small library/office room and sat me down on a chair. This was beyond my wildest fantasies. And there I sat, not knowing just how to behave.

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

taking this all in. Meanwhile, I was learning what 'activity' could mean. Trungpa was totally alive.

Then, before I knew it, he was inspecting me, and then proceeded for the next hour or so to instruct me in meditation and topics like that, but he never called it that by name. He taught me to watch my breath, and he watched me watching my breath go out, and watching it come in again. I felt on the spot.

And he carefully monitored what I was doing. In particular, he was concerned with my "out" breath. I was not letting it go out far enough or deep enough for him. "Michael, let your breath go all the way out... all the way!" As I self-consciously struggled to do so, he remarked, "Don't worry, it will come back!"

And I did this, but it was not as simple as just following his directions. A lot of deep stuff inside me was happening at the same time. As I breathed out more deeply, my whole life-long fear of letting go, of dying and death, flashed through my mind. I struggled with it for a moment and then just let go. As the breath went out, all my fear vanished. Perhaps this moment marked the beginning of my actual dharma practice.

And although, after that weekend, I did not see Trungpa Rinpoche again, I have never forgotten his concern for and kindness with me. I went on to discover my root lama in the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche and become very involved with KTD Monastery in Woodstock, NY, and have trained there for the last 35 years or so. However Trungpa Rinpoche opened a door for me that has never closed.

I have two more little anecdotes from his visit to Ann Arbor that year. One was the local occult bookstore owner, a friend of mine, who was shocked to see

Trungpa smoking a cigarette and brazen enough to ask him about it. Trungpa's response to that: "Someone might like to see me smoke."

The other event was when I dropped Trungpa Rinpoche off at the airport. I tried to tell him that he was just about the first person I had ever met in my life that I did not feel any personal resistance to or criticism of. His response to me was: "Well Michael, we are both married men and we are about the same age." With that he said goodbye.

While we were together, Trungpa also asked me about the poster I had made for the event. It had an image from a Tibetan woodcut of a flying dragon, clutching a pearl in each of its four claws. (see the enclosed image). And did I know what this dragon I chose was was about. I told him that and that to me the image was just striking and suited (in my mind) his visit.

He then proceeded to point out to me that the dragon in the woodcut holds four precious pearls or gems, one in each claw. As long as the dragon has a grasp of all four pearls, he can fly, but if he drops even one of them, he plunges to the ground. I later came to understand that these are the Common Preliminaries, the "Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind to the Dharma." I understood that these four thoughts are essential for any further practice – all four of them.

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

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

These are the four thoughts that turn the mind, and for many of us, these are the door through which we entered Buddhism, why? Because these four thoughts are obviously so important to all of us. I wrote a little poem on the four thoughts many years ago.

THE FOUR THOUGHTS THAT TURN THE MIND

This precious life,
Impermanent and brief,
I know.

My actions keep on piling up,
And I can't quite get my ducks into a row.

Trungpa said to me,
So many years ago,
By grasping just one thought or two,
We'll never turn aside.

We must, he said, maintain all four,
And leave not one behind.

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

Here is the traditional prayer about the Four Thoughts in both laptop and printable form. You might want to have a copy.

The Four Thoughts (laptop)

http://traffic.libsyn.com/spir.../The_Four_THoughts_Laptop.pdf

The Four Thoughts (printing version)

http://traffic.libsyn.com/spiri.../The_Four_THoughts_PRINT.pdf

MEETING THE KARMAPA AND THE TASHI PRAYER

April 27, 2018

I want to share another dharma prayer that you can print out or use on a laptop with you and with it a little story.

“This prayer arose from the lake of Jampal Gyepé Dorjé’s mind on the third day of the third month of the Fire Monkey year (1896), an auspicious time according to the configuration of planets, sun and constellations.”

This prayer is called “The Verses of the Eight Auspicious Ones,” but is commonly known as the “Tashi Prayer.” “Tashi” means auspiciousness. The prayer is a bit long and frequently recited before undertaking any task or trip. It has a lot of hard-to-pronounce names in it that are part of the history of the lineage, so it’s a bit of tough sledding until you get to know it. Some of you might like to have it, so here it is in both laptop and printing versions (2-sided).

TASHI PRAYER (laptop version)

[http://traffic.libsyn.com/.../Eight Auspicious Ones LA PTOP.pdf](http://traffic.libsyn.com/.../Eight_Auspicious_Ones_LA_PTOP.pdf)

TASHI PRAYER (printing version 2-sided)

[http://traffic.libsyn.com/.../Eight Auspicious Ones P RINTER.p...](http://traffic.libsyn.com/.../Eight_Auspicious_Ones_P_RINTER.p...)

I can tell a bit of the story here about my copy of the Tashi Prayer. In this photo, you can see the first page of my copy of the Tashi Prayer. That’s the fingerprint of the 17th Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje, on the cover of the prayer. His Holiness put another one on the last page.

At the time, he was (and we were) at something like 15,000 feet of elevation in the young Karmapa's (who was twelve years old at the time) ancestral home of Tsurphu Monastery high in the mountains of Tibet.

Right next to His Holiness was my own twelve-year-old son Michael Andrew, my wife Margaret, and two of my daughters, Anne and May. They all came along with me when our teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, told Margaret and I one year during a short interview (when I asked him some questions) that we should go to Tibet and ask His Holiness for the answers.

As you can imagine, as someone who thinks twice about going to the local grocery store, I was stunned at his statement. I mumbled something like, "Rinpoche, some day I aspire to do that...yada, yada, yada" and Rinpoche responded "Go this year, now, this summer."

Whoah! When your root Lama asks you to do something, you just do it, that's all. And so we did, and within a month too. I won't go into our trip right now, but here is a link to a book of all our stories of that trip, for those who are curious and have the time.

"Our Pilgrimage to Tibet"

<http://spiritgrooves.net/.../e-bo.../Our-Pilgrimage-to-Tibet.pdf>

Anyway, it was there in Tibet that the young 17th Karmapa went through my book of sadhanas and prayers and marked some of them with his fingerprint in red ink. That was something!

The whole of the story is in the book, but the most important moment for me that came out of our three-days at Tsurphu Monastery with His Holiness was the

moment when we first met the young Karmapa. I will say something about that.

We have finally made it to his home after some 40 miles of no-real-road, driving through streams, and so on. We came bearing letters of introduction from different rinpoches. His Holiness sees people usually once a day around 1 PM, but we were told to skip that and that he would see us separately. In fact, he would perform a special practice for us. So, we waited for that time.

And when it came, it was a steep climb up to his quarters and Tibetan stairways are like ladders on a ship that you actually have to climb. I always get quite sick in Tibet from the altitude, with lung problems requiring antibiotics and the whole works. So, there I was, still suffering from altitude sickness, climbing these stairs, sick as a dog, etc. All I could do is climb, with my eyes down, and put one foot in front of the other, trying to make the trip up a few flights to where His Holiness was.

When we finally reached his quarters and entered them, my family was busy doing the customary three prostrations before any high spiritual leader (as was customary), and I was still at the back of the room trying to get my shoes off and mostly to get some air back in in my lungs after the climb. LOL.

Anyway, I finally got up front where my family was, did my prostrations, and sat down. His Holiness was only a few feet away and his eyes were like no other ones I have ever seen. He would look right at you, fix your gaze with his, and then he would up the ante by continuing to focus his eyes in and out like some motorized lens. And here I was, prepared to see and meet a very powerful being and taking this all in.

That's what most of the spiritual masters that I had met up to then felt like – some great being!

Yet, his holiness was different. There was none of that in his presence. In fact, I didn't even think about His Holiness other than that he was right there and so young, perfect, and all of that. What happened in his presence was that instead of my realizing something about His Holiness, I began to realize something deep and profound about myself. I would have never guessed what then happened!

I had always projected an image and thought of myself as pretty fierce, a bit tough, and all of that. Yet in His Holiness' presence I realized that at heart, beneath all of my fierce persona and manner, I was just a big softie, an easy mark.

And it was exactly what all the books say about His Holiness the Karmapa, who is an emanation of Chenresik (Avaloketeshvara), the bodhisattva of compassion and loving kindness. So, my point (and what stuck and I took away) is that I was not realizing His Holiness' compassion and loving kindness, but my own! What a twist! Through that meeting I realized not his but my essential nature. I realized that beneath all the bric-a-brac and outer veneer, I was at heart a deeply compassionate being, just as I am, warts and all.

Now, that is not something I was used to realizing; in fact until then I had never realized it. And there, high in the mountains of Tibet, at an altitude I could hardly breathe in, that is what I realized, sitting in front of (as the movie by Eddie Murphy was based on) this "Golden Child."

With his telescope eyes, His Holiness resolved me in the moment so that I saw my own essential nature, not his. Well, they are the same anyway.

Here is a photo of a photo taken that same day after our meeting, when he came out and just hung out with us for a bit and beneath it the first page in my Tashi Prayer, marked by the young Karmapa.

And so, I share with you this little story and offer you a copy of the Tashi Prayer, if you would like.

DHARMA PATH: THE PICTURE WITHIN A PICTURE

April 28. 2018

What was I doing before I discovered the dharma and how do I now use dharma in my own life? To me, that is a good question. It's not that I didn't have a life; I did, and that life did have some sort of plan going. Like most folks that I knew back then, I was trying to make sense of it all as best I could.

I liken my view to a patchwork quilt. A number of the squares in the quilt were filled in, some in great detail, but there were also huge holes or gaps. It was anything but a whole quilt.

And to continue this analogy, while what squares were there told little stories, all of the squares in my quilt did not themselves create a larger picture. In other words, I could see some of the trees pretty well, but not the forest. I feel that's not a bad analogy.

If I had to add it all up, I did not have much of an overall plan and certainly was not on any path that I could discern. When I got over just reading about the dharma and started to actually practice it, walk the walk, a lot of gaps in my world view began to fill in, even if it was very gradual.

And so, as mentioned, not only are the holes or quilt-squares gradually filling in, but more important, all those squares in the quilt themselves start to form an image that arises from the whole quilt, call it an overview. That overview "image" is invaluable, the mother of the path of the dharma itself. Without it, we can't see where to go, where we are now going, and that we are progressing at all.

FREEDOM FROM THE FIVE FEARS

April 29, 2018

In between extensive yard work yesterday, I was listening to a particular Buddhist teaching for about three hours. It was live streaming. In that teaching, the rinpoche spoke of some of the signs that Bodhisattvas of a fairly high level experience. In particular, a statement that Bodhisattvas are free from what are called the “Five Fears,” which interestingly enough are:

THE FIVE FEARS

- (1) The fear of not being able to make a living and support yourself.
- (2) The fear of death and dying.
- (3) The fear of not being praised and ever acknowledged.
- (4) The fear of being born in a lower state, such as an animal, etc.
- (5) The fear of feeling intimidated in the presence of others, i.e. stagefright.

IMO, an interesting group of fears; those five fears are food for thought, at least I thought so. Of course, those are not all of the qualities of a Bodhisattva, but they are something to think about. I know I thought about them when I heard this spoken yesterday at the teaching. Check it out. I overcame the first one, but as for the others: I'm still working on them. LOL.

THE OXYGEN VENT OF THE PRESENT MOMENT

May 1, 2018

As I have commented here before, I have no idea what will be in tomorrow's blog that hopefully I will write because I depend on the moment to provide me with all the freshness there is and any inspiration that comes from that. I have faith that the moment will always provide me with worthy subject matter to be aware of and sometimes I write about it. In other words, I never know what I will be writing about tomorrow until it appears spontaneously to my mind.

And this is not just a natural part of my makeup or a "gift." I do it by design and have worked to get myself as close as possible to the edge of the present moment, the pure oxygen vent of inspiration from which all spontaneity arises. I like it like that, to discover what is interesting if what arises, moment by moment, as it comes to mind. That way, there is no menu and even fewer leftovers.

Yes, of course this approach has its challenges too. There is also something that we could call the "freshness of nothing," which never fails to get my full attention. Nothing also is something and it's not uncommon for me to discover that too. In which case, there may be no blog that day or, more likely, a blog about nothing. LOL.

So, I wait upon the present moment as a child waits on Christmas morning for his parents to wake up so he can go downstairs and see what is under the tree. I am the eldest of five boys and all five of us would sit at the top of the stairs around 5-6 AM, while our dad and mom would finally get up, go downstairs, started some coffee, turn on the Christmas tree lights and,

finally, said “OK guys, Merry Christmas” and we would hurtle down the stairs.

And I am learning not to be disappointed, even by disappointment itself. Posting here on Facebook each day is a dharma practice that I have been doing for many years. If you think I spend a lot of time on Facebook just because I leave it on in my computer, you would be wrong. I post here, but spend my time doing other things, like writing these blogs. I do try to answer questions; however, unlike my own curiosity, my Facebook friends have very, very few questions. LOL.

For my dharma brothers and sisters, it says very clearly in the Mahamudra Lineage Prayer that “unwavering awareness is the body of meditation.” The body of meditation means the main vehicle we use. IMO, the key to unwavering awareness is the evergreen freshness of this present moment. It doesn’t get any more inspirational than that. However, it has taken me years of practice to learn to pay attention to this moment right now.

And I should add, no less a Mahasiddha than Tilopa pointed out in his classic Words of Advice, very simply but devastatingly:

- (1) Don’t Prolong the Past.
- (2) Don’t Invite the Future.
- (3) Don’t Alter the Present.
- (4) Relax, as it is.

These words were not meant as an aside, but the whole enchilada to be realized in a nutshell. He dismisses the past and the future, but not the present. All he says of the present is not to alter it with

conceptualizations or what-not and then, finally, he instructs us to “Relax, as it is.”

I’m working on doing just that as best I can.

INTUIT: BEING IN THE MOMENT

May 2, 2018

Practicing being “intuitive?” Sounds like an oxymoron, but it’s not. You would think it would be easy to just be here in the moment. All we have to do, as I mentioned, is just “Be” in the moment. Easy? No, not so easy in practice.

Sure, we can be in the moment, but for how long? Within seconds or nanoseconds we are distracted in one of a million ways? It would shock us to realize how little time we actually spend in the present, thanks to the distractions of the past, the future, and our tendency to alter or mess with the present.

It’s like trying to keep a ball in a groove; it goes everywhere else but in the groove. However, if we can learn to relax and let go, the ball will naturally fall into and just stay in the groove. This whole problem is similar to what learning basic Tranquility Meditation is all about, to allow the mind to come to rest naturally on an object. And that object could be the present moment. It’s called “meditation without an object.”

I’m afraid that most of the time we spend practicing basic meditation may be spent doing it incorrectly. The correct practice (one that actually works) takes no time at all, yet I spent something like 32 years very busy doing it incorrectly. I suggest that you avoid what I did if you can. LOL.

As a hedge against that, consider intuition. I suggest that it can be helpful to concentrate on winnowing the wheat from the chaff of our intuition. When you have an intuition, act on it and see how far off you are from it working out as you intuited. Intuition admits of practice and, as they say, practice makes perfect. We

can hone our intuition until it gets more and more on point, but we have to try. Intuition is not going to improve without our using it.

And I'm not suggesting here that we "guess" at things. It's not quite as crude as that. Don't guess (that's the intellect), but rather "intuit." Act on your feelings, on your hunches, on what feels true or right from your heart.

And I wouldn't suggest you jump off a bridge if you feel you might be able to fly. LOL. Start with simple things that come to mind; don't hunt for intuition, but be open or aware enough that when something intuitive arises, you recognize it. And, of course, try acting on that and trusting that intuition.

Just as when we learn Tranquility Meditation (Shamata), where we practice allowing our mind to rest on an object, with training our intuition we do the same. Don't expect to be perfect right out of the chute. It takes practice, practice, and more practice, but it can bring great rewards.

Learning to be more intuitive brings spontaneity and the freshness of the moment to our life. It is what all the great Mahasiddhas recommend and they have pointed it out in a thousand ways.

Ivory-tower (conceptual) dharma is not what we need and it would take too long, so say the rinpoches. Following the teachings, of course, is necessary and beneficial, but there comes a point where we cannot be a follower of anything but our own thread of interest.

However, once we find our own thread of dharma interest or intuition, one that we can naturally follow through the process of our own realization, then we

are both on our own and part of the lineage at the same time. At least, that's my opinion.

RECITING DHARMA PRAYERS

May 2, 2018

Earlier I blogged about the difference between reciting standard dharma prayers from texts and learning for ourselves the essence of these prayers, eventually putting them in our own words, and saying them with heart. There are a couple points here:

The traditional prayer texts are just that, traditional, and in the beginning we all say them by rote, since we have little experience of our own. And these prayers often were written by great lamas in the past, so they can be as brilliant, succinct, and as to the point as possible, much more-so than we could write.

However, and IMO there is a “however,” ultimately as we progress, some of us (as we begin to realize what these prayers are about for ourselves) will find it more comfortable to eventually find our own words for these prayers. Certainly enlightened Americans will eventually write new prayers. People often start with the dedication of merit, learning how to dedicate merit and then tailoring it to their specific situation and needs. Another point is that some of the prayer translations were done long ago, perhaps even in another dialect (like UK English rather than American English), and so on. And there are dozens of English translations that we can choose from.

As the essence of these various prayer texts are realized through their continued practice, we may find it more heartfelt to invoke the meaning of these prayers ourselves in our own words. We may not need any words at all or start to find words on our own.

In that way, these invocations or prayers become not something that we are simply reciting, but rather they can express how we feel (and are) in our hearts. In my experience, some of these prayers are “evergreen” in that I have no need to put them in any other words. But other translations (and keep in mind that these are ALL translations!) are tailored for people different from myself or even my region.

In that case, as I realize the meaning of these prayers, in the past I gradually do two things. First, I gather many different translations of the same prayer and compare them. And without losing any meaning, I cut and paste those segments from different translations that strike me in the heart. I have done this often.

And others texts, like the dedication prayers available here, I end up saying the dedication from my heart in my own words, which words I have shared with my root lama.

Yet, as mentioned, having these traditional prayers (as downloadable below) in some convenient format is not only helpful, but necessary, especially early on. So, with that in mind, here are a few of the traditional prayers and invocations of the Karma Kagyu Lineage (containing English and Tibetan transliteration) that you can download as PDF files, for viewing on a laptop (and printing) or print them out (double-sided) in traditional Tibetan pecha format.

The printed versions all fit on 8.5” x 11” paper (which is readily available) and can be output on your home printer prints on two sides OR the laptop version can be printed out in correct order. Then, just carefully cut the pages and you have a small version of the traditional Tibetan rectangular book format (pecha).

And we can always take the Printer Versions (2-sided) to our local Staples and have them print it out on nice paper.

I hope you find these helpful.

THE FOUR THOUGHTS THAT TURN THE MIND
(printing version)

<http://spiritgrooves.net/.../The%20Four%20Thoughts%20PRINT.pdf>

THE FOUR THOUGHTS THAT TURN THE MIND
(laptop)

<http://spiritgrooves.net/.../The%20Four%20Thoughts%20Laptop.p...>

Where would I be without the “Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind to the Dharma.” When I first heard these four thoughts that are capable of turning the mind away from samsara’s distractions, they were almost exactly what I had held within my mind all my life, although I had not as clearly understood them. This is where I kind of started with the dharma and I went from there.

TASHI PRAYER (printing version 2-sided)

<http://spiritgrooves.net/.../Eight%20Auspicious%20Ones%20PRIN...>

TASHI PRAYER (laptop version)

<http://spiritgrooves.net/.../Eight%20Auspicious%20Ones%20LAPT...>

“This prayer arose from the lake of Jampal Gyepé Dorjé’s mind on the third day of the third month of the Fire Monkey year (1896), an auspicious time according to the configuration of planets, sun and constellations.”

This prayer is called “The Verses of the Eight Auspicious Ones,” but is commonly known as the “Tashi Prayer.” “Tashi” means auspiciousness. The

prayer is a bit long and frequently recited before undertaking any task or trip. It has a lot of hard-to-pronounce names in it that are part of the history of the lineage, so it's a bit of tough sledding until you get to know it. Some of you might like to have it, so here it is in both laptop and printing versions (2-sided).

THE FOUR IMMEASURABLES (printer version)

<http://spiritgrooves.net/.../Four%20Immeasurables%20PRINTV3.p...>

THE FOUR IMMEASURABLES (laptop)

<http://spiritgrooves.net/.../Four%20Immeasurables%20LAPTOP%20...>

This is a lovely prayer for the benefit of all sentient beings, from humans on down to the tiniest microbe, asking that all beings have happiness, be free from suffering, be blissful, and impartial.

LINEAGE PRAYER (printer)

<http://spiritgrooves.net/.../Lineage%20Prayer%20PRINT%20V2.pdf>

LINEAGE PRAYER (laptop)

<http://spiritgrooves.net/.../e-.../Lineage%20Prayer%20LAPTOP.pdf>

This is the Mahamudra Lineage Prayer, a concise prayer written by a great lama that capsulized the essential points of the advanced realization practices into a few words. Most practitioners in the Kagyu Lineage say this prayer daily. I know that I do and I consider it of the greatest value in my practice.

DEDICATION PRAYER (printer)

<http://spiritgrooves.net/.../Dedication%20of%20Merit%20PRINT%...>

DEDICATION PRAYER (laptop)

<http://spiritgrooves.net/.../Dedication%20of%20Merit%20LAPTOP...>

It is important (and thereby traditional) at the end of each day (or at any time during the day) to dedicate the merit and virtue of whatever we have done, however small, to the benefit of all sentient beings that they may become enlightened.

There are many, many forms of dedication and ways to dedicate merit; this is only one well-known prayer. While we can make up our own (and I do), it is considered more effective to dedicate our virtue to all the buddhas and bodhisattvas and ask them to use the merit to benefit all beings because they know better how to do this than we do.

And we can dedicate not only our own merit, but any and all merit now, in the past, or in the future to the benefit of beings.

REFUGE AND BODHICITTA PRAYER

(printing version)

<http://spiritgrooves.net/.../Refuge%20and%20Bodhicit%20PRIN...>

REFUGE AND BODHICITTA PRAYER

(laptop version)

<http://spiritgrooves.net/.../Refuge%20and%20Bodhicit%20LAPT...>

In this Samsaric world of ceaseless ups and downs we all find ourselves living in, there is no relief other than the dharma. As we discover the dharma and its value, it is traditional to take what is called “refuge.” In fact, there is even a ceremony that those who choose to follow the dharma enter into called “Taking Refuge” or the “Refuge Ceremony.” We take refuge in the historical Buddha Shakyamuni, and in his teachings

or method, and in those realized followers of the Buddha who hold his teachings called the Sangha.” That’s the first page of this invocation.

The second page of this short prayer concerns what is called “Bodhicitta,” which literally means something like “Awakened Heart” and is the key to keeping us on track as we practice the dharma.

INHERITING THE MIND

May 3, 2018

[This blog is pretty conceptual, but it does have some strong emotional meaning or content, but to get there it is going to take some tough sledding intellectually, so please take note.]

Broadly speaking, the many dharma practices can be divided into beginning and advanced practices, but that is not a linear curve. In a very real way, it is an exponential curve, divided unequally between the purification practices (clearing out our obscurations) and “Recognition” (of the true nature of the mind) leading to the realization practices like Insight Meditation and Mahamudra Meditation.

A byproduct of the realization of Insight Meditation, part and parcel, is access (almost at will) to the wealth of the mind by questioning, asking, and invoking. To me, by analogy it brings to mind the California gold rush, finding the answers to all possible questions.

Years ago (1960s) in our blues band we did some songs by the great acapella Black Gospel group the “Swan Silvertones,” including their song “Seek, Seek,” which went like this:

“Seek, seek and ye shall find,
Knock, knock and the door shall be opened,
Ask a favor and it shall be given,
And the love comes trickling down.”

Here is the actual song:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w1MtXU7jNH8>

In the advanced “realization practices” like Insight Meditation and Mahamudra Meditation, which are

triggered by an event called “Recognition” (of the true nature of the mind), realization gets you the essence of truth when you ask the mind properly.

The above words describe (to me) the characteristics of Insight Meditation and what realization as to the nature of the mind provides. As mentioned, a feature of Insight Meditation is the ability to investigate and ask of the mind just about anything and receive what I would call a definitive answer or at least an answer definitively. This is markedly different from the more tentative confidence with questions and answers that we have ordinarily.

Don't ask me how all this is possible, because I don't know. But I do know it is possible because I have seen it done innumerable times. They say the Buddha could speak to many people in a group at once and each would hear exactly what they needed in words they could understand -- and in their own language! Perhaps Insight Meditation is like that. The answers we hear from the questions we ask make sense and are in our own speak (so to speak) in a language we totally understand. And all this is without a doubt.

My point in saying these answers are “definitive” means they are complete in themselves and do not lead to needing further definition. This type of answer satisfies and effectively ends our question and questioning. The answer points at (or out) the true nature of the question and THAT is the end of the question. A simple change in the order of magnitude can obviate a world of previous questions in a flash. In other words, questions are often answered (perhaps much to our surprise) by their ceasing to be a question for us. But that is not all that I am pointing at here, although this by itself is something to consider.

Insight Meditation of the type that is present as part of Mahamudra Meditation, with its clarity and luminance, is like a question-answering “zone” through which we can undistractedly impute the unvarnished truth as to a topic we inquire about. Our question can just vanish so that we no longer have a question. Such an answer can be characterized by its declarative-ness and lack of doubt or confusion. Through Insight Meditation, we receive a definitive answer that is complete in itself to the point of satisfaction by cessation. No question remains. I don’t know how to say this in words any more clearly.

My first dharma teacher would take words apart in a meaningful way. He would parse the word “question” as “Quest I On.” He liked to joke that he stood by the gospel and would repeatedly say that gospel means “Go Spell.” And he would and he could.

Now, all of this may sound like so much mumbo-jumbo, but it’s not. However, it is difficult to put into concepts and words that communicate the reality. In fact, sacred text after text point out that it is impossible to communicate the true nature of the mind in conceptual language, words that at best can only be understood, but that have not yet been experienced, much less realized.

We each have to realize the nature of the mind for ourselves.

Words can only point out the way to (or at) the experience that we can have, which experience hopefully leads to the eventual full realization of that experience. That’s why the verbal instructions are called the “pointing out” instructions. They point at an experience (and an eventual realization) that we each must have individually. They point beyond the

concepts that they themselves are to the sense of it all, which sense is a physical experience.

Yet words are just words and they alone do not guarantee that we can connect the dots from the words to find the actual experience, much less be able to fully realize that experience. Of course, this is what the dharma is all about, helping us to do just this: realize the true nature of our mind and experience.

THE PRECIOUS ONE

May 4, 2018

[Note on the food front: I continue to mainly eat Mexican food, mostly black beans, tortillas, avocado, tomatoes, and salsa. Today I made homemade Salsa Verde for the first time. It was great. Now for some thoughts.]

This process of conceptualizing and understanding is different from actually experiencing, and experience is way different from realizing the actual nature of what we are experiencing. These three terms (understanding, experience, and realization) and the journey from one term to the next to the next are key to understanding dharma practice.

You would think it would be easy, but it doesn't seem to be. There is a long trek from intellectualizing or thinking conceptually about the dharma to actually experiencing it first-hand and an even longer transition to the realization as to the nature of experiences we have; yet, we are all on that journey.

It is important in dharma training to understand the difference between these three states as best we can, not to mention shaking off (as Shakespeare wrote) "the pale cast of thought" and immersing ourselves in experience itself. We have to get wet! That alone is hard enough for many of us. Much more difficult yet is to fully realize just what it is that we are experiencing, much less its nature. Anyway, that's the standard dharma progression as I understand it: understanding, spiritual experiences, and realizing the nature of spiritual experiences.

There is nothing wrong with just thinking about something, trying to come up with some conceptual

understanding. Yet, by the same token, it is easy to only “think” and to sail right over the reality of actually experiencing what we conceptualize and just take up contemplating experience from a distance. And taking or risking a plunge into experience seems to be more rare these days for many, unless we are just forced by fate into experience and find ourselves in a situation.

And, as mentioned, even more rare is, after stabilizing our experience enough so that we can get our arms around it, to fully realize an experience for what it actually is. And, as mentioned, we don’t always freely enter the arena of action and experience, although life manages to immerse us quite often enough as it is.

The progression of dharma practice follows a similar pattern. Pundits and scholars can rationalize and understand it; practitioners can experience and attempt to know it, and adepts can realize the nature of everything around us. It’s helpful to at least pinpoint which of these categories we spend most of our time in; at least I find it so.

When we discover someone who is adept at realization (like a lama, and that is rare), as often as not they have enough compassion and care that, if we ask them with heart, they can and will guide us from wherever we are at in our journey. However, we first have to ask.

Yet, chief among the guidance left to us by the Buddha himself was how to do all this ourselves, which ultimately we have to do anyway. No one else, even the Buddha himself, can do this for us.

So, if we just conceptualize, then we need to experience and know in the flesh what we are talking about. And if we are experiencing what we previously

just conceptualized, then we are working toward the realization of the nature those experiences, i.e. what happened?

Dharma training contains nothing but methods and practices to handle any of these situations. In my opinion, it not only helps, but is necessary, to find an authentic dharma teacher, someone who can guide us as we move through all these changes. In fact, in Vajrayana lineages, an authentic teacher is indispensable.

I searched around the dharma community for many years before meeting my current dharma teacher, a very high Tibetan lama who is now in his nineties. I have been working with Rinpoche for about 35 years. The word “Rinpoche” as translated from the Tibetan to English means “Precious One,” which indeed he is.

“WHEN YOU SAID ‘WAIT’, YOU MEANT A LONG TIME”

May 5, 2018

This blog is a little bit of a ramble on the tendency of many people to be too passive in general and particularly when it comes to the dharma, as if we are waiting for someone (a knight in shining armor?) to find us in this life, acknowledge our value, and perhaps even rescue us.

It's like we are on a subway ride with no destination known, endlessly riding and waiting to arrive and get somewhere, a goal that has not yet appeared and will probably never appear. In fact, we wait to be found or discovered to be of value until we realize that we have to discover ourselves. That's the message the dharma brings: do-it-yourself. It can be some tough love. LOL.

I'm using this quote from Shakespeare's "Hamlet" out of context, but it addresses what I am pointing at:

To be, or not to be -- that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles
And by opposing end them.”

Here I'm not talking about suicide, but rather taking action and control of our lives -- doing something about our situation. Many of us are still waiting for someone to save or rescue us, to do for us what ultimately we will have to do for ourselves. We've been waiting all our lives, when the reality is more like the old "Pick up your bed, Lazarus, and walk." We're in a queue that just goes on and on, waiting for an end that has yet to even begin -- a perfect Catch-22.

Anyway, here we wait, looking for an assist, while facing the near-impossible task of pulling ourselves up by our own bootstraps – waking up. So, how do we go from passively waiting to be found (or acknowledged) to have the confidence to act in our own behalf?

The Buddhists call it waking-up or awareness -- becoming-aware. We wake up when we finally become aware that we alone are responsible for our own enlightenment and that only we alone CAN respond to life positively (or not). This is the essence of what the Vajrayana Buddhists call the “Pointing-Out” instructions and “Recognition” of the true nature of the mind. At that time we recognize not only that WE have to enlighten ourselves, but more importantly, we realize that we CAN enlighten ourselves and that everything we need to do that is at hand.

It is like turning ourselves inside out which by definition also turns the outside in. Instead of imagining we are on the inside looking out, we realize that we are now on the outside looking in. With what was the outside now in, we become the mother of our own world -- the caretaker. We then have compassion.

Through “Recognition” of this, we accept (and then embrace) the responsibility for our own enlightenment and that recognition is the first (and perhaps the most crucial) step or trigger in the long journey of realization to enlightenment.

How else did we imagine this would happen, if not through our own effort? Buddhism does not have a savior. We have to save ourselves, drive our own car, so to speak. However, to do this, we have to take possession and be in the driver’s seat of our vehicle-

body. We can't just wait in the back seat and watch it all happen and roll by.

Realization is first person stuff.

FACE-OFF AND FACE-UP

May 6, 2018

Back in the early 1960s, when there were few books on Tibetan Buddhism of any kind available, there was the “Tibetan Book of the Dead “(Bardo Thödol) translated by Walter Evan-Wentz , which is about liberation through hearing, traditionally around the time of death. Of course, a title like that drew me to it like the proverbial moth to a flame.

The Tibetan Book of the Dead is about dying and the after-death bardo states when we wander in them. Back then, I did not know that this life we are living now is also a bardo state, the Sixth Bardo, called the natural bardo of this waking life from birth to when we die.

Something that stuck in my mind, even back then, was when in the bardo after death the bright blue light of reality appears. It seems that for most people the tendency seems to be blinded by that bright blue light and to seek refuge from the brightness in the dimmer white shadowy light which also appears. There is a lot more to it, but the idea here is that it is hard to look at the truth and it is not just reserved for the bardo. It seems to me that we behave the same way in this waking life too and not just occasionally, but much or all the time. In other words, we agree to forget what we find too hard to remember and keep in mind – the brilliant truth.

So, if we want to practice for our eventual walkabout in the bardo after death (and the various lights we will encounter), we can practice right now in the hard light of reality, the truth of this life whenever we are confronted with it.

How is this all that different from what we have now going on in this life, where the harsh light of truth can send us scurrying into the dim light of diversion and distractions, anything but the reality we face. I admit that this is perhaps not as obvious as what the Book of the Dead points out in the bardo, but we still act like the deer in the headlights in this life and often ignore the reality in favor of any old distraction we can find.

I suffer from this myself. Somehow, I often manage to miss the point and instead choose anything but the reality that is right before me. With me it's too often "every which way but loose" or free.

Those of us who are married have a built-in reality check in our spouse. Whether our spouse is right or wrong on a given issue, the fact that they challenge us remains a sign that we should take a reality check. Margaret and I will be married 47 years in a couple months. With all the talk of reality practice, the practice of marriage is perhaps the most exacting of all. Trust me.

MARRIAGE AND DHARMA

May 7, 2018

Another title for this blog might be “Where are they keeping all the good stuff?” And so this blog.

When every goodbye is gone and we have pretty much exhausted all of what interests us about our Self, there is a reservoir of wisdom waiting to be mined that is a close as our nearest challenge.

It’s like crossing a desert; when the water of inspiration runs out; where do we turn? The answer is simple: whatever we have ignored (or kept at bay) in life waits for us and holds all of that which we have ignored and rejected. From the standpoint of dharma, it’s like buried treasure.

What we have ignored and pretended is not there in life, of course, “IS” very much still there and offers a rich harvest whenever we finally get around to acknowledging it. If we exhaust the low-hanging fruit of wisdoms, so to speak, these hidden rooted-treasures remain untouched because we have considered them untouchable. In other words, up till now we have avoided them at all costs. Almost everyone suffers from this, whether they realize it or not.

In the more advanced teachings, the great Mahasiddhas have pointed out that the very thoughts that we originally were bothered by become (in time) the food we need to cross the desert-of-dharma-methods that arise later on in our practice. It’s like the old phrase “what you fear shall come upon you,” and it simply means: that which we have rejected or pushed away will in time assert itself on us until we exhaust its challenge.

In fact, these hidden gems of the things we have refused are almost like a picnic lunch packed in the thicket of time that we finally get around to eating. There is no other food! Perhaps, it's the last place we want to go as in "don't go there," but it becomes our best resource when all else runs out and fails. Like a shadow, it's what remains to be known until we want to actually know it. A negative interest is just as interesting as a positive interest... to us.

In time, as we condescend to acknowledge their existence, like a brain surgeon we begin to deconstruct and carefully take apart all that which we have especially avoided up to now. We have come full circle and find that even our most negative interests, those things we most disdained in life, when we let them arise, not only are interesting, but fill us in with exactly what we have been missing and waiting for. In fact, that's all that's left for us to do.

And so, if we want to see what is in reserve for us down the road (what the future looks like), just make a list of those things you most dislike and avoid. They will be our roadmap when we finally exhaust this turnpike of self-interest. Anyway, that's the overview.

Under or beneath that view, at the nitty-gritty level (where the rubber meets the road) is this kind of facing up to what we most dislike and its (as we might have known) not exactly a walk in the park. There is indeed some tough love there and we only manage to turn to it when all else is found wanting, at least I do. Let's call it the forbidden (or hidden) fruit. LOL. We only reach for it when everything else is exhausted and it takes real work for us to face it.

Yet, it's right there waiting for us, closer than our own breath and tailored exactly to our needs. My wife is an expert at pointing these out to me, complete with

chapter and verse, that is, if I don't want to see it clearly myself. This is why, IMO, marriage is like a mirror and perhaps the most valuable dharma practice for those of us who are monks or nuns, if we are up to it and ready.

Of course, challenges exist for single persons, as well. But if we want an infinitely-recursive drill-down to accelerate our dharma practice, IMO, marriage puts many other practices to shame. You can't beat it, but unless we are ready for it, marriage can also be a very difficult way to go, looking in a mirror that close. Yet, if we are open to it (and need it), the challenges of marriage hold for us the whole of what we have not hated, hidden in what (up until now) we like least of all. LOL. I find this to be true.

IT'S MY OWN FAULTS

May 8, 2018

[Going into a period of weeks of guests, taking care of grandkids, and having a lama visit, so (along with Margaret) I will be chief cook and bottle-washer for a while. My four-year old granddaughter arrives in a few minutes for an on-and-off stay here for a week or more. I will try and post as I can.

Also, I just found out I planted a rhododendron bush in too much sun, so there I was digging it up and replanting in more shade five minutes ago. It was a good size plant that required a wheelbarrow.]

And that's not all. A change is in the air and it's not just spring, although that helps. In general, I don't only have to recover from winter, but there much more. It's time to clear the deck, close the door on the past a bit more, and consider my life. Don't we all do that every once in a while?

Junctures such as I am at appear from time to time, and when they do, they articulate my life, shunting me this way or that. In my case, apparently feeding on the low-hanging fruit of my Self (which I have been busy doing for decades) is coming to an end. It's lasted a long time, but at present it seems I am being forced to get beyond that, like it or not. Whew! Actually, I like it because it promises a new epoch. As they say about flowers after they bloom: "It's finishing up." That would be me.

Popping out or being forced out of my imagined agenda is revealing of whatever I'm popped out of. Like a mask that no longer covers my face, what I have ignored or hidden from myself because it makes me uncomfortable is finally seen. LOL.

I finally am figuring out I have outgrown myself, molted, come out from behind the curtain, etc. Use your own words. Like a blind man feeling his way along a corridor, I no longer can just see by what I like and think I “want” to do, but rather now more by what I don’t like. Apparently, I have exhausted the positive low-hanging fruit and am getting ready to dig into all that I don’t like, have ignored, and consider negative. I have read about this! LOL.

You can be sure that I have followed out every positive line of thought of what I like until finally I’ve come up empty of that and I’m left at this point pretty-much just with what I don’t like, with what I have avoided all these years until now. We’ve all heard the old slogan “All roads lead to Rome.” With me, these days, it’s all roads lead to my faults, much as I wish they didn’t. Anyway, it’s time to stop running from them and just look them right in the eye. What’s the problem here?

With the dharma, in the beginning it seems it’s always purification, purification, and more purification, trying to get ourselves down to a fighting weight of clarity so that we can begin to realize the nature of the mind and reality. And it’s incrementally progressive, always verging on new territory, new ground I have not yet covered. The result of the purification process (when it’s done) is clarifying and welcome, but the purification process itself can be painful indeed.

Yet, the pain is mostly in finally getting around to approaching my problems and looking right at them; once I accept them, it gets more interesting, of course. Anyway, that’s where I am at just now.

I don’t know why it never occurred to me until now to actually pursue my faults instead of run from them.

Or, that removing them would bring me what I most need and want. LOL.

OPENING OUR PRESENCE

May 9, 2018

The slipstream of our wake defines us, much as telltale foot-tracks in the snow marked the invisible man in the movie of that name. Like making angels in the snow as kids, everything we do reveals us. It's like backing into the future by looking in a rear-view mirror.

I find that just being "good" is not enough. Our internal cruise-control works for a while, but as we exhaust our good karma, we are increasingly exposed to what remains. And I hesitate to call it "bad" karma, because it too has a purpose; let's just say it is our karma.

And it is right there where it always has been, waiting for us to stop ignoring and take advantage of it. All our karma (good and bad) is there for a purpose. Certainly, it is there. LOL.

I believe that all of the things we try to avoid in life have a reason for being there. If, instead of pushing them away and/or denying them, we face what we find hard to take and begin to unpack them, they hold the keys to our eventual freedom. Running from them will never work. We should all know that by now.

Eventually, just living our life becomes a practice as worthy as any. If we run out of things we think we want to do, all of the things we have overlooked, pushed back, ignored, and refused to acknowledge are waiting for us, as fresh as fresh can be and potent.

If we read the teachings of the great Mahasiddhas, we find that a time comes in our practice when what

once seemed to hold us back (thoughts, habits, tough karma, etc.) are the only means to progress because, literally, they are what are holding us back.

So, twist and turn as we might to avoid the inevitable, it will find us in time. Another way to say this is that when we finally get around to it, all of what we have hated and ignored will be there waiting for us to discover and recognize. We bring it with us.

And these precious faults will be all that holds us in this world of samsara. And, like kids at Christmas, we will open them one by one and find freedom.

Here is a little poem about poems I wrote years ago.

My Poems

Poems,
A home for my thoughts.
Dear thoughts,
The very best of me,
All that's precious and kind,
Now sealed in words,
Like insects in amber:

Prayer flags endlessly waving,
In the gentle chalice of the mind.

THE URGENCY CONUNDRUM

May 11, 2018

Don't underestimate the difficulty of learning the dharma. Without a doubt, IMO learning the dharma is the most difficult thing I have ever done in my life. I'm sure this is my problem, but one of my greatest fears is that, just as it was difficult for me, perhaps other people will have trouble getting over the initial learning-dharma threshold to the point of grasping the true nature of how the mind actually works. As mentioned, perhaps this attitude is because it has been so difficult for me.

I can remember back in the 1960s, sitting only a few feet in front of Zen Buddhist teacher Alan Watts while he spoke for an evening. I was shocked to see how obtuse he was about the obvious. Watching Watts that evening gave me confidence that I could learn the dharma, if only because Watts seemed to understand so little about everything. LOL.

Perhaps today folks who read my writing may feel the same way about me, that I don't get the obvious. I guess it is difficult for me to grasp that the dharma takes time to sink in and that we ("I" to be exact) should be in no hurry for others or myself.

It's the "No wine before its time" philosophy, much like Shakespeare's "Ripeness is all." Certainly I understand those quotes, but still I am often left with this sense of urgency, as if we all need to seize the moment, make time for dharma, and clear some space in our lives for progressing our dharma practice.

However, I am beginning so see that perhaps ripeness IS all and that we can't pick fruit that is not

yet ripe. And that it is OK if we don't make it this time around, but roll over into the next life to make the next step in rounding off our dharma edges. After all, what's the hurry? I wish I believed that.

It's probably nothing but, as mentioned, I still have this sense of urgency about it all. Perhaps this feeling arose in me by contemplating that unless I get a few things right in this life I may not even get a human rebirth in my next life. Or, unless I reach a certain state of purification, the chance of my entering one of the Buddha Realms after death (and not taking any rebirth at all) is probably out of the question.

And yet, consider that a field of flowers just needs water, sun, and some time. There are flower buds in all kinds of different stages spread out across any field. And there is no hurrying the flowers to open sooner than they do.

I would imagine that rinpoches, who are skilled dharma teachers, can't be worried about whether the field of their students "get it" this lifetime or the next. Probably, as good gardeners, they are busy tending all the buds in whatever stage they are in. Let them blossom as they may and when they may.

And these dharma teachers probably see it more like a case of "hurry up and wait." In other words, waiting for the sun, rain, and time IS the fastest way to realization. Patience IS the key to full-speed ahead.

Perhaps, just perhaps, I am beginning to see this concept of letting patience do its work. Then again, I still worry about others getting the relief that dharma can bring to a life. For me, this is a real conundrum, amounting almost to something of a riddle.

“MANAGING” IS THE NEW NORMAL

May 12, 2018

I want to say something about managing untoward events in our life. Mostly, I'm talking about managing health issues, but the same idea goes for any event that shakes up or shatters the Self, leaving us wide awake and standing out at the edge of the void.

It's happened a few times to me in my life, but not often enough for me to be able to keep it in mind, much less see it coming. It kind of wipes the slate clean for a few days and, like Humpty-Dumpty, it takes my Self some time to reform and put itself back together again. That short time when our Self has vacated is very precious for insight and inspiring a new approach.

These last two years have had so many health issues that set me back that I have kind of forgotten what moving forward feels like. And it's this feeling of losing forward momentum and falling backward that I am looking at here.

I'm not going to dwell on all the health details that set me back, but they were plenty, certainly more than enough from my point of view. Seeming endless trips to doctors, hospitals, and procedure after procedure, with many MRIs, CT-Scans, EKGs, sonar scans, muscle testing, an operation, lab work, and just on and on.

What IS interesting to me is how soon I forgot what my old “normal” even felt like; you know, the one I have been used to all my life. And over the last couple of years I spent month after month trying to get back to where I was, i.e. back to “normal.” Of course, that's when the term “new normal” was floated by someone

and I tried my best to understand what that actually meant.

However, I was too busy trying to get back to feeling like I used to before all the health issues struck that I pretty-much just ignored all of the friendly advice suggesting I find for myself (and accept) a “new normal.” What I was experiencing was not normal, new or otherwise.

And the only thing that flagged down my attention was that I gradually realized that I didn’t even remember my old normal all that well anyway and certainly could not get back there and somehow revive and relive it. That was water long over the dam and I was slowly realizing that even clinging to the idea of how it used to be was wishful thinking and a mostly waste of time. And, anyway, I don’t like the idea of living in the past.

All of this health-stuff was a new world for me and I had to find a way to accept it because there it was, bigger than life and all-consuming. So, this concept of the “New Normal” kind of grew on me. At least it made sense. And here comes the heart of this article, some thoughts about finding a new normal and my two cents on that term and its value.

I’m not sure what those who told me about the “new normal” meant by that term, but certainly I needed something to measure my life by. Looking for normal still had the word “normal” in it and all the baggage that brought with it. With health issues and their recovery, “normal” is kind of like a moving target. It shifts from day to day and month to month. To me the whole topic is anything but normal.

And, in all honesty, I never did get to feeling a new normal and I will try to tell you why. My attempts to compare how I felt in recovery to how I believe I used

to feel normally just never quite made sense or clicked. It was one of those “Close, but no cigar” type of things. However, let me tell you what did happen and what did work:

I never could quite turn my current health symptoms into something I would call normal, because it was, well, not normal. LOL. The whole idea of capturing the past is like the old slogan “You can’t go home again.” It was doomed from the get-go. When I finally gave up trying to feel normal or even to feel out a new normal, what I found that did work was to just concentrate on managing my symptoms, including everything I felt about how it used to be. I believe that if we step back, that itself is a misstep, at least after the first few days.

Instead of trying to make how I currently felt resemble how I used to feel, which “used to feel” was already fading in my memory, I simply found that managing my current symptoms as best I could actually made me feel quite normal once again. That’s the secret, IMO.

Saying that may sound to you so obvious that you may ask what is the difference between that and what I had for many months been trying to do? I guess it is as simple as not trying to regain something that once was, but instead making the best of (and managing) what I am feeling now and in the moment.

In other words, my attempts to reinstate what used to be normal failed. I could not remember and recreate the past, if only because my condition due to health had changed so much. I didn’t even feel normal.

What did work is when I stopped trying to do all of that comparing me now and then; instead. I began to just actually manage my existing conditions and situation. Managing to make the most of what I had, my

symptoms, conditions, and the situation for me in general gave me the sense of normalcy I had been looking for.

I approached feeling normal not by attempting to reinstate the past, but by moving forward, accepting my current conditions, and making the most of them from day to day. Yes, that sense of normalcy is perhaps now a little more fragile, but being proactive and learning to manage my own condition feels quite normal.

So, water over the dam is just that. The past is the past. We can't step in the same river twice and as some of the Zen teachers say not even once. LOL.

What we can do is make the most of what we have. We can wrest control from that part of us that vainly tries to reinstate the past and just drive the car that we are in now, good, bad, or indifferent. We may not be or have the old "normal" we once were, but accepting and actually working with the conditions we do have feels quite normal indeed.

In fact, this must be what I did before all of the health issues intervened, which was to manage my conditions (which were then benign) and drive the vehicle-body that I was in and had.

So, I no longer try to be normal or even look for a new normal. Instead, I make the most of whatever I have on hand, warts and all, and make that work.

Managing it all is normally what I have done all my life, so managing a "recovering me" feels just right.

Anyway,

this result (just handling it) is better than anything else I have tried.

UNTOWARD LIFE EVENTS

May 12, 2018

This whole idea of events that life brings us that are a shock to the system, events that leave us feeling empty and vulnerable are to me fascinating in themselves. Shattering the ironclad sense of Self that we all have is unusual in itself, even if it only lasts for a day or so.

The great pith dharma teachings are filled with pointers from adepts and Mahasiddhas explaining that in moments of surprise or loss, we are not only vulnerable, but that these stunning moments can be ideal for looking at the true nature of the mind, if we will allow it. In fact, without such moments we tend to be so wrapped-up in whatever we are engaged in that nothing else gets through.

So, sudden events like the death of a loved one, the loss of a job, or whatever untoward event comes our way can have an upside if we are aware enough to take advantage of them. In other words, these empty or void moments should be taken advantage of, since they don't come too often for most of us. And obviously we can't seem to avoid them!

However, taking advantage of what otherwise are fairly devastating or sobering moments and events in our life is not all that easy. The Rinpoche that I have worked with for the last 35 years points out that even smaller, less devastating, events can trigger insight on our part into the true nature of how our mind works. He would mention that a sudden noise, explosion, slamming door, or whatever can clear out our mind (if only for a moment or nanosecond)

allowing our awareness to extend beyond the normal closure and pre-occupation with our Self.

It's almost like some kind of natural shock therapy, blowing out the cobwebs of our distractions and somehow ringing our bell. I have had enough of these kinds of moment to catch my attention, although in my case, it takes a pretty strong event to become unattached to my Self long enough to just look around a bit. Yet, it does happen.

And while, intrinsically, my gut reaction is to avoid such experiences of shock to the system as much as possible and to bend over backward trying to fill in the void that can open in these times as fast as I can, I have noticed that these times are not only painfully sobering, but are opportunities for increased awareness. At least in my case, they assist my dharma practice.

I find it a little embarrassing (and perhaps discouraging) that, in my case, it takes such a powerful event as a shock to the system to pry my attention away from my business-as-usual of distraction and set me outside space and time long enough to even take a look.

The discouragement comes from the thought that I would never volunteer for these semi-catastrophic life events, yet when they come I can, if I don't panic because of vacating my Self, grow very much from fully experiencing these events. They bring a message.

It's too bad that I am insensitive to the degree that it takes some grand-slam of an event to jar me free from what I am usually preoccupied or stuck in. LOL.

What I have found is that these major shock-events can be ever so valuable for grasping the dharma.

And, if I can stand to be without the constant pacifier of my Self-preoccupations for some days (or even a moment), reality rushes in to fill the void, pointing out to me what makes the most sense in my life path, directionally. These scary events are great for reorienting.

As mentioned, I don't find myself asking for or invoking these major life calamities directly; when they do naturally come along, they are ideal times (if I can stand them) to reevaluate and re-plot my life course. If nothing else, at these untoward times I can see more clearly and respond accordingly.

One of my most powerful dharma breakthroughs came years ago when I suddenly lost my job (and all income) and was plunged into that unemployment hell that many folks experience. That event popped my right out of my normal bubble and opened my mind.

And the same is true for my difficult health problems in the last two years. Who would EVER choose to go through that? Yet, once permitted, while physically I may never be the same, dharmically I am much better for the experience. However, this is not a message to the universe to send me any more health problems. LOL.

And the heart of any discouragement from these kind of life-shock events is that apparently this is what it takes to get my attention. How sad is it that that I can't just be open to grasping the nature of life and the mind, without the taser-like force of such humbling events.

And so, IMO, the saving grace for any of you out there who suffer similar events is to take advantage of them as best you can to reorient yourself dharmically. That's what I am slowly learning to do.

THE “REAL” IN REALIZATION

May 14, 2018

In my life, I have done a fair bunch of stuff. I have not been afraid to work hard because I always worked on things that I loved to do. That has been a saving grace for me.

And I have had some success and some failures, which is just what Samsara promises to us all. And, as enjoyable as my successes have been, they don't hold a candle to realizing the dharma. I didn't say “understanding” the dharma or even practical experience with the dharma. I said “realization” of the dharma. And the reason is simple. Success is wonderful, but transitory. We have it and then usually we have something quite opposite just down the road, always too soon for my taste.

The nice thing about dharma, at least in what are called the “realization practices,” is that “realization” is not temporary, but rather permanent. Once you have it, you always have it. Worldly success, at least in my case, is transitory. Like the sun peeking from behind a cloud, success comes and goes. It is hard (at least for me) to always be successful. I've known ups, but also downs, and on-arounds – not to mention everything in-between. LOL.

I've gradually grown tired of the up and down quality of ordinary life. Yet, every modicum of realization that dharma has brought me remains evergreen; it comes and it stays with me from that moment on. What's not to like in that?

The things that I most love, what gets me up in the morning are not my successes, but rather the brilliant quality of what the dharma practice of “Insight

Meditation” offers. There is nothing on Earth like it, IMO. This may sound sacrilegious, but to me, Insight Meditation is like pure endorphins. No, it does not have an opiate effect, but yes Insight Meditation is totally addictive, at least for me.

And the treasure map as to how to master Insight Meditation includes (at least in my case) a random factor; it’s a map with something that can’t be programmed or counted on. It just has to happen. This is what makes koans in Zen Buddhism of such long life or the pointing-out instructions in Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism so necessary.

The adept dharma teachers labor with their students until something (seeming perhaps almost by accident) jars the student into realization. Perhaps it’s a bit like brain surgery, the process of very, very carefully teasing or pointing out the actual nature of the mind until the student finally grasps it. It’s not like it is very far away.

From the moment of recognizing the true nature of the mind (and the various realizations after that), the student is then on his or her own. They don’t need a teacher from that point onward, at least not as they did. It’s like the infant groping about until it latches onto the mother’s nipple.

Of course, I have thought about all this for a long time, in particular what it takes to snap a student out of their normal attachments just long enough for them to glimpse or realize their mind’s nature, recognize what it is, after which there is no going-back to worry about. With realization, we don’t go back. That’s the nature of realization and why it’s so hallowed.

In the midst of all our day-to-day experience and attachments is realization, right in front of us, so close

we can't see it. It just takes a nudge to push us over into realization, but that nudge is, as they say, as fine as frog's hair. An authentic teacher, like a watchmaker or brain surgeon, must tweak our attention "just so" that we are distracted from our regular distractions long enough to realize the nature of how the mind works, after which we remain relatively undistracted, at least to a significant degree.

If recognition and realization were easy, we would be buying it at the corner drug store, but it's not that simple. And it is a two-way street. Not only must we find an authentic dharma teacher who is willing to work with us, but we must meet them halfway by purifying ourselves so that our obscurations become transparent enough that we can see through and beyond them. And that's up to us.

I understand all this, but I'm not a rinpoche. I don't know how (or yet have the words) to help folks shake off their distractions long enough to have realization. All I can do is talk about it, which must get boring to readers. I apologize, but I probably won't stop talking because to me nothing else is as important.

COMING EVENTS CAST THEIR SHADOWS

May 19, 2018

They do, and not always in some ominous way. The anticipation of this coming trip to Chicago and my weeklong stay at the astrology conference is quite distracting. This distraction is interesting as well. It does cast a shadow from the future on the present; I can feel it.

And it shows me once again how powerful anticipations and expectations are. It was the great Mahasiddha Tilopa who clearly said:

“Don’t invite the future.”

These are not just coming events in linear sequence like I might imagine, one after another, but the whole trip (like a cloud) impinges (even now) on the stability of my mind; at least I find this so in my case. And this is aside from all the business of packing and working out the details of the trip, which I fully expect and understand.

It’s that the whole anticipation of the known (and the unknown) is like a white-noise that drowns out the more subtle intuitions that I am used to and depend on, what we could call my quiet mind. Yes, there is a kind of excitement or buzz, but its way more invasive of my peace of mind than I would have guessed. I can see that I would have to be a lot more dharmically stable than I am in order to just filter out the angst or whatever we might call it that is in the air.

I can understand all this, but I would not like to live this way all the time. I would be losing what is most precious about the present moment – pristine clarity. All of this low-level excitement takes the edge off the quality of the moment and, as mentioned, particularly

the more intuitive subtext connotations, what we call micro-contrast in photography. It's enough to make you think. LOL.

As the Lojong dharma teachings point out in one of its slogans "Whatever you meet, instantly join it with meditation." In other words, take whatever arises to the path. I don't know about "instantly," but taking this condition that has arisen for me to the path is pretty unavoidable; and this because everything else has kind of dried up or been subtly obscured anyway. LOL.

So, if I am going to blog, it seems that it will have to be about what I am going through and where I am at this moment. And that's exactly what I am doing.

And the moral of the story for me is to stay present. Whatever the moment brings, that and that alone, is the essence of freshness and should be received to its full extent. For me that means, again in the words of Tilopa by relaxing "as it is."

THERE IS NO TIME LIKE THE PRESENT

May 20, 2018

Literally, this is true. As I like to joke with myself, the present moment is like the old image of folks hanging around the office water cooler. The present is where everything happens, a singular oxygen vent, where all the oxygen in the room is. Everything else is either past or future. This moment is our primary source and resource. Period.

It should not surprise us that the dharma is very much concerned with being aware of and taking advantage of what's happening right now. The key (and classic) dharma instruction appears to be the great Mahasiddha Tilopa's word of advice "don't alter the present." Anything that alters, obstructs, or obscures the present moment needs to be let go.

Are we a slave to the moment? Well, that's not the word I would use, but yes we are. It pays to pay attention to what's happening right now. In fact, the seminal Mahamudra Lineage Prayer goes so far as to say "Unwavering attention is the body of meditation," meaning the main part of what we do.

I point this out because, obviously, it is important. And it's not because I think it's important; all of the pith essential texts tell us that it is important. So, what should we do?

Obviously, whatever we do has to involve the present moment, but how? As mentioned above, the Lineage Prayer says "unwavering attention," which is a pretty tall order for most of us. That means "all the time" attention, not just a glimpse or a glance. Try it for even one minute and you will see what we are up against.

If you check it out and are honest, you can see that you have a long way to go to reach anything close to “unwavering.” Even trying to be unwavering is not unwavering, etc. Therefore, we should understand why so much of preliminary dharma practice is about removing distractions by purifying ourselves in one way or the other. There is no way around it.

And if, on principle, we don't like the idea of purification, then we are not yet ready for any serious dharma practice. Just as in the womb, the cervix has to be 100% effaced or thinned out before a baby can be born, so in spiritual realization, our obscurations have to be thinned out to the point that they become transparent and we can see through and beyond them.

How we want to go about doing this is up to us, but the great lords of dharma have gone to great effort to make it as easy as possible through a variety of purification techniques and practices. It's funny how often we may balk or hem & haw about taking the only exit there is. Then, like everyone else, we finally just walk through that door. LOL.

There IS no time other than the present!

“FINELY WROUGHT OR OVERWROUGHT”

May 23, 2018

[I'M OFF -- If you are reading this, I am on the road to Chicago, and probably early in the AM too, as I that's how I tend to be. Not sure how much time I will have to post here on Facebook for a while, but you know I will do my best. I may just post some iPhone photos from the conference and say a few words. On the other hand, if I have thoughts worth sharing while at the conference, I may want to post about those. LOL. I always try to keep my Facebook friends in the loop.]

I am a bit shocked at how little it takes to upset my applecart. I don't mean I get all upset emotionally, but rather how delicate is the stability of our mind actually is, whether natural or due to dharma practice. In other words, if all things are well and my life stable, this is reflected (obviously) in the stability of my mental state.

Conversely, it takes very little to destabilize that stability and drown out much of the clarity I have achieved through dharma practice. It's like someone turned up the white noise volume to where it overwrites any of my more subtle intuitions I have come to depend on. It's easy to become overwhelmed with this kind of static until I have little direction. It's like the opposite of the old Atlantis-rising stories, only here the lovely Atlantis is being flooded and submerging. Everything is flat-lining.

All of this gives new meaning to the often-quoted second word of advice from the great Mahasiddha Tilopa, which is “Don't invite the future.”

Expectations, speculation, and in this case just plain old anticipation are enough to rob me of what is most

valuable, my peace of mind. What a delicate flower I seem to be. It does not take much to disturb my mental balance and overshadow my sensitivities. LOL.

I am reminded of a phrase I came up with as a young adult, "Finely wrought or overwrought."

PREDICTING ASTROLOGY

May 24, 2018

[Some notes on my trip to Chicago: It took a little over four hours. I did not sleep well the night before, which is common for me when I'm too amped up about going somewhere. So, I was up a lot in the night. Finally, I just said the heck with it and headed out of town about five in the morning. Might as well drive rather than lie on my back staring at the ceiling. The sun was already trying to rise, so the "rosy fingers of dawn" were already visible as the poet Ovid might have put it. Heading toward Grand Rapids and down the east coast of Lake Michigan put me right into dense fog, which followed me almost all the way to Gary, Indiana. Heavy fog is not a lot of fun, with trucks and semitrailers suddenly appearing from the fog as great bright beasts in the night.

The only thing worse than dense fog is dense traffic which I entered almost as soon as the fog began to lift. And it got heavier and heavier until I was bumper to bumper for at least an hour. I was headed into what Chicago calls the "Miracle Mile," where I would be staying, and I joked to myself that this is what it is called because it's a miracle if you get through it. LOL. But I did.

I couldn't wait to reach the hotel, park the car, and be safe inside the Marriott, which is almost like a small city in itself. I would not have to face that traffic until I go home in about a week. But I was more tired than I wanted to let on and I found that my room would not be ready until 4 PM, which for me meant no nap. It has about 8:30 AM or so. Story of my life.

Luckily, I was able to get into the locked market place area, where I was soon busy trying to put my booth together, which was a great diversion from just being tired. And I soon found myself meeting old friends, new friends, and ended up doing quick astrology-chart readings for some of them. After all, it was something I could do. LOL.

Finally, I got into my room, which is great. I am one of the speakers at the conference, so they had a lottery that assigned a hotel suite to 15 lucky speakers and I was one of them. I have never stayed in a fancy hotel room before and it is pretty amazing. I would never spend that kind of money for a room, but I can see why some folks do. I could get used to this. LOL.

Anyway, I was out of Chicago traffic and snug as a bug in the hotel. About the only event that was not a prepaid special pre-conference lecture was a panel discussion on astrology and prediction. It lasted from 2 PM until 5 PM and I was busy sorting things out with my booth, so I could just pop in for a few minutes at a time here and there. I don't know all of what was said, but the gist I picked up did not sound like my take on astrological predictability. So, rather than comment on what I heard or didn't hear, it is kinder to just give my two-cents off the top.

PREDICTION AND ASTROLOGY

Is astrology predictable? To answer that question, we have to understand what astrology technically is. IMO, astrology and astronomy are connate, meaning they are two sides of the same coin and they arise together as halves of one inseparable piece.

Astrology is basically "cultural astronomy." In other words, astrology is what astronomy means to us and nothing more (or less).

Astrology is not meant to predict particular life events other than to give meaning to totally predictable astronomical celestial events. And, as we know, astronomy can predict celestial events for thousands of years into the future and with remarkable accuracy. We have lists of these events and they are called ephemerides or commonly just “ephemerises.” We know the moment of each New and Full Moon for ages into the future. That is pure scientific astronomy. Astronomy is (practically speaking) totally predictable and that is all the predictability there is in astrology as far as I know it.

So, what then is astrology? Astrology, as mentioned, is cultural astronomy. Astrology is what all these easily predicated astronomical celestial events mean for us, what they portend, if you will. And they are nothing more than that, but that should be enough.

Trying to reverse engineer predicted events so that instead of giving the meaning of the predicted astronomical events, we take an event like a plane crash or finding a pile of money and predict when that event will occur without astronomical backing, to me, is an exercise in futility. We could only do that if we were adept enough as astrologers to identify which astronomical event(s) indicate a particular life-event and looked up those events in an ephemeris and declared that this particular astronomical event indicates there will be a plane crash or whatever.

My point is that if we stop using an ephemeris as our fiducial and start predicting events psychically, we are no longer doing astrology, but something else, like fortune telling or whatever Nostradamus did. LOL.

I can't say that no one can do this psychically; I can say that I can't do this astrologically without using an ephemeris as my touchstone. It just would not be

doing astrology. Astrology, like any of the mystical sciences, can be used as an oracle to “get on our contacts” as the psychics say and allow the universe to speak to us or through us, but that is an oracular event, not astrology. I do it all the time, but I don’t consider it astrology, but, as mentioned, using astrology (like tarot, I-Ching, etc.) as an oracle. I have no problem with that.

However, what I believe I heard from the snippets of the predictability-panelists was all kinds of what seem to me self-imposed problems of morality, ethics, possibility, etc. that to me just don’t exist. The astronomers produce the ephemerides. The astrologers take these, as is and without modifying them, interpret what these singular events mean or might mean. To me, it’s as simple as that.

Interpretation of anything is just that, interpretation. It is in interpreting these events where astrologers differ and find their differences. As Shakespeare said, “There’s the rub.” Astrologers, at best, only agree in general (loosely) on what all these astronomical events mean. If there is one thing astrologers do not have in common, it is interpretation. We are all over the map. Every serious astrologer I have even met is like a walking Bible of their own interpretations. I don’t even want to think about how many times over the last many decades that one astrologer or another wanted to go over with me their interpretation of Hitler’s chart or present to me the only authentic chart for the U.S.A. that they had come up with. I can only say that astrological interpretation, IMO, is in its infancy. Yet, it alone is the key to the future of astrology.

So, yes, there is a wide world of astrological interpretation out there, but a very narrow world of

astronomical events. Astronomical events allow virtually no interpretation as to their authenticity. Yet, what they mean, cultural astronomy, is what astrologers do and this varies all over the place.

If I could predict the stock market, meaning if I could pick the astronomical event(s) that would make me money, don't you think I would do just that? That's how predictable astrology is or isn't. I am not saying that no one can do this; I am saying that very, very few can or have done this to my knowledge or satisfaction. And I have looked.

Years ago, I put on many different conferences at our center in Big Rapids, Michigan (Matrix Software at that time). And one such conference was on financial astrology, using astrology to make money. And, if I remember right, there were 22 speakers, meaning 22 panelists, each of whom made their living (or most of it) advising others how to invest their money. I remember looking forward to learning how to use astrology to do just that.

However, what I came away with is that, to a man or woman, most of these speakers seemed to have no money themselves, which seemed odd to me for a financial astrologer. And, worse, a number of them had to confidentially (and privately) ask me to bail them out with a ticket to get to our center. They did not have the funds and the conference was mostly a get-together for financial astrologers to meet with themselves, with some audience in attendance, but being with one another was the main point of the conference. They had to get there on their own.

These were nice folks, of course, and we had some fun, but how most of them made a living advising others financially using astrology is beyond me. About all I learned from the conference is that astrologers

cannot predict the stock market, try as they might. If some can, they are not telling anyone else. LOL.

So, I find myself keeping the psychic sciences (probably an oxymoron) separate from my astrology. As an astrologer, I do my best to look at the astronomical events, patterns, and what-not and suggest what they indicate to me, IMO. Can I predict your future? I can if you understand that I take a predictable astronomical event, like transiting Saturn to your Ascendant, and tell you (to the best of my ability) what that astronomical event may mean, like that you are entering a more internal period, and so on.

The future of astrology, to me, would be if astrologers could get together and hammer out (get more specific) on what particular astronomical events mean and portend. That would move astrology into the 21st Century, IMO. However, all that anyone would have to do would be to look up an astronomical event for which there is an agreed interpretation (more refined than we have now) and interpret it for themselves. Who would need astrologers? LOL.

In the meantime, I have found that carefully examining the astronomical facts produces a wealth of interpretation aids for astrologers to consider. Free e-books that I have written of some of these analyses are “Burn Rate: Retrogrades,” “Interface: Planetary Nodes,” “StarTypes: Life Path Partners,” “The Astrology of Space,” “Full-Phase Aspects,” and others. See the links below.

AMIDST THE ROAR OF THE CROWD

May 25, 2018

I'm still here in Chicago at UAC, the United Astrology Conference, getting as much sleep as I can, which has been minimal. Because of the sheer size of the conference (at least 1,000 astrologers), the busyness everywhere, and the din of the crowd in the marketplace where I have my little booth, I often feel like a dry leaf blowing around in the wind.

I have been interviewing as many astrologers who are speaking here as possible, plus some who are not speaking, but are just here to listen. I am just recording audio for podcasts and I'm glad that I brought two shotgun mics, which are uni-directional and thus do not pick up too much of the background noise; otherwise getting a clear audio signal here would be tough.

One of the topics that seems to be emerging from all these little interviews has to do with the future of astrology. Where are we headed and have we somehow lost our sense of direction in the midst of all the intense communication enabled by advances in media such as smart phones and the like? And why, if we are ever more connected would we be less in touch with our basic sense of intuition?

Of course, I can't say we have figured it all out, LOL, but one idea that comes up is our basic signal-to-noise-ratio as regards intuition. It seems that while we are better and better connected, spending huge amounts of our time on our iPhones and other devices, the total amount of preoccupation with communicating itself obscures what there is to communicate. In other words, the busyness and

activity of communicating itself amounts to white-noise that can obscure rather than enhance our own more subtle intuitions.

And why this could be important is that our general sense of direction may well not just come from just the sheer thought of figuring out where we are going, but rather from very subtle and gentle intuitions coming from deep in the mind that urge or guide us almost unconsciously. Without meaning to, perhaps we are suppressing our inner oracle that feeds us like a mother does a baby. Adding layers of veneer between ourselves and our inner steering mechanism may well end up distancing us from our inner sense of direction. And thus we wander.

Losing touch with what naturally has (from time immemorial) guided us from within may result in a net loss of the inner signal that has always guided us. Hopefully, this is a temporary phenomenon from which we will eventually rebound and remedy, putting us in closer touch once again with our own inner oracles.

It's like we are losing our ability to read our own inner compass because it is being lost due to the noise of our own activity and thus this sense of confusion as to where we might be headed. Of course, here I am focusing on where astrology is headed, but I believe this is a more general problem and not just limited to astrology.

This would explain, at least to me, why so many young astrologers are pursuing the classical languages like Greek, Latin, Arabic, and so on. It's an attempt to find in the wisdom of the past what we can no longer sense well enough in the wisdom of the present. It does not take a genius to realize that every thought, word, and deed originally came out of the

mind itself and manifested as it would. If that inner sense of direction is being obscured by our very modern activity, it is no wonder that we reach to the past for guidance. There is, however, another approach we might consider.

We might look into toning back or down the white-noise that is preventing us from being naturally more intuitive as we have traditionally been in the past. Of course, this raises the specter of some form of meditation or mind-training. And I am not referring to the many relaxation forms of meditation. Of course, we should relax the mind. Rather, I am pointing to what the historical Buddha taught, which is awareness training, i.e. waking up rather than relaxing. As we become aware of our own distractions, like the old game of Pick-Up-Sticks, we can begin to gently remove these obscurations a bit at a time.

And so, my point here is that it is, IMO, easier to remove our inner distractions and once again amp up our intuition signal than to search for it in the past or the future. I am not saying that documenting the past is not worthwhile. After all, I am an award-winning archivist who has helped to sustain both music and movies through carefully documenting them.

Just as our body craves certain foods and vitamins, so do we crave the intuition within ourselves that provides us with our inner directionality and compass. We can search the world to find what is already within us or we can learn to mine our own inner direction and intuition. As for myself, I find removing what obscures my inner vision to be the easiest way to attain this, although I recognize that there are, as we say, different strokes for different folks.

And so, these are just a few of the thoughts that are coming out of this wild and crazy gathering here in the Windy City.

IT NEVER RAINS BUT IT POURS

May 28, 2018

This has to be funny. Tomorrow is the last day of the UAC (United Astrological Conference) and tonight is the banquet dinner. There are over 1500 (I am told) astrologers here and it sure looked like it in the vast ballroom-like room, tables as far as you could see. I had to go; after all, I paid for a ticket. LOL.

Today, I worked ten hours straight, either recording interviews with other speakers, but mostly doing free mini-readings for astrologers attending the conference. I was at the banquet, sitting at a table with my friends Juri Stork and Alois Treindl from Astrodienst. I had chosen the vegan option on the menu and was served up a huge slab of tofu that shook like jelly. I had to laugh, because many of us on a vegan diet stopped eating tofu years ago. Of course, I dutifully ate it.

Yet, I was fading fast and the noise in the room with 1,000 people (or whatever number were there) eating and talking was so loud that Juri and I, although sitting next to one another, could hardly hear ourselves. I tried to hang on, but I was so tired, so I told Juri I had to hit the hay and quietly slipped out and went upstairs to bed.

And there I was asleep, but the hotel phone kept ringing and ringing. I tried to answer it and managed to disconnect it without meaning to and drifted back to sleep. But it rang again a minute or so later. Now I was awake so I answered it.

On the other end of the phone was my friend Michael Lutin, who told me that I had won the Lifetime Achievement Award to a standing ovation from a sea

of astrologers. And, after it was determined I was no longer in the room, Michael received it for me. As they say, "Who woulda' thunk it." And Michael said that he and Ray Merriman wanted to come up to my room and deliver it.

Whoah. I had not let the maid service into my room for a week, so it was, well, it was just the way you might imagine it. So, I said OK and up they came. And there I was in my pajamas. They shook my hand; I sat them on the couch with me on a chair facing them. We had a few laughs and they explained that I am one of a few astrologers to win such an award. Both Ray and Michael had won this award some years before.

I was totally shocked to find this out. When they left, I called my wife Margaret and we had a fun talk.

So, there you have it. I'm too awake right now (sitting here in my hotel room in Chicago) to go to sleep so I am writing this blog and enclosing a quick picture of the award.

A FEW WORDS TO MY ASTROLOGICAL FRIENDS

May 30, 2018

[I'm about to hit the road back to home, driving. It's been a mind-opening time. I realize that I need to spend more time, one-to-one) with astrologers who would like to be introduced to some of my techniques. I have arranged with Kepler College to offer webinars to this effect. And I will configure my home desktop computer to do live one-to-one consultations at no fee to anyone interested. This might take a few days, but if you are an astrologer and would like to have me walk you through an introduction to your astrological Dharma Chart, send me an email with a request, your birth data, name, and what kind of astrology you do, and we will set up a time where we can talk together and look at your chart. And if you are a dharma practitioner I will also do this. My email is Michael@Erlewine.net]

Many years ago, after I founded Matrix Software, astrologers from all over would managed to find their way to where I lived, fellow astrologers. But it puzzled me that because I had programmed astrology on the new home computers, they nd assumed I was some kind of gearhead. They would kind give me a nod, but there was always this subtext of "Michael, just leave the interpreting to us." That's gearhead profiling (LOL) and I always wanted to explain to them that I am an astrologer first and foremost and a programmer second.

After all, I learned programming to calculate alternate kinds of astrology like Local Space that could not be calculated without it. And math was always my worst subject. I had to take Algebra One three times before

they finally just pushed me through with a “D.” So, learning the trigonometry and math needed to program the precise positions of the planets was really difficult for me. I am an astrologer first and a programmer second. Always.

And while I understand how freeing it was for astrologers to be able to computerize their calculations, I don't feel that programming astrology is my only contribution to astrology. In my opinion, there is another “freedom” I have brought to astrology that in the long run will be even more important to the future of astrology and to their road to better acceptance by the public and greater personal income.

And what this turns on is the graphic-mudras or mandalas as revealed by being empowered through realizing the nature of our own heliocentric natal chart. I have worked on this for almost as long as I have been programming. And I will try to be brief.

Some four hundred years ago the astronomer/astrologer Copernicus pointed out to his peers that everything does not revolve around us here on Earth. In fact, we revolve around the Sun. I'm not sure how this all came down, but eventually the group of astrologers split into two groups, with the future astronomers walking into the future with two separate charts clutched in their hands, the traditional natal chart and also the newly discovered heliocentric chart. Both were a map of the same birth moment and the same planets, each from a different view. But together they kind of triangulated a nativity, resulting in something amounting to a three-dimensional view of an event or person.

And the rest is history, with the astronomers becoming one of the two oldest academic disciplines,

the other being botany, and astrologers proceeding on with the traditional natal chart, but without the insight (or empowerment) of the helio perspective. It is unfortunate that today, in the West, astrology is not a right livelihood. We are not cherished by society, but exist in many ways almost as a form of entertainment, much like gypsies. And to add insult to injury, many astrology struggle their whole lives to make a good living and this makes me sad.

IMO, perhaps due to clinging to the geocentric traditional natal chart solely, we are perhaps too attached to whatever to see clearly enough to provide our society with what they need so that our social place might be elevated. I can well remember back in the early 1970s going to a bank to ask for a loan to buy my first programmable calculator. This was before home computers even existed. And, of course, when asked what I did for a living I proudly told him I was an astrologer. The loan official reached into a drawer and pulled out a paper with loan risks ranked in order of their recommend-ability. And he went on to point out to me that “astrology” (as to risk) was just above that of migrant workers. My request for a loan was denied.

On the third time back to the bank I finally got the loan and the rest is history. Of course astrology programs became indispensable to astrologers and they allowed me to develop concepts and techniques otherwise impossible for me. And while some of my techniques (like Local Space) are now in most astrology programs, what I consider the most powerful and indispensable technique of all, that of determining your heliocentric archetype or tribe is at the top of my list. Why is that?

It is because the heliocentric archetype or tribal-mudra is capable of offering astrologers the empowerment that astronomers took so long ago and that astrologers failed to take so long ago. By also identifying (and transmigrating) to the helio chart, the sense of confidence and accuracy is so confirmed that it can amount to a pathway to greater acceptance and a better livelihood.

This is simply true because while the traditional geocentric chart is a map of our personality, circumstances, and karma, it still does not clearly point out to us the actual nature of our chart, that from which drives the geocentric chart. However, the natal heliocentric chart is much more stable in that the patterns it shows are actually what is happening in our solar system at the time. And while we do not live on the sun, we are an integral part of our solar system and can benefit from understanding where we actually relate to the other planets and the Sun, working as a whole.

I know that we like to dismiss the sun as a big ball of hot gas, yet consider ourselves a meaningful soul or whatever, with a spirit and soon, yet we ignore the spirit of the Sun, which gives life and spirit to us all. LOL.

In the future, this will change and the helio or Dharma Chart will be found to be the fiducial or key chart which it is. The helio chart (and its archetypes) is the foundation from which the geo chart springs and makes sense. As astrologers, learn to identify with our helio archetype or tribe, we may have to purify ourselves a bit and get our act ready for a higher octave, but any effort in that regard will be well worth it.

It is important to understand the importance of confirmation in our lives and our practice. The helio archetype and its graphic mudra is absolutely confirming, which gives us the confidence to more fully identify and realize our chart.

CHARTING THE ALAYA CONSCIOUSNESS

June 4, 2018

[Before I blog, here is a photo of me displayed on the screen at UAC when I was given the award, but managed to miss because I was already in bed sleeping. It is kind of fun, so I share it. And now a blog I hope some of you read and discuss with me.]

I have been busy doing short astrology readings via the web on and off through both the day and night these last days. Doing readings is not new to me. I have done them since around 1972, so I'm no stranger to looking at people's charts. And what am I learning by doing this?

Well, what I am learning, which is also why I am taking my time to do these readings, is that folks need confirmation as to who they are, why they are here, what they are capable of doing. When we are in doubt (or wonder) what we would be good for in this world, this amounts to an obscuration. It can be hard to see beyond our doubt as to who we are.

I found out decades ago, in the early 1970s (and much to my surprise), that the traditional astrological chart, as helpful as it can be, is limited. I never knew this until I knew different. It is as simple as that our geocentric natal chart, which is a snapshot from Earth of the entire solar system, does not accurately in many cases convey what is actually going on in the solar system at the time of our birth.

The traditional geocentric natal chart is an oblique view of what is actually going on out there in the solar system. It does give us a picture of what's happening, but (appropriately enough) only from Earth's view. And while there is nothing wrong with that, by

definition it is incomplete as to accurately describing what is actually happening as the planets orbit the Sun (and not the earth).

Maybe it does not matter for many of us that we see the system in which we live somewhat askew. On the other hand, at least for me, it seems to matter a great deal. Once I understood what a chart of the solar-system aspect patterns at my birth actually mapped, the helio chart, I understood that my traditional geocentric natal chart (for all its value) has a somewhat limited view.

Both charts complement each other, but once I actually grasped the nature of my helio chart, everything kind of came together in my mind and clicked. I then understood WHAT my limited geo view was looking at and trying to describe. This helped immensely. In fact, it was then that I began to understand what was going on behind or beyond my personal (geocentric) karma.

And so, spending many hours lately walking people through the transition from the geocentric natal chart of their karma to identifying with their helio chart of their dharma has been very rewarding, rewarding for many of those I sat down with, but also rewarding for me to realize how empowering this sort of re-identification process can be. By this I mean, it is possible to transmigrate our identity (astrologically) from our traditional geocentric natal chart to that of our heliocentric natal chart.

Of course, I knew this for myself, having discovered my own helio (dharma) chart decades ago, but it has also been an affirmation to walk folks through the process of identifying with the helio chart in addition to what they already know about their geocentric chart. In an astrological sense, this process is similar to

what are called the pointing-out instructions in dharma as to the nature of the mind. However, in this case I am pointing out to those interested that the essence of their traditional geocentric natal chart can be found in the helio chart which, IMO, is a chart of our dharma and dharma path. This may sound like just a flight of fancy on my part, but here is the way I think about it:

The traditional geocentric astrology chart represents the flowering of our personality and karma in this life we are living. It's a map of the circumstances and situation in which we have been born and find ourselves embedded in this life. So, what then is the nature of the heliocentric chart? And this is where it gets interesting for me.

The heliocentric chart is a map of what was actually in effect in the solar system at the moment of our birth and not just how our geocentric natal chart viewed or saw it. We could say that by living life, we gradually work through the karma of our traditional chart until we find (if we are lucky) the essence of that karma, which IMO is our dharma path or a mudra as described by our heliocentric chart.

In other words, it is the helio chart from which the view from Earth arises. After all, the Sun is our total source of light and life. We all know that. And I will go one step farther, perhaps out on a limb, but I can't seem to avoid it, even if I try.

Our helio chart, a map of our dharma, contains the roots of all our karma as well. And so, much like in Tibetan Yogacara Tibetan Buddhism, the Alayavijnana (storehouse consciousness) is the sum set of karmic traces (vasanas or karmic seeds) that marches through time from birth to rebirth bearing all of what drives a new personality and Self at rebirth, so the helio chart amounts to a map of our dharma,

describing the path that we are taking or must take (rebirth by rebirth) in order to exhaust our karma.

Where did this idea come from? Well, like all ideas (and every word and deed), it came from searching in the mind itself; the Buddhists call the mind: the “Wish-Fulfilling Gem.”

Looking at the helio natal chart as a kind of rough map of our storehouse consciousness (alayavijnana) I find very revealing. The helio chart tells us what are the overarching chart patterns that drive our most inner self and that our geocentric natal charts apparently only sees that material “through a glass darkly.” Don’t let me remain twisting in the wind. LOL. Does this idea not warrant at least some discussion?

It is interesting that a study in 2005 found that 20% of Americans still believe that the Sun circles the Earth and a 2011 poll found that 32% of Russians felt the same way. I don’t believe astrologers believe this, but they have yet to be empowered (as a group) through realization of their heliocentric archetype or mudra.

MEDITATION IS NOT EASY

June 6, 2018

Not everyone is ready to learn to meditate. Of course, we all could learn to do some relaxation practice, which is often thought of as meditation. But the meditation taught by the historical Buddha was not about relaxation; it's about waking up and becoming more aware. I'm afraid this basic confusion between the two basic types of meditation is rampant. In fact, most meditation taught in America, as far as I can tell, is of the relaxation variety.

I get a chance to talk with quite a few people and it is clear, at least to me, that many have a difficulty concentrating, remaining on track, and their mind wanders all over the place. If I want to talk with them, I have to wait until they reach a break in their wandering where I can get their attention enough to join in and do my best to return us to whatever topic we were discussing.

In other words, before many folks are ready to learn meditation properly, they have to learn to concentrate enough to stay on track enough for there to be some continuity. If we want to talk with these "wandering" thinkers, we have to come up with some way to flag them down and bring them back into the conversation. This kind of wandering mind in others is probably something most of us are familiar with. It's harder to tell if we do this ourselves because, like the planets, we sometimes become the "wanderer."

However, there is another way to miss the boat on meditation training, which I am more familiar with because I am a vicym of it. And that is to try TOO

hard to concentrate. And here is a bit of my story; it might ring true to a few of you out there.

And I am sorry (and a little ashamed) to report that I practiced Tranquility Meditation (Shamata in Sanskrit) for a solid 32 years (probably more) and never managed to get the hang of it. Think about that just for a moment, 32 years! it must be some kind of record! LOL.

And the problem was that I was trying too hard to do something I already knew how to do. I can explain. And the only reason I got over this problem is because my wonderful teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, made a comment to a group of us that caught my ear and attention. What he said was “Some of you who work on computers may have a leg up on the other practitioners because you already know how to concentrate.”

Hmmm, thought I. I have been on computers for decades and not just browsing, but as a programmer concentrating precisely. In programming, even a single character or number out of place and the program often doesn't work. And I had programmed pretty much seven days a week from morning to night for many, many years. It was Rinpoche's comment that woke me up to the fact that perhaps I already knew how to concentrate in the meditation-sense, not just a little, but a lot.

It was after that comment that I realized by “trying” to concentrate on sitting meditation, as I had been doing for years, was like salting the salt, so to speak. Here I sat, year after year, on the cushion TRYING TOO HARD to do sitting meditation as best I could and it had never occurred to me that I already knew how to concentrate. It never occurred to me. This is how hard it can be to know where we are at all by ourselves. All

I needed to do is to stop trying so hard to concentrate and just let my normal skills at concentrating take over.

So, the moral of this story is that you might want to do a quick check to see if you already can really concentrate based on something you do at work or for a hobby and just relax into that concentration mode, a mode you know only too well. Once I started to do that, things went a lot more smoothly.

I do believe that different folks may learn meditation differently. It's a long story, which I won't relate here (but have in various books) and this I believe is unorthodox or unusual. I didn't really learn to do Shamata meditation effortlessly until I found myself able to do Insight Meditation (Vipassana). It's usually the other way round, i.e. we learn Tranquility Meditation (Shamata) and then we learn Insight Meditation (Vipassana).

In the Kagyu lineage (and the tradition of Mahamudra), both Shamata and a special form of Vipassana are combined in what is known as Mahamudra Meditation. However, the special form of Vipassana (Insight Meditation) as used in the Kagyu tradition is very different (so I am told) from the many other forms of Insight Meditation as practiced in most Mahayana Buddhism. I don't really know what exactly these other forms do, but talking with those who practice them I hardly recognize what I know as Vipassana as we practice in Mahamudra Meditation.

And so, my point is that (as I have been told by Tibetans) in Tibet neither Shamata (Tranquility Meditation) nor Vipassana (Insight Meditation) is taught to beginners until the Common and Extraordinary Preliminaries (Ngöndro) are completed.

And Ngöndro, as those of us who have done it know, is not an easy practice.

Why is meditation taught in this country BEFORE Ngöndro? As it was explained to me, the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche tried to introduce Ngöndro to Americans, but we balked and did not take to it, so instead it was decided to teach us sitting meditation (Shamata or Tranquility Meditation) first and then see whether we could get behind Ngöndro.

I'm not a scholar in all of this, but I wish I had been introduced to Ngöndro (difficulties and all) and THEN taught sitting meditation. It might have been easier for me, although when I first heard about Ngöndro, it seemed to me totally Medieval; being true to the American form, I and was not about to do it. In fact, when I asked my root teacher, Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche if I could do Ngöndro, he said to start with Tong-Len instead. Even when I finally did Ngöndro and manage to finish, I was asked to do it all over again. LOL. I had to do it twice.

I believe different students may practice the practices in different orders depending on the nature of the student. In the students I work with, I suggest they also start with Tong-Len practice, although I find that learning what I call Reactivity Tong-Len is much easier and brings fast results. There are several articles on Reactivity Tong-Len in this free book.

<http://spiritgrooves.net/.../Tong-len%20-%20Second%20Edition....>

“IT ALL DEPENDS ON YOU”

June 7, 2018

Many years ago, I interviewed scores of the finest blues players in America. I remember this quote from my interview with the great Howlin' Wolf:

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

Our inner compass and innate sense of intuition or direction is like this or, as my first dharma teacher (a traveling initiator for a Rosicrucian order) use to say to me: “Given the opportunity, everyone is going to do what they want.” What we “want” or lack (our desire) is what drives us on and just as my teacher pointed out, given the chance we each do what we want.

And when, in our life, shocks break out and throw us for a loop, like the grass in the quote above, it takes time for us to recover, but recover we usually do. We eventually absorb the shocks of life outbreaking and reemerge, right back on the trail of karmic breadcrumbs that we follow. How do we turn our karma into the path of dharma? That is a question I often ask.

The simple answer seems to be that we eventually realize the true nature of our karma, which is also the nature of the mind itself – something like that. For me, the rub is that word “eventually.” Buddhism is definitely of the “No wine before its time” variety, so how many lifetimes it will take is how many lifetimes it takes.

However, there is a variety of Buddhism called Vajrayana Buddhism that, while perhaps not in an absolute hurry, still is interested in becoming realized (at least some) in a single lifetime, like the one we are living now. So, what is the magic message to show us how to speed up this otherwise eon-like journey?

Well, it includes at least several things. First of all are what are called the Extraordinary Preliminaries, some very difficult and time-consuming purification practices. It seems the shortcut to enlightenment first depends on thinning out our obscurations so that we can see more clearly into the nature of what the mind is all about.

Then, there is the fact that in Vajrayana Buddhism, you don't do it alone, although we still each have to do it all by ourselves. In other words, we find a teacher with whom we resonate with and who is willing to work with us through the whole process of our path. And finally, there is our willingness to work our tail off. We may just not feel like it, in which case we will take the scenic route through samsara to enlightenment through innumerable kalpas. LOL.

I am more of an express-dharma practitioner myself. If I have to go through all of this purification, I would rather get on with it right now. I hate stuff hanging over me that I eventually have to do anyway. And it's not "whether I like it or not," because we very much have to like practice for it to be effective. That's a hard corner to turn.

And so, I welcomed a guide and teacher into my practice and have found this in my dharma teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche. That he would accept the likes of me as a student and work with me as he has for some 35 years is beyond my ability to thank him. No wonder that the term "rinpoche" means

“precious one.” That is an understatement. No money could buy and no thanks are enough to express the gratitude I feel for Rinpoche’s kindness to help me work through my various obscurations.

Years ago, Rinpoche said to a group of us “We are the stragglers, the ones who in all eternity up to now have never managed to realize ourselves.” The implication is that we can go on forever as we have or we can decide to work toward actual realization. It’s all up to us. Like the old song points out: “It All Depends on You.” LOL.

ASTROLOGY: “JIM DANDY TO THE RESCUE”

June 8, 2018

The above title of the song by Laverne Baker back in 1956 is my attempt at humor, and here is that song, a blast from the past for those who can't resist.

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

It's probably presumptuous of me to think modern astrology needs a bit of a rescue, but that's how I feel. I just reviewed my “déjà vu” of the recent UAC, the United Astrology Conference, where (so I am told) some 1,500 astrologers assembled for a week of sharing and celebration. This is not my first rodeo; I have done this many times before and come up with pretty much the same conclusion. Please forgive me for talking about it, if you don't want to hear it.

The general public views astrology almost as a kind of entertainment, certainly not as a right livelihood and no matter how you spell it, astrologers just are not making enough money IMO. Some are, but many (or most) are not. Hopefully, we all are aware of this.

There, that's the end of my rant, so you can rest in peace. I am more interested in what can be done about this. Nothing much has happened as to the status of astrology (in my opinion) since I joined in, which is somewhere around the early 1960s, some 58 years ago or so.

I was impressed at UAC by the number of young astrologers that were there and they seem very active, which is a good sign. Perhaps they can move the status of astrologers forward. Yet, the floodtide of my own generation, which produced many great astrologers has, IMO, not moved the needle much. What's the problem?

The simple fact is that astrologers as a group are not providing something to society that society needs, at least enough to warrant being labeled a “right livelihood” and awarding us with a higher standard of living. As I learned myself from the loan officer at the bank (decades ago) when I tried to borrow money to buy my first programmable calculator back in the early 1970s, astrology is right above “migrant workers” in their loan-risk list. My loan was denied. LOL.

IMO, it’s time for astrology to perhaps have a “come to Jesus” talk with itself and see if we can collectively figure this thing out. Talking with other astrologers, as I have done lately, we all seem to generally agree on the diagnosis as touched on above, so let’s not belabor that if you don’t mind. Instead, let’s just look to a remedy.

IMO, the problem is not with society as some astrologers complain, but with astrology as practiced today and with we as astrologers. It’s our problem and not society’s. In my lifetime of astrology, I have seen astrologers tilting at the windmill of science over and over again. And I have done all I could to support it. I put on a three-day “Neo-Astrology Conference” back in July 21-23 of 1989, that included some of the best technical and research-oriented astrologers we had at the time, folks like Michel Gauquelin, Thomas Shanks, Robert Donath, Lee Lehman, Doug Pierce, Dr. Suitbert Ertel, Rob Hand, Charles Harvey, JohnTownley, Mark Urban-Lurain, Ken McRitchie, Alois Triendle, Robert Schmidt, and others.

I put on a second Neo-Astrology Conference June 23-24 of 1990 and many other technical conferences or dharma-related conferences including, but not limited to:

ACT Conference at AFA in New Orleans in 1980
ACT Conference at AFA 1984 in Chicago
Tibetan Astrology Conference June 22-23, 1985
Heart Center Retreat Conference, Sept. 1, 1985
Tai Situ Rinpoche at the Heart Center, September
1985
Heart Center Meditation Retreat Fall 1985
Ven. Thrangu Rinpoche at Heart Center, Jan 1986
Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche at Heart Center, Jan 1986
ACT Conference at UAC June 26-July 1, 1986 San
Diego AFA ACT Conference in LA July 15-20, 1986
Matrix Hindu Astrology Conference Aug 9-10, 1986
Khenpo Tsultrim Gyamtso at Heart Center Aug 25 &
26, 1986
Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche at Heart Center, Dec 12-
14, 1986
Family Dharma Weekend, July 3-6, 1987
Act Locality Conference June 30-21, 1987
ACT Hindu Astrology Conference, Aug. 8-9, 1987
H.E. Shamar Rinpoche at Heart Center, May 8, 1987
Matrix Computer Software Workshop, June 22-23,
1987
Meditation Workshop at Heart Center, July 12-13,
1987
Calm & Clear Mind Workshop, July 18-19, 1987
Matrix Computer Software Workshop, Aug 10-11,
1987
Natural Cycles Conference Jul 30-31, 1988
Eastern Astrology Conference June 18-19, 1988
Matrix Computer Software Workshop, August 1-2,
1988
Traleg Kyabgon Rinpoche at Heart Center. Fall 1988
Neo-Astrology Conference, July 21-23, 1989
Matrix Astrology Software Workshop, July 24, 1989
Second Neo-Astrology Conference, Jun 23-24, 1990
Act Conference AFA in Chicago, July 1992

... and many other dharma events, not to mention a financial astrology conference with 22 of the best financial astrologers and more. The acronym "ACT" mentioned above stood for "Astrological Conference on Technique" as founded by astrologer Charles A. Jayne and me decades ago. These were panel discussions of ten or so astrologers that ran, hour by hour, during many major conferences. They featured technical and often science-oriented astrologers talking together and audience participation was totally encouraged. There were grand discussions.

In these various conferences, I did my best to push the envelope for astrology both in the direction of vetting a more scientific or realistic approach to astrology and also integrating astrology with the dharma teachings. How much was actually accomplished is hard to say.

IMO, the push for a more scientific astrology and the various research methods was pretty much a bust. No real results have convinced me or the scientific community that I know of. I can remember talking to Michel Gauquelin during one of his visits to my home toward the end of his life. He was very dispirited.

However, with dharma, I feel we (at least I) have been more successful and it is here that I see the future of astrology headed, incorporating some of the Tibetan mind-training techniques to help purify our mind and increase our awareness. It is in the level of awareness IMO that astrology has fallen short. And this shortcoming we can do something about.

And so, I feel that astrology will go through a kind of reformation, not so much one of techniques, but rather of the state of our mind. It could be that I say this because I have tried to do this myself and am

confident enough in the results that I feel others will follow or are already doing this.

As to what this might entail, it could be several things, the first of which would be raising the level of our mental awareness. While relaxing types of “meditation” are most popular just now, what is most needed IMO in astrology at this point are the types of awareness-meditation as taught in India and Tibet called Shamata (Tranquility Meditation). Shamata encourages awareness and concentration, which help to stabilize a wandering mind.

However, in my experience, success with Shamata Meditation depends on having a fairly unobscured mind to begin with. If we have trouble practicing Shamata, the remedy for that are various physical and mental purification practices. We can clean up our mind. These practices are not so difficult, but they can be tedious and do require some effort on our part. Just as we have as a society retrained for the Internet and online activity, something similar may be required for astrology as a whole to wake up a bit and empower themselves.

Having just returned from a week of talking at some depth with scores of astrologers, I found (in general) a difficulty for many folks to concentrate and a tendency to wander in conversation, losing the topic and falling into sidebars that were, basically, non-sequiturs. I can sometimes do this also. LOL.

Separating astrology from the various psychic-sciences is a thankless and needless task. Of course, we may have both of these qualities within us. My point is that I feel it is important that we know when we are doing astrology and when we using astrology as an oracle or just winging it as mediums.

Putting my money where my mouth is, I have spent many years doing my best to learn to be more aware myself. It's not that easy. And it might be harder for those without the time I was able to carve out to do this.

Aside from this, I also have been interested in how to bring some of the dharma methods into astrology, so that astrologers can benefit. I have done this in primarily two distinct ways, one involves a very simple dharma technique that is easy to do and does not require any extra time or scheduling on our part. This is called "Reactivity Tong-Len," mainly the chapters on this reactivity technique.

"Tong-Len: The Alchemy of Reaction"

<http://spiritgrooves.net/.../Tong-len%20-%20Second%20Edition...>

The other method is astrological and I have pointed this out many times here on Facebook. It is called learning of and becoming initiated into the Dharma Chart, our heliocentric natal chart. This particular chart is so stable and confirms our deepest natal meanings that I consider it essential, the fiducial chart and not some optional add on.

The series of helio whole-chart patterns or archetypes are essentially graphic mudra or signatures of our base karma which dictate our dharma path. I find that learning of these various archetypes and using them to look at the archetypes of ourselves, our family, friends, coworkers, etc. is liberating to say the least.

In other words, learning to use the archetypes is an enlightening practice in itself, one not only of value to our clients, but a way to learn and sharpen our awareness as astrologers. And I find it endlessly fascinating and by using these archetypes

(StarTypes) have very much approved my mind, not to mention my astrology.

“Dharma Chart / Karma Chart”

<http://spiritgrooves.net/.../Dharma%20Karma-2003%20rev%20Nov2...>

Of course, as you might expect, I am telling you what has worked for me. It may or may not be of any value to others. And it came down to, in my case, undertaking some purification practices to thin out my obscurations until I could actually meditate as opposed to trying to meditate. And, second, using the heliocentric archetypes is not just a whim of Michael Erlewine, but an empowerment that we as astrologers should have taken hundreds of years ago when Copernicus pointed out that everything does not revolve around us.

However, those of us who are still astrologers (and were not empowered as were the astronomers in the helio chart 400 years ago) can still take the empowerment today. I have worked for forty years or more trying to make that possible for myself and for anyone else interested.

It may be easy to ignore my requests that you look closely at your heliocentric signature or chart. After all, I am just another astrologer and astrologers each have their special techniques, some which may seem kooky. We all know that.

However, the helio chart is of key importance, not because I say it, but I say it (and share this with you) because it is true and so very important. It's not just another technique, but a technique of another order of magnitude, another level than our traditional astrological techniques. You have to either trust me on this or go and see for yourself, preferably both.

I have rededicated myself to assisting my fellow astrologers and fellow dharma practitioners in all of this as much as I can. I try to make myself available on Facebook by posts and offer personal looks at your helio chart (as much as I can) if you are an astrologer or dharma student.

TURNING THE MIND

June 9, 2018

Most techniques are just that, a technique we learn and enact to get a result. But dharma techniques, at least in my experience, are different. They are not effective if just repeated by rote. They require heart, even devotion. And how do we get there with that?

We light a match, turn on a light, brush our teeth and so on and etc. and it doesn't matter too much how we do it as long as we go through the steps. But with almost any kind of "spiritual" technique, just marching through the steps may not cut it; in fact it probably won't.

So, how do we get more sincere, heartfelt, and devoted if we are just getting started? Where is the path into that frame of mind? Good question.

When we get into a near traffic accident, we tend to get religion fast, no? Or, when someone close to us dies, especially suddenly, or some other major shock breaks out in our life, we tend to get serious in a hurry. Yet, that's something we can't just order up and if we could, who would choose it?

So, how do we get down from our ivory tower or off our high horse enough to where the rubber meets the road in our life? As mentioned, few people would choose adversity and so we float on by. And, every once in a while, life punches our ticket for us and that punctuates an otherwise somewhat smooth ride in the clouds and brings us crashing down to earth.

But short of inviting tragedy, how do we, as they say, "get religion?" I don't consider Buddhism a religion, but rather a method for awakening. That's as close to religious as I get. Traditionally, the beginning

teachings, what are called the “Common Preliminaries” in Buddhism, are the “Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind toward the Dharma.” That’s where I started, what first caught my attention. And these four thoughts do just what they say; they turn the mind away from our normal distractions and point it at the heart of who we are and what we are living.

The Four Thoughts are mostly so simple that deep within me they were already a part of my life. These thoughts were not strangers, especially the first three of the Four Thoughts. I suppose that most of you are already familiar with these thoughts, either formally as listed or naturally as a human being, and they are:

(1) PRECIOUS HUMAN LIFE – This life we are living is precious indeed. Don’t we all sense that? And the Buddhists go further and tell us that in the whole world of sentient beings, the chance or opportunity to arise in a human birth is very, very rare. The word they use, as stated here, is “precious.” From a very early age I did not want my life to be wasted; I wanted to be entirely used up in a meaningful way. I still feel that today. It’s not something I had to hear or read about; even hearing this first thought of the Four Thought confirmed what I had always known within.

(2) IMPERMANENCE – This second thought was also second nature to me, how very, very fragile life is. The Buddhist teaching on impermanence that I first read was that our lives are like soap bubbles -- that fragile. As a student of Mother Nature from around the age of six-years old onward, I deeply knew and saw the impermanence in life. It was as close as seeing all the earthworms trying to cross the tarmac as the sun rose, prepared to fry them to a crisp. Impermanence is all around us -- everywhere.

(3) KARMA (CAUSE AND EFFECT) – The third of the Four Thoughts took me more time to appreciate, but it came on like the steadiness of rain. In fact, it is inexorable and the older I get, the more exacting the laws of karma are. As I joke to myself, it's like rushing into the cow pasture, only to come tiptoeing back. Our every thought and action is not only recorded, it leaves a trace that is sure to accumulate and ripen for better or for worse. The only practical way to remove karma that is once created is not to create any more.

(4) THE DEFECTS OF SAMSAARA – This fourth thought that turns the mind took me longer to grasp, but is just as essential. It is hard for me to put into words, but essentially what it means is that we will never get all our ducks in a row. Samsara is inherently flawed, a cyclic world of ups and downs that goes on until we are worn out of existence. And the only exit from Samsara is through the realization of its true nature and the path to enlightenment.

These, then, are the four thoughts or reminders that can actually turn the mind away from our habitual distractions. Otherwise, we dream on, eternally floating through time with no purchase or grip on reality; life is just a dream we are having.

As mentioned, it was these four thoughts that first caught my attention and with which I totally identified. And although they are called the Common Preliminaries, there is nothing common about them except that we all share them. In fact, at the very end of a long series of dharma practices, when we finally begin to practice the quintessential Mahamudra Meditation, the first thing we encounter all over again are “The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind toward the Dharma” again. In fact, when I began Mahamudra

practice, I spent three solid years just on these four thoughts. That should tell you how important they are.

If Buddhism, at least Tibetan Buddhism, is a religion, it is the religion of natural reality, of things just as they are. Of course, I celebrate the dharma because, as a trained naturalist, the dharma is about things just as they are.

These four thoughts were further confirmed for me by my meeting the great siddha, the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche in February of 1974. When I first encountered Trungpa, I served as his chauffeur for a time. And I had created a poster for a talk he was giving in Ann Arbor, Michigan and when Trungpa Rinpoche saw the poster, which featured a woodcut of the dragon that you see here, he asked me if I understood this image.

I told him that I chose the image because it seemed to fit and he went on to explain to me the following:

Trungpa explained to me that the dragon flies in the sky only because each of his four paws hold a precious gem or pearl. And, as long as he can maintain his grasp on each of the four gems, he can fly, but if he let's go of even one of them he falls to the ground.

This is how I was taught to view the “Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind.”

MINING THE MIND FOR ASTROLOGY

June 9, 2018

I see that many younger astrologers are learning the classical languages of Greek, Latin, Arabic, and so on, perhaps hoping to find lost meaning or techniques that will shed light on today's astrology. And while I applaud this mining of the classic languages (and have a close friend engaged in this) I don't find myself of that persuasion. Even if I find something, I know it will always come down to cultural astronomy, which is what astrologers do: explain what the astronomy means. And I am reminded of the poem by the great poet William Blake, "The Marriage of Heaven and Hell," where he writes:

"After dinner I ask'd Isaiah to favour the world with his lost works; he said none of equal value was lost. "

It is true that all poems, writings, thoughts, ideas, and everything else we come up with originally came from the mind itself. And there is no sign (that I know of) suggesting that the mind is now empty of thoughts. In fact, it seems as full as ever, a cornucopia which can never be emptied, no matter how much it gives or is taken from it.

And my exposure to the Tibetan Buddhists over a number of decades and the concept of terma (dharma treasures), in particular hidden treasures in the mind, has served me well over these many years. My view is why read a book or study a language if I can learn to access the mind directly and unearth treasures there that will satisfy our needs? Many, if not most, of my own astrological techniques never existed before I found them in the mind and went through the exacting process of realizing them.

We all use the mind, but few know how to exercise the mind (like a muscle) and search within it for treasures of the mind that can be brought forth and shared with the world. There is a long history of mind treasures in the Tibetan tradition and many of them are astrological as well as the root dharma. And I have learned some languages (Latin, French, and Russian), but not to fluency. However, I have learned to bring mind treasures forth and then go through the extended process of realizing them, which is an art in itself.

And mind treasures or “mind terma” are not as simple as just picking a flower; they have very definite requirements. The mind “terma” first has to be grasped intuitively or essentially and imprinted. And around that essence, concepts may arise that have to be understood. And these concepts have not only to be understood, but they also must be fully lived or experienced and often for a considerable time at that. And, finally, from that extended experience of initiation, if all goes well, actual realization can arise. It is at that point (realization) we can share these mind treasures with the world and not before.

Otherwise, these mind treasures remain in nascent form within our mind and are pushed before us just like when, in swimming, our own waves we make can push an inner tube endlessly just beyond our reach. This is where the various forms of dharma practice come into play.

So, my point is not to discourage anyone from studying the classical languages of astrology (of course not), but rather to offer an alternative approach where, instead of mining the past and ancient languages, we learn to mine the present (the pure

oxygen vent of the moment) for the astrological mind treasures that may be available to us.

Being myself lazy, these mind treasures have been my method of choice over the years to produce meaningful techniques that can be shared with my fellow astrologers. I have done this for many decades with, IMO, some real successes.

And, of course, the key or secret to all this is awareness. And while some have awareness at birth, the rest of us (like in my case) have to actually learn and practice to have awareness great enough to pick up on the seminal inceptive imprinting of mind treasures. Mind treasures, like stars burning in the firmament, infuse and release their essence as a stamp or mudra, a signature or scroll that we gradually absorb and read until we can practice and flower that insemination.

Why is not everyone accessing the mind this way, if it is so easy? I never said it was easy, but it is possible and we can learn to do it. As pointed out, it takes awareness and if we don't have enough awareness (as in my case), we have to develop it just as we have to learn anything else, through practice.

The historical Buddha turned the wheel of the dharma; it did not turn by itself. Neither will our dharma wheel turn by itself.

The problem, however, is that while we have all learned to use the mind like a tool (black box) to get things done, as a society we have not learned to actually look, search, and get to know the mind itself. For most Westerners, this has never occurred to us... yet.

DHARMA'S ENDORPHINS

June 10, 2018

I don't really know that much about "endorphins" except that I have read they activate the body's opiate receptors and cause an analgesic effect. My takeaway from this is that endorphins put us into some kind of zone that is pleasant.

I can't really speak to that, but I do know of one type of meditation that definitely puts me into a zone, although it is not in any way foggy or "opiated." Instead, it is clear as a bell and lucid. And this is Vipassana, Insight Meditation. However, there are many kinds of Vipassana, so all Vipassana meditation is not created equal.

Do I recommend Insight Meditation? Sure I do, but it's not all that easy to learn. For me, Insight Meditation came at the end of a long series of dharma practices that were mostly for purifying obscurations. It took me quite a while to get my obscurations thinned down to a "fighting weight" so that I could even undertake Insight Meditation. You may be much more fortunate. Even then, it took a serious event in my life to shock me into grasping the nature of Vipassana meditation.

That it took such an event to get my full attention saddens me because, at least in my case, it seems I don't learn unless something untoward happens, something heavy enough to pop me out of this little dream that I've been having called life.

Insight Meditation itself is not a purification practice, but rather one of the realization practices, usually the first one we encounter after the purification practices are successful and it's a doozy. I don't mean this as a tease, but the Kagyu Mahamudra style of Vipassana

is worth any number of years (or repetitions) of purification practices – whatever it takes.

We all like the idea of dharma “realization, but by definition we have no idea what realization is like or is all about for that matter. Nada. So, what’s so good about Insight Meditation?

Well, from my limited (but still important to me) experience with the Mahamudra style of Vipassana, these are some of its positive attributes, in no particular order:

It marks the end of fear and angst as we know it.

We have no doubt about the dharma or our realization of it.

We don’t absolutely need a teacher or further guidance.

We know that we can actually realize the dharma and just how to do it.

We start to live for dharma practice.

Our mind is stabilized.

Our sense of compassion becomes natural and not contrived.

We have mixed our mind with that of our guru.

Each day we extend and expand our realization.

And the mind becomes our personal teacher such that our every question to the mind is answered or vanishes like the dew on the morning grass.

I could go on and on, but perhaps you get the idea. However, before the Mahamudra form of Vipassana (Insight Meditation) can be practiced, there is one little bridge to cross and that is called “Recognition.” And by that, we mean recognition by ourselves as to the true nature of our mind, which can ONLY be pointed

out to us by an authentic teacher, usually one who has already had that recognition.

“Recognition” is the “ring-pass-not” of dharma, the point where many dharma students gather or pool-up, waiting to cross that bridge. We can’t fake recognition or pretend we have had recognition because without it we cannot proceed. It is as simple as that. Without eyes, we cannot see.

And this is why in the Vajrayana Buddhist tradition the bond (samaya) between student and teacher is so important. Most of the pith texts written by the great mahasiddhas and rinpoches clearly state that without an authentic teacher (called our “Tsawi Lama” or “Root Guru”), the recognition of the mind cannot happen. It has to be pointed out. We can’t do it ourselves or, if we can, the teachings say that it would take an untold number of kalpas to accomplish.

And so, we dharma students perform the purification practices again and again until such time as we have thinned down our obscurations so that we can see through what obscures us and recognize the actual nature of the mind, with the help of our teacher, of course.

This “Recognition” is a big deal. It takes time and cooperation with an authentic teacher to make it possible, but once realized we can begin the realization practices like Vipassana (Insight Meditation.) And it sounds like a lot of work, which indeed it is, but “Recognition” of the true nature of the mind is where we are all headed with dharma. We work to that end.

Obviously, if we have achieved “Recognition” and the realization that comes with it, performing the purification practices would be a slam-dunk. However,

for those without that realization, the purification practices, such as Ngöndro, can be a tough slog indeed. IMO, the key to the purification practices is our attitude. Doing the practices by rote will just result in our having to do them all over again. This happened to me. I did them twice at the request of my teacher, also my Tsawi Lama.

What we CAN do, however, is do our best to have an open and loving attitude toward our practice, even though we are aware that on some days we may be (to some degree) whistling in the dark. Our patience (and the purity of whatever outlook we can manage) is what is required. No matter how tough it may be to do our practice on a given day, accept that difficulty with open eyes and with a good heart. A day may totally suck, but we can relax and accept that too. That too is practice.

If we find ourselves whistling in the dark, whistle a happy tune. LOL.

AMERICAN REALIZATION: DANIEL P. BROWN

June 11, 2018

In my many years of studying and practicing dharma, most of my instructors and teachers have been Tibetan lamas and particularly rinpoches. I have met few American teachers that have caught my attention by the short hairs, so to speak.

However, there is one American dharma practitioner that I treasure, Daniel P. Brown, an Associate Clinical Professor of Psychology from the Harvard Medical School. Brown is also a translator of the Tibetan teachings and, more importantly, he is a sincere practitioner of Mahamudra and related disciplines. IMO, Dr. Brown gets it!

I just happened on Brown some years ago while following links related to the Mahamudra teachings. Anyway, as it so happened, I watched a bit of an interview of Daniel Brown on YouTube and was first struck by something he said.

Brown pointed out that in the Buddha's classic "Four Noble Truths," that first noble truth, the "Truth of Suffering," is (in his opinion) simply the wrong translation. The correct translation according to Daniel Brown ought to be "The Truth of Reactivity," the RESULT of which then is suffering and not "The Truth of Suffering" as commonly translated. Perhaps this may sound like a small thing, but the moment I first heard that statement, years ago now, I immediately knew that Brown's translation was accurate. I don't know why; it shot through my heart like a lightning.

Indeed, it is our endless reacting (and reactions) that cause us to suffer; therefore, the focus of the "Four Noble Truths" should not be on the resulting suffering,

but rather on our reactivity, these constant reactions that we have that create the suffering. Learning to be aware of our reactions, toning them back, and allowing them to eventually subside ultimately results not only in relief from the countless major and micro reactions, cringes, prejudices, etc. that we have all day, but includes the release (and return) of all that energy it takes us to react. And these reactions have been going on like ... forever!

More important yet is the fact that our habitual reactions are a major obscuration to the clarity of mind needed to receive the pointing-out instructions as to the true nature of the mind, after which we begin the realization practices such as Mahamudra Meditation and its very special form of Insight Meditation.

And, last but not least, the removal of reactivity and its replacement with appropriate responses leads us to awaken to the greater awareness that can begin to unpack and empty out our karmic traces as stored in the alayavijnana -- the storehouse-consciousness. Other than toning back and removing reactivity, I know of no other way for us to remove karma once it has been recorded other than to stop creating it.

Reaction Tong-Len or Reaction Toning (as I call it) is IMO the easiest and fastest way to accumulate awareness that I know of. Anyone can do it and since it is based on our reacting, it takes no effort on our part. We already paid by reacting in the first place. All we have to do is be aware of the reaction as it takes place, own it 100% as ours, and then drop it and move on.

We start with large reactions like a door slamming, the phone ringing, an insult headed our way, shocks to the system, and gradually get down to finer and

finer reactions, including our prejudices, cringes, judgements, and right on down the line. As mentioned, we don't dwell on what we reacted to, like regretting, worrying, commenting, or anything at all. We note them, own them as ours, and drop them. The results of this practice accumulate rather quickly compared to many other practices I have done and I have done a fair amount, including two Ngöndros.

In summary, some years ago, after hearing professor Brown describe that alternate translation of the "Four Noble Truths," I took his insight to heart. As mentioned, it hit me like a ton of bricks. In fact, for me it was such a revelation that I immediately set to work seriously practicing just that – toning back my reactions. I approached it as a special form of Tong-Len, but one we did with ourselves rather than with others. I found it very powerful indeed and built a whole dharma practice out of it that I have shared with many others.

In time, I presented this Reaction Tong-Len technique to my teacher the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche in front of a large shrine room full of dharma students and Rinpoche acknowledged that it was an authentic technique. My presenting this here is not to congratulate myself, but rather to point out how this technique went straight to my heart and quickly resulted not only in a practice that I could do (did and still do), but one I can safely recommend to others. And best of all, it is so easy to do, can be done off the cushion, takes no extra time, and it works fast. It actually works, almost in real time!

Classic Tong-Len is an important part of the Lojong practices, but "exchanging yourself for others," as it is typically described, CAN BE quite abstract and conceptual for many, at least in the beginning. On the

other hand, “Reaction Tong-Len” allows us to come to know our own endless reactions, one by one, and spontaneously tone them back on the spot, thus releasing an enormous amount of energy that is bound up in our constant reacting and micro-reactions.

Hearing this teaching on the translation of the “Four Noble Truths” was for me a trigger and it was instantaneous. It struck me to the heart and I immediately realized the truth of what Brown pointed out. This is not usual behavior for me.

I have tried to contact Brown (and I have written reviews for some of his material), but we never have really connected. I don’t know if one can have a teacher-student relationship without meeting, but I am at least a student of Brown’s clarity. LOL.

If you want to hear for yourself why I value Daniel P. Brown, here is a link to a very long interview audio (1-1/2 hours) of Brown at his best.

<https://pointingoutway.org/teachers>

Under the bio for Daniel Brown, use the CLICK HERE to access the audio, which is a very long interview, but you can hear Dr. Brown’s crystal clear thought on these topics. And farther down are six short video interviews of Daniel Brown to further confirm what I am saying.

THE GREAT WAY: Part 1

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=grBkn9fWD6Y&t=88s>

THE GREAT WAY: Part 2

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xswXWVOqyfo&t=10s>

THE GREAT WAY: Part 3

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YI_LJAilu8Y&t=12s

THE GREAT WAY: Part 4

www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJwTT-6ox0I&t=8s

THE GREAT WAY: Part 5

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n3yimUJugbE&t=7s>

THE GREAT WAY: Part 6

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iKpVqjfO9BQ&t=15s>

And finally, for those who want to read more on the Reactivity Tong-Len, here is a link to a free book where several of the articles are on this technique:

TONG-LEN: THE ALCHEMY OF REACTION

<http://spiritgrooves.net/.../Tong-len%20-%20Second%20Edition....>

MIXING MIND WITH MIND

June 12, 2018

In Vajrayana Buddhism, “mixing” is a key term. It means mixing our mind with the mind of our guru or teacher. How is that done and what does it mean? Let’s start with what it means; that’s easier to explain.

If we mix our mind with the mind of our dharma teacher, our “Tsawi Lama” or root lama, which is the one person in the entire world who first introduces us to the true nature of the mind (so that we get it!), then we are mixing our mind with the nature of mind itself. Why? Because, our root lama, having achieved authentic recognition of the actual nature of the mind themselves, has therefore already mixed his or her mind with the mind itself. At least, that is the idea as I understand it. If we can mix our mind with their mind, we would both have mixed our minds with the nature of the mind itself. That is the idea.

Therefore, when we mix our mind with that of our guru, provided we have had Recognition pointed out to us, we too mix our mind with the true nature of that mind. Sky mixes with sky, water with water, so to speak. Eventually, there is no practical difference between the two, student and guru, at least as regards the mind.

Now, how we do this is more difficult because how we do this can vary so. While the nature of the mind is the same for all of us, the ways we realize and mix the mind can be all over the place. There is no single rule that I know of. In general, the mixing of our mind is the focus of the practice called “Guru Yoga,” where we do just that, learn to mix our mind with that of our guru.

In what are called the “Extraordinary Preliminaries” or “Ngöndro” (what I call dharma boot camp), the Guru Yoga practices are the final set of five extensive practices, the finishing up of what are basically purification practices.

In general, while we may finish the 100,000 or so Guru Yoga recitations, we are never done with Guru Yoga practice and most practitioners continue to do one form or another of mixing our mind with that of the guru as long as we live. I know I do this every day.

I can still remember, soon after I met the rinpoche I have been working with these last 35 years, without knowing much of anything about actual dharma practice other than sitting meditation, I asked Rinpoche whether I could do the set of Ngöndro practices. His answer was no, not yet. He started me out with something a little less intense, a purification practice called Tong-Len. And it was some time before I actually did start Ngöndro. By that time, from all the stories I had heard, I had a healthy respect for the Ngöndro practices and for good reason.

It took me some years to finish Ngöndro; I had a full-time job and a family with kids to raise, but I eventually finished it. As I have told folks here before, when I was all done and asked Rinpoche which of the more advanced practices he would now like me to do, his answer was “Would you like to know what I would do if I were you?” Of course, I said yes. After all he was my dharma teacher. “And he went on to say “I would do another Ngöndro.” LOL.

And, of course, I did another Ngöndro and so did my wife Margaret. Ngöndro (and many other dharma practices) are often counted by sheer numbers (hundreds of thousands) or by sheer time (how many years or whatever), but the only sure way to measure

the completion of this practice is when our teacher see the results and says we are done. I've learned at least that much. LOL.

DHARMA PUSH AND PULL

June 13, 2018

[Before I blog I must tell you what's up. My granddaughter 4-year-old Iris rolled in today for a two-day stayover with Grandma and Grandpa, while her mom is off to play some music gigs around the state. One of the first things Iris told me was "Grandpa, we have two days to play" and she meant it.

Tonight we made a picnic-like dinner of some veggie hot dogs with homemade French fries and coleslaw. Iris likes mustard and ketchup on her dog (with a slice of dill pickle on the side), so we had that. Then Iris helped me water the flowers, which is no quick task. After that Iris and I watched a little bit of one of her favorite movies "Moana," followed by Grandma giving her a bath and getting her ready for bed. So, I'm going to be a little busy for a couple of days, but will try to get something together in the form of a blog. Here is one now.]

I have always been troubled by the use of the word "detachment" and "attachment" in dharma translations, as in staying "detached" and not "attaching. I know what they are trying to say, but it can sound like we should isolate ourselves from enjoying life and that's not what the dharma points out. Perhaps my resistance is because ANY static state (like asking us to be in a state of detachment) is like just a snapshot of an ongoing process. Everything is "in process" and nothing is a permanent state. Buddhism is all about process (which also changes) and recognizes no eternal state of anything.

In other words, it's a principal law of dharma that nothing is static; everything is interdependent and

ever-changing. So, and words that are indicative of “states” are not dynamic enough for me and IMO miss part of the whole point. Worse, they can be misleading for beginners who might think we should not allow ourselves to feel anything, but remain detached. That would be a huge mistake dharmically. As mentioned, everything is in process and changing. In many translations, we are constantly being told not be attached to things and/or to remain detached from things -- that idea.

A more correct way of saying this might be that we should not cling to things we are attracted to or cringe, flinch, and wince from things we don't like. It's this “reaction” thing again. Don't clutch; go with the flow. All of this kind of discussion works both ways, for and against, feeling too positive for something (pull it toward you) or feeling too negative against something (pushing it away). Push and pull is something we can all understand.

It is said that the point where we start to create or record karma is when we grab at (pull toward us) what we like or push back (away from us) what we don't like. This push/pull on our part is what is meant by detachment/attachment. We do push away from us what we are repelled by and pull toward us what we like. It is pretty much a constant and happens endlessly most of the time.

The teachings say that this push/pull action on our part creates karmic traces (vasanas) that are dutifully recorded in great detail the storehouse-consciousness. If we can learn to stop reacting (and start more naturally just responding) with our pushing and pulling and thus desensitize our reactions, the texts say we stop recording karma; it is this reactivity, this clinging-to or revulsion-from that creates the

karmic traces that fuel rebirth and obscure our clarity of mind.

And then there is reification. Let's not forget that the whole concept of reification is integrally key here too, our trying to make things more real than they are. When we like something, we grab at it and bring it close. When we don't like something, we push it away. And like veneer, by doing this, we add layer on layer of this reification, trying to make what we like more real of an object than it actually is. Pretty soon, much of our world becomes brittle and reified beyond the reality that it naturally is -- a mere caricature of itself.

It literally becomes unrealistic and reminds me of those paintings of Elvis on velvet I used to see around. And thus we lose the flexibility and quality of life by straining to elevate our prejudices (likes or dislikes) through reification. It is ironical that our own biases become a major obscuration to actual realization of the dharma.

This is why, at some point in our dharma practice, it helps if we become aware of our reactions (likes or dislikes) and start toning them back, rather than constantly reifying them. Instead of reacting, we learn to respond more naturally to the shocks of life (even the minute ones). And our reactions (positive or negative) are not like isolated shots with an echo; instead, they are more like a constant whirlwind-din of karmic noise that drowns out any of the more subtle tendencies we might have. A crude example might be:

Someone says something that hurts our feelings. We cling to that event and constantly think about it, bringing it to mind for hours, days, weeks, or even years later, and each remembering of it digs a deeper

and deeper groove or track of karma in our mind. That too is a form of reification. Our reactions, through repeated reviewing, can become rock hard, fossil-like karmic knots that cloud and obscure the mind.

In brief, we have an almost endless series of micro-reactions taking place each day, positive and negative, infinitesimal cringes (pushing away) at this or that we are judging or don't like. On the other hand, we have just as many micro crushes (pulling toward us) on things we like, our attempts to reify or even gild-the-lily. Between the two, we are busy recording all these karma traces to the storehouse-consciousness most of the time. Either way, push or pull, this karmic accumulation is perhaps the chief obstacle preventing us from seeing through all this self-obscuration and finally recognize the actual nature of the mind.

"I'm just sayin'."

EMPTY OF NOTHING

June 13, 21018

[Busy day. Been taking care of 4-year old Iris for the last couple of days and two more grandkids arrived, 6-year-old Emma and 2-year old Josephine (and their mother Anne), so it's full-tilt ahead in the old homestead. Here is a photo of Iris and a baby wild deer taken less than an hour ago. This deer is on its way to a wildlife rescue operation a few miles south of here. Our friend Teresa Unger found it near its dead mother on the road and allowed us to take a peek.

Years ago, our whole backyard was filled with stainless steel cages as we were on the board of a similar wildlife rescue operation, healing wild critters and releasing them back into the world. Our kids were raised around wildlife and learned to care for them from an early age. This is a first for Iris, I would bet. And now: on with the blog.]

“Emptiness” is a hard dharma term to understand because it probably is not the best term for the job. And, since the concept of “emptiness” that many people have (like a bowl is empty) is by now so ingrained in us that it has become our default understanding.

Therefore, it's an uphill climb to expect this term “emptiness” (so much used in dharma texts) to suddenly somehow be reformed. I'm afraid the popular idea of “emptiness” (as mentioned) refers mistakenly to an emptiness of everything (as in: completely empty) rather than what this term points to (or at) in dharma teachings, which is empty of independent existence, like a permanent Self, an Eternal Soul, and so on. What to do?

Well, as mentioned, we can either reform the word so that we stop thinking of emptiness as “empty of something” or we can just use another term. A surrogate phrase for emptiness is sometimes offered and that is “un-findability.”

If we search for something thoroughly and cannot find it, eventually it can be said to be unfindable; it’s just not there. The dharma texts, especially those on the pointing-out instructions as to the true nature of the mind, are filled with attempts at searching the mind to find all kinds of things, mostly things tagged with some form of entity status.

For example, try and find the mind’s center or edge or whereabouts. We also can’t find the mind’s color, where exactly the mind is in our body (or anywhere), and on and on. In what is called the “analysis of the pandita,” nothing of static or “permanent” existence is ever found, not ever. But, and here is the point, to fully know this, we have to each personally search the mind. That’s why I am writing this post.

A huge mistake that dharma students make who are seeking to recognize the actual nature of the mind is to short-circuit this vigorous searching-of-the-mind process by conceptualizing. Basically, this happens when we jump to conclusions intellectually, when the actual instruction of the dharma teacher was to search the mind vigorously. I was a complete victim of this error for many years, so I know this by hard-knocks. I will explain.

A classic example is the instruction from the guru to the student to search the mind thoroughly to see if the mind is the color red. In Tibet, dharma students were instructed to spend three days and nights doing nothing other than searching their minds to determine if the mind is the color red. They then returned to the

shrine room and were questioned about their search. After that, they were given other colors with which to do the same search (three days and nights) like, green, blue, and so on. And this kind of questioning went on for three months straight.

When I was first asked to do this myself, it was obvious to me (right off) that the mind is not the color red; the mind has no color, thought I and did not bother to spend three days searching that out or even consider doing spending that kind of time on it for an instant. I just jumped to the conclusion that, of course, the mind is not red or any other color. Any fool knows that. Period, end of question.

Sadly, it took me years to realize that was NOT what I was being asked to do. I was asked to search the mind and see if it was the color red. The operative word was not “color” or “red” but rather “search.” I knew that the mind was not the color red or any other color and that was that. However, and here is my mistake spelled-out, I did not search and search the mind to come up with this answer. I just conceptually thought it and set the whole questions aside; that was the end of it.

Yet, what I missed by that shortcut was my doing an exhaustive search of the mind. I never got the exercise of searching and searching. I never wore myself out and got totally exhausted from the search process and I never gained the “mental-muscle” (if there is such a term) needed from such an exercise. As mentioned here, that was a HUGE mistake on my part.

It was years later that I finally had a second thought. Once again, my dharma teacher was asking us to look at our minds to see if it was the color red. However, this year I asked myself that if very skilled

practitioners in Tibet did this sort of thing for three months straight (and they were the brightest of the bright), perhaps I had missed something along the way. And then it occurred to me it was not the color red that was the point, but the search process itself.

It was then that I realized that we actually must search the mind again and again and again to gain the experience of not finding any color (or whatever). And when I did that, when I thoroughly searched my mind, my dharma progress improved almost at once. It appears that we need actual experience in order to realize anything. My point is that a simple mistake like this can result in our being stuck with no progress in learning dharma and we stay there for who knows how long, years? I speak from experience or, rather, no experience. LOL.

So, how does all of this relate to the concept of emptiness? Do I digress? I don't think so. All of the above points to the un-findability of any permanent "anything" (Self, Eternal Soul, etc.) in the mind. So, the mind is empty of anything permanent, but otherwise it is not empty. That is what the term "emptiness" is pointing at, not that the mind itself contains nothing or is actually empty, but that the mind is only empty of anything claiming permanent existence that we might expect and be searching it for. Of course, reification on our part can only cloud the issue.

And so, the mind is not emptiness or empty per se, not totally empty in some stark sanitary American way, but simply empty of any successful search for the existence of a permanent soul, Self, and so on. And this is not some new kind of emptiness; it has never been any different for eternity. If we have reified reality, looking for an imagined permanence, then we

will be thoroughly disappointed. That's a good thing because whatever is the case, here we are, alive and well.

For example, the mind is not empty of clarity and lucidity, but rather it is full of exactly these qualities. The mind is never empty, but has definite qualities, just not anything we can put our finger on. It is not empty (but full) of pure awareness, for example – that idea.

Our learning about emptiness is the process of the un-findability of anything we might be attached to or imagine exists by itself independently. “Emptiness” means empty of something that supposedly has independent existence, yet we cannot find it no matter how much or hard we search the mind. Rather, everything is interdependent and nothing has ever had a singular independent existence, not now or ever.

As Daniel P. Brown points out, what is often translated as “Emptiness” is this un-findability, the inability to find anything with permanent or static (eternal) existence in our receptive and ever-changing mind. Everything is already interdependent.

VIRTUAL REALITY

June 14, 2018

This is just a bit of a ramble.

What if it's all virtual and there is no reality? What if there are only layers-and-layers of veneer, like the skins of an onion, with nothing at the core?

More painful yet is our shifting awareness, searching and searching, moving from layer to layer of veneer in this virtual reality and with no apologies. Or, worse yet, we no longer find any layer that feels "real" enough for us to identify with. No compass at all. No North Star. And where are we with no compass? Or, is our compass the very problem? That's it. That, my friends, is reification at work. LOL.

Who can say what each day will bring, sunshine or rain? If our expectations have been reified until they are finicky beyond real, we have a problem. Holding our nose is, well, not helpful. We need both hands to handle what each moment brings. And life can at times be overwhelming.

If you have ever seen a large ship pass through the locks in a canal, you have a hint as to what negotiating time's blockages are like. I don't mean to be vulgar, but they are like very big turds. We have to be flexible enough to just let some things pass. As the Bible says: "It came to pass" and I say: let it pass.

It is easy to be overwhelmed with what comes up in us to be eliminated and it can fill us until we are jammed tight. There is no point in further identifying with what has come to pass (whatever it may be), you know, dwelling on it, worrying it, etc.; just let it go, help it to pass, is recommended.

This reifying of everything has become the rule and not the exception in Western society. Just look at modern advertising, media, or movies; everything is realer than life, totally reified. Everything is tweaked to the teeth.

The problem with reification is that if we tweak everything to the max and then expect to find it in the actual world, we will always be disappointed. Instead, if we stop our reifying (exaggerating) and just take things as they come (and are in reality), what (and who) actually shows up may actually be enough to satisfy us.

As most of us know, the dharmas see all appearances as a great magical illusion, like a dream. And so, our life may be much more virtual than we imagine, a dream we once had, yet one we have yet to wake up from. My point is that reality as we know it may be much more ephemeral than we imagine; and our sense of reality, of feeling the suchness of life, may be more subtle than we know.

If everything is hyped, exaggerated, and gilded beyond the actual reality, this is exactly the reification that becomes an obscuration as described by the dharmic texts.

Look around you in this world and look inside yourself, as well. How much are we reifying our natural state of mind, "gilding the lily" as the saying goes. And if so, how can there be any direction but down out there waiting for us?

REIFICATION REDUX

June 15, 2018

[I have been busy babysitting, getting ready for a huge studio sale coming up (a year in the making and 35 years accumulation), and a large family reunion of around 50 people in a few weeks and 20+ folks will be staying at our center which is turning into a giant bed & breakfast. So, today's blog is a little more embroidering on the concept of reification, society's obsession with gilding the lily.]

Now, this is not a rant, but just an observation. I quite discriminating and am, by nature, very critical; yet, like the gunslingers of olden times, I try to use my critical faculties only when necessary. LOL.

And I don't have to point out that much of the modern world as seen these days in media, technology, Internet, etc. is not what could be called "natural". Even "reified" would be an understatement. When I compare what I see around me in the various media (and in society at large) with what I see when I go to my local grocery store, there is no comparison. People in the grocery store do not look like the people I see in the media hype, not even close. Neither do I. LOL.

And people lie, even when they don't know they are lying, by painting a better picture than the facts support. That too is reification of a kind, making things seem realer or larger than life. Almost everything is hyperbole these days. Just look at the food ads on TV for your local restaurant and then go to that restaurant to eat; you will see the food seldom resembles what we are shown in an ad – not even close. This is so prevalent that we ignore it and don't even bother to

complain or notice anymore. We just nothing about it. This is pure reification of the first order, not just with individual persons, but by entire cultures and countries.

Putting a “happy face” on everything may be a social requirement, but it’s misleading just the same. For example, people have always given me a lot of lip over the fact that I don’t smile unless I feel like it or laugh unless I find something is funny. And I won’t apologize for it either. It’s just the way I am. And I don’t smile on demand for photos either, unless I do.

Years ago, when one of the things I most wanted back then was to practice a particular sadhana (a form of the Bodhisattva Vajrapani), I discovered that in my lineage (Karma Kagyu) the emanation of that deity in this world (Vajrapani) was His Eminence Goshir Gyaltsab Rinpoche, one of the four Heart Sons of the Karmapa. And low and behold I found out that Gyaltsab Rinpoche also did not smile much.

Everybody said so and his photos confirm this. Now, here was a rinpoche after my own heart and it only sealed the deal as far as I was concerned. LOL.

I wrote a couple of letters to Gyaltsab Rinpoche who lived in Sikkim, India asking for this particular Vajrapani empowerment and wondering when he might visit the United States. And I eventually would receive a letter signed by His Eminence, penned by his secretary, saying that unfortunately there were no current plans for such a visit to America. Hmmm.

I finally decided I had to go to India myself and request this particular empowerment in person from His Eminence, which I did, along with my Wife Margaret and twelve-year-old son Michael Andrew. The trip and its ordeals is a story in itself, in particular the treacherous washed-out mountain roads along

high cliffs in our attempt to reach Ralang, Gyaltsab Rinpoche's brand new monastery.

We did manage to get there and His Eminence was so very kind to give that particular empowerment, called "Dor-Je Tum-Po," (a wrathful form of Vajrapani) just for us along with my good friend (and translator) Ngodup Burkhar, who was helping us get around India. So, there we were, two beings together with few smiles. LOL.

Most of my childhood was spent studying nature and nature is not long on the social graces. Maybe that is where I picked up my habit of just being as I am, from Mother Nature. Who knows? What I do know is that all of the modern hyperbole and exaggeration of almost everything only confuses things, IMO. Perhaps socially we have forgotten what a normal mind and a natural sense of truth are like.

From my point of view, it's not alright to blow everything out of proportion and to just tattoo a smile on our faces. I can see it in what has happened to the traditional 5-star rating system for restaurants, hotels, products, and just any old thing. These ratings used to actually vary from one to five stars, but somehow these days almost everything gets a five-star rating. How did that happen and why do we put up with it?

I am not saying that we have to take a page from the Amish and lobby for "plain," but the only advantage I can see to all this hyperbole is the progress of greed. It's no wonder that many of us depend on Mother Nature to keep us honest. Advertisers and lobbyists have yet to find a way to compromise nature itself. It remains inviolate, although perhaps ever being reduced in extent. Nature IS plain. As my first dharma teacher used to say "We don't break nature's laws; they break us." And they still do.

My point here is that the term reification is broader than just attempts to gild the personal lily, so to speak. Reification is pervasive in this modern world and renders attempts to bring quality to life useless by way of its ubiquity. Everything now is the “best,” five-stars, and nothing is “nothing” anymore. There are no longer one-star ratings or damn few.

I used to laugh when I realized that all the local newspapers in the state seemed to win an award for being “the best” newspaper, perhaps all of them but one; someone has to be the “not-best.” All of this reification is suffocating in its extent of gilding everything with the glitter of greatness so that any evaluation is impossible. Talk about rudderless.

Enough said. You get the idea. We are drowning in hyperbole and, as the old quote says “With nary a drop to drink.” It’s not just the natural environment we are ruining, but quality everywhere has become a victim of what amounts to viral-reification.

Remember, this is not a rant, but just an observation. LOL.

THE NEED FOR OTHERS

June 16, 2018

We can't just open a bud and get a flower. Flowers open by themselves and in their own time. It's the same with learning to give and the best kind of giving is giving-way, making room. Forcing ourselves to give, like forcing the unopened flower-bud, is just another case of robbing the cradle. Relax. There is a natural process of opening in which we all can take part effortlessly.

Don't get me wrong. I am not saying here not to give and do whatever we can to help others. I AM saying that we can learn to move with the rhythms of life and be sensitive to the natural resonances around us. There is a natural process of giving and taking going on. "For every thing there is a season" and the same is true for giving.

There comes a point where what we have so carefully reserved for ourselves all these years (that need to fill) is exhausted. We don't need anything more for ourselves. We can't use any more it because we already filled that need for more. We have enough. For us, there is no catalyst there any longer. It has timed out.

The catalyst we now need (one we can actually use) begins to come from outside us, through helping to fulfill the needs of others. It's exactly the same need as before, just not within our own skin. In other words, we begin to be naturally driven (and catalyzed) by the needs of others.

And it's just interdependence at work, the awareness (on our part) of a larger organism that includes both ourselves and others. An analogy: just as the

barycenter of our solar system often is outside the body of the Sun (suspended in space), so our center of gravity can no longer be found within us, but is now outside of us, within others. It happens.

Our own inner need reverses itself, much like a glove turned inside out. What was inside is now outside of us and what was outside is now perceived as part of our inner life. As mentioned, “giving” means “Giving way” or “Making Way.”

A little poem from me.

Poem

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

“I BELIEVE MOST PEOPLE ARE GOOD”

June 17, 2018

[Transplanting all my Hostas; too much sun is burning the leaves. Margaret suggested that I try what is sometimes called “Vegan Gardening.” Why it’s called that I have no idea. But the idea is not to disturb the soil (as I’m used to doing), but rather build on top of the topsoil, so to speak. I did not like the idea at first, but seeing that yesterday was Margaret’s birthday, I thought to give it a try. And today I am told is Father’s Day.

What I did was to leave the soil as it is, with some layers of dried leaves on it. Next, I took some kind or ratty old topsoil (with twigs and things in it) that we had in some barrels on the alley. I spread that over the leaves. Next, I laid down four 40 lb. bags of organic gardening soil, leaving a mound about 4-5’ high. Then I dug down through that, sometimes getting into the topsoil a bit. I watered the depression and placed each Hosta in the hole and built a mound around it. They fit pretty well. I then watered the plant thoroughly. It is under a tree, so it won’t get too much sun. I may spread some compost around under the plants, but first I will wait and see how they do. And now some blog.]

I have studied the natural chain of climactic events in life since I was a teenager. I was empowered by my first dharma teacher, a Scottish Rosicrucian (traveling) initiator in the Saturn cycle (and mysteries) in my mid-twenties as was able to go through my first Saturn Return with eyes wide open.

The natural series of climactic events as life unfolds for us can be empowering, a magical initiatory journey

each step of the way. However, it also can be a nightmare if we find ourselves being dragged through these life events against our will. There is a bell curve and, like the Three Bears, we are either ahead of the curve, behind the curve, or just right -- riding the crest. I used to talk to myself and I would tell me "We have to go to meet our maker," at least halfway. Pro-active is good, but not enough so that we hurt others and not too little so that we are masochistically dragged through life.

And it's not that this life of media hyperbole we all are all presently living in is not harmful. It is. We don't know what to believe or, worse, we believe (and put up with) what we know not to be the truth (the hype), just because it is easier. With everything so twisted and skewed in the world these days, it does not leave much left that is not glazed over with veneer, much less worth fraternizing with. For me, Mother Nature is always the litmus test for reality. Nature is what it is, nothing more and nothing less.

As for more movies, media, the news, etc., I'm afraid most of that has become a caricature of itself. Even CNN is caving in to the unreality of bias and so on. As an analogy, it's like my health problems that restrict me to being a super-vegan (I don't eat sugar either). There are virtually no restaurants that I can eat at anymore, so I cook at home. Perhaps if I lived in a big city, there would be restaurants, but I'm not a big-city boy either. LOL.

So, I'm afraid that I am starting to feel allergic to hyperbole in general, to all the hype and endless reification that coats life with suffocating veneer until we can barely breathe any reality. Aside from nature, what is real anymore and where do we find it? I was

out working in the garden for a couple of hours today. That was pretty real.

The endless “Have a good day!” greetings are just tiresome. Few mean it or even are aware they are saying it. I much prefer this comment from a WalMart employee when I asked her a question, who said: “I don’t know; I just work here.”

While I am mostly a blues and jazz fan, I do like some classic country music like Jimmie Rogers, Hank Williams, Kitty Wells, Hank Lochlin, and so on, but modern country music, not so much. However, I have to admit that some of the lyrics of this recent song are pretty good.

“I believe most people are good,
And most mama’s oughta qualify for sainthood.”

Luke Bryan “Most People Are Good”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=liqktLC7xR0>

“TO SAY MORE IN SILENCE THAN IN WORDS”

June 18, 2018

Temperatures were in the nineties yesterday, with the heat index closer to 100 degrees, plus this is not dry heat, but wet-heat, muggy, with humidity in the high 60-percentile range. It was too hot to do too much outside except early in the morning. We don't have (or like) air conditioning, so it's the odd fan here and there around the house turned up as high as it will go.

Managing my health problems is like putting your hands around a flame to shield it from the wind. I carefully protect myself so that I can still feel mostly normal. If I get too far out of my comfort zone, there is no comfort zone. LOL.

And then there is the yard work, as much hard physical exercise as I can handle, the result of which wrings ever more toxins from my body. Hours of work outside that can soak me to the skin causes the release of toxins in my blood and brings on a time of not feeling so well a day or so later. It is not just me; we all do this. Impurities are stored in our fat and when we work it off, those impurities are released into our bloodstream and can cause (at least for me) headaches and a general malaise for a time.

As I have written here before, getting over serious health problems does not result in a return to normal or even to, as they like to say, a new-normal. There is no such thing. What does work IMO is learning to actively manage my health symptoms (work with) and stay on top of them. That kind of engagement does feel pretty normal.

As for my state of mind, couple the heat index with a growing awareness (lately) of my own tendency for

hyperbole and we have a recipe for a renewed sense of sobriety on my part, a kind of quiet time for me. I feel quite inside myself. My inner concentration has somehow fused into a smooth continuity that has no variations, like I'm in some vast space that is very, very silent in the midst of whatever is going on around me.

Perhaps all this is a harbinger of some inner change that is approaching (or already here), a change I will have to get used to and learn to use. On the surface, it more severely limits what I seem willing to write about these days, but I take it that this is some kind of purification result, one that I eventually will relax around. It's very clear and clean, but right now just a little austere IMO. It does not admit much or care to witness.

No matter how restrictive my mood for writing is, whatever I come up with still manages to make sense, especially emotional sense. I see to that. It's my way of sending a message to myself that I am still alive and doing well. LOL.

I am reminded a bit of this poem I wrote some years ago.

TIME TO MIND

Lost again in the swing of time,
I agree to forget,
What I find so hard to remember:
This moment.

Always later,
Urged awake by impermanence,
I am back again,
But farther down the road.

Time takes my mind,
In small and larger bites.

The little ones,
I reconnect and can remember,
But the larger gaps,
I can only leap across,
Guess at.

And hopefully learn,
To say more in silence,
Than in words.

Nov. 20, 2009

THE BODHISATTVA WE DON'T KNOW

June 19, 2018

Let's talk about bodhisattvas. And I'm not commenting on those classic bodhisattvas in the dharma texts we know of out there "in the sky of the mind," so to speak, as much as I am on those nascent bodhisattvas living among us and in particular the bodhisattva that we may find within. I apologize for using so many words, but I find this concept difficult to describe otherwise.

I realized not so many years ago that Bodhisattvas don't just, as they say, spring from the head of Zeus, but rather are fashioned by time like finely wrought steel or formed over time like diamonds. My first dharma teacher used to explain to me the difference between a diamond or a pearl. A diamond, he would say, is formed by intense pressure over an endless span of time, while a pearl is a bit of irritating foreign matter that an oyster coats and covers over.

Bodhisattvas are obviously diamonds (not pearls) and, as mentioned, they do not simply arise ready-made, but are the result of a very long process of polishing and rounding off their rough edges. And there very definitely are "baby" and juvenile bodhisattvas out there among us, bodhisattvas that are just forming and they may not at first resemble their future bodhisattva-selves all that much. They are here with us now.

And let's not forget that bodhisattvas (and even Buddhas) start out as ordinary people just like us. For example, a nascent Bodhisattva may have an almost unhealthy interest in other people, somewhat of an obsessive concern with people other than

themselves. They literally may be beside themselves to the degree that they identify with others more readily than with themselves.

We all know that full-blown Bodhisattvas are in attendance to and make up the retinue of a Buddha. They too are more concerned with (and serve) beings other than themselves. And while there is an obvious difference between these two types, it is a difference in degree and not of kind.

My point is that an inordinate concern with others, even if it is a bit neurotic, is a hallmark of an unusual ability to respond to others. This rare sense of responsibility (the ability to respond) in such a marked degree is another clear sign of a bodhisattva in the making.

Bodhisattvas don't just grow on trees or do they? We may like to think of the Bodhisattva as the full-blown realized beings that they are in the teachings, but how did they get that way? As mentioned, even Buddhas start out as perfectly ordinary people, so bodhisattvas certainly do as well.

That means that nascent Bodhisattvas must be all around us; they too have to start somewhere. How do we spot them, if indeed we can? And more important, if we can find them in this world, is there some way that we can help them on their path? I believe we can indeed, by helping them recognize themselves.

In Western society, historically, Americans are ashamed to be servile, to be seen as in service to others. Much better (or so the American tradition goes) that somebody serve us. In other words, we are not meant to be servants. Others should attend us; we don't attend them -- that sort of thing. Of course, in the East, service to others is very highly thought of.

And, I know; this is all changing as America gets more and more into the role of being a service provider to the world, but the flavor of that macho past still lingers. Let's see if we can find the smelling salts to clear it up.

I am speaking here more to those of us (and I am one) for whom others have always loomed large in our life. Instead of impressing others, we ourselves have been impressed by them. Put another way, we all can't be the life of the party and at the center of attention; some of us have to attend to whoever is the life of the party. In other words, it takes two types to tango. There are those who naturally find ourselves standing back and watching. It is inherent in us. And you might be surprised to find out which of the two types you are. Feel it out, without thinking, and you will just know which one you are. LOL.

As mentioned, I am one of those folks who were born to attend to and care for others, although this tendency in me went against the grain of what society traditionally rewarded way back in the 1950s when I was growing up. It took me quite a bit of time (and some guts) to accept that I was in fact more receptive than aggressive and an even longer time to empower myself in these qualities. Aggression did not become me. It was as simple as that I usually objectified and cared for others far more and well before they objectified me, i.e. saw me as someone. I saw them before they ever saw me, if they ever did. It's hard to get someone to see you if they are used to just being seen. Are you still with me?

At worst, I was the "wallflower," the one who stood back and took it all in. I easily saw the big picture and was very receptive, despite my wish to be otherwise; I found that everyone confided in me quite naturally.

Every conversation found me the big listener (and talker too), attending to the needs of others while they got something out of their system. I used to joke with myself that if you wanted to go out to dinner with someone (and have a good time), I would not be your first choice. However, if you were in trouble and needed to talk about something, I was just the person you wanted to talk with. I still am.

At this point, I hope you are getting my point that, as the Macrobiotics used to say, “The bigger the front, the bigger the back.” Or as the philosopher Hegel wrote “We go behind the curtain of the Self to see what is there, but mainly for there to be something to be seen.” We each have to ask ourselves: are we mostly the seer (the one who sees) or the seen (the one who is seen)?

If we identify with the “seer,” the one who sees (rather than the one who is seen), then we have naturally IMO the makings of a Bodhisattva. We are already on that path, but may have not yet realized it. As mentioned: in this society, at least until recently, it was not considered too cool to be serving others, but rather better to be the one served, and so on.

This may be an unusual view, but it’s worth considering.

“EVEN I CAN’T SNEAK UP ON A MIRROR”

June 19, 2018

Like snow melting on the warm grass until it finally starts to accumulate, dharma training is a long series of instructions that must be made real and in time take root. It is like gardening, when we transplant. It takes time for a plant to catch on, for roots to grow, and new growth to emerge.

We have an external building here at our meditation center that is a large shrine, but I prefer the small shrine in my office (shown here) because it is right here with me all day long. In one small room, I have my desk (and computers), the shrine, a couch to sleep on, and a big-screen TV to watch a movie and relax if I wish. Aside from going outside and exercising, that’s all I need other than time with Margaret and some babysitting as it comes. LOL.

After many decades, much of my dharma practice these days is off the cushion, mixed with whatever else I am working on. However, every morning I open the shrine, fill the offering bowls, and sit down on the cushion for prayers, mantras, and so on. I do something similar at night, empty the bowls, dedicate the merit, and pray for the long life of my teachers.

Otherwise, during the day I try to be mindful and mix my practice with whatever I am doing. And, as I can, I’m always mixing my mind with that of my teacher -- always mixing.

It sounds so simple, but it has taken me decades and decades to work my life around so that dharma is the driver of what I do in a day. It was not always that way. Living for dharma used to be just a dream I once had, something I aspired to. The difference between my dream and the reality of my daily life was immense, a bridge way too far at the time.

It took years of inching along, gradually positioning and repositioning my view and practice until I actually wanted to do what I had or set out to do. That was no slam dunk. It was the very, very slow progress of aligning myself with what “is” until what I needed to do (had to do) was directly in the way of where I was traveling anyway, which is perhaps the most difficult practice of all. As they say, “bring it to the path.” That

is what I am talking about here, making dharma out of what I have to do anyway. And for each of us, that differs. IMO, aside from practicing off-the-cushion, there is no other way we can accumulate enough practice to gain realization other than to go in retreat. Even that is no guarantee.

This kind of continual adjustment is not done in a day or a year. It is like a spider crawling across a web or a mountain climber crossing a sheer rock face, handhold by handhold. That is what it takes to position ourselves so that what we HAVE to do is also what we WANT to do rather than the opposite, where what we want to do (and dream about) is not what we have to do. And this is not some neat magic trick, but the painstaking hard work of repositioning our life toward the dharma.

You might think it would be easy, like rolling off a log, and perhaps it is for some folks. But for me, in my case, it was almost impossible and took what seemed forever. I was running a large business, raising a family, and on and on. The art of positioning all that I had to do each day so that it was directly in the way of my dharma path, so that it WAS my dharma path took a little miracle. And it only really came true when my business years were over and I was retired or close to it.

It takes real time for most of us to arrange things in our life around the dharma. Squeezing the dharma into a busy schedule, going out of our way to practice dharma, and so on may be admirable, but it is not efficient and is no substitute for mainlining dharma 24x7.

My point is that Rome can't be built in a day. It takes years, not only for the practices themselves, but perhaps even longer to arrange our life so that we are naturally driven to practice dharma from love of it. We really do have to get all our ducks in a row.

It is not enough to manage to count through the practices and just get them done. That seldom works. We actually have to position ourselves so that we (with our whole heart) want to do whatever number (or amount of time) we are instructed to do the practices. And that, my friends, takes some pure

alignment, some lining up on our part. In the case of dharma practice, all pieces of the practice have to be heartfelt.

So, take an average life with a business to run (or work to go to), a partner, a family, and all of the other responsibilities that modern life is prone to. Then, try to flip your priorities so that dharma is driving all of that rather than the exigencies and pressures of society. Such a dharmic life can't just simply be rearranged by brute force and expected to work. Instead, our every little intent has to be naturally aligned (like a school of fish align and all point) with the dharma.

In my own case, I spent years that turned into decades trying to make dharma the driving force in my life and I'm still working on it. While, with our normal life we can get away with just perfunctory observance of what necessity dictates or the law demands, but with dharma that is not enough. Not only do we have to thread the needle of Insight Meditation, but to do that requires a purity of intent and dedication that cannot be faked.

As I like to say, even I, as clever as I am, can't sneak up on a mirror. It's like that.

[Here is a photo of the little shrine in my office. People ask me about the prayer flags hanging over my shrine and the fact that there are no words on them. My answer is that these prayer flags are for formless meditation, meditation without an object. LOL.]



IT GOES WITHOUT SAYING OR YOU CAN SAY IT AGAIN

June 20, 2018

It is our choice whether something goes without saying or we choose to say it again. This is an age-old conundrum: should we be silent or speak out. There is no right or wrong answer. As for me, I choose to “say it again,” even if it is obvious in order that there is no mistake.

This is especially true when it comes to dharma. Many of the classic dharma texts advise us to not say too much about our dharma practices, lest this knowledge be grasped only conceptually and itself become an obscuration to realization.

I get the point, but find myself on the other side of this advice. Yes, I know that too much description has the danger of leading to a student having only an intellectual and conceptual knowledge of the dharma and mistaking it for realization, thus making it even harder for them to attain any realization. I have seen this happen, but as mentioned, IMO, there is another side to this.

We are in those years when dharma is first entering this country. There is so much we don't know and we are probably many decades from any kind of dharma saturation in the U.S. They say it takes the dharma 300 or so years to enter a country. We are perhaps 100 years into Zen and very much less with Tibetan Buddhism.

What I see when I look around (and what I have seen for decades) is beginning dharma practitioners with very few authentic teachers available to them and even fewer with one-to-one, hands-on, contact with students. There are simply not yet enough authentic dharma teachers to go around.

I'm not talking about India, Nepal, and Tibet, but here in the good old U.S. of A. I have worked with my dharma teacher for 36 years and he lives some 800 miles away. And, since he does not speak any English, I can't just pick up a phone and call him. To get any message through to Rinpoche, I have to

write a message to one of his senior students asking them to please present my question to Rinpoche. And these students are lamas that are super busy, so I don't like to burden them with my questions. Of course, I do ask them when I have to and they are always very kind in trying to get me an answer. But this is not an ideal situation.

Back in the 1960s and 1970s, we were all learning about the dharma as best we could. And for some reason, we seemed to have gotten the idea that you don't talk about your practice and we didn't. It has to be a sad commentary that there we were all filled with questions and not talking about it with one another. I'm not referring here to private instructions from my guru to my ear. I am talking about sitting meditation, Lojong, and any of the obvious dharma preliminaries. Back then, mum was the word. We were like ships in the night.

Well, after traveling to Nepal and Tibet a couple of times, watching the monks talking and debating with one another everywhere, it gradually became clear to me that we had been fed some wrong information early on. Dharma is about sharing and all the monks do talk about, discuss, debate, argue, and what not all the time.

And there is nothing secret about Tranquility Meditation (Shamata) that can't be shared. In fact, we need to talk about it, share with each other, and learn from one another, especially if there is little access to rinpoches as there is in this country. What we don't share and do keep to ourselves are any mouth-to-ear private instructions between teacher and student, of which I can't think of any right offhand. LOL.

As mentioned earlier, I see there is a danger of polluting the mind of beginning students with too much lingo and conceptual knowledge, so that these concepts solidify to the point that the student mistakes conceptual understanding for actual realization. This is a problem that's going to happen to most students to some degree anyway. It is part of sorting out the mind.

What troubles me and why I share as much as I do is that I see many beginners struggling to practice dharma by rote, without heart. They have received some kind of instructions from books, teachings, and so on, but are just blindly

executing them. I have myself learned the hard way that perfunctory dharma practice by rote will never turn the tide of the mind away from distractions. In fact, our practice can very easily just become one more big distraction.

In my experience, the dharma has to grab us by the shorthairs, so to speak. It has to raise the hair on the back of our neck. My experience is that concise dharma instructions (upadesha) must rivet our attention so that we wake up and become naturally driven to practice dharma. Just as a baby tries to latch on to the mother's breast (and perhaps has to be helped or guided), so do dharma practitioners have to find the kind of zeal and enthusiasm that will take them across whatever tedium they encounter along the way. Learning any technique can be tedious if we lack the enthusiasm to accomplish it.

I see my goal is to infuse those interested in learning and practicing dharma with enough energy and awareness that can help keep them going until they reach a natural incendiary point of ignition, after which their own internal combustion will keep them on point. Until a dharma student reaches what is called the "Recognition" of the true nature of the mind, they need all the help they can get. After that, this is not a problem.

I know from my own experience that just slogging through a practice will not cut it. We each have to find our way of practicing dharma so that it wakes us up, not just puts us to sleep. I am not foolish enough to believe that the many preliminary purification dharma practices are not tedious unless we have what is called Bodhicitta, an enlightened heart. Only such zeal will set us afire and burn away the dross of wanting to sleep on through life.

My aspiration is to help dharma students find their bodhicitta, that incendiary point where we grasp the nature of our own mind, after which we don't need any help; we can help ourselves. However, IMO, until that point we need all the help we can get.

I don't want to belabor this analogy, but if you have ever seen an infant trying to find its mother's breast, that is the perfect analogy. Once we latch on to the enlightened heart

(Bodhicitta), we are good to go. Until then, we are vulnerable to losing our way and kind of whistling in the dark. That is my experience and my opinion. And it is this why I aspire each and every day that I may share whatever little realization I have with those who can benefit from it. As I see it, that is my mission, my reason for being here.

BODHICITTA: AWAKENED HEART

June 21, 2018

[First: Happy Summer Solstice, this morning around 6:19 AM EDT or so. We are at the top of the year for sunlight and its all downhill from here.]

I can remember as a boy scout (out on a camping trip) trying to start a campfire in the damp and rain. With a little piece of flint and some steel I would strike away creating sparks while trying to get that first flame that would become a fire.

In a similar way, I created a recording studio in this town (for audio and video) where young people (including my daughter) could record music and they did. I was not the engineer, the producer, or one of the musicians. What I did was bring all the physical components together and set the stage, so to speak, where the magic of music could take place. I created the context in which the creation of music was enabled. Dozens of fine albums were made at the Heart Center Studios.

However, with dharma it is more complicated. I don't consider myself a "dharma teacher," per se, but more of a dharma "sharer," providing dharma students with as much of the surrounding context for dharma learning as I can. For example, I do not usually teach the sutras and all of that. Instead, to the best of my ability, I try to help lay the groundwork, set the stage, and generally inform dharma students how all these dharma practices work and how we fit into them.

If I had to label myself, at least what I aspire to, it is to help dharma students find and develop what is called Bodhicitta because, to me, this is the single most important quality to have in practicing dharma. Without Bodhicitta (an enlightened heart), dharma is just so much dust floating in the wind; we will never realize much of anything.

Many of the translations of the word "Bodhicitta" say it is "Enlightened Mind" or "Enlightened Consciousness," which probably is technically correct, yet IMO these translations are a little too "dry." If you ask a Tibetan where their mind is mind located, they don't point at their head as we here in the West

might, but at their heart, actually the center of the chest. So, a realistic translation of Bodhicitta is more like “Enlightened Heart.” And by that I mean a heart on fire with zeal to learn and practice dharma. IMO, an even more accurate meaning of the sense of the term would be “Awakened Heart.”

And where does such fire come from? In my understanding and experience, it comes from the arising of true heartfelt compassion within us. And since everything is interdependent, like the old song “the knee bone is connected to the ankle bone,” etc., we could say that compassion arises from the moment we grasp what is called “emptiness,” which word “emptiness” refers not to something being physically empty as it does that we discover that anything of true permanence simply cannot be found anywhere. It is unfindable. Reality itself is virtual. That Realization (with a capital “R”) of un-findability is what engenders true compassion, when we seek and cannot find. It never fails. And the list of interdependence (and its links) goes on and around.

So, interdependence resembles a Catch-22; it always points to an endless circular process of reference, a sort of pointing at “pointing-at.” And what I’m pointing at here is that the circular chain of interdependency, like all circles, has no beginning and no end. And where we begin (or start) to understand all of these chain links, it does not matter the order. Like a child with a coloring book, we color a little here, then color a little there and gradually we fill in the picture.

Yet, it is written (and I can but agree), that the sine qua non of all requisite dharma qualities is Bodhicitta. If there is a fiducial, that has to be it. And so, we need to have Bodhicitta because that is the ground or base for any dharma progress, IMO. Without it, without heartfelt compassion for all sentient beings, we are like freeze-dried dharma without the water of Realization. We don’t realize what the situation is.

And so exactly where we start does not matter, since this is a circle of interdependency; whatever floats your boat is fine. However, the only result that matters is the engendering of Bodhicitta, however we can manage that. I pointed out that traditionally the arousal of compassion is a necessary

ingredient for Bodhicitta, but there are many roads to Rome, so to speak.

Any way we spell it, the Awakened Heart has to be the result; otherwise dharma practice just does not work. Every upadesha (pith teaching) points this out. We have to have “fire in the belly” to practice dharma and expect any realization. And the good part is that we can’t fake it. It has to be genuine. Authentic dharma is the only kind that counts or works. Conceptualizing dharma is a start, but without heartfelt zeal it is as “Tinkling cymbals and sounding brass.” Words alone can but point to a living experience we each must have. And without such a heartfelt experience there can be no realization because there would be nothing to realize. Bodhicitta is what it is known at, an Awakened Heart. Perhaps more on Bodhicitta in another blog.

“UNTIL THE REAL THING COMES ALONG”

June 22, 2018

Instead of forever studying dharma books and texts, I found that I would rather just think things through for myself. This is not impossible I found. It is not that the dharma is just a book or some historical document. The dharma teachings came from the natural dharma, what is called “The Lama of Appearances,” the truth of the reality that is all around us. The Buddha did not invent the dharma; however, he did point out to us the truths he found that were already there.

I will never be a scholar or a pundit; I am a practitioner and part of my practice is working the dharma through by myself from understanding to realization. Is there any other way? It's not that I have not been exposed to and heard the dharma through teachings. I have. Those teachings are meant to be something more than just concepts that we understand and then that's the end of it. Dharma teachings must first be understood and then experienced in the flesh. And it is from that real-time experience that realization can eventually arise or we can just wander around in circles having experiences in samsara. LOL.

Yes, I read actual dharma texts and parts of some other books, but only to prime the pump, so to speak. From what I read and understand, I then have to go off and (using Insight Meditation) think each thought through to confirmation. In my case, this takes a lot of time. At least I don't have to annotate or underline my insights like I do lines in a book; each insight as it arises in the mind is already underlined. It is perfect. This statement should not be easy for readers to understand.

In other words, after receiving teachings, I then study dharma through verifying what I understand conceptually through the Kagyu style of Insight Meditation, a very special form of Vipassana (Insight Meditation). With Insight Meditation, the dharma concepts are verified for me from the mind itself, idea by idea, and in my own words, words that I understand. I am my own (we each are) translator, not of language, but of dharma ideas. With Insight Meditation, we perceive them directly and there is no mistake or equivocation. It is a

process of having an insight directly into the mind itself. And there is no doubt that I know of.

I can understand if the above may sound a little hokey, but unless you have been trained in the very special form of Insight Meditation that is part of Mahamudra Meditation, you won't fully understand what I am pointing out here. That's what this form of Vipassana is all about: direct insight. It is not a relative truth. We are "all in." Perhaps not the best analogy, but it's like putting on special goggles that see things as they actually are.

I have a library of many hundreds of books on Tibetan Buddhism. I am happy to say that I have not read them all, but I have read enough to know that I don't need to read anymore. LOL. Instead, I need to practice the dharma step-by-step until I have fully experienced it and have signs that I have realized its content. My teacher, an abbot and high Rinpoche, will tell me whether I have grasped the teachings or not.

The only reason we would want to read another book on dharma is because (for whatever reason) we don't know how to practice or don't enjoy practicing. The key to loving practice is Bodhicitta, an awakened heart. And the key to Bodhicitta is actual Compassion, a driving urge to help anyone and everyone. And, the key to Compassion is a taste of emptiness. And grasping emptiness depends on not being able to find anything permanent in the mind, no matter how much we look. And we have to search and search and search until we are certain that we can find nothing at all and it is then that we begin to realize that reality is basically virtual, like a dream we are having.

When we begin to grasp emptiness, then we can't help but have compassion for all beings, and that compassion is the generator of Bodhicitta, and Bodhicitta makes dharma practice the only thing that it makes any sense to do.

I know that this list may sound like a cookie-cutter solution, but this (in general) is the way that these interdependent practices interact, and usually in that order. However, Bodhicitta is the key.

And lest we forget, Bodhicitta is an unrelenting and insatiable drive to be of use to others. However, in my understanding, while Bodhicitta is a natural byproduct of Recognizing the true nature of the mind, until Recognition, Bodhicitta is, to some degree, trumped up on our part. We aspire to Bodhicitta more than we yet have it within us as a permanent driving force.

Like the old Billie Holiday song:

“If that isn’t love, it will have to do,
Until the real thing comes along.”

LINING UP THE SPIRITUAL DOMINOES

June 23, 2018

If you want the standard Vajrayana dharma path in shorthand, then “Recognition” (of the actual nature of the mind) is the event threshold to reach and cross in our dharma practice and Bodhicitta (Awakened Heart) is the primary attitude that we need to get there.

Ultimately, everything revolves around and depends on these two factors. We need Bodhicitta (open heart) to reach Recognition and we need Recognition to begin the realization practices like Insight Meditation and Mahamudra. Finally, everything hangs on or revolves around Recognition, the guardian on the threshold to the path to final enlightenment.

It may sound as complicated as a Chinese puzzle and we do have to juggle several things at once, but if we concentrate on one factor at a time, it is easier. Something I have been told by lamas a number of times (as a directive) is to experiment seeing everything as a magical illusion. I hear that, but for me effort does not suddenly a hologram make. “Trying” to see life as illusion is just one more “try” to add to the pile. LOL.

It turns out that seeing everything as an illusion is the same thing as actually grasping the nature of emptiness. And despite many, many teachings and descriptions of emptiness by learned texts and teachers, the only method that I know of to experience emptiness is to personally search in the mind for this permanent “Self” that we all seem so stuck on or find just where in the mind is anything like an eternal (static) soul that so many believe exists. Take a look!

If we don’t just conceptually “think,” but instead actually look and search, search, search our mind to find anything permanent at all (like a Self), then perhaps we will see that the mind is empty of any permanent anything and that anything permanent is simply unfindable – not there. You can’t find it. Buddha could not find it. When I say “search,” I mean REALLY search (not just intellectually) for days and nights until we are certain nothing is there. We must exhaust ourselves TOTALLY until we are certain that this life is a

virtual reality, a reality that is indeed virtual and not a static existent, permanent entity.

And when we finally do get a whiff of how unsolid everything actually is, then (and maybe) we are grasping emptiness, which means grasping or finding nothing permanent at all anywhere. And that's because it's unfindable. After all, if what we take for real is but an elaborate construction of mind, a virtual reality, then at some point it has to strike home to us like an arrow. Wait for that!

THEN, so they say, after grasping the emptiness (unfindability) of our situation, uncontrived compassion for all beings will just naturally arise as we realize the state we are all in. And that compassion and caring-ness is the ground that drives Bodhicitta – the awakened heart. And the sheer persistence of Bodhicitta is the push we need to go the distance to “Recognition” of the true nature of the mind. And last, but not least, “Recognition” signals our entry into the realization practices and the first true step toward enlightenment.

Sorry if this sounds too formal, but that's how I understand it. Now, all we have to do now is walk it. LOL.

“A PIECE OF GOLD IN A SEA OF SILVER”

June 25, 2018

This blog is mostly for my fellow astrologers, so non-astrologers, please bear with me. There are at least four different astrological charts commonly used to map nativities, depending on which coordinate system we are looking at and why. Each of these coordinate systems is mapping the same planets at the same exact moment in time, but from an alternate viewpoint or perspective. These four coordinate systems can be triangulated to good advantage. Just for the record, the four most common coordinate systems used by astrologers are:

(1) Traditional Geocentric Natal Chart

This uses geocentric Tropical (or Sidereal) coordinates of Ecliptic Longitude and Latitude. This is a map of our earth situation, karma, self, and so on, a very important chart, personally.

(2) Heliocentric Natal Chart

This uses Heliocentric Tropical (or Sidereal) coordinates of Ecliptic Longitude and Latitude. This is a map of our inner archetype or tribe that we belong to, what drives our geocentric chart; it is very important spiritually.

(4) Local Space Natal Chart

This uses the place-centered coordinates of local Azimuth and Altitude. I call this the microscope because it charts in extreme detail our local position and orientation. This is a very important chart to adjust locality and other positioning.

(5) Earth Coordinates Natal Chart

This uses the earth-centered coordinates of Right Ascension and Declination as projected onto the heavens as well as Earth. This chart is often used in mundane and political astrology.

Each one of these separate coordinate systems is a useful and valid way to look at our birth time and the heavenly bodies. Although I would like to walk folks through all four of these coordinate systems, that will have to wait for another time. Here I will limit myself to describing the differences

between the traditional geocentric natal chart and the heliocentric natal chart. I'm trying to make a point and I hope some of you can receive it fully and take it to heart.

There is (I feel) a basic misunderstanding about the standard geocentric natal chart and the seldom-used heliocentric natal chart which I would like to clear up. We live here on earth; we don't live on the Sun, which does not mean that the sun-centered chart does not affect us or is not also valuable.

We are fixed here in this earthly realm, with our physical body, character, and personality, including everything that we could describe about this earth-world we live in. We don't live on the Sun and don't have any personal physical relationship with the Sun, other than one of reaction to its warmth, light, and thus the fact that our very life (and so on) depends on the sun. All of us here on Earth are literally a reaction to the Sun's life-giving forces.

The heliocentric chart does not map our outer physicality and persona, but it does map our inner life, call it the mind, psyche, tribe, archetype, or what you will. In other words, the traditional geocentric natal chart is specifically about our life here on earth, a unique earthly viewpoint that amounts to a snapshot from Earth's perspective of the entire solar system.

However, when we look at the helio chart, we can't think of our being placed there on the surface of the Sun. Instead, the solar influences are not physical, but are meta-physical and located somewhere deep inside us; they are nowhere particularly to be found here on Earth but are the inner effects of the solar system that embraces us and the Sun from which life comes.

In summary, the helio chart is not physical. Here on earth we have eyes, nose, and ears, etc., but our helio chart has none of these, not to mention no Moon or the 12 houses. The heliocentric natal chart is not about our earthly attributes (physicality), but rather it is a map of our basic consciousness and, at best, our general dharma orientation and what drives our karma.

We do each have an inner life, all of our feelings and the life of the mind itself; and the helio chart is a map or chart of those inner regions, as nebulous as they may appear to us at

this time. We can clarify them by learning to identify with the helio chart. This is transmigration!

The Sun constantly radiates with light and energy. Yet, the Sun is surrounded by the planets in their orbits and together they endlessly create different patterns in the heavens like a vast kaleidoscope. Each of us is born during this or that cosmic pattern or archetype. While Earth (and the traditional geocentric natal chart) is a map of our physical situation, the heliocentric archetype at our birth describes the style or general archetype we represent. This is not happening externally, but rather it's happening like deep inside us – metaphysically, so to speak.

So, while it is absolutely true that we don't live on the Sun, this does not mean that the Sun does not provide us with light, warmth, and thus life. The helio chart represents not only an inner life that we all share (the common mind itself), but the particular archetype (planetary patterns) that was in effect at the moment of our birth – our particular archetype.

This helio archetype is something that we only respond to in terms of what it causes our physical life (individuation and what-not) here on earth to form like. The earth chart (geocentric) is a chart of our appearances, how we appear to ourselves and to others, the situation we find ourselves in.

However, what drives the traditional earth-centered natal chart is the Sun and everything that is happening (planets) around the Sun. We could say that the spirit of the Sun is looking through and out from our eyes. We ARE that consciousness. The helio chart is a map of what (I hesitate to say “who”) is inside us looking out. We are it, that “one” who is inside looking out before our archetype is stepped down into the Earth plane and trapped in a body of circumstances.

These vast heliocentric chart patterns describe (as the old song goes) “lazy circles in the sky.” And these great slow-moving heliocentric archetypes are the fuel that drives our earth; they are what the traditional earth-centered chart is but a snapshot of. These two charts (geo and helio) are reciprocals of one another in some manner. They dovetail.

And it is from these heliocentric cosmic patterns that our personality (or Self) arises and forms around us, much like

crystals form in heavy sugar-water. These patterns drive us from the inside out, as I mentioned. While we can look in a mirror to see our physical earth-personality, our inner archetype is much more difficult to make out and bring to focus because it is not physical but metaphysical – beyond the physical.

It is a great good fortune for astrologers that the helio chart provides a literal map of these archetypal patterns and the forces they represent. We can learn to read these great helio patterns almost like we read a book. I have.

And while we can apply all of the astrological techniques we have learned in our years of geocentric work to the helio chart (progressions, transits, solar arcs, etc.) and they give good results, these grand inner archetypes have other qualities that are unique to themselves and of greater importance to astrologers and astrology.

Because these archetypes (StarTypes) describe the inner forces (and karmic traces) that drive us and out of which we fashion a Self and our world of appearances, these same slow moving patterns are as close as we will ever get to having an actual map of our deeper consciousness, what is called the Alaya Consciousness or Storehouse Consciousness, technically called the Alayavijnana.

We know what we look like in the mirror each morning, but we have less of an idea what motivates us from the inside, what drives our passions and attachments that cause us to react and do or become what we are.

After 46 years of working closely with these helio archetypes (which I deemed StarTypes years ago for my own enjoyment because they act like Star-Gates or dharma paths that each of us travel), I am working hard to share these results with the astrological community while I am still on the planet.

It's somewhat ironic to me that astrologers who are said to see into the future cannot see the future of this profound heliocentric empowerment. The way I see astrologers casually treating the helio chart (as if it is just another chart) says better than any words I could the situation that modern astrology finds itself in.

For me, the discovery of the helio or dharma chart was like finding a piece of gold in a sea of silver. The Dharma chart is so precious, a map of what astrologers have never had a map of, our inner desires that make up the tribe or archetype we belong to. I searched for this information for many years in the traditional geocentric natal chart and could only at best see there a dim outline of the reality. If we grasp our tribe or archetype, we immediately know vocationally what we are capable of and relationship-wise how we will be compatible.

To have in the helio chart a map of what drives us from within and the particular dharma path it leads to is precious beyond words. However, the world is so very busily distracted going nowhere that we don't realize the value of the helio chart even when it is presented to us. I am not looking for lip service here, but for those who, empowered by the helio chart, are transforming their lives through its use.

And so I ask you, my fellow astrologers, many of whom I just saw recently at UAC, to please consider this approach and add it to your astrological toolbox. I am here to answer questions or to even walk some of you through your helio chart.

“ENOUGH OR TOO MUCH”

June 27, 2018

“Enough or too much,” a classic quote from the great mystic poet William Blake; his “Marriage of Heaven and Hell” rings true. And it sneaks up on me too. Everywhere I turn, suddenly there is no “room in the inn,” so to speak. I’m fed up and have, at last, perhaps had enough. Anyway, that’s how it goes in my book. Many of the old Buddhist texts call it “Revulsion from Samsara.” I don’t like that phrase, but if the shoe fits ...

Everything I do makes me slightly nauseous, a little sick or repulsed at myself. I know that it is my problem and no one else’s. As my first dharma teacher used to say, “I have no pot to piss in,” nowhere to unload. That, to me, says it all. And what does it mean?

For one, in my case, it means that I have little alternative but to wait for the smoke to clear. I’ve run out of bandwidth and, like a straightjacket, what I’m sick of now defines me. “I’m sick of pretty much everything” says it. LOL.

When we run out of room to maneuver in this Chinese-puzzle of a life, we are stuck with what we are and have (once again) painted ourselves into our particular corner. I do it all the time.

The Christians might say “Let go and let god,” but being Buddhist, I don’t say that, of course. I do let go and surrender to the moment... as if there is another choice. LOL. For example:

A thought comes into my mind; I don’t seize on it (like I normally might), but rather just let it hang there, floating free or whatever. As mentioned, I let my mind rest and allow the thought to rise to the surface and evaporate like the old Magic-8 Ball we used to play with.

To use another Christian verity, “Not my will, but thine be done,” only in my case, it is more like “Let it be” whatever it is. Or as the great Mahasiddha Tilopa best said in his 3rd word of advice:

“Don’t Alter the Present.”

That's it. Anyway, the jig is up; there is no more wiggle room and I'm up against it. It's almost a relief, like it feels when I step on an airplane and surrender my life to the flight. Yet it's more than mere resignation.

Anyway, it signals a little mental house cleaning in the wind or even a bit of a purge. As mentioned, the only response that I know of is to allow myself to respond to the moment just as it is. Thank god! Finally! It's about time. LOL.

INTERPRETING YOUR OWN ASTROLOGY

June 27, 2018

The various planets circling our sun each have their individual qualities. Over the centuries, perhaps the more intuitive among astrologers “sensed” or gradually grasped the nature of each planet as it related to its center the Sun... as best as possible. And astrologers passed this lore forward through time and began to combine the many astronomical possibilities and interpret not only the planets themselves but their various combinations. We all know this.

Writing astrological interpretations for a set of combinations is not something I originally ever thought to do. Writing my own set of interpretations only came after many years of familiarity with every aspect (no pun intended) of whatever combination was being examined.

Finally, I wrote these combinations because I was not happy (enough) with what was out there. I wanted interpretations to use in the reports that I was designing that I could use with confidence and agree with.

Over the years since, I have written many complete astrological reports over the years and the interpretations needed for their various sets of combinations. But in this brief article I am looking at what I call the basic 3-way astrological combinations that we all can use, whether we are an astrologer or not. I will try to explain how.

The 360 Three-Way Planetary Combinations

Although 3-way planetary combinations are probably as old as when astrology knew of three planets, they came into prominence through the work of German astrologer Alfred Witte (1871-1941) who founded the Hamburg School of Astrology. Although Witte developed several astrological techniques (Trans-Neptunian planets, planetary rulerships, etc.), it is his planetary formulae, what have been called “Planetary Pictures” that we are referring to here, in particular his methods of relating any three planets to one another. Witte’s technique was later popularized and expanded by

German astrologer Reinhold Ebertin in his quintessential book “The Combination of Stellar Influences.”

Witte presented three kinds of planetary pictures, which I will review briefly here.

Half-Sums

These are very straight-forward, one planet is at the midpoint of the other two. This is called a Direct Planetary Picture.

VENUS ----- SUN ----- JUPITER

In the above, the Sun is at the center or midpoint between Venus and Jupiter.

Half-Sums with a Common Axis

Here we have several half-sums that share a common axis, with our or without a planet at that point. In this book, we will cover only those cases where there is a third or common planet.

VENUS ----- SUN ----- JUPITER
----- MARS----- MERCURY

Here we have the Sun as the midpoint between the planetary pair Venus / Jupiter and also as the midpoint between the pair Mars and Mercury.

Indirect Planetary Picture

The third form of planetary picture occurs when a third planet aspects the midpoint of the other two. This is called an “Indirect Planetary Picture.

VENUS ----- JUPITER
SUN -----|

In the above, the Sun is at some strong aspect to the midpoint of the Venus/Jupiter combination.

3-Way Aspect Patterns (in general)

An alternate use of these 3-way planetary combinations (developed by this author and highly recommended) involves using ANY whole-chart aspect pattern in the astrological chart that involves three or more planets. To me, a whole-chart aspect pattern is any series of Ptolemaic aspects (Conjunction, Sextile, Square, Trine and Opposition) linked

together that go around the chart and collectively add up to 360-degrees. You can use the smaller aspects at well and still get some flavor, but the heliocentric chart is much more relevant for this technique than the standard geocentric chart, although both work.

Examples of such patterns would include the Grand Trine, the Grand Cross, the T-Square, and dozens of other patterns. I have written an e-book "StarTypes: Life-Path Partners" that details some sixty common patterns. Check them out.

StarTypes: Life Path Partners

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/StarTypes.pdf>

Using any chart pattern, any three contiguous planets in that pattern can be interpreted using this 3-way method of analysis. Simply select what you consider a key or important planet in the pattern and use it plus the two planets flanking it (on either side) to form a 3- way combination and look it up in this book.

For example, I include here as an example my heliocentric natal chart. It includes a Grand Trine configuration that includes many planets, so we have many possible 3-way planet combinations that we can explore. Some of these would include:

Saturn-Earth/Sun-Neptune

Saturn-Earth/Sun-Venus

Uranus-Earth/Sun-Neptune

Uranus-Earth/Sun-Venus

Jupiter-Earth/Sun-Neptune

Jupiter Earth/Sun-Venus

... Plus we could do the same using Neptune and Venus with Pluto as the central midpoint and Saturn, Uranus, and Jupiter on the opposite end and have six more combinations.

AND we could use ANY three planets connected by the aspects we use (midpoint or not) and get meaningful interpretations. For example:

Let's use the Earth/Sun as our point of focus, since the Sun/Earth represents a connection to our self and is the only single planet in the grand trine configuration.

As to what other planets to use on either side, let's choose the planet Uranus from the group on the left, and the planet Neptune from the group on the right, which gives us this combination. The Sun and Earth are interpreted the same. Here is the book as a free download:

<http://spiritgrooves.net/.../Interpret-Astrology-3-Way-Combin...>

URANUS-SUN/EARTH-NEPTUNE

Using the Table of Contents of the book "Interpret Astrology: The 360 3-Way Combinations," we look up this 3-way combination and find the following entry:

Living Together / New Age Man

Meaning:

Alternative approaches to spirituality; new ways of embracing reality. This includes new insights into food, health, families -- you name it. Also, music and film, a break with the traditional. Something new.

Relational:

New insight into understanding (and thus accepting) relationships. Living together.

A Word on 3-Way Combinations

I kind of like the "New-Age Man" part, since I have been involved in home birth, home education, organic foods, astrology, and so on my whole life. It mentions music and film; I developed the All-Music Guide (allmusic.com) and the All-Movie Guide (allmovie.com), two of the largest entertainment-oriented sites on the Internet. Of course, I have been an astrologer for over 50 years. I could go on and on, but you get the idea how this book can be used.

The uses of this book are only limited by your imagination and the number of 3-way combinations in your chart that stand out. I have been using these large aspect patterns for many decades in my astrological counseling work, looking at both the standard geocentric natal chart and the heliocentric natal chart, but mainly using the helio chart.

As for me, I do not use these three-way planetary combinations (other than as half-sums), but I do use them in ANY three-planet aspect pattern WHETHER OR NOT the central planet is a midpoint of not. For example, consider the

common aspect pattern that I call a “Wedge,” which is an aspect pattern stretching around the chart (whole-chart pattern) that consists of an Opposition (180-degrees) connected to a Sextile (60-degrees) connected to a Trine (120-degrees. Thus all three aspects go all the way around the chart and add up to 360-degrees. That is what I mean by a whole-chart pattern.

You can isolate any three connecting aspected planets, look up that 3-way combination, and read the interpretation in the above book.

This may seem a little complicated, but it really is not. You do need to have your chart drawn out so you can see the patterns. A site I built ([Astrologyland.com](http://www.astrologyland.com)) has a free chart service here.

http://www.astrologyland.com/free_chart.../YourFreeChart.aspx

Don't be afraid to play around on examine different interpretations.