

Dharma Blogs

2019 Winter



by Michael Erlewine

Dharma Blogs

2019 WINTER

By Michael Erlewine

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 Winter of 2019 posted on Facebook and Google+.

Michael@Erlewine.net

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

Main Browsing Site:
<http://SpiritGrooves.net/>

Organized Article Archive:
<http://MichaelErlewine.com/>

YouTube Videos
<https://www.youtube.com/user/merlewine>

Spirit Grooves / Dharma Grooves

Copyright 2019 © by Michael Erlewine

You are free to share these blogs
provided no money is charged

Cover image Dharma Protector Mahakala

Contents

THE WIDENING GYRE OF DHARMA	8
STAINING THE PRACTICE	12
VIGILANCE IN DHARMA PRACTICE	17
CHEATING OURSELVES	20
DHARMA: WRINKLES IN TIME	22
THE DHARMA OF ELASTIC TIME	24
CONDUCTING TIME IN MUSIC	29
MAKING BLUES TIME	39
INTERVIEW WITH HOWLIN' WOLF	45
JUKE JOINTS AND SATURDAY NIGHTS	52
DHARMA: "I LIKE TO WATCH TV"	61
DHARMA: THE APPEARANCE OF EMPTINESS ...	65
DHARMA: MUNDANE RESISTANCE	66
DHARMA: MIND FILTERS	69
"IF THERE WAS A LAKE, THE SWANS WOULD GO THERE"	71
DHARMA: THE THREE TURNINGS	75
DHARMA: THE POINT OF PASSION	79
MY BIG "BUT" WHEN IT COMES TO DHARMA	83
WHAT HAVE YOU ARCHIVED LATELY?	86
THE PRESENT MOMENT: THE GIFT THAT KEEPS ON GIVING	87

ANN ARBOR – THE 1960s SCENE.....	89
ANN ARBOR HEART SONG HOW I FELL IN LOVE AND GOT MARRIED	92
LAUNDERING OUR KARMA.....	101
ATTACHMENT: HAVING-TO-HAVE.....	103
DHARMA: PIE-IN-THE-SKY	105
DHARMA: FIRE & BRIMSTONE.....	107
HOWLIN' WOLF INTERIEW	109
DHARMA: THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM.....	110
WHAT IS DHARMA PRACTICE ALL ABOUT?	112
EATING TO LIVE: BEYOND VEGAN.....	115
EATING TO LIVE SERIES HOW TO COOK AND ENJOY TEMPEH	118
DHARMA: WAIT FOR IT.....	123
DHARMA: PRACTICE IS NOT PERFECT	126
WONDERING ON DHARMA.....	127
February 3, 2019.....	130
DHARMA: THE APPLE AND THE TREE.....	132
THE TIDES OF DHARMA.....	135
MANTRA: THE ANCHOR OF MIND	136
THE SECRETS OF OATMEAL	138
DHARMA: THE BLESSINGS OF THE GURU.....	142
DHARMA: THE LIE OF SUBJECT AND OBJECT .	144
DHARMA: COMING EVENTS CAST THEIR SHADOWS.....	146

DHARMA: THE LIGHT JUST BEFORE DAWN	148
DHARMA: WHAT GIVES ME PAUSE.....	152
DHARMA: WANTING THE GOOD.....	155
DHARMA: HARDENING OFF	157
DHARMA: THE MYTH OF SEPARATION	159
DHARMA: INNATE INSIGHT	161
DHARMA: THE RING-PASS-NOT	164
DHARMA – JUST DESERTS.....	168
DHARMA: EMANATIONS	170
DHARMA -- THE SCHOLAR THAT I AM NOT.....	171
DHARMA -- SEEING “SEEING” ITSELF.....	173
DHARMA: THE RAIN OF BLESSINGS.....	175
DHARMA: REVERSE-SCHOLARSHIP	177
DHARMA: THE VIEW OF THE PARTS	180
DHARMA: THE THREE R’S.....	182
DHARMA -- RECIPE FOR REALIZATION	184
A STORY FROM THE LEELANAU	187
A DHARMA STORY -- THE DRAWING	191
DHARMA: VISIT FROM A HIGH LAMA	194
DHARMA -- A PICNIC IN TIBET	196
THE VAJRAYOGINI-TARA CAVE AND THE BIRTH CANAL	199
HOSPITAL	202
THE SITUATION.....	203

A CLOSE FACSIMILE.....	204
GLEAMING	205
“A BEAUTIFUL MESS”	206
MY CURATION DILEMMA.....	208
AFTER THE BAKLAVA.....	210
ASTROLOGICAL EMPOWERMENT	212
“STRANGER IN MY OWN HOME TOWN”.....	215
A CODA TO CHANGE	217
MY HUMPTY-DUMPTY SELF	219
SONAR PINGS	221
LIFE GOES ON.....	222
TERTONS: THE TREASURE FINDERS.....	223

THE WIDENING GYRE OF DHARMA

January 1, 2019

Getting back from my week of “vacation” is not the end of the trip. There is all the processing that I must do or that I do automatically. And that takes time.

No one is asking me what I learned from this trip, but nevertheless I ask myself. You know, “Inquiring Minds want to Know,” and all of that. In previous blogs over the last week, I have shared what I knew at the time, but insights just keep coming. LOL.

Overshadowing all my previous comments is the dawning of the following observation that (like a vast mothership hovering overhead) appears to be the major lesson I am learning from all of this and I will lay it out here as best I can.

When I packed my bags for the trip, of course I was sure to bring along my little pecha-holder that contains all of the various sadhanas and prayers that I recite on a daily basis. I’ve got to have that. It contains my on-the-cushion dharma practice. Of course, a lot of the dharma practices I do (after all these years) are not only ones on-the-cushion, but off-the-cushion too in what is called post-mediation, as I go about my business, etc. That’s a large part of what I do.

And on the trip I dutifully did my practice, even in the unfamiliar places where I happened to be. And no, dharma practice on-the-run, so to speak, is not (at least in my case) as good as dharma practice on-the-cushion back in front of my little shrine at home. However, I march through the motions regardless. And now comes the interesting part.

In the midst of the rush of trip events, some of them not so nice, certainly I was caught up in the current of those events, but tried to keep my inner gyroscope stable and pointing north, so to speak. However, to my astonishment, a few days into the travel I realized that one day I had forgotten to do my daily practice. Not only had I not done it, my daily practice never even occurred to me. I found that hard to believe, but you better believe it happened. Well, as you can imagine, that got me to thinking.

And among the thoughts that came was a little bit of realization as well. I realized that the dharma and its practice was not somehow all in that little pecha-holder of prayers I carried around. It was perhaps even more so in the whole context and gestalt that was the environment I had set up and lived at home. In fact, it was like dominoes how it all worked together. And it did not depend solely on those prayers I clutched to my heart. LOL.

It was not just the dharma prayers that sustained me. In my home shrine, but the entire environment in which the dharma was set, like a jewel is set in a ring or broach, an every widening gyre of interdependent circumstances that all conspire to provide me with stability. And this includes not just the things that are “dharmic” and that I feel are “important,” but everything, all of the things I don’t really like to do, but have to do anyway. They all interact and serve to protect the context in which my dharma, such as it is, flourishes.

In previous blogs from the trip I have mentioned that I was not so good at taking my “dharma” on the road, but even then I was still thinking too narrow-mindedly, thinking only of those things that you and I could agree are the “dharma,” and not so much the

supporting actors and setting, the context in which all that dharma thrives. That's the particular little realization that I am now sitting with and will attempt to share here.

My life in the small town of Big Rapids, Michigan is much more like a kind of retreat than I had imagined. And like a retreat, every aspect and act depends on and influences the whole. In other words, the context of dharma is global, an ever-widening gyre of interdependence, the result of which is that everything (every last thing) is either dharmic or food for dharma.

My daily ritual here at home, just about every last thing I do, is necessary for the context in which my dharma practice (and any realization I might have) to be viable. I would imagine that this is why beginning dharma practitioners like me are told to go off to some solitary place, like a cave or cabin in the woods or, in my case, just a home I seldom leave and a practice that is not bounded by my on-the-cushion practice, but includes everything around me as context.

The dharma supports that are not obviously dharma, but that are indispensable nevertheless in making the dharma possible, must be honored and valued. Without that routine and support, dharma practice can begin to unravel rather quickly. That is what I am realizing. Capiche?

And in case I am being too subtle or not explaining all this well enough, allow me to sum it up: Up until right now there have always been two parts to me. There is the dharma (and I know that is important) and there is the rest of what I have to do around the house to live and keep going. This realization I am having, small as it may seem, is rather a big deal for me. Why?

Because, it's like I am (or have been) of two minds, one (to me the more admirable one) is the dharma and learning it. And the other, are all of my not-so-good habits, call it my delinquencies, those habits that were kind of at war or at odds with the dharma. This would be things like not wanting to exercise enough or eating things I should not eat if I want to be healthy and live, and so -- lots of them.

And the realization here is that I now see that all of this activity surrounding my "dharma" is, if not dharma per se, then at least dharmic. "They also serve who only stand and wait" sort of thing. By realizing that all of this is just one activity, rather than the dharma and then everything non-dharmic in my life, I become of one mind. And by one mind, what I mean is that I finally feel responsible for these other areas in my life that I labeled as non-dharmic and personal, something I could be (or free to be) delinquent about.

Now don't get me wrong, This is not a New Year resolution, but perhaps a New Year realization. Hope some of you can understand what I am talking about here. If so, witness it please.

STAINING THE PRACTICE

January 2, 2019

This is a problem all dharma practitioners face. And not just dharma practitioners, but everyone in all walks of life. And it's not enough to be vigilant and guard what is precious to us from others. How do we guard against ourselves doing just that: staining what we have that is most precious? Let's look at both scenarios: dharma and life.

As for those of us who practice dharma, staining our practice is easy to point out. Every time we resist doing our practice, rush through it, or mindlessly bungle through it produces a result, call it an obscuration or stain. Just as we can lay down a positive result, it is just as easy (perhaps easier) to lay down a negative track (and underscore it repeatedly) that obscures and clouds our mind. We do it all the time and live with the result.

Our intent and how we treat our practice in our mind can be as important (or sometimes more important) than the actual practice that we do each day. At the very least, we should be aware that we may be staining our dharma practice. Let's have a little more detail.

It's easy to see when we do or do not do any kind of daily dharma practice that we have committed to and set out for ourselves. That's like a switch; it's either on or off. We do it or we don't. However, that's not the end of it.

"How" we do our daily practice is even more important, because we may not even be aware that we are staining our practice by just how we do it. From our point of view, we did it for the day, but we

may not look too carefully as to just how we did it. Did we just rattle through it drone-like? Did we do it, yet did not really want to do it, but just wanted to get it over with so we could get on with our day and do whatever? Or could we hear ourselves doing the practice, but we were nowhere around. LOL. There are dozens of such scenarios.

Is it better NOT to do our daily dharma practice rather than continue to stain it with our boredom or resistance? That's an obvious question, but one that rolls downhill. Pretty soon, we just don't practice at all. That's not what we want either. Let's face it; this is samsara, so we can expect just about every impediment that we would be sensitive too. Right?

The problem with staining our practice through our own actions and intent is that stains of this kind, ones that affect our dharma practice, are very hard to remove. Like the old detergent commercials as they intoned on how hard it is to get out those deep, down stains. LOL.

And those of you reading this that have no dharma practice are not exempt from the problem. Everything we do that is important to us can be stained, not by strangers, but by our own attitude and behavior. We do it to ourselves, whether we are aware of it or not. So, what to do?

There is no easy solution; otherwise we would all be on that bus a long time ago. As for what I do? I can share that. First, I need to just take a deep breath and relax. And then I need to look at the list of things I want to do, things I have committed to do in a day, things that stand between me and just doing whatever I want, including doing nothing at all. And, in my case, I have to slow down and be careful to not just rush through my practice or any of my daily routines I

“HAVE” to do. I accent the word “have” because this is what I have to do, like it or not.

Unfortunately, I don’t have a simply switch I can throw and have it be done and suddenly be on the other side of it. As mentioned, this is what I have (on hand) to do. And those of you who do not have this problem better guess again before you decide you are not liable here. I am exaggerating here to make a point and the problem exists at ever more subtle levels, so don’t imagine that you are immune.

Just as pain in our body is our friend because otherwise we would not know anything is wrong until it is too late to do something about it, so the signs of staining our practice are pretty easy to read and they, like bodily pain, are smoke signals to us that something is wrong.

IMO, it is better to do your practice, even if you don’t “feel” like it, than not doing it, PROVIDED you (that awareness that you are using to read this) are aware that you are coming up short in the practice department that day. At least you are aware (and can remain aware) of the problem and that you are staining your practice. It’s a bit like pinching yourself.

Next, you can slow down and take conscious control of your own practice. If it is too long, make it shorter, but try to get into whatever parts of it you can. When we once asked Rinpoche how long we should practice some of the realization practices like Insight Meditation (Vipassana) or Mahamudra Meditation, he said as long as it takes to raise your teacup and take a sip. Many short sessions done gracefully (with heart) are better than one long one done with sheer will and no heart -- something like that.

My point is that all of these warning signs (like bodily pain) exist not to hassle us, but to inform us that something other than our intent is being realized, something that will have to be removed before we can see clearly what to do. Yes, these warning signs lay down a track of obscurations that can further cloud the mind. However, if instead of just ignoring them and allowing them to pile up (it's the same with bodily pain) we take notice of them and heed their warnings. We take evasive action by working with the problem day by day and moment by moment.

These are like road signs that tell us there is a curve ahead or that a bridge is out. These signs are our friends if we will be our own friend enough to put them to use and correct whatever course we are veering off from. It's obvious when we are bored or resisting what we have to do and all the signs that add up to staining our practice. At the very least, finish your practice, even if it means being aware each moment that you are not comfortable. Either that or get comfortable. LOL.

And those of you not doing dharma practice, as mentioned, it's no different in whatever you have to do each day. Don't do it, do it with willingness, or at the very least do it with awareness that you are not comfortable. All of these external (or internal) signs exist as warning flags to make some adjustment.

I am reminded of an astrological counseling session I had with a prostitute. She complained about what she had to do for a living. I listened of course and my suggestion was that she find some other way of making a living. Her response was, "Hell No! I could never make this kind of money doing anything else." My response was "Well, if you mean that, then I

suggest that you stop complaining and put your heart into your work like all the rest of us.” LOL.

VIGILANCE IN DHARMA PRACTICE

January 3, 2019

If we read ahead about the more advanced dharma teachings, we find that pure attention is not only advocated, but required. In fact, in the quintessential Mahamudra Lineage Prayer there is the line “Unwavering attention is the body of meditation,” where “the body” means that this is the main thing that we do, have unbroken attention. From where I stand, all I can say is “Good luck!” And to prove the point, just try maintaining unwavering attention for even a minute or so, much less all the time. It seems impossible to do. We quickly get exhausted.

And we can't maintain unwavering attention by force of will or the sheer effort of wanting to do it. Unwavering attention is the byproduct of pure (Absolute) Bodhicitta and the compassion that comes along with it. We are attentive when we are interested. That's Bodhicitta in a nutshell, concern for all sentient beings.

Most of us are not there yet. And so, what can we do to begin to develop unwavering attention? It's not going to just spring itself on us; we have to develop it and we can initially do that by working on vigilance. Yet, even vigilance has a driver, so let's first look at that.

Vigilance is something we can develop through dharma practice only if it is something that we naturally want to do. And “Wanting to do,” remembering why we are doing this, is the key to solving what we “have to do” each day. It's our responsibility to dig down deep enough into our motivation to find a vein of intuition or our original

intent that will sustain our practice. Obscurations that continue to pile up until we can't see through them have to be removed or at least kept at a minimum.

Part of discussing the staining of our personal dharma practice (and how it can be corrupted by our own lethargy, delinquency, and boredom) is being aware and maintaining that awareness or vigilance throughout the day as to when we are not really into our practice as we might be. We should know when we are waiting for our practice to be over or not feeling like doing it, we push the envelope against the grain.

This is a type of vigilance on our part. No, it is not the unwavering awareness that is mandated by the higher realization practices, but it is a good start, a way of developing that kind of awareness.

I have also written and spoken about becoming aware of our own involuntary reactions that arise throughout the day and carefully being aware and noting them until they begin tone themselves back, as another way to develop a more constant sense of awareness. For most of us, pure unwavering awareness does not just spring full-blown from the head of Zeus, so to speak. It has to be learned and practiced by our learning to become increasingly aware through these kinds of practices.

It's like working to iron out the wrinkles or crinks in our daily practice until it just flows more smoothly. To do this, we have to repeatedly find the heart to practice, what is called Bodhicitta. It's there within each of us, but often is mired under the load of obscurations that we ourselves generate. We have to remove these obscurations just as we have to clean a pair of glassed from debris. Vajrasattva practice which is part

of Ngondro can help with this for those who have the permission, instructions, and lung for this.

For those who have not been given permission for that practice, we can, as I suggest, take a deep breath, slow down, and very carefully remove the wrinkles in time that bunch up to obscure our daily dharma practice. It's easy to lose our way in the busyness of the daily demands on our attention and snow over our original intent to practice until we can't feel the practice we are doing. This is where or when we have to tread carefully, uncover our original pure intent, and follow our better intuition.

We may have to shorten our practice, take the time it takes to remind or remand ourselves of the inspiration it takes to be present in our own practice. I like the line in a song written by one of my daughters (Anne) which goes "I want to be there when I die." Being present is almost everything, especially with dharma.

Boredom, hurry, busyness, etc. are not our friends. Each time they arise, it is worth the time to slow down on the spot, back up, and smooth out or clear away whatever pileup of obscurations we have accumulated. By doing that, we can find our way home to our original inspiration, even if it is only by degrees. We can thin out the veils that obscure us from fully participating and being present enough to effectively practice.

I have given some suggestions above as to how we can begin to increase our ability to be attentive and mentioned the Reaction Tong-Len practice and more on that topic can be found here:

<http://michaelerlewine.com/viewforum.php...>

CHEATING OURSELVES

January 4, 2019

What I wrote a couple of days ago is the fact that the dharma is infinite in its interdependencies and that dualistic separation and relative truth is ultimately futile. And the reason is that reality is already absolutely one. If we are of two minds, we just have to focus our inner binoculars (through dharma practice) until there is a single image.

The above line is a mouthful that is easier said than realized. Putting the rocket back on the launch-pad or putting the toothpaste back in the tube is a non-starter. As Shakespeare said so succinctly “Ripeness is all.” So, with dharma we have to take our time because there is no hurrying perfection.

It’s a fact that there is non-realization before there is realizing, especially when it comes to the dharma. On top of that, Samsara seems to be cyclic like the tides, with waves of not knowing pushing us ever farther up on the dry beach before we are immersed once again by another high tide of knowing or realizing more than we did. I lived two blocks from the Atlantic Ocean for years and walked the beach endlessly, so I know about tides.

All of our doubts and second thoughts are just wasted energy or as Shakespeare said “The expense of spirit in a waste of shame is lust in action...” There is such a thing as right action as the Zen Buddhists so perfectly point out and nothing less will do, so let’s take our time and do it correctly.

In other words, if we are in a hurry, we have to slow down long enough to get it right. LOL. There is no back door to enlightenment, no grandfathering

ourselves in, so queue up and do it properly because otherwise we are only putting off our own realization. Dharma practice is like a sticky clutch. It's a rough ride unless we take time and learn to do it properly.

And we can't cheat the dharma. If we think that we can cut corners and be niggardly or in a hurry to get enlightened, we only cheat ourselves. It does not work that way. An island core of our dharma practice surrounded by a sea of self-doubt and worry will not work. It can't be one or the other or even both.

Dharma "Realization" is the realization of absolutely one, a unity, and is ultimately not discursive. It's not an option, but rather it is just the way it is. We can't improve the dharma, nor can we skip any step along the way. It's like nothing else we know. It works!

As I say to myself, gaming the dharma would be like trying to sneak up on a mirror. Our self gets in the way every time. That's what dharma practice is for, thinning out our attachments and self until they are transparent.

DHARMA: WRINKLES IN TIME

January 5, 2019

I am concerned here with our awareness of time from within time itself. For most of us, time is not a smooth flow or a straight line, but very much “wrinkled” or bunched up. And by that I am talking about our awareness of being aware. Mostly, we are not.

Like a bad clutch or a CD that skips, our continued awareness is simply not free-flowing, but rather bunched, liable to fits and starts. You can notice this all throughout the day. I am especially aware of this when I take a walk. I am walking at the top of a hill and noting the fall or winter colors and the next thing I know I am at the bottom of that hill. What happened?

Well, what happened is what I am calling here a wrinkle in time. I was aware and then I lost an entire section of time to being distracted. Time just kind of bunched or wrinkled up and I am left with fits and starts of awareness. Those wrinkles or bunched-up sections of time have to be ironed out. Put another way, our awareness of time has somehow to become continuous, with no gaps. But like the Great Britain slogan “Mind the Gap,” which means to beware of the gap, here we mean be mindful so that there is no gap.

Sure, you can try to remain vigilant, so there is no gap in your attention, but that will last about a minute or so. And then you will wake up to the awareness that you just had another gap in which you went where? Wherever. My point is that we can’t solve this problem with brute force, by forcing ourselves to remain aware. That is doomed to quick exhaustion and we wake up to awareness somewhere farther down the road of time. It happens to all the time.

These wrinkles in time have to be smoothed or ironed out slowly and carefully, moment by moment. Above all, we have to relax and allow time to present itself to us, second by second and hour by hour. And it will, if we will stop seizing up and blanking out. Needless to say, this is a long-term project that will take time, like: all the time there is.

The first step to a solution is to realize the problem exists and to note when we come back from a distraction into the world of being aware. We wake up or snap back. Not to confuse the issue, but just as these wrinkles happen throughout the day, the same effect happens in yearly or multi-year cycles. We are plodding along in the fog of life and suddenly we are back again, fully present and then, so it happens, we fall back asleep again, to only return or wake up years later.

The long and the short of it, whether monitoring daily lapses of attention or cycles that take years for us to return, is to take it a moment at a time. And to do that we have to deeply relax and allow time to “present” itself and that freshness of presentation is the fuel that will keep us aware and awake.

THE DHARMA OF ELASTIC TIME

January 6, 2019

A comment made yesterday by my long-time friend James Greenberg about space/time brought to mind some of my own thoughts about time and space. In these blogs I present to my Facebook friends a variety of information. Some are my understanding of the dharma from many years of being exposed to it. Others are actually experiences I have had and finally still others are what little realization I have been able to make sense of.

I see myself as what is called a phenomenologist, someone who prefers (or can only) speak of their own personal view of things. Yes, I share teachings, but mostly what I present here is my personal take on things, lacking anything better and not feeling comfortable just parroting what I understand from the dharma teachings. Which brings me to the point of this blog, which is concerned about things that last or are true. If I can, I will spend the next blog of so on this concept, if only because it has been so central to my own realizations.

Time is elastic. It expands and contracts in response to effort on our part. We stretch time in response to the kind of activity (action) we make and thus live a life in between the seconds quite different from that which we live on standard clock time. Are you aware of this? If not, that is why I am writing this just now.

I certainly didn't always know this and I did not know how to expand time at will and I did not learn it all at once. Like raindrops before a storm, I learned about the elasticity of time slowly at first, drop by drop, and only later in any quantity. There were many stories I

have with hints, but here is one story of how I discovered expanded time.

I had learned to play the guitar in the late 1950s and early 1960s, mostly folk guitar, learning Carter-Picking and what is called Travis-Picking, which is also called three-finger picking. There was a folk music circuit that extended from Berkeley to Madison to Chicago to Ann Arbor to New York City to Cambridge, Massachusetts, and back around. I would hitchhike from Ann Arbor to New York City many times, sometimes with a well-known (an phenomenal) guitar instrumentalist at the time by the name of Perry Lederman. I also hitchhiked with a young Bob Dylan in 1961, and with others. I was part of that scene.

Later, in the summer of 1965 (the same time the Grateful Dead started up out in San Francisco), my brother Dan and I started the Prime Movers Blues Band in Ann Arbor Michigan. We were probably one of the first “hippie” bands in the Ann Arbor area or as far as I know in the nation, for that matter. A young Iggy Pop was our drummer. Anyway, I started to tell you how I learned about elastic time, and it involved music, so at this point you know something about my music background.

One night I was playing on an elevated stage in an Ann Arbor bar called “Mr. Flood’s Party.” I could really look out at the audience in front of me. And I was having a very good night, musically, something that was not always true. Music, like everything else has its moments. It goes up and down in cycles.

So, there I was up on that stage. I had just played some really good music, meaning some music really well. It was emotionally moving. I don’t remember what song I was singing, but I was happy with it. I looked out at the crowd expecting perhaps to see

their appreciation, to get some credit, and what did I see?

No one was giving me a thumbs-up or the high-fives. Instead as I gazed down at the crowd, they were all lost in concentrated contemplation, obviously looking inward and completely absorbed in their mind. They were not looking at me. Hmm, thought I, what is this? And then I got it.

The music had been so good that it affected the mood of the crowd. The effort I had put into singing and playing had somehow stretched time open in the mind so that everyone there was able to slip inside ticking-clock-time and experience themselves in expanded time. The audience was lost in personal reverie, having found through the music the space and the kind of time in which to have essential thoughts that were perhaps waiting for a moment like this to arise so that they could be consciously experienced. After all, eternity must be somewhere. It certainly is not something waiting for us at the end of linear time. LOL.

In that moment, I began to realize that we can make time, expand time by the sheer effort of our creativity and mind. And in that expanded time we can do and create things, set life directions, imprint, etc. -- things that cannot easily be done in world-time. This was news to me. I knew something about expanded time. I knew I could turn inward and find more space, but I was not really aware that we could all do this together and that this was what music did (or could do) for us, open up the mind and give us a little bit of expanded time, a piece of eternity right in the middle of our busy lives.

And I can never forget the song written by Bert Bacharach "Let the Music Play," song by the Drifters

(also later by Diana Ross and others.) The true import of this tune cannot be found even in the original version, so I will leave it for the very few who can take this to hear to listen to the other versions. Here is the original by The Drifters. And some of the words are given below.

By the Drifters:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hqA1fdfGn4o>

By Roy Hamilton:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hqA1fdfGn4o>

By Diana

Ross: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PktuS-cW7U>

Let the music play
Just a little longer

Let the music play
Just a little longer

Let the music play
Just a little longer
Just a little longer

Let me hold her in my arms
Let me thrill to all her charms
A little longer.

Make the music play
Just a little slower
Just a little slower

Let me hear her tender sighs
Let me look into her eyes
A little longer.

Make the music play
Keep this magic going
Keep those trumpets blowing ...
All through the night

Don't ever skip a beat or
She may slip away
And if we were parted
I'd be broken hearted
Till she's in my arms to stay
Forever and a day
Please let the music play

What I was learning that night was that the ritual of playing music perfectly had the effect of opening the mind, not just for me who was playing and singing it, but for everyone present as well. This was something to learn. And by extrapolation, I soon learned that any ritual we enact with heart and precision can do the same thing, whether it is poetry, painting, dance, or what-have-you?

Eventually, I stumbled on the source of these rituals that expand time, which of course include the various forms of Buddhist meditation and the other mind-training exercises. Here is the mother lode. By learning to meditate properly, we can expand time and slip between the seconds and experience an awareness that somehow escapes us in most of our ordinary clock-time.

This is a taste of what I would like to get into in the next few blogs. I realize that I will lose a lot of you who may not resonate to this concept, but then I'm writing for myself and for those very few who are on the same wavelength.

CONDUCTING TIME IN MUSIC

January 6, 2019

This article is about musical time and how it is made - making blues time. The classic blues players, like all great musicians, literally “make” time. They don’t just follow along in time like most of us do when listening. They set the time, inset the time with their music, but it goes deeper than that. Every once in a while you and I might look at our watch and see what time the clock says, but the time in between those clock checks goes unchecked. It just passes and like the old song from Sandy Denny, “Who knows where the time goes?” I certainly don’t know where it goes. My point is that while clock time seems to be regular, what goes on when you and I are not watching the clock can be anything but regular. In other words, time contracts and expands, especially when it comes to musical time.

The really great blues players, and we all have our favorites, actually can ‘make’ time. Time is also something we make. My favorite blues artist for “making” time would have to be Big Walter Horton, the Chicago blues harmonica player. In my opinion he could make the best time I’ve ever heard. He could show me the best time I have ever had musically, the very best time I have ever experienced. And I have of course (like we all do) my own sense of time, you know just going along each day, like each of us are doing now, reading this – taking our own sweet time or not; some are in a hurry.

But with Walter Horton, Muddy Waters, Howlin’ Wolf and other blues greats, somehow their music takes over time as I know it. They can overtake my personal

sense of time and replace it with the kind of time that they make, which is for me a much more vast sense of time, you know, more time, time enough (and space!) to do other very important things in -- extraordinary time. I can synch up or resonate to their time and it becomes (for the moment) my time. Big Walter Horton (for me) is a great director or conductor of time and I gladly groove along with him to his beat. Great blues players can expand time and, in that expanded time, these musicians give us more room to experience or listen, creating an envelope (almost like an aura) with their music, an envelope of space in which I have more room or space to know myself, to relax, to be myself, or to just think and be here now. Making time in this way is what this article is about.

And I did not just sit around listening to the records. In the late 1960s and early 1970s I had the opportunity (and took it) to interview scores of blues musicians with audio and later with video as well. This went on for some years. I interviewed almost every great blues player you could name. And I got to know some of them, like they would stay at my house for days or weeks, etc. For instance, my brother Dan and I spent a whole night drinking Jack Daniels with Arthur (Big Boy) Crudup who wrote Elvis Presley's first tune that he recorded and another night with Big Mama Thornton who first did "Time is On My Side," and so on.

MUSIC BEYOND TIME

I will hazard the statement that "Activity creates space and space orders time." Chew on that for a while. I certainly have.

Making time is one of the hallmarks of the great blues musicians. Most of them are gone and I have resigned myself to not hearing their kind of expanded

musical-time played live any longer, although I can still hear it on some recordings. It is gone. However, to my surprise, I actually experienced this form of blues time live a couple years ago after all these years. It was at a Michigan music festival called "Wheatland," held not far from where I live here in mid-Michigan. Perhaps 20,000 people attended it.

They had a musician there named Aubrey Ghent, a lap-steel player from somewhere in the southeast; I believe it was Florida. Ghent plays gospel music and, sure enough, that day he was making time like the old masters. I was spellbound. I had not heard profound "blues" time like that since back in the day around Chicago and places like that. And Aubrey Ghent was sitting up there on the stage playing blues time, just like they used to. The audience was mesmerized.

And Aubrey Ghent was 'making' the time. It immediately put me back in a musical space when I used to listen to players like Muddy Waters, a space where a blues player would take over time as I knew (and lived it) and would put me through something I could not put myself through, taking me on a trip and to a place where I sure liked to go but did not know how to get there.

Aubrey Ghent had that kind of sense of time and one of the songs he displayed it on was, to everyone's surprise, "Don't Worry, Be Happy," the Bobby McFerrin tune. The whole audience just stopped whatever time they were having and went on Ghent's time for a while. And of course, the rest of the night we were all telling each other about that incredible music. What I am after here is what makes that kind of music time incredible?

Maybe at the end, after you listened to Ghent, you would say to yourself, "Wow, that music was 'really'

good,” but it is way more than just the music being ‘good’. Most of those present had just experienced something that they never had before and that some of us hadn’t heard for a very long time. And maybe they can’t quite remember it or maybe they remember it later, slowly, over a period of time, calling it back into memory with satisfaction, a little at a time, reading it back to themselves from the imprint. Here is a taste of Aubrey Ghent for those who have time. I know; many of you don’t “have” time. LOL.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LqkZvebPE48>

Anyway, Howlin’ Wolf would put me through something like that when I was with him. And another blues player who did that to me was Chicago’s Magic Sam. Some of you may not know of Magic Sam, but he was one of the most virile, seminal guitar players that have ever played the guitar. And he also was an incredible singer, and I ‘mean’ incredible! You can hear what I am pointing out here on the Delmark album “West-Side Soul” by Magic Sam which I include here. If you like the blues and have never heard Magic Sam, do yourself a favor :

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xt9v1KZ56Ok>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7S5DGqCfk8o>

I first heard Magic Sam live in Chicago back in the mid-1960s in one of these large rooms like you find in some of the Chinese restaurants in the major cities, the ones with really low ceilings. I am talking about big rooms, where they have all these little tables and chairs that kind of go way back in the distance. You can’t even see the end of them and in this case everyone was already standing. I couldn’t see Magic Sam. I had just squeezed in the door and was standing flat up against the back wall, and the place

was packed. All I could make out were heads as far as I could see. Yet I could hear this incredible sound coming from somewhere way up front. It was Magic Sam's voice, which immediately made the hair stand up on the back of my neck. I had never heard anyone sing like that. It was literally a shimmering sheet of sound. It was Magic Sam making time. That kind of time was rare then and almost impossible to find now.

In my opinion, what we are getting from blues players today, and I don't mean to offend anyone, so I will try to say it gently, is the original music "sounds like this," as in: "it sounds like Howlin' Wolf." To myself, I just call it "reenactment" blues. Today, we are now reenacting something that used to be there, but no longer is, like: Howlin' Wolf used to be there, but he is no longer with us, and so on. Or, we could just say that no one sings like the Wolf and those who try are just re-enacting Wolf, trying to sound like Wolf.

The problem with younger players re-enacting Wolf's songs is that they always make me think of Wolf and whoever is singing does not really sound like Wolf. This spoils it for me, because there is no comparison. I would rather these young players just sing Wolf's songs in their own voice and with their own experience, so I could hear 'them', and not through a Wolf filter, and often a lousy one at that. That's just me.

CONSIDER THIS:

Most musicians listen to someone like Howlin' Wolf or Big Walter Horton and they set about to learn Wolf's style, to play Wolf's licks, and so on, in hopes that they can make the kind of music Wolf makes. But this is just exactly backward to what would actually be needed to create the effect of a Wolf or a Muddy Waters, and this point may be a little subtle. Playing

Wolf's licks, and so on, will never get you there. Wolf is not doing that. Wolf is not trying to resemble anyone. He has managed to get his mind and consciousness (whatever we want to call it) into a certain state so that anything he plays already has that sound and perfection. It is already perfect "Wolf." You can't imitate perfection and why would you want to?

Therefore, to play like Wolf plays, you would first have to perfect not your guitar licks, but your mind, your consciousness, pay your dues, and get yourself into a state where anything you do, including playing music, will already be significant, and will exactly signify you and where 'your' head is at. Do you understand? Don't work on the licks only, but work on perfecting yourself, your life, your consciousness, and where your mind is at. Then whatever you do will sound right, at least right for you. Anyway, back to "making time."

The main blues players from back in the 1960s were all incredible, but the greatest time-maker of all time as I pointed out (for me personally) was the harmonica player Big Walter Horton. He could set or make time better than anyone I have ever heard. I refer you to Volume Three of the "Chicago the Blues Today!" album on Vanguard, and the song "Black Spider Blues," as an example.

Horton is playing the harmonica background (and solo) here with the great Johnny Shines and the two of them are making time together. Here is a link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MxfKX6sF6pM>

And it is perfect. If you were to add someone else, the time would probably immediately change for the worse and the expanded sense of time that I can

clearly hear on the record would be lost, unless that player too was of the same caliber.

And by “making time,” I mean this: We all have a sense of time. Musicians who play regularly know that on the really good music nights they can make time slow down or somehow expand; time stretches. I may not have the best words here. The energy and effort put out by the musician to build the musical time actually creates not just a slowing down or expanding of time, but also produces some kind of mental or psychological space in which the audience can think or exist in. It’s like clearing out the mental cobwebs when I listen to one of these masters; they somehow give me inner-time to perhaps know more about myself. I learned this years ago in a little bar in Ann Arbor called Mr. Flood’s Party. I’ve told this before, but for those who were not here, I will briefly tell the story:

Musicians, at least this one, constantly worry about how they sound. You know, is it good or good enough? Anyway, back then, playing harmonica and singing in that bar along with my brother Daniel (on guitar), I had a good night. I felt that finally I was playing what I intended to play and I looked at the audience, thinking, well somebody might be giving me the thumbs up, like “Michael, you’re doin’ good, man!” But there wasn’t any of that. As I looked out over the audience, everyone was in some sort of trance. They were all looking into their own mind as if in some kind of reverie. And I suddenly realized what was happening and said to myself: “Oh, I get it now. It’s not about me!” I realized that, like everything else in life, even music has a “what’s in it for me” quotient, and in this case it was about what was in it for them,

the audience. My music only gave them the room to experience their own thoughts more fully.

Great musicians make space or room in time. They expand time into space and make more room. They make room for us to think and experience. They “make time” and in that expanded time people can get some very personal and specialized jobs done, like thinking or feeling whatever they need to. We all do this and music is not the only avenue. For example, I work a lot. And I get up like at two or three in the morning and I work until five at night. I might take a nap. And then somewhere around 6 PM I like to watch a movie. It doesn't have to be a whole movie or it might be two movies. It often is just a little bit of a movie. In that movie time, that down time, I am, of course, watching the movie, but I am also mulling things over that happened that day in my mind.

Movies may be the most common form of meditation for most people, because we are in reality just looking at a spot on the wall and holding very still. Isn't that what meditators do? Anyway, in that down time I get things done in my mind (while I am watching the movie) that I need to do. I am processing the day's events. For me, it is very relaxing and actually quite necessary.

When great blues players play, they create a similar kind of time in which we, the audience, can get into and experience ourselves. So the great time setters or conductors, the great blues musicians (great musicians of any kind) take over our sense of time; They take over what we can call clock time, this time and that time. They take it over and supplant it or replace it with their sense of time, what they know how to do. They're setting the time. They are creating or making the time for us and suddenly our mind is

caught by their sense of time. We are into it. This is why live performances can never be replaced by recordings.

We might say afterward, “Oh, isn’t that an incredible guitar player” or we could also say “Wow, he or she took me on a trip.” Musicians make time and in that time we the audience have our own personal experience. It is not only about ‘their’ music, but also about our life. That is the point here. That is what great music is all about.

I can remember one example and it’s a good one. In Chicago, back in the mid-1960s I went into a club, a tiny little place (I forget the name of it; it might have been “Mother Blues”) that the great Howlin’ Wolf was playing in. It was very late and there was nobody there. There was only Howlin’ Wolf and next to him there was his wonderful guitar player Hubert Sumlin. That’s it. So my brother Dan came in and it was almost totally dark. There was just a little bit of light up near the stage. Wolf was sitting on a chair way up front and singing like only Howlin’ Wolf can sing. And for a while, time just stopped. It was not so much that, as it was that the walls, that whole place I was in, faded and gradually became some kind of transparent.

Not just the walls, but from the walls on out forever. What remained was this consciousness (I guess it was me) floating in an ocean of translucent space. And scout’s honor, I was not on drugs! Everything just went void. For that time I forgot where I was in my life. I had to reach inside to get a hold on myself, and there was nothing to get a hold of. Wolf’s voice and the power of his musical time had taken over mine. I could have been anywhere in the universe –

somewhere, and yet there was still no place to identify. Place had nothing to do with it.

I was transfixed by Wolf's time. And of course I came out of it, but it was like: how could I forget this? That's what I mean by time. Wolf's time was better than mine. I wasn't even prepared for the experience; it just happened. He took me deeper than I could get by myself. It is like one of those times when somebody dies that is close to you. Those events kind of stop you in your tracks and make you, for a time, go deeper and be more open. You are popped out of your groove and open to alternatives. Life is new again.

This is getting too long, so perhaps I will add a little more tomorrow or soon.

MAKING BLUES TIME

ACTIVITY GENERATES SPACE AND SPACE ORDERS TIME

January 8, 2019

This interesting concept is where words can fail, but I will give it a try. You may have to meet me halfway. Have you ever been in one of those car accidents or near accidents when you see it coming, but maybe can't avoid it? It is easy to find these events when driving on ice. Your mind concentrates and you are "right there." Time slows down and everything seems to be taking place in slow motion. That is somewhat similar to what I am pointing at here when I use the term "making time." In times of stress, intense awareness, or extreme concentration, time stretches and slows down.

You can experience it all happen. Time just somehow expands or makes room. "Making time" with the blues is like that. However, it is not all about duration and time slowing down. In music time, it is also about the space or aura surrounding the music expanding and making room to be or exist in. The two are connate, meaning they arise together and are part of one experience.

The standard blues progression is just twelve bars which keep repeating themselves over and over. In order to take control of that progression and go deeper with time, the blues musician has to concentrate (be aware) and articulate each bar of that blues progression, putting the brakes on here and rushing to catch up there. What matters is to emphasize and willfully access, accentuate, or push

the time leading up to this or that change here, and drag out the turn- around or what-have-you over there.

If a musician is aware or present enough, and has enough experience, he or she can articulate the blues so that, although clock time just ticks on along, the end result of the effort is to expand time, slow it down, and we go between the clock-ticking seconds into what can only be described as expanded time, time in which we are beyond the distractions of the moment (our regular life) and able to taste or experience what is beyond, beneath, and above (use your own words here) the normal. I don't want to call it eternity, because that term has been overused, but it is somehow outside, however marginally or temporarily, our normal sense and experience of time. This then is what I mean by "making time." Musicians do this all the time (pun intended) and with time.

And really great musicians give us such great time or can make time so well that we can hitch a ride with them, even if only for the length of a song. For those moments we are on their time, traveling with them, part of their mandala, and they are taking us deeper within or beyond conventional time to something greater than that. It is easier to experience this than to put it into words. Let me try another metaphor.

The discipline and energy of making music can create more room in time than we normally have – expansion or extension. Think of it as an aura or envelope of normal time that somehow expands time as we know it (and the moment) into something deeper and wider – stretches time. It doesn't stretch time longer, as in making a song last longer; it stretches the time deeper as in: going beyond normal time into somewhere else. I don't have a word for it. In

other words, when time appears to slow down, the song in clock time does not slow down or get longer in duration. That stays the same. It is our consciousness and experience that stretches or reaches deeper inside ourselves. We expand. The more intense the activity in an ordered way results in this expansion.

In other words, intense musical activity creates space, an envelope or aura, and the 'kind' of our musical activity (the kind of blues we play) creates the kind of space or room we can experience or rest in. Different musicians create different spaces for us. Think of it as a living room, more room to live, room to move around in, something like a time out from whatever line of life we are usually travelling along.

The more that the musician is able to work the time, the more of an aura or special space surrounds the moment, and in that space or in that extra room, there we are, experiencing it, living in it. We are experiencing not only the music, per se, but the music allows us to experience ourselves as well, to go where we can't usually get to on our own, except rarely. And this brings up the question: what is music?

I won't go there just now, but when great musicians make time, and we experience that expanded time, we use it like money to think about or spend however we like. It is not only about their music; this experience is beyond the music, if you mean labels, lyrics, notes, song titles, and albums. Music is not only about what it means, as in the words of a song, but those words and notes are only references, means and ways to experience the heart of music, the purpose, which is to experience the expanded present and atmosphere that I can only point to here.

The words and sound of music depend on what they mean, the sense it makes. And 'sense' is always an

experience, not an idea or thought. When great blues musicians make time, we sense it and have a deeper actual experience. We live it on their time. Often that experience is 'special' because we can't get there from here, not from our day-to-day experience. That is why we listen to music. A great musician is capable of transforming our day, sending us back home with a deep experience and sometimes with a new sense of direction. In that expanded time, we may have room enough to adjust or reorient ourselves, to IMPRINT ourselves with a direction that we can maintain after we come down or out of the expanded moment.

That's what I mean when I say "Space orders time." Given the extra space (and slowed-down time) we can rearrange our priorities and lock them down.

There you have the general idea of making time. Please don't read this article as a know-it-all statement from me, but more as a question, something I have been thinking about and interested in for decades, something to be discussed.

And what is co-emergent with this is the whole idea of ritual. What is ritual? Ritual is often described as a series of acts performed in a fixed order to achieve a particular effect. The key point here is to achieve the effect. That is why we do the ritual.

To a great degree, performing music is a ritual since the effect of music is to give us a certain experience and state of mind. The problem with ritual (or any prescribed technique) is that it admits variation. It is supposed to be invariable (ritualistic), but in real life there can be a great deal of latitude to any given ritual.

And by that I mean that performing a ritual (like music) can only get you in the general ballpark of

where you want to be. It's like taking a bus and getting off at a bus stop. We still have to walk from the bus stop to the door of our house. In a similar way, playing music by rote will get us to the bus stop, but getting a home run to expanded time will be up to us, up to the musician. And the musician has to be there to do that.

This is where adjustment, call it improvisation, comes in. We always have to tailor our music performance until we get in the pocket, the "groove" so to speak. In other words, we can very easily perform a ritual (like a song) and not get the effect we hoped for, not found the groove.

For example, I can sing one of Howlin' Wolf's songs and not get the effect he does. That last mile to wolf's groove is a hard one to tread. LOL.

And so, aside from the ritual of learning a song, what can be missing is the life experience, realization, and wisdom of the songwriter. Good luck with that! And I will end here with a little story.

As a young person, I liked to read biographies of whatever heroes I had at the moment. And better than biographies, for me, were autobiographies – their life in their own words. And I read diaries and journals too.

Well, in the journals of the German author Franz Kafka, was a single line that stuck in my mind and it took many years for me to finally unpack it. Kafka wrote "Each line I write already has perfection." How's that, thought I?

And I finally figured out that what Kafka was trying to say is that each line he writes already has perfection because he has perfection. To rephrase this, instead of just working on his writing style, Kafka worked on

himself, his state of mind and consciousness, to the point that every sentence he wrote was a sign or signature of his perfected state of mind.

Too often we struggle to play music (or whatever), when what is missing is first perfecting our state of mind and THEN playing music.

If you really are into this, here is some footage from the landmark Ann Arbor Blues Festivals, narrated by my. You might like it:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2NZL_KDI59s

INTERVIEW WITH HOWLIN' WOLF

January 8, 2019

BY Michael Erlewine

August 2, 1969

Since we are on a music kick, let me share with you something that I have posted here before, but it is wonderful, an interview I did years ago with the great blues legend Howlin' Wolf.

Back in the late 1960s and early 1970s I did scores of interviews of famous blues performer. This interview with Howlin' Wolf was done the 1969 Ann Arbor Blues Festival and there I was backstage talking with Wolf. It was just the two of us standing in the open sun and it was not your normal interview. Blue expert John Sinclair has stated that this is the best interview of Wolf he knows of. I would agree. I said very little. LOL.

As I stood there listening to this huge man, I flashed back to some years before when I had seen the Wolf performing live in a small bar at the north end of Chicago late one night. There was no one in the place, just Howlin' Wolf and his guitarist Hubert Sumlin. My brother Dan and I stood somewhere at the back of the place and it was very dark. Wolf was way up to the front, with one small light playing on him. He was sitting on an old wooden straight-backed chair. It was all light and shadows.

And Wolf was singing as only he can sing, and his music not only filled the room, it actually took over all sense of time as his laser-like voice penetrated deep into my brain. For a while, I lost all idea of who or where I was. The walls of the room just went

transparent, as did my body, and I found myself suddenly thrust outside of time, beyond any sense of myself that I knew, somewhere out there on my own in this vast universe, just a mind floating there. This was more than just music. This was a life initiation, as I believe you will get a sense of from reading my interview with this great bluesman.

HOWLIN' WOLF:

“Some of them said years ago: ‘We will never make it to the moon.’ I said: ‘You never know.’ Today, we settin’ on the moon and got a flag up there. You understand? But they told me that we couldn’t do that. Don’t never say what we can’t do.”

“Next thing, I’m looking for a man walkin’ down the street with no head on his body. And if they say they can’t do it, I’m gonna’ tell ‘em, ‘You’re wrong.’ He gonna’ come down sooner or later. That’s right. This is of the day. He will have no head and be all heart, just one big heart.”

“Because these performers probably have the biggest hearts in the entertainment business, and there were thirty or forty thousand kids here trying to learn about heart, about understanding, about developing their hearts. Thousands of hippies, hipped-up children, with great big heads and tiny hearts, trying to lose that big head and get that big heart. The big head and the hard-heart of modern rock and roll and psychedelic music has gone as far as it will go. The heart just has to be developed and this, the first of all the blues festivals, promises much to cross the generation gap and bring the old and younger Americans closer than they have been for the last decade. Because blues performers have big hearts.”

"I'm not a smart man. You see, I got a little head and a big heart. Because blues is based on the common ground shared by all people, black and white, young and old. Blues is the story of the human life, of its loves and struggles. All rock and roll, all jazz, all American music finds its roots in gospel music and in blues. Blues is not unhappy music."

"A lotta' people sing, but they don't sing with no understandin'. When you repeats your words, make sure to make some understanding of what you're sayin'. Those men played a clear guitar. They made clear notes."

"I've been pushed way back. I don't know why the people wouldn't let me up to the front like they did. I was just dirt. I felt like I was just dirt, so I stayed back, because I was able to back up my own self. I didn't think I had no right to be out there trying to push and scrap. I didn't think I had no right to be out there tryin' to push and scrap up no few nickels, you know, which I needed... never get too many of them."

"But, I'm a funny kind of person. I don't never want to take advantage of nobody and think I'm takin' advantage of... you know what I mean. Let the peoples have it. Then if anything for me, it will come by, and I'll get that."

"Well, now anytime anything is pushed back, sooner or later, they gonna' bring it to the front. They can't keep it hid always."

"I'll tell you. when people can't make or use you, they don't need you."

"There ain't gonna be no trouble. Somebody gonna' come on up to the front and say "I am the man. I'm sorry," That's right. There ain't gonna' be no hard feelings. He didn't come for no trouble, but he gonna'

sure let you know that he are 'the man.' Supposed to be."

"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."

"You don't never learn it all. You just learn some portion of it and be able to, you know, entertain. And I play a certain portion of harp and a certain portion of guitar. I'm not a smart man. You see, I got a little head and a big heart. That's all I need. You take people. When they got a big head, they don't make it far".

"You're supposed to make it pleasin' to the peoples ears; then they don't mind listening to the tune."

"I heard a negro, howlin' and moanin'. I said: I take it from you. He was an old man. I said: I'm gonna' take that someday and make something out of it. I took that howlin' and that yodelin' and put it together and made me a thing of my own."

"You got to get in the right position to where you can control your voice. I'm not a smart man. You see I got a little head and a big heart. You got to know your keynote. You got to know your notes from staff to staff. If you don't know your notes from staff to staff, I can tell when you pick up your guitar, you really don't know what you're doin'."

"I don't mean to be funny, but if you let me, I'll show you, and tell you, if you will accept it. But if you think because I'm a Negro and you're not supposed to be told nothin', you understand, you're wrong. You're supposed to be told somethin' by anybody, when you're doin' wrong."

“Take a learnin' from anybody. Somebody can always tell you something that fit you.”

“I hope I don't talk too much. No, I don't know. I'm just tryin. So, now that's a lotta' ground your covering, when you say you know better than me. I just know some of the things that are supposed to be done. When you say you know it, that covers the whole world.”

“Some people don't want to tell you how it is, but I'll tell ya.”

“If we were playin' in a key, tell me your tonic and I'll tell you what else you're supposed to do. All I want to know is your tonic. I'll build the rest of it. See, but you got to have your tonic. That's your startin' off. Without that tonic, when you get ready to stop, you stop somewhere else. Anytime you start on your tonic, when you end your song, you got to be right back on your tonic.”

“I don't have no education, see. Now you can take my sense and put it in a paper bag and it'll rattle like two nickels. But you see, understandin', that's all I need. Common sense, that's all a man needs now, common sense. Just get you some common sense and pass on by.”

“Some of the music is too loud today, because it knock the eardrums to your ear. Them high speakers, tall as that fence there, is blastin' your ear down, all the time. Boom. Bam. Bing. You know what I mean?”

“That's uncalled for. You hear that? I played on a show one night and I went home and cut myself all up and down the back, because I heard that thing in my sleep. It's too loud. I'm sorry. Ain't no need in me tellin' you no lie. It's too loud. That go for the white boy, and

the Negro boy, and any old Mexican, anybody! When it's too loud, it's nothin' but 'knockness.'"

"Knockness, just some stuff comin' together, and you don't understand what it mean. That's what you call real garbage. That's the worst garbage in town. That's right, but the peoples eats it up. Just like the rabbit eatin' the carrot. What's up Doc?"

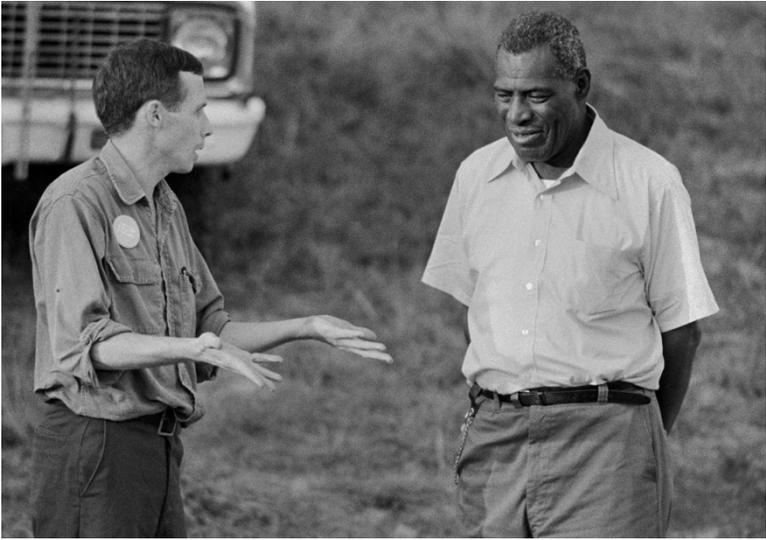
"I don't dominize no musician. I hate to hear a man dominize a musician, but I will say: music is too loud. Whether you playin' good or whether you playin' bad, you know it's too loud."

"Dominize, knockness. Some knockness. Something knockin' together. You know."

Here is a video with some footage of Howlin' Wolf that my brother Stephen took back in 1969, plus me narrating and also some music by my band, the Prime Movers Blues Band.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2NZL_KDI59s

[Here is a photo of me interviewing Muddy waters. Photo by Stanley Livingston.]



JUKE JOINTS AND SATURDAY NIGHTS

January 8, 2019

This is the last of a series of articles on music and blues music in particular. I am not a music historian but rather a music archivist by trade and a critic of music. However, the topic of juke joints as they relate to the history of blues and jazz does interest me enough to do a little research, which I did. I may be a little more didactic than usual. This is long, so just you folks who have that kind of life time can bother with it.

This is a short article about juke joints and their part in African American music, in particular the pre-history of blues. It also sheds some insight on the proverbial innate-musicality of Americans of African descent. What seems forgotten here (conveniently once again) is the whole specter of slavery and what that dictated. Some of you blues fans may find this interesting. Let me know if you do. It is not my intention to be arrogant, but I feel it is important for all of us to look at this topic.

JUKE JOINTS

The term Juke (or Jook) Joints is probably derived from the Creole “juk” meaning to be disorderly and rowdy. Juke joints are said to have arisen after the emancipation when Jim Crow laws forbade blacks from entering white establishments. The facts show that they existed long before that, probably as early as there were plantations and slaves. In other words, even after the emancipation when slaves were free to leave the plantation they were not allowed in any establishment in town. Proscribed from white society and white establishments of any kind, juke joints arose wherever blacks could gather, socialize, eat,

drink, and dance; many also sold grocery items, moonshine, and some even had rooms to rent and other conveniences.

Jook joints were originally shacks built by the plantation owners themselves on their own property to give slaves a place to socialize and blow off steam. Most were open only on Saturday nights and were not much maintained. And juke joints always had music, which meant at least one musician and often two or three. Historically tagged as 'blues' joints, the music originally played in these places was not blues but dance music -- ragtime, slow-drag, etc. What we know as blues today did not actually appear until the early 1900s. In fact, musicians were not the focus early on but rather were there just to enable the dancing. Juke joints were all about dancing. It could be one happy drunk person dancing and clapping their hands with maybe someone hitting a table along with them or perhaps a harmonica – anything with a beat.

And juke joints could be held anywhere, in someone's home, an abandoned sharecropper's house, any old shack of a building or even outside - wherever. In slavery days (and even after) blacks had no transportation, so juke joints had to be within walking distance or reachable by tractor, bicycle, or mule. And there was no law at juke joints.

On plantations the authorities never came unless the owner himself called them in to break something up. It was private land. Later, during prohibition and the sharecropping days, the sheriff was actually paid to stay away so that the illegal whisky would get sold and everyone in power got a piece of that. The law only came when they were called in on purpose. They never just "showed up."

Most early juke joints were one-room shacks, seemingly always too small for those who filled them. And they were not open the rest of the week, just Saturday nights, so they didn't get much upkeep and they weren't much at all, just some kind of roof, four walls, and a dirt floor.

I did not grow up down south and I am not African American, but as a musician I have played in plenty of bars both black and white. In fact I played more often in black bars than white ones.

Older blacks liked the kind of blues our band played – Chicago-style blues. I never knew the Deep South juke joints but I am sure that most any small bar on a hot summer night after a long week will hit the same pitch, if only for an hour or two. As for the rough quality of juke joints, I have seen knives, guns, clubs, whatever, and actually witnessed one fight (hiding behind our amplifiers) that it took nine police cars to break up. I can only imagine what a joint without law would be like.

A juke joint was often an open shack in the back yard with a tin roof. It didn't take much of a place to draw a crowd. People were looking for somewhere to go and any excuse for a place would do. If you have ever found it hard to wait until Friday night when you got off work to visit 'the scene' at some local bar, imagine if that one Saturday night a week was your only chance to let it rip and socialize AND if there were no other opportunities for you than hard work the rest of your entire life aside from singing in church Sundays.

That was the case for African Americans before emancipation. Consider that. I am reminded of the poem "Black on a Saturday Night" by Rita Dove of which this is an excerpt:

“... and an attitude will get you nowhere fast so might as well keep dancing dancing till tomorrow gives up with a shout, 'cause there is only Saturday night, and we are in it - black as black can, black as black does, not a concept nor a percentage but a natural law.”

We all can identify with a wish to socialize, especially after a difficult work week. Just imagine if that Saturday-night once a week was your only chance to do anything other than what you were told to do AND for your entire life this would be the case. That Saturday night and the following Sunday church service would take on a whole different meaning. And history records that blacks that could sing or play music were more valued than ones that could not.

AFRICAN-AMERICAN MUSIC

I find it interesting to read comments about the innate musicality of African Americans. I don't question that. What I question is the myopic view that manages to ignore two-hundred years of slavery when blacks were basically restricted to one night of social gathering per week and what that might actually mean in their history.

What seems forgotten here (once again) is the whole specter of slavery and what it infers, so I am asking readers to please think about this for a moment. And I am going to repeat some of what I presented earlier.

You are twenty-five years old, young, bright, full of promise, and a slave to some owner of 'you'. While you have your whole life before you, in the slave's case that life is already mapped out in terms of the possible. You work at what you are told from morning until night and what is left?

Perhaps you have Sundays off and maybe something like a Saturday night. That's it. You don't have

college, schooling, or even trade school. You have no hope of seeing the world or even this country because you are not free to travel anywhere. You are not free! You are somebody's slave. And depending on how far back we go, you can't even read and write and your owner likes it that way.

I spent a good part of my young adult life studying black music so I know full well blacks are great musicians. Wouldn't you be too if your parents and their parents before them had nothing to look forward to but Saturday night music and Sunday-morning services? Instead of a myriad of possibilities and choices you had no choice and two possibilities. The only social outlet you had each week was perhaps getting together with your own kind on Saturday nights and singing the Gospel in church Sunday mornings. Music and dance were one of the few outlets open to Black Americans and to their forebearers. Everything else was scripted. No wonder blacks know music and dance! It didn't all just come from Africa my friends. That would be overlooking the obvious!

SONG AND DANCE

My point is that, aside from any traditional culture carried over from Africa centuries ago, plantation life (slavery life) left only a few opportunities for free time; music and dance were often the only social outlets open to slaves and then only at certain times. Life as a slave in America gave African Americans generations of training in music and dance in addition to whatever culture they actually brought with them from Africa. Think about it and I will reiterate, please.

You are young, hopeful, energetic, and you have zero plans that involve freedom on your part. Your whole life is already entirely scripted leaving only Sunday

church service and perhaps a Saturday night at a juke joint open to you. No wonder black Gospel music is so powerful. And no wonder blues music is so powerful. These were the only outlets open to many black Americans for generations – Saturday nights and Sunday mornings. The rest of the time they were slaves! And the transition from slavery to tenant farming did not change things much for most blacks. In fact as often as not the black tenant farmer ended up owing the plantation owner money at the end of the year – another form of slavery.

There was one break each week. Work stopped for most blacks in the slavery (and tenant) years sometime Saturday afternoon and that is when barbecues and social getting-together began. By Saturday night, workers were headed for the juke joints on foot, by tractor, and by mule. Early on, the juke joints were right on the plantation itself and black workers would even drive the plantation tractor right to the juke joint with the understanding that as long it was on the plantation they could use the tractor.

I am not going to go into extreme detail on juke joints and what happened there. That has been covered elsewhere, but suffice it to say that these places were where the work-week steam was let off, and the later the night got, the more out of control these joints could become. It is said that after 11 PM anything could happen and usually did, everything from bar fights to shootings and knife fights.

My main point is that these Saturday night juke joints were the focus of music, dancing, and celebrating. This is where the blues were conceived, although they may have been born and grew up later. This is where dancing was permitted and drinking took place. This was your one night out. And (as mentioned) the

law never went to juke joints unless it was called in. That was understood by all. So there was the juke joints music and dancing Saturday night and the gospel singing in church Sunday morning. That was it.

I have pointed out that juke joints or barrelhouses (as they were also called) originally were set up on plantations as a place for blacks to socialize on their one night off, which was Saturday. Later on, after the emancipation, when tenant farming had replaced slavery, blacks were not allowed at bars and saloons in town, so juke joints sprang up just outside of town at crossroads or wherever it was convenient. These joints were often hardly anything at all except a place to meet, drink, gamble, and dance. They were essentially shacks hastily thrown together and often with not enough room for but a few to dance - jammed.

It is true that juke joints were later moved into town, urbanized by whites in the south and called "Honky Tonks." But the original juke joints were hardly any kind of building at all, with no running water, and so on – just a tin roof and some side walls. That's it. But juke joints were where everything exciting happened socially for black Americans way back then.

So, when we say that blues music and blues musicians were popular with blacks, understand that it means a lot more than just 'popular'. The juke joint scene was all the freedom there was to let off steam and have a good time. Period. That and Sunday morning church service and gospel singing.

The main point here is not to just describe the juke joint scene but to highlight that the skill of black Americans in blues and jazz, in dancing and having a good time, did not only come from Africa. It had generations of extreme focus right here in this country

to hone those skills into a veritable lineage. And those who believe that the emancipation changed all that had better get out their history books because tenant farming changed things very little at first and often made things even worse. In slavery, African Americans had nothing to lose because they had nothing. As mentioned, with tenant farming they most often went into debt to the plantation owners on top of struggling to make a living.

If your whole life was work unending until you died and that one Saturday night a week of celebration followed by Sunday church were your only social outlets, what would that mean to you? How important would that music be and the musicians that played it? That is my question and also my point.

If blacks are master singers, musicians, dancers, and entertainers, it is not just because they brought these skills from Africa. African Americans have had 200 years to refine these skills. It's no wonder that some say that white Americans can't dance and blacks can. And it is no wonder that popular music (especially jazz and rock 'n roll) in America finds its roots in the blues.

And it is not only about dancing and playing music; it is about having a good time in the midst of whatever your situation is, about letting go and grabbing time to celebrate in the moment – being here now. There is wisdom here.

And it's all right there embedded in the music. You can hear it. Growing up, I could hear the wisdom in the blues music and it pulled me to it. The music of Pat Boone didn't grab me that way, but Muddy Waters and Howlin' Wolf did. There was something in the music that spoke to me beyond the sounds. These blues musicians knew something that I knew little of

and I hungered for it and it was not just the sound of poverty or deprivation.

Later, when I had an opportunity to interview scores of the greatest blues musicians, I got to know these players often on an eyeball-to-eyeball basis. What I heard in the music was backed up by the persons they were. Blues greats like Big Momma Thornton, Arthur Big-Boy Crudup, Roosevelt Sykes, and Howlin' Wolf were incredible beings that made me feel accepted and welcome.

They had wisdom and life experience I did not have and that my teachers in school did not have. They had what I wanted to learn and I yearned for it. I more or less studied rural folk music, blues, and jazz from the late 1950s until around 1971. And it was an inspiration.

In the early 1970s I found the Tibetan Buddhists, who had the same joy and insight that I found in the great blues artists. And they were also devoted to knowing the true nature of the mind and life. While I never abandoned my blues teachers, I did begin to study and practice with the Tibetans and am still doing that today.

It was never the down-and-out nature of the blues that caught my attention. It was the wisdom of life and the ability to seize the day and find joy in any situation, the ability to master extreme circumstances and still have a life. As Americans, we all owe a great cultural debt to our African American brothers and sisters.

DHARMA: "I LIKE TO WATCH TV"

January 10, 2019

That's a quote from the great comedy movie "Being There" with Peter Sellers. I know, it's probably blasphemy for me to suggest that watching movies is the most common form of meditation practiced by Americans, but I actually believe it is, or as close as this nation comes to meditation. I watch movies all the time and know what it does to my mind, so what else can I say? It's not all bad. LOL.

For me, watching movies is a form of meditation, aside from the plot and content of the film. Sometimes it doesn't matter what I watch. I just need to calm my mind, stare at one point on the wall (screen) and cool out. Yes, the plot runs on to the end, but in the meantime I'm reviewing my day, shuffling and ordering priorities, and allowing intuitive thoughts and ideas to surface and be prioritized. In that "movie space," I reorder my life and priorities.

If I ask you to sit down and follow your breath or watch a spot on the wall undistractedly for two hours, I bet I get few takers and even the ones that try will mostly fail. However, if I ask you to sit down and watch a good 2-hour movie, no problem. We might even binge watch. LOL. So how much is true of what I say.

There is truth to it, but like the old game of Pick-Up-Sticks, we might have to parse things carefully. It's true that by watching a movie, we are focusing on a fairly small area and holding our attention to it limited by the movement of the content. However, we still are more or less holding our vision steady for a long time.

And it is true from my own experience that I'm not always that concerned with what I watch or I will just watch part of a movie or miss the beginning, and so on. There is something more going on with movies and me than meets the eye, so to speak.

I find that movies for me are just a way to relax and I don't just mean entertainment, per se. Yes, the movie flickers on the silver screen or TV, but somewhere behind that flickering image my mind is doing other stuff. I am relaxing, but what relaxes me (apparently) is allowing my mind to settle and process whatever daily events or whatever actively needs going over.

Sure, a movie is a bit of time out from the day-today events and usually movies for me come at the close of the day, in early evening. And what my mind does on a movie is not what my mind does on the cushion doing meditation, but perhaps the movie is more effective than my on-the-cushion practice. Maybe I am looking in the wrong direction, expecting the movie to be like the meditation practice when it is the other way round. The on-the-cushion practice should consider the kind of relaxing the movies offer. I'm "just saying."

With a movie, it is easy for me to suspend effort and just let things roll along, while too often in my day-to-day activity (or even meditation practice) I am struggling or even paddling upstream. LOL. So, how much can we hitchhike on what happens when we watch a movie and apply that to our efforts at meditation?

If nothing else, the relaxation that many of us experience through a movie is exactly what practicing meditation requires. We could start there. Tranquility Meditation (Shamata) is a method for stabilizing the mind; movies do this for many of us as well, with no effort on our part.

I certainly practice dharma each day, including sitting on a cushion. However, in all honesty, the relaxing, stability, and sorting out of my mind is often (or always) better by my watching a movie or a bit of one. That should tell me something and it does.

So what is it that I am suggesting here, that we stop sitting on the cushion meditating and instead watch movies? LOL. No, that would be the reverse of what I mean. What we might do is take note of how we are movie-watching as compared to how we are sitting meditation. And, we might take a lesson from movie watching and bring that kind of relaxation to meditation. That's my point.

There is no doubt that I am more relaxed watching movies, and yet I am maintaining interest with no effort, unless it is a bad movie. There is a lesson in there somewhere. And for me, the lesson is as simple as interest or passion. Ultimately, the secret to unwavering attention meditatively is just being interested in what we are doing. Imagine that.

Tranquility Meditation is important to stabilize us so that we can properly perform Insight Meditation, at least that is often what the teachings state. Yet, it's not like we stabilize our mind and that's the end of it. Stabilization is a process that has to be maintained, so it's not out of sight, out of mind. And the great Mahamudra Meditation is a combination of Tranquility Meditation and Insight Meditation, a very special mix, so the teachings say. It's like shooting an arrow. We have to first stabilize the bow and our stance in order to then aim and shoot the arrow.

In other words, we need both stability and insight, Tranquility Meditation and Insight Meditation. Why I am not more relaxed with the more formal meditation

on-the-cushion practice is a question I should ask,
and I am.

DHARMA: THE APPEARANCE OF EMPTINESS

January 11, 2019

A concept that is integral to the dharma, but one we westerners sometimes find hard to grasp is that of co-emergence, also known as “connate.” These terms are applied to many dharma concepts like, to use one example here, “Appearances” and “Emptiness.” These are two qualities that are connate or co-emergent, like two sides of the same coin. There is only one coin, but it has two sides.

In this example, co-emergent means that appearances and emptiness arise together as one, not two. It’s not that appearances are empty, but that appearances are the emptiness appearing or arising. Appearances ARE the emptiness itself. They are connate.

Appearances do not “cause” emptiness to appear or vice-versa. They are already connate, one and unified. It’s not that, as mentioned, one is the cause of the other. They arise together as one, already married forever, so to speak.

That is what is meant in the realization practices by the term “all-in.”

To put it plainly, in the “realization” practices it’s not like we are standing at the station watching the train pass by, but rather that we are on the train and WE are passing by or through. No one is watching.

DHARMA: MUNDANE RESISTANCE

January 12, 2019

We are on the lookout for boulders while we trip over our own feet or stones in the pathway. Or, as the Bible said “To strain out a gnat and swallow a camel.”

Consciousness or awareness is seamless, contiguous. It has no wrinkles, folds, or junctures. Anything not continuous is an obscuration. And this is true down to the least resistance or ignoring on our part. Those are what I call wrinkles in time, dropouts, enfolded layers of ignorance, where we are simply missing or ignoring the obvious.

We don't have to be a genius; the writing is on the wall by way of any distraction or loss of continuity and mindfulness. We can start by being aware that we have been distracted the moment we return to awareness, when and if we do return. LOL. Continued returns to awareness is like flicking a cigarette lighter that won't light. Sooner or later we may get a flame and be able to light our way, but we need fuel. And the fuel is maintaining continuous awareness, so there is a Catch-22 here, a no-win (or very difficult to win) situation.

Let me drill down a bit. Looking for major distractions or lapses of the mind or attention is just the low-hanging fruit. More numerous (and easily obvious) are what we can call our resistances, anything we close our mind to or ignore, i.e. turn away from. These resistance-lapses or mind-foldings obscure the contiguous continuity of the present moment. These little wrinkles in time (ignorance) can be unpacked and unfolded, releasing the energy needed to repress them that they contain.

It's like finding fuel within our own mind, compliments of our own distractions and ignorance. When we catch ourselves ignoring or suppressing in the moment, we can just pause and allow what was repressed to unpack itself right before our eyes. Un-wrinkle the knots of time, iron them out, and move on unwaveringly in the present. Try! It's not so hard.

And it sounds like I am suggesting a lot of conceptualization; but I'm not. What I am saying is learn to use your natural hic-ups, your knee-jerk reactions, to alert you to where time breaks down and you lapse out in distraction. I have written much about this under the dharma practice Reactivity Tong-len here:

<http://michaelerlewine.com/viewforum.php...>

However, in this blog I am saying more. Don't just look at your reactions, but become aware of any chore-like repression in whatever you are doing. They are also reactions. Instead of underscoring that resistance, recognize that it is there and unpack it. Don't blink! In response to working with our resistances, time will un-wrinkle and even out in response.

They key to unwavering attention is not just looking for our big reactions, but rather processing and handling the myriad of minute almost imperceptible resistances that happen constantly. Smooth them out and they will amount to a huge step forward in awareness, IMO.

[Photo by me of a section of my office shrine. From left to right, Lord Gampopa, Marpa the Translator, and Milarepa.]

“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”

For those of you who would like to have access to
other free books, articles, videos, and so on by me,
here are the links:

[http://traffic.libsyn.com/.../Links to Michael Erlewine-V2.pdf](http://traffic.libsyn.com/.../Links_to_Michael_Erlewine-V2.pdf)

DHARMA: MIND FILTERS

January 13, 2018

Let's talk about mind "filters" or the lack thereof. In general, we are all about filters, using them to the degree that almost nothing natural gets through. We filter out what we don't like and filter-in what we do like, constantly. Like the plaque that clogs the arteries and heart, our myriad of filters clog our mind from experiencing and realizing its own essence. So, there is (for the most part) no one without filters.

Like the old game of Pick-Up-Sticks that I played as a youth, most dharma practices, especially the so-called Preliminary Practices (purification), are a process of removing one filter after another until our mind runs clean. This takes time, practice, and real effort on our part.

However, when a channel of realization is finally opened, in the realization practices (like Insight Meditation and Mahamudra Meditation), we learn to rest in that clarity, lucidity, vividness, and openness. At that point, insight and clarity are what is important and everything else (the remaining filters) are the dross that with the light of insight we continue to remove by knowing their nature.

Pure insight is the stream of the present and, as we remove the filters and smooth out time until it is even, we begin to transfer our identity from all of our likes and dislikes (self-attachments) to the non-attached unfiltered stream of present insight. And we gradually learn to depend on that insight.

Pure insight, like a crystal lens, becomes our touchstone and fiducial. Riding the stream of insight, depending on it, our words flow through rather than

resist it. Our thoughts and actions become reflections of our deepening insight rather than obscurations.

It is a hallmark of insight meditation that it is, well, pure insight, with no equivocation, no doubt. Whether it is universally true or just genuinely true for each of us as individuals I can't say.

Living in the Midwest, I have never surfed the waves of the ocean, but I have dreamed of doing so. Surfing the stream of insight meditation is probably as close as I will ever come. Given the opportunity, I would do insight meditation every moment of every momentum with no second thoughts.

“IF THERE WAS A LAKE, THE SWANS WOULD GO THERE”

January 14, 2019

It typically takes 300 (or more) years for the dharma to come into a country. You can see this plainly if you follow how the dharma came from India into Tibet. Tibetans made the difficult journey from Tibet to India, where they received the teachings from the Indian Mahasiddhas and brought them back, teaching by teaching, to Tibet. And it was not homogeneous.

The dharma did not spread through Tibet like dropping a single pebble into a pond, but it was more like a rain of dharma, different teachings springing up here and there. Over time (hundreds of years) these different teachings smoothed out and were shared more equally throughout Tibet, but pockets of more in-depth teachings persisted in certain places and in particular lineages.

The same thing is happening as to dharma coming into this country and the west in general. In that famous statement by the 16th Gyalwa Karmapa, when asked why the great Tibetan teachers would come to America, he said “If there was a lake, the swans would go there.” And they did and are still doing so.

It is still early in time as for the dharma taking hold in America. First, there was the Zen Buddhists who appeared early in the 20th Century and much later (in the 1960s and 1970s) the Tibetan lineages began to arrive and take hold in this country. So, we are still less than 100 years into the process. And what is that process?

There are two basic activities taking place around us in the response to the dharma teachings, like two trains running. The most important process is that of recognizing the true nature of our mind. That is the goal of all dharma. However, in order to do that we have to remove enough of our obscurations so that we can recognize our own mind's nature. This kind of purification takes time and effort, thus all of the many purification practices like the Common, Extraordinary, and Special Preliminaries, and so on. These can take many years and even lifetimes.

Yet, one thing is certain and this was pointed out by the historical Buddha in what is called the Third Turning of the Wheel of Dharma and that is that each of us, in fact every sentient being, has Buddha Nature within us right now, this very moment.

We don't need to search the outside world to find what is already innate and an essential part of us. We just have to relax and carefully remove the bric-a-brac and obscurations that veil our own true nature. And that is what dharma practice is all about. It's not the difficult!

The two processes then are, on the one hand removing what obscures our inner nature and on the other getting pointing-out instruction as to how to recognize the nature of our own mind. And so, dharma practitioners are doing just that. That's the whole point.

Whatever we have done in the past up to now, no matter how bad we have acted, whatever actions we have committed, what is called Buddha Nature inside us has never been stained. At the worst, it only has been obscured or further obscured, making it harder and harder for us to find that purity within. It's still there. And it is never too late to start removing

obscurations and seeing more and more of the actual nature of the mind.

In other words, we don't have to be long-time dharma students to start removing what obscures our mind. There is nothing "religious" about dharma, any more than there is in science and natural law. Dharma is natural law. It makes perfect sense as a practical matter, if only to negotiate our life better. It's not even that hard to do, but like turning the wheel of dharma, we have to actually do it. Someone has to turn the crank. That would be each of us. LOL.

[Illustration by me.]

"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"

For those of you who would like to have access to other free books, articles, videos, and so on these topics, here are my links:

http://traffic.libsyn.com/.../Links_to_Michael_Erlewine-V2.pdf



DHARMA: THE THREE TURNINGS

January 15, 2019

A question I often hear is why don't we simply read the words of the Buddha himself as recorded in the many sutras rather than the endless commentaries on them? We should read the sutras, but there are some problems nevertheless. The historical Buddha of our times, Shakyamuni Buddha, offered what are called the three different turnings of the wheel of dharma, each turning designed for dharma practitioners at a different level. However, they can be all mixed together in no particular order. This can be confusing, especially if we are looking to be clear on what would make up a practice session rather than contemplation.

And so, in order to address this, there exists an even larger body of literature that is called "The Commentaries" on the sutras, the sutras being the actual words of the Buddha. And what, in general, the commentaries do is to compile, compact, and organize the teachings of the Buddha into sets of instructions that are easy to assimilate for those practicing at a particular level. If you are coming into Buddhism, cold (so to speak), it can be very difficult to get oriented with the sutra alone.

By all means, read the sutras, but you may find (as I did) that the commentaries are more digestible. Ultimately, I want to have the teachings boiled down to something like a practice I can understand and actually do, with no confusion in my mind about just how to do it.

And it is helpful, even important, to know something about the historical Buddha of our time, the Buddha Shakyamuni. Originally, in the lifetime that he was to become a Buddha, Shakyamuni was born as the prince Siddhartha Gautama in the plains of Nepal in the 6th century B.C. As the son of a king, he never wanted for anything and having everything at hand, he was not much attached to things. Over time, Siddhartha realized that the desire world and attachment in general was not satisfying to him spiritually. At the age of 29, he left his kingdom (and his wife and son) to become an ascetic. For some six years,

Siddhartha studied and practiced “the austerities” with a group of five followers who were also ascetics.

Eventually Siddhartha realized that, like attachment, detachment/austerity was also not a path to realization, so he left seclusion and professed a life of balance, not one of attachment or detachment (austerities), but a path that is known as the Middle Way between these two extremes. His five fellow ascetics deserted him and went their own way.

Siddhartha then sat under the Bodhi tree for a number of days, a time during which he achieved enlightenment and became the Buddha. He then travelled and sought out his former friends, the five ascetics, who when they saw him coming would have nothing to do with him. However, he was by then so resplendent that one by one, all five of the ascetics rejoined him and he gave to them his first teaching, thus turning the wheel of the dharma for the first time. This is called, appropriately, the first turning of the wheel, of which there were eventually three turnings.

(1) The First Turning – Hinayana. The foundation vehicle, concerned with the absence of a permanent self.

(2) The Second Turning – Mahayana, the greater vehicle, concerned with the emptiness of self and phenomena and the arising of Bodhicitta and benefitting other sentient beings.

(3) The Third Turning – Focuses on Buddha Nature and has been fuel for Vajrayana students in the instructions on the realization practices.

Traditionally, the First Turning (Hinayana) is studied by those beginning the path of dharma who are trying get their act together and come to terms with the concept of the non-permanence of a self or “Soul.” The second turning (Mahayana) is concerned with the emptiness of phenomena and the arousal of Bodhicitta and compassion for other sentient beings, and the third turning is concerned with Buddha nature (and tangentially with the Vajrayana). Here is the root of methods and practice for those who aim toward realization in this very lifetime. The above description is a very general explanation, so forgive me.

The dharma is intrinsically natural to life as we know it. The Buddha did not invent the dharma, but realized it for himself and passed it on to us in the bargain. There are said to be

innumerable Buddhas that punctuate our interminable existence from time to time, each realizing the dharma and sharing it with sentient beings. The Buddhist cosmology has no beginning, no end, and no creator. LOL.

Apparently the Dharma waxes and wanes over time on the order of eons. These times that we are in now are said to be a dark-age, an age when the teachings are gradually becoming less available instead of more available. If this is true, we should do our best to share and practice the dharma as we are able (keep truth and awareness alive) and help prevent the dying of the light. Also, we should attain enlightenment and help all others do the same.

[Line Drawing by Sange Wangchuk.]

“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”

For those of you who would like to have access to other free books, articles, videos, and so on these topics, here are my links:

<http://traffic.libsyn.com/.../Links to Michael Erlewine-V2.pdf>



DHARMA: THE POINT OF PASSION

January 16, 2019

[A brief update as to what I am doing these days. Talk about tedium, I have been gathering the almost 70 hard drives I have around here (most between 1 and 5 terabytes each) and compiling their directories digitally and printing them out (at least the folder list) on paper.

To date, I have a notebook book that is by now 1-inch thick of these directories. The drives now are all numbered and have a label/barcode pasted on them. Each has a protective case and they are stored side by side on shelves. That is only step number one. Next will be the hard part, going through them, one-by-one, and extracting “essential” data and information and moving that to a compilation disk drive to further protect it. No one else would (or could) do this, so I had better do it to protect some information so that it could be passed on.]

And now the blog:

When I consider what IMO is important in dharma practice (or in life itself!), then having true interest or authentic passion comes to mind. There’s no getting around being interested, even passionate, in what we do. Due to the laws of karma, it would make sense that we each have some passion for something, if we can only find it within ourselves.

If we have no interests (or are unaware of what those interests are) then only constant effort on our part can make up for not being aware of what we are naturally interested or passionate about. And without such interest, we tire easily. However, if our interest in a topic is heartfelt or constant, then we have something close to a perpetual-motion machine. We are interested. Our passions keep us going for good or for not-so-good. After all, the teachings say that is what drives us from rebirth to rebirth, our karma and its traces is what we have to do.

Oddly enough, my life history since I was quite young has been intertwined with what interests me, with my passion for this or that activity. I have monitored my own interests consciously (or at least been aware of them) since I was something like six-years old. And I have paid my dues in this

regard. In fact, I pretty much ignored all 12 years of schooling in favor of what actually interested me. So, I not only have some skin in this game, but also decades of concentrated experience. And such a path cost me dearly in what society accepts. I have taken the “road less travelled by,” so to speak.

Let’s start with a tautology: we all have interest in whatever we are interested in; however, that interest may NOT extend into the repetitive process of dharma practice strongly-enough to get us over the threshold of the preliminary purification dharma practices needed to reach the realization practices.

And the idea is simple. There is no set amount of purification need; it cannot be measured by numbers of iterations or in time spent, but rather is like cleaning our windshield wipers. We either can see through them or we cannot. We purify our obscurations until we can see to recognize the actual nature of the mind. That’s it.

In other words, we can bog down in the physical process (and accompanying tedium) of the various required practices like the Ngondro (Extraordinary Preliminaries) before we can finish them. I know this only too well. I finished the entire Ngondro only to be told by my teacher to do the entire thing all over again. Why? Because, although I had done everything, I still had not removed my obscurations enough so that I could see to recognize the true nature of my own mind. That’s how it works folks.

And I am not the Lone Ranger in this because I have seen it happen, not only to me, but to others. Not only that, but there seems to be a vast sea of folks who started Ngondro but have yet to finish that practice. They have either slowed down to a crawl or have stopped entirely. And worse, many have rationalized why they are doing something else instead to compensate, but that rationalization is open to question. And so, where is the extra fuel we need to persevere in these preliminary dharma practices?

Finding our natural thread of interest and protecting or even cultivating it can be important. This is why, IMO, it is KEY that we find our natural interests as early in life as possible, However, finding these veins of pure interest in our own

nature can take time and involves being able to relax enough for those interests to reveal themselves to us. Initially, we can't always see them!

I believe there is a solution. Dharmically, there is an all-access-pass to a driving-interest in what is called Bodhicitta, which translates to something like "enlightened heart" or "awakened heart." Once Bodhicitta is fully awakened in what is called Absolute Bodhicitta, there is an endless supply of interest and drive. However, for most of us this is still in our future.

And it takes going from Relative Bodhicitta (having good intentions to all) to being on fire with compassion for others, which is the Absolute Bodhicitta I mentioned. For that to happen, one has to have something to share or give to others and the desire to share it, and that something is some "realization."

The problem as I see it is that this transformation (transition) from relative to absolute Bodhicitta is part of the realization practices, which starts with "Recognition" of the true nature of the mind." So, we have a Catch-22 or ring-pass-not going on here. We need Recognition to arouse Absolute Bodhicitta and we need Absolute Bodhicitta to have unflinching interest and compassion for all sentient beings. Not easy to resolve.

My point is that the journey and path from the purification practices to Recognition as to the nature of the mind can be long and arduous, so we need all the help we can get from an authentic dharma teacher (someone!) who can point out to us the true nature of the mind so that we grasp it. And, IMO, pointing out the true nature of the mind to each of us is as complex as brain surgery. It takes both time and care.

It is my experience that the purification practices (i.e. when we are purified enough to see) end up by our working with some authentic dharma teacher (who is willing to work with us) until we actually grasp the nature of the mind on our own. And, the recognition of the nature of the mind on our part depends on two things, the authenticity of the teacher and the readiness of the student (which is up to us).

I joke to myself that the guru and the student are connate or co-emergent! They have to arise together. LOL

[Photo by me of the winter woods.]

“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”

For those of you who would like to have access to other free books, articles, videos, and so on by me, here are the links:

<http://traffic.libsyn.com/.../Links to Michael Erlewine-V2.pdf>

MY BIG “BUT” WHEN IT COMES TO DHARMA

January 17, 2019

I loved the Pee-Wee Herman show when it debuted, especially the original pilot for adults, although there was adult-fare in everything Pee-Wee did. In the movie “Pee-Wee’s Big Adventure” there is this dialog. I can’t help but share it. Forgive me if this is childish. I was raised as one of five boys and this is the kind of thing we laughed about. To me, it’s just funny:

Simone: ... Paris France..

Pee-Wee: You’ll get there Simone.

Simone: Oh, I don’t know.

Pee-Wee: Why not? What’s stopping you?

Simone: Well, Andy for one.

Pee-Wee: Who’s Andy?

Simone: My Boyfriend.

Pee-Wee: Simone, this is your dream. You have to follow it.

Simone: I know you’re right... but...

Pee-Wee: But what? Everyone I know has a big “but”... Come on Simone, let’s talk about your big “but.”

That being said, let me tell you about my big “but” when it comes to dharma. LOL.

There are many kinds of Buddhism, each in their own way looking at the same dharma which we all experience. I ended up in the Karma Kagyu Lineage of Tibetan Buddhism because that’s where I found my root teacher and it seemed to fit and still does. It’s really good for the way my mind works. Yet, like all things, it too has its particular views and methods. Other forms of Vajrayana teaching emphasize things differently.

It only took me some forty years of practicing, gradually becoming more intensive, for me to practice properly something like Insight Meditation. I am a slow learner when it comes to the dharma. And when I finally did manage Insight Meditation, it was in a very limited way, a way that continuously has to be extended and expanded. And that took real effort and time. It still does, especially when effort in this

context means no-effort. LOL. All this is traditional and quite normal.

I always have appreciated (and was early-on enamored) with Zen Buddhism, but that, as mentioned, was not where I found my teacher. And I still am incredibly impressed with the way that the Zen practitioners approach doing things, like the equality of doing anything we do. In the Zen traditions, everything from washing dishes to combing your hair (and of course sitting meditation practice) is treated pretty equally as far as an opportunity to practice dharma. We all know what Zen is telling us, but perhaps it is not mentioned as often or as emphasized as in Zen.

In other words, I'm impressed with the Zen equanimity of action. Myself, I'm still playing favorites, although the farther I go, the more equanimous it all becomes. For me, as regards expanding and extending Insight Meditation, I have gone from one focal-interest to the next, each taking quite a long time, while it seems to me (correct me if I am wrong) that the Zen approach is to, early-on, treat everything thing we do as an equal opportunity for practice. No favorites.

I could have used at more Zen approach from the beginning of my practice days and perhaps it is taught in parts of my lineage, but I never encountered it, at least not repetitively. And it reminds me of the popular story in Tibetan Buddhism of the King who did not like the stones, dust, and ruts around his palace grounds, so he ordered the ground covered with fine leather so that he could walk barefoot. As time went by and he wanted to wander farther and farther from the palace, this became more and more difficult. Obviously, it would have made much more sense to make a pair of leather sandals and walk anywhere, etc.

That same insight is true for me with the extension and expansion of Insight Meditation. Instead of mastering one portion and then another and then another, as I do and have, I wish I had been also taught from the beginning how to do everything I did with attention, care, and love rather than play favorites, mastering areas of my life in serial fashion – one by one. I hope I am being clear.

This is just a thought. I'm not complaining, but pointing out the difference between dharma techniques. As mentioned, I am (very gradually) getting more universal (global) in the application of Insight Meditation, but more practice early-on with equanimity as to whatever came up might have been helpful. There is nothing that I do that does not deserve careful attention on my part. I am learning that. For me, it's all about Insight Meditation as part of Mahamudra Meditation.

And Insight Meditation as taught in the realization practices, is IMO, vitally addictive. You can't (or don't want to) do just a little of it. Once launched into the sea of insight, it's hard to settle for anything less. The problem I have is that rather than an entire sea of insight, so far I have a few lakes of insight that I have developed. It seems I am extending Insight Meditation one area of my life at a time, instead of developing this form of meditation so that whatever I encounter in life is grist for the mill of Insight Meditation. It's all a matter of confidence and certainty, which I say in passing, but dharma-confidence deserves a whole book of its own.

Again, it's like that old traditional story in the Tibetan tradition (mentioned above) of the King who tried to cover his entire kingdom with leather to protect his feet when walking, when he could have just used a pair of leather sandals.

I am extending Insight Meditation from area to area of life, when I perhaps would have also benefited by developing my meditation to be more portable (like the leather sandals mentioned above) so that everywhere I go and everything that arises is met with Insight Meditation. I am working on that now. I can see how these two different approaches (Zen and Vajrayana) end up at the same place. I am still heading for the place where the two paths converge. LOL.

WHAT HAVE YOU ARCHIVED LATELY?

January 18, 2019

I get asked where will you find the various blogs that I have posted here on Facebook without having to painstakingly dig back through my Timeline. My answer is that I have compiled a free PDF file (that can be downloaded) for those blogs I have posted in the last 90 days or so, some 81 blogs.

<http://spiritgrooves.net/.../e-boo.../Blogs%202018%20FALL-V2.pdf>

I have also compiled quarterly blogs, also in PDF format, that go back to the beginning of 2015. They are located here. You will have to scroll down to the year (and quarter) you want. These contain blogs on dharma, music, astrology and topics like that. They are here:

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

What would you expect from an archivist? Speaking of archivists, these last days I have been, as mentioned in an earlier blog, gathering all the computer hard drives I have on hand (some 75 hard drives), and creating a table of contents of what is on each one, printed out for a very large notebook. It looks like I have 176 Terabytes of data to dig through, separating the wheat from the chaff. That should keep me busy. LOL.

[Photo by me.]

“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”

For those of you who would like to have access to other free books, articles, videos, and so on by me, here are the links:

<http://traffic.libsyn.com/.../Links to Michael Erlewine-V2.pdf>

THE PRESENT MOMENT: THE GIFT THAT KEEPS ON GIVING

January 19, 2019

I often marvel at this present moment we all share and how fresh it is. There is nothing like it and everything we know comes from and through it. The past and the future can't get close enough to the present. Philosophers tell us the present is so instantaneous as to be almost non-existent, yet it is the cornucopia that produces all the world we live in.

Perhaps this is why the present moment is practically non-existent, because it is omnipresent. It's the all of everything we have. Yet, many (if not most) of us have trouble staying in the present moment, riding that razor's edge. Instead, we wander in the past, speculate on the future, or are constantly trying to alter the present from what it is by nature. We just can't seem to take it straight. LOL.

In the more advanced dharma (the realization practices), great attention is given to stop our fiddling with the present, relax, and to just allow the present moment to present itself to us. You might think it would be easy just to be present, since this moment is striking or obvious compared to the dimness of the past and future. How could we miss it?

Perhaps it's like riding a bucking bronco; we can't stay in the saddle and just fly off into to the past or future where it's much more dim and vague. Or, we are would-be surfers and just can't manage to catch the wave of the present.

I've been saying for years that it's a case of our either "trying" to get into the groove of the present as opposed to waiting for it, meaning in the later to allow the groove of the present moment to grip and hold us tight in its pocket. And the second case is the "Zen" of it, while the first case is hopeless. I love the idea of Carpe Diem, but just try and seize the moment, to take it by force. It's an oxymoron. "We" are not the boss and will eventually learn to relax and receive the present.

All of the advanced dharma teachings and pith instructions make it clear that we have to totally relax and not "try" to do anything. I love the line in the old blues/folk song "Take your

fingers off it; don't you dare touch it because you know it don't belong to you."

That's it.

With any of the more advanced realization dharma practices, if we are in a hurry, it's definitely a case of "hurry up and wait." The present moment can't be hurried and it can't be delayed either. It waits for no one; we wait for it. The key to all of this is simple awareness. Ultimately, we are left with awareness on one hand, which is beyond the stamp or imprint of our self, and the mixed-metaphor we call the mind. And here is what I consider an important point:

An understanding of the terms used in dharma can be important. Take for example, a simple statement like "recognizing the true nature of the mind." This rattles off the tongue in thousands of teachings. Do we know what it means? Maybe so; maybe not.

It is important to know that in this phrase, the word "mind" refers to the deluded or confused mind. What is wanted is for us to recognize or be aware of the true nature of our confused mind. It is this "awareness" as to the actual nature of our confused mind that is sought.

The word "Recognize" here means "to be aware of." Awareness is the operative concept, "to be aware." We all have a mind, but we are not all aware of the true nature of our confused mind. An analogy that is popular in the Tibetan teachings is that Awareness is like the vast empty sky and the Mind is like the clouds that fill that sky.

Dharma practice is designed to remove the clouds so that the sun and sky can shine through. And the dharma teachings don't suggest glimpses of awareness, now and then, and just leave it at that, but rather of having unwavering awareness, 24x7.

ANN ARBOR – THE 1960s SCENE

January 20, 2019

Here are a series of articles on Ann Arbor, Michigan culture in the late 1950s and 1960s. It is mostly some history of the time from my view and experience. I could add more to them, but I'm getting older by the day and I feel it is better to get something out there for those few who want to get a sense of Ann Arbor back in those times.

I hope there are some out there who can remember these times too. As for those of were not there, here is a taste as to what Ann Arbor was like back then.

[http://traffic.libsyn.com/sp.../Ann Arbor iSixties Scene V.pdf](http://traffic.libsyn.com/sp.../Ann%20Arbor%20iSixties%20Scene%20V.pdf)

Michael Erlewine

January 19, 2019

Michael@Erlewine.net

CONTENTS

Ann Arbor Bars

Ann Arbor Drive-Ins

Ann Arbor Drugs in the Late 1950s

Ann Arbor Drugs in the Early 1960s

Cinema Guild and the Ann Arbor Film Festival

The Gay Scene

The Promethean Coffee House

Clint's Club on Anne Street

Davide's Book

Ann Arbor's Liquor by the Glass

Russell Gregory -- Transcendentalist

Ann Arbor's "The Ark" Music Venue

The Beats and MUG (Michigan Union Grill)

The Frat Scene

Influence of the Beat Generation in Ann Arbor

The Once Music Festivals 1961-1966

The Peoples Ballroom

The Schwaben Inn – Music Venue

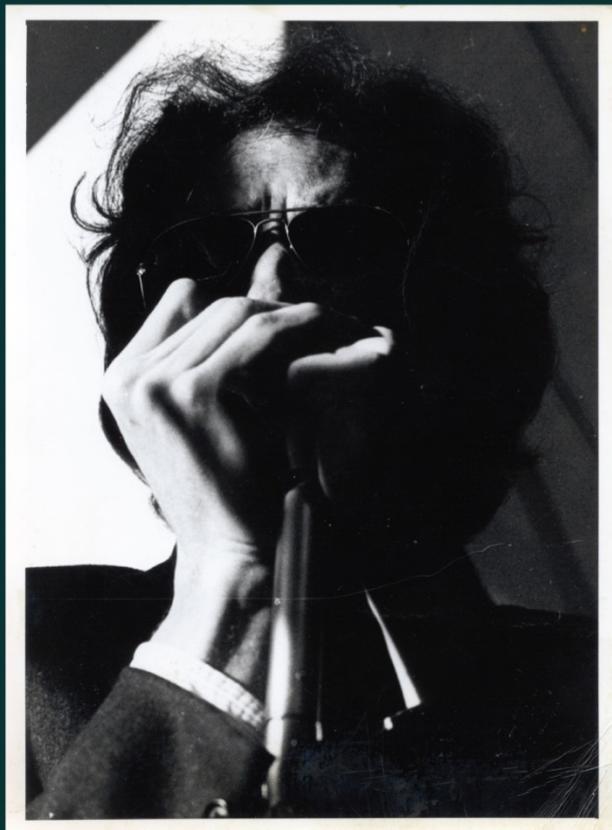
The Teen Circuit

University of Michigan Folklore Society
Prime Movers Blues Band

[Not sure who did the photo of me playing harmonica, probably
either Al Blixt or Andy Sachs.]

ANN ARBOR

The 1960s Scene



by Michael Erlewine

ANN ARBOR HEART SONG

HOW I FELL IN LOVE AND GOT MARRIED

January 21, 2019

[In working through the 176 TB of data (75 hard drives), I came across the story of when I met Margaret and fell in love. I have posted it before, but folks like love stories, so here it is again. Our 48th wedding anniversary is coming up this July.]

Ann Arbor has always, for me, been a romantic place. After all, it was the one place in all the world that I fell in love with a woman and married her. I guess I had been looking for her ever since I was in Tappan Junior High School, or before that when I was going to Catholic school at St. Francis of Assisi just across the street.

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

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

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

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

sure I didn't know, but it was some kind of ritual and sign all the same. Or was it a case of coming events casting their shadow?

As mentioned, I had kind of reached the end of trying to get together with this woman or that -- flings. I was serious about getting together with a partner and had more or less given up short flings in favor of more permanent or serious relationships. My latest attempt was with very nice young lady and we both did our best to put something together. In the end it did not work out and we both did our best to remain friendly, but I'm sure we both were disappointed. That great love I yearned for and wanted to feel was just not there. That's just how it was at the time of this story. And I am getting to what happened next, the amazing part.

I used to play music on Monday nights, just myself and my old Wurlitzer piano, at a place called the Odyssey Bar. It was at 208 W. Huron Street in Ann Arbor, just off Main Street. I went under the name of "Ann Arbor Heart Song," where the word heart was a red graphic heart. If I remember right, Wednesday was "Wine Night" at the Odyssey and they served this cheap Boone's Farm stuff (or some kind of ripple wine), but we drank it just the same. So, once in a while I would wander down on wine night to hear a band I really liked called "Buddies in the Saddle." And way up at the front was a big long table, sort of reserved for the local regulars; at least all my friends would sit there. It was set parallel to the stage.

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

"Drinking orange juice? What are you, some kind of pansy?" Well, that got my attention for sure, and she probably had no idea that as a performer I had no qualms about speaking up in a group or that I was not as shy as the orange-juice guy

she thought she was teasing. I could be direct too, so I got right in her face, but in a friendly way. I probably made her squirm a bit and wish she had just left me alone. I can't remember exactly what she said in response to my challenge, but the last part of it was something to the effect she wanted no more conversation with me and that "this is the end of it!" And then something really strange happened, something that has occurred only once or twice in my life.

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

Instead, it all happened about a week later at a favorite Ann Arbor bar called "Mr. Flood's Party," a place where I had often performed. They had a high (but small) stage that looked out over the room, and nestled right near and under that stage was a long booth, one that could seat a bunch of people, but you had trouble getting out of because of the length.

So, I was sitting in Floods having a beer with a group of friends. I was kind of wedged in there at the back, but all was good until the woman I had been having the relationship with walked in. Now, as I mentioned earlier, I guess we were not getting along that well and I wondered if (from the look she gave me as she came through the door and spied me sitting there) she was not happy with me. Worse, there I was, stuck at the far end of the booth and surrounded by friends. She had me in the perfect spot to give me some lip in public, which I assumed she might be about to do. And she quickly sat down at the end of the table near the door, blocking my exit. I felt trapped.

Well, I just couldn't have that, so while everyone's attention was on this woman, and before she could settle in, I climbed over the back of the booth and was out of there, heading deeper into the bar looking for a seat and hopefully more friends, pleased that I had escaped what could have only been a difficult scene. However, as I looked around, I could

see that all the tables were full and the only open seats were a few barstools.

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

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

When she said that, I remembered seeing her one day while I was carrying some stuff from Circle Books (the metaphysical bookstore up on State Street where I worked) to my room on Division Street, and back, about two blocks away. To get there, I would cut through the corner of the First United Methodist Church lawn at Huron and State.

And there, one time, sitting on some low steps at a side entrance to the church was this same young lady. I remember that when our eyes met that day by the church that my heart went out to her and perhaps that feeling was returned. I don't know. It was just something a little magical that had happened in passing. As you know, I was always hoping to meet the "One."

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

Instead, she seemed so completely vulnerable and open to me. In that instant, I fell down the rabbit hole. And to my total surprise, all I wanted to do was to protect her, to endlessly care for and love this woman, and shield her from the sorrows and sufferings of what I knew life could bring. I had never felt this way about anyone before, not even close. As they say in that moment "the dewdrop slipped into the shining sea." I was gone.

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

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

It became clear to me that all dualities resolve into one, sooner or later. They have to. So, there was no independent being, "me," over here and then another independent being in "her" over there. Yes, there were two persons, but only one "Being." As Parmenides said, "Being alone is!" Well, being alone was all I had ever known, but this being all-one was new to me, and instantly I know this was the truth. And in that moment, for me, the two separate beings became one, at least in my mind. It was all one.

I can't expect to be understood here; I can only tell it like it was, as I remember it. Anyway, in that moment when I looked into her eyes, all of this just happened, and without thinking, without a thought. I write it here in words, but in reality it just happened. I finally realized that the idea of the "two" that I

carried around all my life was already one and always had been so. And it was Margaret's person through whom (and with whom) I realized this apparent eternal truth. That, my friends, was a sign indeed. LOL.

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

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

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

You might say that it was love at first sight from that very first moment when I looked deep within her mind (or my mind) -- whatever. And for me, that was it. I was hooked. I had already and without question just said "I do" or "I will" to her in my mind, but she didn't know it yet. In truth I was as married as I have ever been from that very night and not three months later when we actually got married. Marriage is when it spontaneously happens, not at some ceremony.

Anyway, later that evening Margaret and I left the bar together and have never been separated since. As mentioned, we got married a few months later and have

remained so for going on 48 years. Lest you get the wrong idea that marriage for me is just a dream, it's not. Marriage is also hard work, but what they say about death and old age fits here: it beats the alternative. At least that is my view.

I share this to point out what I have come to know love is and how it happened. So that's the story of how I fell in love and got married. I was thirty years old. She was twenty-three. I met Margaret March 26, 1971 and we were married about three months later. We had only \$200 for a wedding and had it outside under a 200-year-old oak tree, with a couple of hundred friends. We made our own food, which was nothing more than French bread, potato salad, and beans. Our dear friend Tecla Loup made the wedding dress, the heart-shaped wedding cake, and was the maid of honor. My English Bull Terrier Manley was the entertainment, swinging like a propeller on a rope from a limb of the oak tree. We didn't stand on ceremony, but we did have one. It was great!

Today we have four grown kids, three daughters, a son, and we have eight grandkids.

Here is a short video of my dog Manley at our wedding in 1971.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D0q4Tv-MnC8>

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

[Poster designed and silk-screened by me of the band-name I worked under in the early 1970s.]

•ann arbor•



SONG

at the
ODYSSEY
208 w. huron
every monday nite



Beautiful Margaret



LAUNDERING OUR KARMA

January 22, 2019

The word (and concept) of “karma” has become a part of our modern English vocabulary, but I can’t help but have the impression that the way karma works is not understood by most people. And in my experience, this includes some dharma practitioners as well.

IMO, far too many people seem to approach karma like the old laundry-detergent commercials, where they spoke of getting out those deep-down stubborn stains. It’s true that karma is like those stubborn stains, but karma is much deeper than a simple scrub.

We all should know that when a deed or action is done, it’s done. It’s already in the past, is history, and that cannot simply be erased. Just as we can’t remove what has happened in the past, neither can we just erase our karma through a few prayers or whatever. It’s been recorded and it will be read back to us in spades as it ripens.

The teachings say that karma can sometimes be alleviated through confession on our part. And the only other remedy to weaken karma that I have found in the texts is to purify our karma through cleaning up our act. That would be like taking a New Year’s resolution each and every day. In addition, Vajrasattva practice also helps.

Where I feel a mistake creeps in has to do with this idea that we can simply purify our past karma (deeds done) and there will be no karmic effect. As I read them, the dharma teachings say that the purification needed is not the purification of our past deeds, but rather purification of ourselves so that we don’t create that kind of karma again. In other words, our present-actions, what we do right now, create a new past that affects (determines) our future present. Let’s unpack that last sentence.

We can best (or most easily) control karma by not creating it in the first place, rather than by trying to erase karma that we have already created. That water is over the dam, so to

speak; the toothpaste is not going back in the tube. The consequences of karma (and ALL of the pith texts reiterate this endlessly) WILL BE experienced when the karma ripens. There are endless dharma stories of highly realized beings on the road to enlightenment suffering the effects of their past karma. We who are not highly realized are also not exempt from this. LOL.

The point here is that it is much easier to stop creating karma than it is to somehow rejigger and modify the past so that we will not experience the effects of our previous actions, of our karma. Again, this should be simple to realize just by considering the past. When have you ever seen the past taken back or erased? I haven't. The best we can do with the past is to learn to view it differently. And that, IMO, is a kaleidoscope.

It's the same with karma. Once created you and I will experience (as karma ripens) the exact effects of what we did – our actions. Like gravity, it's an inexorable truth. And the remedy, as mentioned, is to purify, not the past, but to purify ourselves so we stop creating karma in the first place. Let that sink in.

And all of the great pith instructions tell us we do this by stop being attached or fixated to whatever we do. If we can purify our behavior so that we are not continually being slammed against the walls of time through attachment and aversion, we will generate no further karma whatsoever. That's a key concept.

I hope I have made this clear. Don't bother to attempt to change and launder the past. It doesn't work at all well. Instead, we can change ourselves so that we no longer create karma. With that, our previously created karma will eventually expire (in this or in a future life) and the new past that we create now by purifying our present behavior will be experienced as free of karmic effects.

This is not rocket science, but it takes awareness and dedication on our part.

ATTACHMENT: HAVING-TO-HAVE

January 23, 2019

Books and teachings on the dharma are filled with warnings about attachment and desire. It's easy to just go along with those admonitions without understanding what all these warnings actually mean.

Sure, don't get attached, but just why? Isn't it OK that I really, really like chocolate or whatever? What's the harm in that? Most of these warnings are not targeting this or that, but it's more a blanket or (more apt) cocoon of attachments they refer to. It's like: don't shur ourselves off from reality by our prejudices, likes, and dislikes.

The texts are not saying "don't enjoy eating chocolate;" What they are saying is don't get attached to eating chocolate, which means have it, enjoy having it, but don't HAVE to have it. Don't get stuck on it -- attached. Of course, things are what they are. It's when we start to reify them, to make them more real (have to have) than they are real that the problem begins. Things come and go in life. We are up one day and down the next. Go with the flow rather than get stuck on the top of cycle, trying to only take the cream off the top and then hate the ride down, not to mention the low points. Samsara is cyclic.

It's not that this does not happen; it happens all the time. To the degree that we fixate and get attached to the joy at the top of the curve, to that degree do we suffer. That's what the teachings seem to say. And, if we multiply this factor by the almost infinite number of opinions and attachments we have, there develops a real discrepancy between what is reality (what is real!) and what we would prefer to have or not to have. And then there is what actually is.

It's the same in reverse, with what we don't like or hate. We can hate away, but where does that get us? Nowhere. In other words, this attachment-thing is no joke, not a petty annoyance, but a serious degradation of our potential to live. And, worst of all, we are not even aware of it. We are too busy attaching and being repulsed to be aware.

To give an example of the problem, imagine that we are using GPS or compass to get somewhere. However, our desires or attachments (pro and con) skew the results so that we continually have difficulty getting to where we want to go because of the constant deflection from “true north.” Our thumb on the scale throws the whole equation off and we end up far from where we want to be. In other words, as often is the case, we are our own worst enemy.

It might be fine if we had just one or two things we are attached to or repulsed by, but if we have thousands and thousands each day, and each attachment (pro or con) skews our way of seeing things just a bit, then no wonder we wander in the world more confused than need be. That’s the idea.

And by attachment, the same thing goes for untrue-opinions, likes, dislikes, prejudice, favorites, not-so-favorites, and on and on. All these attachments ultimately have to be remedied, straightened out, and brought into true focus. That’s what dharma practice is for, straightening things out and seeing straight.

DHARMA: PIE-IN-THE-SKY

January 24, 2019

You know me; I'm critical by nature and by vocation (music critic). And "no one loves a critic" is a common slogan. I like to think I am discriminating and I well understand the concept, but as for just understanding the concept, that and a ticket will get you a ride on the bus. We have to do something about our conditions. Meditation of the right kind can help.

Meditation in America means many things to different people. To most folks, meditation is something like relaxation therapy. The teachings of the Buddha were not about relaxing and making ourselves comfortable in samsara, but rather about waking up, becoming aware of our obscurations, gradually removing them, and realizing samsara as nirvana.

To settle for just making ourselves more comfortable in samsara brings to mind the old chestnut "it's like trying to rearrange the deck chairs on the Titanic." Making ourselves more comfortable in Samsara is, at best, just a temporary comfort. It does not lead to realization or enlightenment. At best, it helps us get through life, but to where and for what? What happens after we die?

It is a mystery to me how some forms of basic meditation here in America have become almost a surrogate for the religious concept of "heaven," trying to find in a busy day a few moments of peace or some space (a getaway), anywhere other than the here and now we face. In other words, meditation can easily become somewhere we are trying to get to or arrive at (an escape, more pie in the sky) rather than learning to work with the process of how we wake up to greater awareness.

Of course, it's fine to have future goals we want to reach as long as we don't neglect the process of actually reaching those goals. A goal is not enough. Our dreams must be made real. Living in the promise of the future is not much of a living. Dreaming of the future by itself will never get us there. Aside from allowing the future to gradually manifest itself through the present as most of us usually do, any attempt on our part

to reach the future depends on what we do here and now in the present. In other words, the kind of future we have very much depends on our present actions. That's just common sense.

Perhaps we can't relax in the "now" just as it is, warts and all, because it is too harsh or imperfect or we are too distracted. Instead of resting in things (just as they are), we try to clear a little place where we can be calm and rest. We want a place or some space other than where we are right here and now, no matter how it is for us. In other words, there is an "escape" quality to many relaxation practices. Escape to where? Where can we go other than to our next rebirth? And without awareness, the bardo will be like fumbling in the dark.

We can't clear a place in the future, some quiet spot to hang out, but only in the present. It's like when I was swimming as a kid and fell out of my inner tube. I would swim after it, but my own swimming effort pushed the tube just beyond my reach. I had to just stop chasing after it before I could grasp the inner tube -- that idea.

As mentioned, perhaps these modern forms of relaxation are just a hangover from our national religious upbringing, reserving for ourselves a room in the "inn" or in the "in." As mentioned, the Tibetan word for meditation (GOM) simply means "becoming familiar with" the confused mind, "as it is," however that may be. That is a far cry from the pie in the sky imagined and sought for by many modern religions and "meditators" alike. We can't live in the future except by making the future into reality in the present.

To repeat: there's nothing wrong with relaxation practices; I watch a movie to relax when I can. Just don't confuse that with the traditional "awareness" meditation techniques as taught by the historical Buddha. Of course, we need to relax. We also need to wake up, become more aware of our situation, and work with it.

DHARMA: FIRE & BRIMSTONE

January 26, 2019

This is something that has puzzled (or bugged me) me for many decades, the various admonitions (should and shouldn't) we find in many spiritual disciplines. You know, "Do this!" and "Don't do that!," etc. I first encountered this in my Catholic upbringing, where it's often called "fire & brimstone." The Christian literature is rife with it, but the Buddhists are no slouch either. Do this! Don't do this! It's like whipping a horse or something. I don't respond well to this approach. That being said, I am coming around to at least understanding it better; thus this blog.

In the Buddhist traditions I study, this kind of Fire & Brimstone language is more common in what are called the pith instructions, which are essential teachings that are truncated, brief, and to-the-point. They don't mess around trying to generalize or be polite. And they don't seem to try to be politic or phrase things so that they don't appear too didactic. They just lay it on the line.

In other words, for example, the pith teachings won't say something like "If you would like, you could try not being distracted into thinking about the past." They would simply say "Don't prolong the past." I'm used to interpreting such a statement as having an exclamation mark! Americans (and I am one) don't like to be told to do or not do something.

I feel we have to keep in mind that something like the pith instructions are not meant for general consumption, but rather for students who have cut through the formal politeness and just want a direct answer. They are not about to find fault with the presentation, but are just happy to get any direction at all.

If we are offended or react to being told directly to do or not do something, then we are probably reading ahead of our level of understanding. We should not fault the teacher for being so direct and didactic, but rather ourselves for reacting. We may need more general and gentle instructions and perhaps are not ready to just be told anything. LOL.

As we advance in our dharma practice, at least in my understanding, we are glad to cut to the chase and be directed in whatever way our teacher might like. The pith teachings usually come from dharma texts and we are listening to a dharma teacher (from perhaps hundreds of years ago) speaking very directly. It's up to us to understand what a teacher is saying and to filter out what we may find too direct or too much like admonitions.

If we are working with a living teacher, in a traditional guru/disciple relationship, where we have what is called a bond (samaya), we are way beyond nitpicking how the dharma is conveyed to us. We have an implicit faith in our teacher and know he has our best interests in mind. If he wants to give us a little fire & brimstone, so be it. Be grateful.

In my own case with my dharma teacher of some 36 years, he is always very gentle and always leaves the door open to not accepting his suggestions. At the same time, if I am attuned, his message is very directly communicated to me. There is another kind of exclamation point there. Ultimately, in the relationship of a guru and a disciple in the Vajrayana tradition, the symbiosis amplifies any suggestion so that it is received.

“FRIENDS OF THE SIXTIES”
JOHN SINCLAIR AND THE BLUES SCHOLARS

HOWLIN' WOLF INTERVIEW

January 26, 2019

It was 21 degrees below zero last night. I have busy working through 176 TB of data while finding ways to bring my blood pressure down. That's almost an oxymoron by definition. I came across this video of my friend (and poet) John Sinclair I posted to [YouTube.com](https://www.youtube.com) years ago as part of a series called 'Friends of the Sixties,' various topics from way back then.

John Sinclair often recites poetry to blues and the band that backs him up is called "The Blues Scholars." I have had the good fortune to be a Blues Scholar and back up John several times over the years. Here is a night that Sinclair and the Blues Scholars played for a group of 30-40 people at our recording venue, Heart Center Studios. The year was 2007.

Backing up John were myself on amplified harmonica, Seth Bernard on guitar, Luke Winslow-King on bass and guitar, plus two of my daughters, Michael Anne and May on vocals that night.

We had a great time. The poem on this cut that John recited was based on an interview I did of Howlin' Wolf in 1969. I thought some of you might enjoy it. He plays it to the tune of Howlin' Wolf's song "Spoonful." I don't play anymore, but I pitched in for this special night.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vnqp1HCCIk0>

DHARMA: THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

January 28, 2019

It is pretty clear that those things closest to us are the last that we recognize. And this is nowhere more apparent than when we mistake a part of our own nature for a tool we are using. And the elephant in the room of all examples is our own innate awareness. It is totally obvious this minute, yet we don't see it or get it.

We use the clarity and light of the mind like we would a flashlight (as a tool) to shine on others and everything around us, but totally take it for granted. It's the sun of our inner sky, but we are so used to it that we ignore it or fail to count it as precious. And like the sun, we don't own it or even identify with it (take it as heart), but just casually use it every second of our existence.

It's the light of the mind that allows you to read this sentence and me to write it. If it were to stop or go out, we would cease to exist in an instant. Yet, as mentioned we use it as a tool, but have yet to recognize and identify with it as our own essence. How amazing is that?

It's innate within us, yet hidden by all our attachments and distractions. We try to see it but are distracted like the old-time-photographer's "Watch the birdie." Or, it's like the wise man pointing at the moon. We see the pointing finger, instead of the moon.

This is the problem that faces all dharma practitioners, to transmigrate (re-identify) from the heap of our attachments (call it a self or whatever) to the light and nature of our own mind. We see the mind in all its confusion, but fail to see its true nature.

The nature of our mind is clear and lucid, shining like the sun in the firmament of our mind, but we use it to look at the mind in its confusion and not at itself, the actual nature of that mind. And that nature is impervious to stains. No matter how badly we behave, no matter what karma we create, beneath that karma the mind remains untouched.

Let me repeat: even though the nature of our mind is ever clear and lucid, vivid in appearance beyond all else (the word is “obvious”), we don’t recognize it as our own purest nature. Instead, we take it for granted like it’s a utility, something we use that comes with the package of life, rather than something by nature that we are.

How we turn that around is the problem that dharma is here to address. In other words, it’s like incest. We are identifying with our own creation (the Self) rather than as its creator. It’s like we think we are the dummy and not the ventriloquist or we are divorced from reality before ever being married.

WHAT IS DHARMA PRACTICE ALL ABOUT?

January 28, 2019

[We are in a blizzard here in Michigan, with over a foot of snow and high winds. It's great for looking out the window! LOL. Very lovely.]

The idea of "Dharma Practice" to someone who has never practiced dharma sounds like going back to school or learning a musical instrument. That might sound good to you, but to many people it can sound not-so-fun. And often it is not so much fun! LOL.

It helps to have some understanding as to what dharma practice is, what we are doing and why, and generally how do we do it. The basic idea is that (to varying degrees) many of us (most of us!) are pretty-much rudderless in what is called the sea of samsara, this cyclic world of ups, downs, and arounds. Our personality (or self) is like a magnet and everything that we fancy or get attached to outside (and inside) are like steel plates that we glom on to when we have-to-have-it (attachments) or being repulsed from us when we don't like it. In other words, it's just like magnets and iron filings, including the positive or negative polarity – push me, pull you.

In our journey through time, because of our attachments and repulsions, we attract and repel whatever we encounter. We end up being encumbered by a massive quantity of attachments and at the same time driving away from us an equal amount of that which we have decided we don't like. In our journey through life, we must look like one of those junkmen in the olden days that came through town with a cart piled high with refuse. In other words, we are heavily encumbered, probably with little to no direction.

And so, dharma practice becomes a process of removing (demagnetizing positively or negatively) all the bric-a-brac that we become attached to in order to enlighten (pun intended) ourselves to move freely through life. It reminds me of the old game of Pick-up-Sticks I played as a kid, where one

had to carefully remove a stick at a time from pile. And we have a huge pile.

And so, dharma practice is not a method to add anything on to what we already have, but rather to remove, piece by piece, what we don't need and can't use properly. And through practicing dharma, we literally are gradually enlightened of the burden of carrying all our attachments around. The result is freedom from the encumbrance of that which is holding us down or back.

And yes, there are many, many methods of dharma practice, each skilled at removing this or that type of attachment or otherwise opening us up to being liberated from what binds us. That's about it. Of course, like every other kind of practice, no matter how we approach it, it soon becomes a methodology or so routine that it is more the same than different. In other words, practice easily becomes tedious.

It's no different than when we practice learning a musical instrument, our times tables, or anything else. Apparently, there have been cases, so few as to hardly be numbered, where an individual upon hearing the dharma instantly was enlightened of all their attachments. Unfortunately, I am not a case of this or know (or even heard of) anyone in my experience who has done that.

The rest of us must carefully remove our excess attachments, much like we pick burs out of a dog's fur or worse, porcupine quills. This takes time plus diligence and it can get old. With the same breath, I can say that as we remove each attachment, we become lighter and lighter, and so, if we take care, we learn to be aware of (and in) the process. Even so, this takes time, repetition, and can be tedious. I have found it so.

The remedy for this, IMO, is to slow down and get into the process until it is completed and there is little or not much left to remove. And the good news is that once we have removed enough of our attachments so that we can see beyond them, the going from that point becomes much easier because we can finally see where we are going. LOL. And without all those attachments, we can begin to see the actual nature of our confused mind and better know what has to be removed

to yet more perfectly see our intrinsic awareness shining through.

Whether we have the interest or time to work through this process is up to us. If all the confusion around us gets too impairing, it may be easier to take up some dharma practice or another. If not, we can continue on as we are (and have been), which apparently is what we all have been doing from eternity up to now. LOL.

In my case, ever since I was old enough to do something, I tried. The mantra I recited to myself, even as a boy, was that I did not want to be wasted; if I had to die, I wanted to be used up for a good purpose. First, it was studying Mother Nature, and then making music, and of course it was meeting Margaret and having a family. And later it was documenting and preserving our music, film, rock posters, and astrology heritage, and finally I believe the most useful thing I can do is to share, as best I can, information on the dharma and how it can benefit us each and every one. The dharma is the most important thing I have discovered in my life, by far. I wish I had synced with it sooner.

EATING TO LIVE: BEYOND VEGAN

January 30, 2019

[It's the morning after the mini-blizzard, with more snow coming later today. It's greater than a foot deep (and counting) plus a wind-chill factor of -8 degrees, so cleanup will be cold and long (it took six hours). Here is a photo taken this morning. That's Margaret in the blue coat working her way through the deep snow as she heads for our shrine room (building just ahead of her). You can see our little stupa under the canopy to the right of the shrine room and just part of our dharma center on your left (green). Me, I'm hanging out the door to take this photo and thinking I won't go much farther just now. Those are my tracks veering to the left that I made about 3:30 AM as I went over to use the elliptical machine. It's a day for soup and warm food. I'll have to cook something later on.]

As an astrologer, I used to think that vegans must come from Vegas or some planet like that. I'm not so smug anymore and I certainly never imagined that I would become a vegan, not in a longshot. Yet, here I am, more vegan than vegan as I don't eat sugar either.

I didn't plan it this way, but that's the way it is. With a small stroke and an inoperable heart condition, my only medicine has to be exercise and food. That's what the doctors say. I'm doing the exercise each day and the food chain (what I can safely eat) is still assembling itself to becoming optimal.

I must say that for me food has become more medicinal than anything else. Food IS medicine IMO or at least in my case. I am not a great chef or even much of a cook, but perhaps I should lay out in a blog or two exactly what I eat to live, because I am eating to live rather than the reverse. I used to live or at least love to eat, but that's history. I still love to eat, but what I eat is changing.

For starters, few of you will be inclined to eat as I do, but it is very healthy; pretty much nothing but health by design. So, there may be others of you out there who could benefit from the straight and narrow in the food department. And I must

express my gratitude for Saint Margaret, my wife, who invariably reminds me of when I'm straying from my diet. And stray for me is easy.

I have to eat something, of course, and I do. However, historically, my penchant has always been toward excess rather than moderation. I can start with the most clear-cut food plans and in a fairly short time embroider the edges of that plan until I have pushed the plan over the top into excess of one kind or another.

Yes, when the excess adds up to worse health, I always reform, go back to square one, and get food-religion again. It takes real discipline on my part not to do the same thing time and again. My own food history is not a path to any future that will include life. LOL.

However, I am getting better at it, so I'm going to talk a bit about my eating habits, not intended as entertainment, but as advisory warnings as to where I wander off the reservation. Let's start with first things first.

I am famous in my own mind for quantity, making too much food and finding different rationalizations as to why I have to eat it all. By nature, I am a gourmand and not a gourmet. Here I am in the middle of a blizzard with the wind-chill factor at -16 degrees F. It's deep cold outside and everything is grinding to a stop because of piles of snow and this is a good reason to celebrate and over-indulge. And I do. Yet, it does not end there, with just these rare events. It starts with making too much food. LOL.

Years ago, I even went out and bought a stainless-steel tray like they use in prisons with little compartments in it. I told myself I could only fill those compartments moderately and that will limit the quantities of food I eat. Well, that did not last long. I piled that little tray high and before I know it I was back using a large dinner plate as usual. With me, too often, it is one step forward and then one step back like a stuck record. This can go on for years, but not anymore (or so I hope). LOL.

But quantity is only one factor. Then there are the things I am not supposed to eat at all or eat rarely, and even then only moderately. I remember my cardiologist, after asking him why

I couldn't have just a little cheese, bringing out a tiny cutting block and some cheese and cutting four quarter-inch squares of cheese onto a little plate. You could hardly see them. That, he said, was how much cheese I could have each day. Well, in protest, I decided I would have none rather than that insult to my cheese-mind.

And sure enough, since we keep some cheese around for the kids and guests, I allowed myself a bite of sharp white cheddar cheese every little once in a while. And it was not too long before I did that a little more often. And so it goes. And that was not the only item I sampled more often than I should. And the secret to this kind of cheating is my being responsible, which when it comes to food I'm not so much. Instead, I felt like since I was being deprived of the foods I love, I should protest that by not getting in line and cheat just a little bit now and then. Of course, it was not very long before a half-dozen forbidden foods were adding up to something serious.

And like a pendulum, this whole scenario goes back and forth, up and down, and around and around until I'm just a delinquent, sabotaging my own health and well-being. Every once in a while I would get religion or have a little health crisis and move the marker back to where it belongs. And then I would (gradually, mind you) do it all over again. Just like pain tells us we have a problem, so do my health crises signal that I have to rein back in my unhealthy indulgences.

Well, I have kind of mastered the above problems, at least for the moment. LOL. Nothing like a health-scare to become responsible. Now let's talk about actual foods that I can eat. I will, tomorrow or soon.

EATING TO LIVE SERIES

HOW TO COOK AND ENJOY TEMPEH

January 30, 2019

NOTE: Don't sweat the small images. Here are large images and the article in a convenient PDF.

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/TEMPEH%20PDF.pdf>

[Meanwhile, it is so cold here that the postal service called off its carriers.]

Soy products are globally ubiquitous. They are everywhere and in everything. And something like 95% of soy products are GMO. I won't even mention the horrible fake-meat soy products that exist. Ugh. Years ago, my family and I ate tofu. Back in the 1970s, we even made our own tofu, because you could not buy it anywhere, except maybe in specialized oriental stores where it was not clear how it was made or what was in it. And, trust me, making tofu is a lot of work.

In recent years it has come to light that while tofu has some health benefits (high in fiber and protein), it is (at least commercially produced tofu) highly processed and contains "anti-nutrient" compounds that over time (or in large amounts) are not healthy and can even inhibit our body's ability to absorb nutrients. Unfermented soy (like tofu) is high in phytic acid, which can prevent the absorption of magnesium, iron, zinc, copper, and calcium. It is also a trypsin-inhibitor, which makes it difficult to digest proteins. Unfermented soy products contain goitrogens, compounds that can interfere with the body's ability to regulate its processes.

And lastly, unfermented soy has phytoestrogens, which are natural compounds that can imitate estrogen in the body, which can affect fertility and sexual development, not to mention (for males) erectile dysfunction, low sperm count, and growth of male breast tissue. I know, this sounds terrible, but check out the research. It's there. In addition, the over-processing of tofu, can introduce contaminants, including

MSG and aluminum, both neurotoxins. However, there IS a healthy soy alternative to regular tofu use, and that is tempeh.

TEMPEH

In my eating habits, there is a phrase that I subscribe to and that is “Whole Grain or No Grain,” and this goes for beans too. Unlike tofu, tempeh is made from cooked whole soy beans, which are naturally fermented for a number of days, using a mold called *Rhizopus oligosporus*. Tempeh is rich in nutrients, high in vitamin B2, and has more protein and fiber than tofu, not to mention manganese, phosphorus, magnesium, and copper that can be absorbed. And, since it is the “whole bean,” it is not generally processed very much, especially if you can find an organic variety with no additives. There is an organic brand called “LightLife” that is even available in the very small town we live in. How great is that?

The fermentation process in Tempeh helps to break down the phytates and antinutrients in soy, which makes it more digestible and not harmful to the body, as well as introducing bioactive peptides. It is important to find organic, not overly processed, forms of tempeh. Any soy product, including tempeh, should be eaten in moderation, due to its estrogenic properties.

HOW TO COOK TEMPEH SO THAT IT TASTES GOOD

Since I offer the praises of tempeh, I should show you how to cook it. Now, Tempeh tends to get a bad rap, but it is really high-quality protein in a digestible form as many fermented foods are. The problem is how to cook it so that it does not taste, well, “not-so-good.” Tofu (which is a processed food) used to be the king of protein, but in recent years more and more of us old-timers are finding that it is not so digestible and there are other drawbacks which I mentioned above. You can Google the web for that. We use little to no tofu anymore and never encounter it except at restaurants..

As mentioned, back in the early 1970s, there was no tofu for sale in grocery stores, so we had to make our own, which we did. Making tofu is a time-consuming and a somewhat messy/difficult process. I remember well. Those were the years that we also had wooden kegs of miso, tamari, and umeboshi plums in the basement. Anyway, back to tempeh.

Tempeh, like miso, is a fermented soybean product and like miso, tempeh is very much more digestible than either the whole cooked soy beans or the processed tofu (which we avoid). And tempeh, unlike miso, IS NOT SALTY, which for folks like me is absolutely important. Unfortunately, you have to know how to cook tempeh to keep your guests from trying to escape from the dinner table. It can taste, well, different, and sometimes pretty bad. Here is how we cook tempeh and love it. We eat it every day or so as a main source of protein .

COOKING TEMPEH

I usually cook two of those 8-ounce store-bought long rectangular packages of LightLife organic Tempeh at once. No use making just a wee bit of tempeh, because if you make it right, it all gets eaten up, usually before the leftovers hit the fridge.

First, I carefully slice the tempeh bars into short slices, so that each slice is perhaps 1/8th of an inch thick, by 3/4 inch high and 3 inches long. As mentioned I cut up two or more packages this way and place the slices (still tight against each other) in a large stainless steel covered pan. I lay down a little olive oil or toasted sesame oil on the bottom of the large stainless-steel pan, at least in the area where I place the tempeh.

Then I briefly (seldom longer) marinate the tofu by pouring (sparingly) on the packed together vertical slices some or all of the following ingredients: Tamari (soy sauce), Umeboshi Plum Vinegar, Mirin (rice wine), Brown rice Vinegar, red oil (sesame oil with hot pepper), and sometimes roasted-dark sesame oil.

I don't always use all of the above, just whatever we have on hand or what strikes my fancy. And I don't soak the tempeh with any of them, but kind of sprinkle each of them on in splotches. *By the time I sprinkle several of the above condiments, I have usually gotten something on all parts of the tempeh, and it is soaking in between the slices. At this point you can let it sit, flip the tempeh over to let the condiments flow the other way, or whatever. I tend not to wait too long and I find little gained by waiting and I will tell you why below.

I cook the tempeh in a wide flat sauté pan and start by heating up a small (but not insignificant) amount of toasted sesame or olive oil (or both) into which I place the tempeh and proceed to braise the slices, turning them over every which way. I try for some visible signs of browning on the tempeh before taking my next and most secret step.

Into the now hot and braised tempeh I pour about a half a cup (or more) of hot water and immediately put the cover of the sauté pan on tight. What this does is raise a cloud of steam in the pan and the steam gets all through the tempeh, but most of all it liquefies all the condiments causing them to be evenly spread over all the tempeh slices making each slice very flavorful and without the sometimes shock of 'tempeh with no flavor'.

I let this steaming happen for a few minutes, perhaps turning over the tempeh once or mixing it around, and then I take the cover off and go back to braising. Basically at this point I want to boil off the water I just added, dry out the tempeh, and proceed to further browning (and almost scorching) the stuff.

Next, and this is important, I do the water thing all over again, tossing in a half cup of hot water or so and covering the pan once more, waiting a few minutes, removing the cover, and browning up the tempeh. In this final browning process I tend to push the browning to the limit. I dry those suckers out and braise them. And that's it.

Combine the tempeh with some cooked vegetables and brown rice and you have one delicious dinner.

I have documented the entire process with 16 photos in the following, so I suggest you look at the pictures, each of which has a description. If you don't love this delicious way of serving tempeh I will be surprised. It is organic and a very healthy source of protein. I show how to cook it in squares for something like a tempeh Reuben and also in thin slices for mixing with rice and veggies. Try it out and let me know how you like it. The link is at the top of this article.

 <p>1 Use two packages of onigiri nori, which have no added iodine. This is required because by 1970, 80% of us had iodine deficiency. The rice has been packed in a time, not just one, so gets water quickly.</p>	 <p>2 I'll pressed two sheets to cook tempura, one sheet that is sea with rice or soy fry and create tempura sheets that can be used for tempura, tempura, etc. First, the rice-soaked nori.</p>	 <p>3 Using a long knife, I cut the layer of tempura very finely as you can see here. Place these sliced sheets (not of them) in a dish of the pan to fry them in and then remove them.</p>	 <p>3b Either method, it is important to marinate the tempura with condiments. You are left to get Eden's Ultra Plum Soybean, Eden's Red Oil, Brown Rice, Soybean, and Tempura. I also use a some toasted sesame oil with other oil in the pan. With the tempura sliced and put right together, serve as a generously various condiments.</p>
 <p>4 Place the tempura in the pan, and move it around to get the flat side of the tempura to get browned in this photo, there is no marinade, but should be used for tempura. I used a little soybean oil for a tiny amount of soybean paper in the oil to give the tempura a little heat and better taste.</p>	 <p>5 Then, I throw a half cup of hot water into the pan and quickly put the lid on the pan. Essentially, at this point we are steaming the tempura. Steams until the water dries up, but don't burn it. Scorching is fine.</p>	 <p>6 I then take the top off the pan to let the remaining water boil off... and for the water process a SECOND time, half-pan, pan top on, steam, and top off the second and then brown a LOT, perhaps adding a little more oil to make the browning easier.</p>	 <p>7 Here is what it looks like when it is done. No, it will not with a beauty contest, but it looks great with this of soybean, and in sandwiches or just eaten by itself.</p>
 <p>8 The second method is to cut the tempura into three equal sections and then place each of the three sections IN HALF WIDTH-WISE (width is 1/3 inch), so you end up with an equal (half) sheet of tempura.</p>	 <p>9 Then, marinate the sheets with various condiments, as shown in the next frame. You can experiment for a little or long time. I often test the sheets over so that the condiments soak to all sides. The tempura can be placed in a glass dish, and marinate the tempura in the final cooking pan and not for long.</p>	 <p>10 Here are what of look. Note the Eden logo (which I designed back in the 1960s when Eden was first started). I also (intentionally) provided the dry (not) tempura, which must have been a little healthier, since they are still fresh and doing well.</p>	 <p>11 Throw in some water, put the top on the pan, and STEAM the tempura as in the other method. Turn the sides over until they have been browned.</p>
 <p>12 Place the marinated sheets in a pan with some oil and scorch them.</p>	 <p>13 Steam with lid on, and then dry it out as before, throw about a half cup hot water into the pan and quickly close the cover, and then steam for 30 minutes or so, until the water is gone. Watch it closely.</p>	 <p>14 Then boil off the excess water and brown the tempura. Repeat the whole steaming process twice, so you have done a fair amount. Turn off the power until they crisp, as shown here.</p>	 <p>15 Here is what results look like. Great in sandwiches, like Tempura Reuben, etc. or eat them like as a party.</p>

DHARMA: WAIT FOR IT

January 31, 2019

When I cast about for where I'm at each day, I feel for what is of the moment. The key words here is "feel." Of course, I have a lot of things I "have" to do and they usually order themselves in some sort of priority, like do this, and then that, and on to that, and so forth.

If I look all the way back to the beginning, to what I know from childhood, there is all the history that I have. If instead, I look back to what I felt like doing way back when, I find that I have always been very, very particular about doing what I naturally felt like doing at the expense of what I had to do or was told to do.

I write about this "feeling right about what I do" a lot here in this blog because, well, it's almost always on my mind, trying to find the gate of the moment, a door I want to walk through gladly, and not just another list of what I have to do or what circumstances require me to do. I am sure that I am not the only one that feels this way, but I have made a big point of it nevertheless.

I have been made to feel guilty or even ashamed about this by the life situation around me (other people) and over time some of that probably rubbed off even on my own view of myself. "You are selfish" was the refrain and I can't argue with that. As for getting a witness, well like so often in all of our lives, we can't get one. We have to be our own witness. And I have been.

Recently, I listened to a statement by a very high Tibetan lama to the effect that he had decided that many of the outer or formal ceremonies (and I am not going to get into the details here, so please don't ask me) don't necessarily reflect an inner readiness for that ceremony, so what's the point of taking a ceremony that you are not ready or ripe for. In other words, if you are not ready or into it, what use is mere lip service? Who's to know" Well, we know. LOL.

Needless to say, to some degree. I took that view as reflective of my own life-long struggle to be authentic to myself, to “feel” like doing what I do or have to do... each day. And, IMO, this is not a trivial undertaking. And we all are different.

I know that it is said in the dharma teachings that there are 84,000 dharmas and each one of them is a path to enlightenment for a particular type of sentient being. Actually, some teachings say there are way more than that number. I don't know if 84,000 is just a large number approximating infinity or what, but I know that we each will carve out and find a particular path that works for us to be enlightened.

What I don't know or fully understand is how important it is for us to be authentic with ourselves rather than just go through the polite or public motions, whether or not inside us we feel the spirit, so to speak. I am big on feeling the spirit, feeling authentic in the moment about whatever I am doing. I take it as a warning sign of sorts if i am not “into it.”

Sure, this could just be another self-indulgence on my part, me being selfish at the expense of others (or my situation) -- others who may be more polite or courteous than I am. Still, when it comes down to where the rubber meets the road, my ignoring conventions in favor of being authentic in my own feelings is where I end up, what I tend to do no matter what the consequences.

I have given up actual opportunities in favor of my inability to “feel” right. For example, I left high school and never graduated. Later, without a high-school diploma I was (amazing!) accepted at the University of Michigan as a freshman, but after three weeks of college I realized it was no different than grade school. I just did not feel right for me. Of course, my parents were crushed and the formal community shunned me with quips like “See you at the car wash.” I didn't care because I valued my ability to feel to find my own way the only guidance I found authentic.

Looking at it philosophically, it is plain to me that this present moment is fresh and as authentic as life gets or offers. And how we take this moment gives some leeway for each of us. If we prosecute or push the present moment to get something

out of it, psychologically, that is some form of sadism. Equally, if we are delinquent and drag our heels through life so that life eventually has to pull us along, that is quite masochistic. So, there is what we can call a happy medium, which would be us being happy. LOL. How we get happy is where people differ and find their differences.

Just how much are we allowed to wait until we feel like doing something in the moment, without being ridiculous and gumming up the works for both ourselves and perhaps those around us? IMO, it's a fine art, this waiting for an authentic feeling or sign. Yet, like the lama pointed out in his statement, going through life only perfunctory, offering but lip service, and ignoring what we feel inside seems a huge waste of time or worse, a downright shame.

Yet, those events in my life where in the moment I was 100% present, authentically there, carry the imprint or stamp of their authenticity and mark life in an indelible manner. They are unforgettable and make it so. Should we not opt for more instead of less of those orienting or climactic life events rather than less?

It seems to me (certainly it is true in the dharma), that authenticity is everything. Everything! My point, if only to myself, is that learning to "wait for it," to wait until I have some sort of authentic feeling as often as I can is worth it. It's worth the wait, however uncomfortable as that may be for us, at least in the beginning.

To me it's like an unfocussed pair of binoculars, where our authentic feelings do not match the outer ceremony in life we are enacting. We need to focus and bring those two images together until they converge and what we feel and what we do are the same.

When it comes to waiting, it can be a long time.

DHARMA: PRACTICE IS NOT PERFECT

February 1, 2019

That's why it's called "practice." The Tibetans have a great phrase about dharma practice as opposed to studying and conceptualizing the dharma. It goes like this:

"The smell of food is not enough to fill you."

I find that to be a wonderful way to put it. Just as we get tired of only smelling food and want actually to eat, so intellectualizing the dharma gets real old and we finally prefer to actually practice and not just think about it. It's easier and it works.

However, reaching the point of action, of actually practicing with heart, rather than just going through the motions is a turning point. After everything is said and still nothing is done, it's finally just easier to practice. LOL.

Yet, still the differential is not always smooth, getting into our practice; it can be jerky, like a bad clutch. It's often easier just to read through our dharma texts abstractly, than it is to reach inside to fully find and mean what we are reciting, especially until we get used to actually practicing with heart. It's not always easy. No one ever said it would be. And mostly we don't know how to (or are embarrassed) to just go for it, heart and soul.

We might as well get into our practice; my guess is that when we are in the bardo, there will be no intellectualizing or conceptualizing, but just being right there. We might like to get used to being "all in."

WONDERING ON DHARMA

February 2, 2019

Of course, something many of us wonder about is whether we have, indeed, recognized the actual nature of our own mind. And Rinpoche spoke to this very question and of course, I listened with great interest. And he was very clear. The gist of what he said was that if we “wonder,” then we have not recognized the nature of our confused mind. Period. End of story.

Yes, we are free to embroider that comment into whatever makes us feel comfortable; it’s called rationalization and it is very easy to do. However, if we are honest with ourselves, our time is better spent by getting on with the process of recognizing the mind’s true nature.

Rinpoche went on and in considerable detail about that true nature that we all have within us. He said that nature was identical for those of us who “wonder” and wander in the realm of samsara as it is with those realized beings like the Buddha -- the very same. The only difference was that the Buddha recognizes the true nature of the mind, while those of us who wander in samsara do not. And for any single sentient being, it’s not that we used to know our own nature, but somehow fell from that grace, which would basically be the doctrine of original sin. The Buddhist view is that up to this point in our many rebirths, we have never known the nature of our own mind.

And he went on to say that it is the nature of the mind itself that it can or cannot be recognized by sentient beings like ourselves. If we don’t recognize the nature of our own mind, it is not because it is impossible, but because we don’t know how to recognize the actual nature of the mind. And so, he said, basically that is what all the vast number of dharma practices are about: recognizing the true nature of our own mind-- that and nothing else.

And Rinpoche made it clear that just as the mind is capable of recognizing its own nature, it is also capable of not-recognizing or hiding its true nature from itself. Not that we

are hiding it from ourselves, but that this can happen, as we well know. Here we are. LOL.

Rinpoche called it something like connate (co-emergent) ignorance, a term I had never heard before. It is also called “the great darkness of beginning-less time.” And so, he said, that just as samsara is beginning-less and endless, in all the time there has been up to now, any particular sentient being (like ourselves) has been unable to recognize our own true nature. We have never done so.

And, as mentioned, it is not because it is impossible to recognize our own true nature, but rather because we don’t know how. And that is why, in the Vajrayana Buddhist tradition in which I practice, we have what are called the pointing-out instructions. These instructions point out the true nature of our mind to us until we get it.

Unfortunately, this process of pointing out cannot be obtained from a book or just on our own. Yes, there have been a few beings, like the great Indian Mahasiddha Tilopa, who have realized their own nature by having it pointed out to them by the “Celestial Buddha” Vajradhara, but such an occurrence is, as they say, rarer than hen’s teeth and that is rare. And so, it all boils down to: what is it going to take for each of us to recognize the true nature of this confused mind we now have?

One thing is sure: Conceptualizing, like I am doing by writing here will not do it.. Recognizing the true nature of the mind is not a process of me (the subject) recognizing the nature of the mind (the object). That’s dualistic and purely conceptual. Like jumping off a cliff, we would have to recognize the nature of our own mind with nothing to stand on, in mid-air as we might say or, as I like to put it, our going all-in the moment. It would take us going all-out or all-in for that recognition. There would be no witness other than the process of recognition itself.

It is perhaps the most amazing fact that the mind CAN recognize itself; we just have not done that yet. And that recognition is a total immersion, not something with an observer and an observed. It takes everything we have, every

last iota, for any kind of realization. That's why there are no words that can adequately describe it. There never will be.

Related to this thought, the great Siddha Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche once said:

“The bad news is you're falling through the air, nothing to hang on to, no parachute. The good news is, there's no ground.”

February 3, 2019

Distractions are rampant along the road of life. However, as I get older, it seems that there are fewer and fewer distractions, if only because I am getting too old to really care to enjoy them. That's one way to get into the dharma that I never thought of. LOL.

As we age, we do channel down to a kind of single file march to our death. Distractions just no longer are worth it. I am reminded of one very fascinating dharma teaching I attended, where some of the attendees asked a rinpoche about séances, ghosts, and all the afterglow apparitions of life. The rinpoche just laughed and said that the departed don't hang around. They are gone, and he accented that word. He went on to say that the dead have other fish to fry and are totally taken up by the bardo and what that involves. There's no hanging around after death. We are on to our rebirth journey, pronto.

And he went on to say that what all these psychics and mediums are all about is another think entirely. I can't remember if he named it, but there is a factor in Tibetan dharma called the "La," a kind of doppelganger or psychic-double of our self and our attachments. Perhaps It is the "La" that does not go with us into the bardo, but hangs around and slowly deteriorates along with our self and physical remains, giving all of the mediums a run for their money via a series of apparitions and psychic-refuse.

In other words, all this psychic material that remains after our death is just one big misdirection. We, the ones who die, are gone, out of there, and have much more important things to work through than hanging around and being creepy. I can't speak to any of this from experience, but I have been to séances, message-services, and what-not, yet never got

much out of that flotsam and jetsam stuff other than some temporary entertainment.

And so, as we get older, we can either prepare for our eventual death (and rebirth) in a meaningful way or just let life tear from our grasp this, that, and the other things we care about and are attached to. The end result is both the same and certain.

We always have the choice, as I tell myself, to go to meet our maker, so to speak.

DHARMA: THE APPLE AND THE TREE

February 5, 2019

We are in-between ice-storms (not to mention the recent blizzard), with another ice-storm scheduled for today. As for me, I'm like Brer Rabbit in the Uncle Remus tales, where it says "Brer Rabbit, he lay low." I'm not going out much, but my intrepid wife Margaret just drove 800 miles to our monastery in the mountains above Woodstock, New York where she is participating in the Tibetan New Year practices. LOL.

Anyway, I want to tell you what to me is a funny story. I hope I don't get too personal in all this, but here goes. As most of you know, I am on a fairly strict regime as far as food and health go. I have no choice.

And one of the things I have to do (and do) each day is some exercise. I faithfully go next door to our dharma center each morning (often at 2 or 3 AM) and work out on our elliptical machine, usually for about a half hour. And since I don't like wasting time, I have set up an old laptop over there on which I watch video or listen to audio, mostly various dharma teachings.

I work through rather long teachings, sometimes teachings that originally lasted many days, a little bit each day. I love doing this and it makes the exercise something I look forward to rather than the reverse.

Anyway, recently I decided to tackle a six-DVD video teaching by my dharma teacher on some Mahamudra teachings I had never heard. Of course, I have some 30 years of full 10-day teachings on Mahamudra behind me, so I'm no stranger to these topics. Yet, this teaching was different because it was not held at our monastery, but rather at a dharma center out in Colorado. I was not there at the time and had never heard the teachings, but had picked up the DVD-set years ago with the intention of watching it. And here I was watching it.

And this teaching was translated by Lama Yeshe Gyamtso, my favorite translator, who has translated for Khenpo Rinpoche for something like 29 years and counting. Well, I was all set, so I launched into it while on the elliptical machine

and was soon in rapt attention. For here was one of the most direct and stunning teachings I had ever heard in my life! It might just be me, but it was like being struck by a 2x4. And here is why it struck me:

The way Rinpoche was teaching in this video was very much like the way I write blogs here on Facebook. I am not comparing myself to Rinpoche mind you, so please get that straight. I am speaking strictly of the “style” of my writing that you folks here on Facebook are quite used to, trying to be direct; only in my case it probably is too long a read for you. Well, here was Rinpoche also stretching out and taking a long time to present what to me was a very profound teaching. As mentioned, it was a pith teaching, at least for me. I took it directly to heart.

As mentioned, I was riveted. In fact, I was so struck by the teaching that after my exercise, I scrambled to take the DVDs next door and continued on by starting to transcribe the entire teaching (which is almost a week long) by hand. I’m still doing it. LOL. And here is the fun part and why I am even telling this story.

It came in the form of a mini-realization. While I was all awash in these teachings I suddenly realized the most obvious of things. I realized where I got my own teaching or writing style from because here was Rinpoche doing the same thing, only much better of course.

And then the obvious occurred to me: I am his student! This should be no surprise to me because I have been working with Rinpoche for some 36 years now. LOL. Yet, what I was realizing is that I AM Rinpoche’s student because his teaching has so soaked into me that I didn’t even realize it. I am his student in every way I am capable of, which is very less than what he is, but still, I carry his stamp in who I am and the dharma I practice I do.

What I thought was my own way of cutting through dharma problems was Rinpoche’s way too. Although Rinpoche is way more skillful (and everything), the way he presents dharma cuts through my confusion and bewilderment like a blowtorch, only I never until now saw it that way. Like it or not, I am his.

Putting all this into words here, it does not sound so remarkable, but trust me, it is. A whole lot of what I like to think of as my own, my very life approach, is from the blessings of Rinpoche. In my own small way, I am like him. Not only do I treasure him as my teacher, a little bit of him has rubbed off. And in that instant or realization it was like a connection or tube snapped together in my mind. I belong to Rinpoche's lineage! In my own way, I am like him as much as I am able. That's where my dharma comes from, from Rinpoche.

Of course I always understood this conceptually, but I had never realized it totally. That's what realization is all about: realization. LOL.

THE TIDES OF DHARMA

February 6, 2019

There is what the weather-folks call “freezing rain” and then there is what I experienced this morning a little after 3 AM as I made my way between buildings to our dharma center and the elliptical machine I have to work-out on. It was not what I know as hail, but rather as the local weather report said, “freezing rain,” but a rain of ice, of tiny ice pellets, that stung as they hit my face and filled the ground around me (like those tiny foam-pellets which we find in packaging that stick to your fingers almost magnetically) until the ground was covered with a myriad of very tiny round pieces of ice. And the ground was slippery too. I had to wear my old shoes on which I have ice cleats just to get across. That’s the outside.

Aside from that, on the Inside, here I am, still kind of awash in all of the waves of dharma that have been washing over me in these last days. Sometimes I think that if Margaret drives to KTD, our monastery in New York (which she just did), I somehow am connected and get the benefit of her trip. Dharma engulfs me. Who can explain it? Who can tell you why? I can’t, but as mentioned, nevertheless, here I am.

I really am still too much at sea to compose a blog today, so I will just say a few words. It is amazing how the mind expands and contracts constantly, expanding, so that (like a wave going out) everything rushes in to fill the void, then kind of contracting, so that everything is rearranged in a slightly new order. Nothing has changed so that anyone but me would know, but there is some new sense of empowerment here, but it is way beyond words and may take me days, weeks, or even months to digest (and orient myself) enough so that I could find the words to share it with you folks here. I can say that it’s a good thing!

MANTRA: THE ANCHOR OF MIND

February 7, 2019

For some time now I've been studying and transcribing a very profound teaching on Mahamudra, taking it all in. And there is so much input from the richness of this particular teaching that I have no single take-away from it all. It is overwhelming. However, one little insight that continues to pierce the veil of my own confusion is this, so let me set the stage, so to speak:

I often blog here on Facebook about the tedium of beginning dharma practices, the various preliminaries and the inescapable tendency to slip into rote repetition of actions and words. If we repeat a practice repeatedly and for thousands and thousands of times, at best it gets worn so thin that it gets transparent (and we can either begin to see through it) or else it gets just plain tedious. The first choice works, the second does not.

In other words, perhaps we see this most clearly in beads and mantras. And this is common to all of us who use mantras, prayer-wheels, beads, or any procedure where the fabricated focus on a mantra or beads serve as an anchor that allows the mind to rest and thereby frees us to see beyond the rote repetition and into the luminous clarity of the mind itself. Of course, this is also what worry-beads are all about. They are an anchor or magnet for our extraneous thoughts, freeing the mind to be clear and transparent. In other words, these mnemonic techniques (mantras, beads, etc.) are taking the hit of tedium for us, so to speak.

The focus on the beads and mantras kind of “renders unto Caesar what is Caesar’s,” and misdirects that restlessness inside us that wants to be occupied, so that we can see beyond the beads (and restlessness) into the nature of the mind itself or at least somewhere in that ballpark. That’s the merit or value of beads, rosaries, and all touchstones. They anchor our focus so that the mind is free to rest.

Yet, even that only placates the “symptoms” of rote and the tedium it entails. What is the real solution to the distractions of practice, be it dharma practice or any other kind of practice?

And the answer, IMO, after looking long and hard for many years (decades and in fact my lifetime) is as simple as "interest." We must be interested in what we do to cross the deserts of practice, be those the deserts of mantra repetition or any other form of anchoring practice. The gate or door to the dharma opens only with the Key of heartfelt interest. If we do not have genuine interest in the dharma (and its practices), progress is minimal to nonexistent.

Finding that thread of interest in my life has been a major preoccupation for me since I was five or six years old. IMO, nothing is as important.

THE SECRETS OF OATMEAL

February 8, 2019

Here in Northern Michigan, especially in winter, we do need oatmeal! And morning oatmeal is the way it happens. But all oatmeal is not created the same. Those of you who love oatmeal will read on, while those of you who don't really know it yet probably won't.

I am not going to flood you here with why oats (and especially whole oats) are healthy. You can get that on the web. What I will point out is that there are different kinds of oatmeal available and how they differ. And I will share with you a secret of how to enjoy whole-groat oats on a time budget..

ROLLED OATS

Take some perfectly good oat groats (oats without a hull) and smash them between two steel rollers and you get rolled oats. All seeds are nature's way of protecting the future. We all know that. So the moment you smash an oat groat, you expose it to the elements and it begins to lose its life expectancy and also its health benefits. It becomes a processed food.

And depending on how much you flatten and further process it determines whether you have regular rolled-oats oatmeal or some form of 'instant' oatmeal, which is further processed. I don't eat these except in Apple Crisp and related deserts.

STEEL-CUT OATS

Take the whole groat and instead of smashing it flat, cut it into several small pieces with sharp steel and you have steel-cut oats. Everyone loves steel-cut oats more than rolled oats because it tastes way better and is somewhat healthier. There is still some life protection in the pieces over being just flattened, but cutting the groats is still processing, with the attendant results.

.

GRINDING WHOLE-OAT GROATS

Now, were talkin'. These are the only ones we eat nowadays and they taste way, way better than steel-cut or any other cut

or flattened oats. And they are very much healthier in that all of the precious nutrients (and so on) are still right there. But there is a price to pay and that is the fact that you unless you want to cook them whole, you have grind them yourself. And we do.

In this super-busy world, who has time to grind oats? Well, it only takes about one or two minutes and it makes a world of difference in the eating. You can pick up a used hand grain mill on Ebay for not much or get them on Amazon.com new for about \$19.95. You just put in the oats (or any grain) and grind. Out comes the oatmeal. It is an easy hassle and does not take long.

GRAIN MILLS

We retired our hand mills years ago and invested in an electric mill, of which there are many on the market. Ours is from Retsel:

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

It is kind of pricey (\$400-500) but it lasts a lifetime, is built like a tank, and will grind all-you-can-eat flours of any kind, like for bread, pastas, etc. Think about it.

MORNING OATMILL

The morning oatmeal is as easy as pouring about 1/3 cup of whole oat groats into the mill and turning it on. A minute or so later I've got oatmeal at whatever type of grind (fine or coarse) I like. Meanwhile, I have been boiling 1 cup of water. I just pour the ground oatmeal into the boiling water, whisk it a bit, and I have fresh oatmeal that also has all the bran and nutrients that the whole oat had.

And, if I am in the mood, I roast the whole oats for a minute in a cast iron frying pan before I grind them and I have toasted oats oatmeal. Too good!

WHOLE OAT GROATS: THE ONLY WE TO GO

My wife Margaret, who really is the wizard of grain grinding and oatmeal cooking, usually soaks the whole oats ahead of time, causing them to swell up, dries them out in our oven, roasts them, and then grinds them. This is the tip-of-the-top best, but I am just a neophyte in a hurry and have never done

that yet, but I piggyback on her dedication in this area. But here is the ultimate in eating oatmeal, at least in my opinion.

THE ULTIMATE SECRET TO OATMEAL

The very best tasting, also the healthiest, way to eat oatmeal is also one of the easiest, and that is to eat only the whole oat groats, not milled, not cut, and not ground. It is about the only way I will eat oatmeal any more. And it's easy!

THE LONG WAY

All you need is the whole oat groats, which are readily available. Of course, the outer straw or husk is gone. And I will only use organic oat groats. You can lightly brown the whole groats in a cast-iron frying pan for that roasted taste, if you like.

Then, simply cook the oats in a sauce pan with enough water so that they don't dry out and put them to slow-cook on the stove. It is easier if you soak the oats overnight. You will need a flame-tamer under the sauce pan, so don't forget. And then just cook the groats very slowly, stirring (or scraping) the bottom of the pan ever twenty minutes or so. Delicious!

THE SHORT WAY AND THE BEST WAY IMO

My wife Margaret came up with this method and it is the best and easiest way to make whole-groat oats for breakfast. Soak the whole oat groats overnight.

Then, in the morning, place some of the soaked whole-oat groats in a small Nutri, Nutra, or Magic Bullet. Add enough water to cover and grind it as fine as you like. This will cut the whole groats up on the spot, thus giving them no time to degrade by the cutting.

And, once ground this way, they will cook in just a few minutes and IMO they are the most delicious and also the healthiest (organic, of course) way to make oatmeal we have ever found.

EXTRA NOTES

The pilot light in our commercial oven is so strong that it dries things out. By the way, perhaps the best single kitchen investment we ever made was to purchase a commercial gas oven with six burners. That was in 1972 and it is still perfect

today these many years later. And you can often pick up a used oven for very little at restaurant supply houses. Get it steam cleaned and you have something of very great value that will make you smile every time you use it.

So there you have my oatmeal spiel for what it is worth, and for making a great breakfast it is worth a lot, if you have time for one. As I get older, there is less and less processed food that satisfies and so I am being herded toward whole-this and whole-that. Whole grains ground are hard to beat in this category. Try 'em.

DHARMA: THE BLESSINGS OF THE GURU

February 10, 2019

This blog is about the blessings of the guru. I should add that before we can supplicate the blessings of a guru, we have to actually have a guru. LOL. That will have to be another blog.

It cannot be overstated how important it is for the student or disciple to gain the blessing of the guru. In Vajrayana lineages, the blessing of the guru is not an option. I also feel that unless we have experienced such a blessing our self, we can have very little understanding or concept as to what this is all about, so let's talk about it. Here is an excerpt from a dharma teaching that is typical:

“And that is really the only thing that is important. It doesn't matter how they instruct you, what the actual details or sequence of practice is. What is important is that the guru actually transmits to you, through the medium of your devotion, the blessings of his or her lineage.”

The blessings of the guru are frequently described as a shower. And this “shower of blessings,” as it is called, is not a shower from above, like a rain or snow shower, but a trigger that sets off a shower within us based on our devotion. And so, the guru's blessing is more like a trigger that we alone could never find. In many sadhanas, we always imagine the guru above in front of us or on the top of our head (sometimes in our heart), but we all know the guru is within us and like a pinata, our guru knows just how to break us open so that we can shower ourselves and be immersive or engulfed.

I feel this whole idea or concept of devotion is too often misunderstood. As a disciple, no one is asking us to give something we do not voluntarily give when we work closely with an authentic guru in a traditional guru/disciple relationship. It's not a one-way street.

Devotion is not a commodity or utility that comes from anywhere other than from within each of us. It cannot be grandfathered in, bought or sold, or even transferred to us from anywhere other than ourselves. And it's not even something that we can drum up and superimpose on the guru/disciple relationship.

If we want a perfect example of what the word "connate" or "co-emergent" means, it is the guru/disciple relationship. The devotion to the guru and the guru's blessing are connate. The devotion and the blessings are co-emergent. They arise together.

In other words, I don't believe they occur in sequence, like the student feels devotion and then the guru gives the blessing or the guru gives the blessing and then the devotion to the guru arises. I believe they are connate. They arise together as one and are therefore indivisible. The technical word for this guru/disciple relationship is Samaya.

In the dharma practices, these blessings of the guru(s) can be and are supplicated regularly. There is no question that many dharma texts and prayers have the phrase "Jin Gyi Lap" (Tibetan) as part of the supplication, which translates to something like "Engulf me in your blessings" or "Engulf me in your splendor." And this is exactly what this means. Like a tide coming in, when those blessings come, it is like a wave that engulfs us. And it changes us perfectly.

It does not come from above, below, or from any direction because we are just engulfed before any direction could be determined. We are just swept away and engulfed in these waves of splendor.

And, in my experience, following any "blessing of the guru" comes increased confidence and certainty in the dharma and that amounts to progress toward recognizing the nature of the mind, which is the goal of all dharma practice.

DHARMA: THE LIE OF SUBJECT AND OBJECT

February 11, 2019

This is a quote from a commentary on a teaching by Tsele Rangröl Rinpoche called “The Lamp of Mahamudra.”

“When the lie of subject and object is exposed, that’s called the “Realization of the View.” It’s also called seeing the nature of your mind. It’s the same thing. It’s also called understanding the meaning of dharma.”

I find this interesting, not because I pretend to have mastered “The View,” but because it caused me to realize exactly the date that I began to work on the problem. It was May 6, 1964 in Berkeley, California when I first took LSD. I know, that sounds hokey, but truth is truth and it was on acid that (for the very first time ever) this young 23-year-old raised-in-the-1950s kid realized (actually experienced) “the lie of subject and object” in real-time. That night changed my life forever.

Yes, as the folklore of the time warned us, acid can alter your mind permanently – forever. And it did, but not as I feared, but for the better. It was from that date that I first saw the nature of my own mind, at least enough for it to be something that was up to me to resolve, i.e. that I could do something about. Before that I felt like a dandelion seed blowing in the winds of life.

That acidy-night I realized that much of what I saw (and often feared) in the outside world were my own projections personified. It could only be me, because what I saw that night was tailored exactly for my personal likes and dislikes.

All my biases and prejudices, likes and dislikes, and most hidden fears were alive, well, and acting themselves out right before my eyes. It was like the outer world was a movie screen on which my deepest hopes and fears were playing. All this was news to me that night. Up to then I thought I was a voice, alone, crying in the wilderness and the world around me, that I found myself in, was completely “other” than myself. I, basically, was a victim in a world I had no part of, an other world (or world of “other”) that I did not create.

However, from that night forward I was a co-creator. I was responsible for my own situation, That realization is the “lie of subject and object” mentioned above. That all-night LSD session in a late-spring night in Berkeley, California was the differential I wanted (lacked) to do something about my condition.

Aside from the very dramatic appearances that can be typical of an acid trip, what remained when all that died down as morning came was a realization, something that is as true today as it was then, that the dualism of myself and the “other” was at best an inconvenient fiction and at worst the curse or nightmare of mundane existence.

Once I realized the fiction of self and other, I had seen the nature of my mind, not perhaps in the sense that we speak of in the advanced dharma realization practices, but it made enough sense for me to instantly become a student of the dharma and take my first step toward liberation.

DHARMA: COMING EVENTS CAST THEIR SHADOWS

February 12, 2019

If I take my phenomenological temperature (as I constantly do) as to what's going on inside me these days, it's kind of like those old Magic-8 Balls. Lately I keep coming up with "Try Again Later." So, what does this mean?

Since these kinds of things are ineffable, obviously I can't say or put it into words, but that does not mean I don't "know" or am not experiencing whatever it is. I am.

The fact is that this last period of time (for some weeks now) the doors of my mind have been blown open and the winds of knowing have rushed through me. It hasn't stopped yet. I have received such an influx and massive imprint that I'm still waiting for it all to die down. For all I know, it could be a new constant. I am reminded of an old quote from the poet William Blake in his "Marriage of Heaven and Hell" that goes "Enough or Too Much." Well, right now it's perhaps too much. I am not at all uncomfortable. I'm just waiting for some conceptualization to appear that might explain all this, although as time stretches on I have to admit this looks unlikely at best.

However, since any of the higher practices, like Insight meditation (or Mahamudra itself) are non-dualistic, meaning there is no subject and object, so that my looking for a conclusion is premature, if not downright oxymoronic. After all, there is the concept of "the point of no return" to consider, the point from which we don't return. LOL.

And I have been pissing and moaning for some years about Insight meditation (at least the way I do it) being too local and not global enough. What's going on right now with me is pretty global or at least much more global than I have known up to this point. And like most dharma realizations, it's not how I imagined it would be. Yet, that's par for the course and only makes sense.

If I try to put my finger on it, which is conceptual, there is push-back, as if the other shoe has not fallen yet or will perhaps never fall. It's either that or the whole idea of the other shoe falling itself is so dualistic that it's a step backward.

To sum it up, I feel very much at sea, immersed, and yet I'm not cloudy. Everything is pretty lucid and within arm's reach. By that, what I mean is that I don't have to go and get something (some idea or concept) to think about, like a comfort blanket. I don't have any particular direction, yet here I am right in the middle (the center) of life. As The Bard wrote, "Something is happening, but you don't know what it is, do you Mr. Jones." I have an inkling.

DHARMA: THE LIGHT JUST BEFORE DAWN

February 13, 2019

The jury is still out as to what I'm going through internally lately and the fact that there has been no conceptual resolution starts to look like my answer. No answer is also an answer and that can be conceptualized.

As they say, "Coming events cast their shadow" and I have been gathering the signs for some time now and they are starting to line up and make sense at last. It's like when lightning strikes and you wait for the sound of the thunder-clap. The longer you wait, the farther away the strike, but in this case it's the reverse. The longer I wait for a change to make sense, the greater the import of the change.

Since I have been waiting for many weeks now and, if I think about it (that is, if I look), the signs are already there that I have been waiting on for months and they seem to be aligning themselves with signs I've been tracking for some years. That is, if I look at it that way, I believe a pattern is forming that I can get my conceptual mind around. It's like driving into the future using the rear-view mirror.

And such a slow-moving change amounts to some sort of more massive reorientation. It's as if my mental and psychological space-capsule, like a huge gyroscope, is slowly rotating in the deep space of my dharma. Of course, these are just words. However, the natural discerning intelligence within me has started to be revealed and function on its own and the results are (at least to me) very interesting. You might ask: what am I seeing?

I don't want to drag everyone through what is quite a long story and yet I have to leave enough breadcrumbs that you can follow along if you want to. It involves my photography and photographs.

I have been taking nature photographs since about 1955 when I was 14-years old. Over the years, my interest in photography was, well, reasonable. However, some dozen years ago, my photo-taking was vastly accelerated when I stumbled upon Insight Meditation (how to do it) not on the

cushion as I always thought I would, but rather out in nature taking photos. I have written about this many times, so I will just post a link for those who actually want the chapter and verse.

<http://spiritgrooves.net/.../Mahamudra%20-%20A%20Story%20Vers...>

And, because I awakened to realizing Insight Meditation through photography (and not by way of the usual method of on the cushion), for quite some time after that awakening, if I wanted to practice Insight Meditation, I had to take my camera and go out in nature and take photos. Consider that please.

Insight Meditation is, IMO, so powerful that (for the first year) I was out watching the sun come up at dawn every morning (and taking nature photos) when it was not raining, from late May until the frost made it too cold to go out outside in late fall -- every dawn. When is the last time you were outside watching the sun come up, much less for six months. That's how important Insight Meditation can be.

With the help of a lama friend, I eventually understood exactly what I was doing, but nevertheless, I was stuck only being able to practice Insight Meditation while doing photography. Sitting on the cushion back at home, which I tried, there was no Insight Meditation happening. How confusing is that? The only method or technique, as mentioned, that worked was photography, and a particular kind of close-up nature photography at that.

Anyway, after the arising of Insight Meditation, it has taken me many years of actual exploration and effort to expand and extend Insight Meditation from photography to other areas of my life. It is axiomatic that any realization has to be expanded and extended. All the pith teachings say this. I found that totally true, but had no idea how difficult it was.

To make a rather long (and arduous) story short, like a spider crawling across a web, handhold by handhold, I very, very slowly was able to extend my practice to include other areas of life and interest aside from photography. It is exactly similar to having a serious illness and the time it takes to rehabilitate or get your body to do what you need to have it do again. It's

like learning to walk all over again. It's very difficult and the difficulty is mostly a matter of confidence. That's a great topic for another blog: Confidence.

The bottom line or end-result is that, after many years, I can now (kind of) perform Insight Meditation doing most anything. It's like I have adopted a more Zen approach to everything I do: take it to the path. Yet, there is an interesting casualty in all this progress and it's too early to tell whether it is permanent or not. My interest in photography, which all these years has been driven by my absolute need to do Insight Meditation, has been waning to the point of not being as important to me as it once was. Push me, pull you.

I now can do Insight Meditation by writing things like this blog and other areas of life too. I no longer need to take photos in order to practice Insight Meditation and, as you might imagine, I haven't been doing that as much. Of course, this is winter and there is very little to photograph as far as flowers, etc., so that could be a factor as well. Still, I feel a shift. This type of meditation is now more portable.

What I have learned is that it was the Insight Meditation in the nature photos that interested me more than just taking nature photos – the baby and the bathwater. This is good and bad, of course. It's not that I did not take hundreds of thousands of photographs, mostly of flowers. I did. I had little choice. LOL. And I got good at it.

However, now I feel that I have been turned loose and freed from being restricted to just one technique or method of performing Insight Meditation (photography). I can now meditate in that manner doing many things, so to speak.

As mentioned, what this means for my photography is too early to tell. I don't feel the impulse to photograph as I have for all these years. I do feel that same impulse to write things like this and so on, so the impulse lives on. I also have enough photos to post one each day until long after I leave this planet. LOL.

The moral or import of this story is that to me the dharma and the driving force of Bodhicitta are stronger than any other force I have known. It is perhaps unusual that I got caught in photography as where I first learned Insight Meditation, rather

than in on-the-cushion practice. However, I have worked my way back to “normal” or near-normal (dharma-wise) for the most part.

One thing I learned in this process is that the dharma best works with what we love in life and can be quite natural. It seeks the path of least resistance, whatever is most familiar to us by nature. In my case, that was Mother Nature. This gives me hope that other folks like me could find their way to dharma realization through what they best know or love and not only through the prescribed techniques from textbooks. Techniques are just to get us in the ballpark. It’s up to us to hit a home run.

In fact, the whole process of discovering Insight Meditation reminds me of a live birth and I have been to a half dozen live births. It’s an enlightening experience, for sure, but it’s a little messy too. LOL. And, above all, it is 100% a natural process, just as a stream or river always finds a way.

That being said, I felt that old photography urge yesterday, not for flowers, but for photos like this of the Mahasiddha Tilopa. LOL. This statue is from the little shrine in my office, where I practice.

DHARMA: WHAT GIVES ME PAUSE

February 14, 2019

In writing these blogs, I can't emphasize everything at once or each time I write. And what really gives me pause can't be repeated or emphasized enough, IMO, but I will mention it here and emphasize how important it is.

What little I know about realization by way of the dharma tells me that "Realization" is not a walk in the park. It's hard won; otherwise, we would all be enlightened by now. Of course, like any of us, I can read all kinds of dharma teachings and books. However, as helpful as reading may be, it all comes down to what I understand, what I have personally experienced, and (most of all) what I have actually realized, if anything. And that's a pyramid with "Realization" at the tip of the top. LOL.

With the dharma, it's not enough to just stick our toe in the water. Baptism in the dharma, so to speak, requires full immersion and nothing less. We must be all-in. And very, very, very few people can get the dharma all-at-once. For most of us it takes time and lots of it. And here comes my worry: what little realization I have tasted makes me stop and think, gives me pause for thought. Why is that? Some of you might be interested and, IMO, this is not an easy truth.

What I want to share with you here could probably be just my own problems speaking up, but I doubt it. You may be much more fortunate than me, yet in my case "realization," what little I have realized, did not come easily. It seems that in order for me to listen, absorb, and learn the dharma at heart, which means more than just conceptually, I have to sober-up (so to speak) or be somewhat in dire straits.

In other words, it takes quite a lot to bring me down from my ivory tower of conceptuality long enough to take in the reality of what is. In fact, to me it often seems that everyone is walking around acting as if they are going to live forever. And perhaps if we factor in rebirth, it's true, but in what form? Nevertheless, like driving a car, we had better keep our hands

on the steering wheel and the tires touching the road. I am speaking to myself.

What few breakthroughs I have had in dharma did not come when I was at the top of a cycle, feeling great, but rather just the opposite, they came when I was forced to taste the blood reality, when I was at the bottom or the bay, so to speak. My nose has to be forced to the grindstone before I “really” get much realization. And so, what am I saying here?

What I’m saying is that as hard as hard-times can be for us to weather, when it comes to the dharma, tough times can be a godsend, often the only thing that will get our attention. Otherwise, we “Sail on Silver Girl” like the line from the song “Bridge Over Troubled Waters.” We never touch the ground. In every image of the Buddha of our times, Shakyamuni, his right hand reaches down to touch the ground. That’s tells us something important, kind of the mudra for our times.

The tough times, the times beyond enduring, like when a loved one dies or whatever touches us deeply are the times that give me pause from the incessant distractions apparently I am so fond of. It’s the times that my Self is shattered, like Humpty Dumpty, and it takes hour, days, weeks, or whatever for me to put my self back together. These times are when I’m outside or beside myself, times when I can be most open to dharma.

I know that we can also realize dharma in the good times, but, sadly, at least for me, I listen better to truth when I am not distracted by my everyday fixations. And times of great sorrow and interruption, when I’m staring out into the void, have been, for me, the times when the dharma has most come home to roost. It gets my attention. Of course, it could be just me, but I doubt it. It could be you too.

And so, these times of interruption from the merry-go-round of life, these hard times are ones not to just hunker-down, wait it out, and weather, but times to take note and make full use of. For me, these often have been times of great imprint, when whatever reorientation I am capable of are stamped into my consciousness.

Apparently, most of us have been skimming off the top of life for innumerable lifetimes, with our tires seldom (if ever)

actually touching the road. Just as the good times are necessary to keep us going, so the hard-times are at least as important to guide us. That's my two cents.

I am reminded of a song written by my daughter May Erlewine called "Rise Up Singing," in which is the line 'You know, trouble ain't built to last.' Here is that song, for those of you who are gifted with time enough to hear it.

"Rise Up Singing" by May Erlewine

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

DHARMA: WANTING THE GOOD

February 15, 2019

“Wanting the good” and “Wanting to be good” are two different things. Something that has always amazed me in myself is my inability to “want” or choose to be good. Now, “good”, can be whatever we think it is, whatever is the opposite of being “bad,” so to speak.

“Good” is not just something we think, but rather something we do, how we act. And the Buddhists, with all their many lists of things to be aware of, are quick to point out that “choosing the good” over the bad is just common sense. There is a naughty part of me that is always murmuring “I’m not so sure.”

Yet, I almost never test the good to see if it is good enough (i.e. not a little bad), but I test the hell of what is bad, to see if it is a little good. My bad habits are tried out almost an infinite number of times to make sure I am not mistaken about them being bad or bad for me.

This is nowhere more apparent than with food and eating. There are foods and foodstuffs that I shouldn’t eat because they are not good for me, not good for my health. The books say. The doctor’s say. My own mind says that some foods are just plain bad for my (or anyone’s) health. And yet, I am not able to just “Drop it!” like I used to tell my dog (when we went on walks) to drop some dead thing in his mouth.

I keep testing it, eating it one more time, to determine if it really, really, really is that bad for me. Well, there is no question it is bad, at least for me and my health. I’m always protecting the bad and seldom the good (very Trump like). This reminds me of a funny story.

A few years ago I spent a week in New Orleans for an astrology conference. And New Orleans is not only famous for its fried foods (fried everything); I was shocked to find there was almost no healthy food around. For example, trying to find an avocado or the clarity of a salad there was very difficult. Everything was fried until it almost suffocated me.

Yet, in that trip I realized that (somewhere inside me) I do value good food, meaning food that is good for me. When there was not healthy food to be found, I was horrified to HAVE to eat fried this and fried that or almost nothing at all. It exposed my hypocrisy. LOL.

So, when the chips are down, I know right from wrong, but when there is the least bit of ambiguity, I seem to play dumb and do this or that against my own best knowledge and judgment. I'm watching myself do it.

My point here, which is made clear in the Buddhist teachings, is that it is up to us to choose the good and that the good is nothing to fool around or play with. In fact, they make a big deal of when a practitioner of the dharma no longer equivocates, "maybe I will and maybe I won't," but naturally and always chooses the good, whatever that may be, in any situation. The purity of our action is sustained and this changes our faith in ourselves.

They go on to say that eventually we choose the good in every situation and that the part of us that likes to "be bad," delinquent, or naughty just dries up and blows away.

I have yet to reach that point. I am working on it, but I'm still testing the bad-for-me to see if it is not good, when I know damn well it's not. Capiche?

DHARMA: HARDENING OFF

February 16, 2019

Gyalsey Togmey Rinpoche states:

'When my belly is full and the sun shines,
I look like a practitioner.
When confronting adversity,
I am an ordinary person.
Since my mind has not mingled with the dharma,
Grant your blessings that my heart may be flexible.'

[From a commentary by Tsele Randröl Rinpoche, translated by Erik Pema Kunsang.]

This quote may not be familiar to many of you, but its meaning should be well-known to all of us interested in the dharma. There is a marked, if not a vast difference, between the state of our mind sitting on the cushion and that same mind caught in an hour-long traffic jam. This is a perennial problem for all beginning practitioners (and for some more advanced students too). We can become quite ordinary in an instant, at least I can. LOL.

In many of the Buddhists teachings, a student is advised or directed to seek a place of solitude to practice. For many of us living within the city limits, this may have to be the corner of a room or a separate shrine room. Then, some (or many) years later, the student is directed to take their practice off the cushion and to town, so to speak. It's pretty obvious how that works.

When we are learning and seeking stability of mind and practice, finding an out-of-the-way spot, some place of solitude, is helpful, perhaps even necessary. And then, when we have acquired some stabilization in our practice, we gradually become increasingly immune to outside distractions, like the marketplace. At least, that's the theory.

In fact, at some point in our practice, we need to expose ourselves to the ordinary traffic of life, perhaps very gradually at first. In later practices, thoughts, distractions (and what-not)

become the actual fuel that fires our meditation. As mentioned, in advanced practices, without thoughts and challenges we can't advance in our practice.

The Zen tradition has all kinds of lovely woodcuts and drawings that illustrate this, like the Ox-herder series. "Meanwhile, back in the jungle" as the old tune "Stranded in the Jungle" by the Cadets went, we each have to learn how to find stability in our particular jungle. I know I do.

I can be humming along like some kind of bodhisattva, being kind, friendly, rolling with the punches, and so on, when "Wham!" I 'm socked in the stomach by something or other. I fall to earth faster than a lightning and my mind is immediately even less than ordinary. And I am not the only one.

As of now, I no longer have many unrealistic expectations as to my meditation's stability. I can be stable or I can be not; it all depends on the mental weather. The front-lines of regular living are where our stability (or lack thereof) is tested out.

IMO, our dharma practice (and any realization we might have) is only as good as we are on a bad mental-weather day. If we are unstable under pressure, then we are unstable period. In many of the teachings on the bardo and after-death states, it is made very clear that when we traverse that period between death and rebirth, we are very, very sensitive and during that time the stability of our mind is crucial in terms of making the right decisions that result in our next rebirth. A little instability can send us careening off track into who knows what kind of rebirth, but for sure it would be one with no say on our part, no choice on our part.

So, how wonderful it is to have a place of refuge in our home to practice stability. Yet, keep in mind that at some point we have to galvanize or harden-off our stability by testing it in the vicissitudes of ordinary life. We when enter the bardo, it won't be on a cushion or in a corner. We will be totally exposed.

DHARMA: THE MYTH OF SEPARATION

February 17, 2019

I am sometimes asked what about how the lineage and dharma path I am on differs from other forms of Buddhism, other paths. Of course, there are said to be 84,000 different dharmas and the teachings say that is just a big number; and they go on to say that there are many more paths than that. Where I find folks stumbling a bit is summed up by the great Mahasiddha Tilopa in this quote:

“This intrinsic and innate wakefulness,
Remains at the heart of all beings.
And yet, it is never perfected,
Without being pointed out by a master.”

And the question that comes up is one I too asked quite early on. I was certain that I could find my way to recognizing the true nature of the mind on my own. I didn't need a guru or master-meditator to point it out for me. If it was there, I would find it. Of course, back then I did not have an authentic dharma teacher. LOL. Pretty much, I was just whistling in the dark.

Well, unfortunately that attitude (and a ticket) would get me a ride on the bus, so to speak. Yes, I did my damndest to figure it all out, but what I came up with was basically a patchwork quilt of concepts, one filled with gaping holes. There was some continuity, but not enough to realize the nature of the mind I was struggling with. There finally was no doubt in my mind that I was at sea.

And yet, over and over again, I find in virtually all the pith Mahamudra teachings the gist of the above quote, that without an authentic master we will not (and cannot) recognize the true nature of the mind. This is what is written and taught. It is not that it is impossible to recognize the nature of the mind on our own, just that (according to the Samadhi Raja Sutra) it takes many aeons, sometimes three, seven, or thirty-seven incalculable aeons. Some sources say that an aeon is a billion years. I suppose that I could hope

that I am at the end of those endless aeons, but odds are that I'm not. LOL.

It took me a long to grasp that such statements are not true because just these great lamas say them; these authentic teachers say them because they are true. Of course, I thought about that. I felt I was too busy or it was too messy to try and work with a teacher or I did not want to depend on the guidance of another person, etc. When it came to rationalization, I was skilled. I wanted to do it all by myself, and so on. All this because, in truth, I had not found an authentic teacher who was willing to work with me. And I had no idea what that might be like.

In truth, I was not rich enough in respect for myself to feel I deserved such a teacher. I could not afford it. At any rate, it was not permitted. I had not accumulated enough merit to have a life-teacher appear.

And so, like an umbrella that I held over my own head to avoid the rain of wisdom blessings, I was not even open or interested in working with an authentic teacher. I felt I had to remain independent of other people; otherwise I was (somehow) weak. This whole guru-thing seemed ickier than finding a life partner to marry and at the time I hadn't been able to do that either. LOL. I felt impoverished when it came to things that mattered.

Of course, all this ended the very moment I actually met my root dharma teacher. Gone! All I needed was someone whose teachings affected me so that they sunk in and I was able to actually learn from them. I love learning dharma. The imprint of learning is the proof of the pudding! And, mirabile dictu, this particular teacher was willing to work with me, warts and all! Under all my crap and rationalizing, that's all I was looking for. And I found it, but I actually had to look.

My point is that each of us might just check our settings once in a while to see if we are even open to finding an authentic dharma teacher. For years, despite my many words, at heart I was not open to having a teacher or thought one couldn't really exist. As they say, we often are our own worst enemy. So, it pays to see if the door is even open and before we try and walk through it.

DHARMA: INNATE INSIGHT

February 18, 2019

One of the elephants in the room for dharma practitioners is “reification,” our compulsive habit of gilding the lily, piling on or shoring up reality. My first dharma teacher used to say to me (and many times):

“My God is no beggar! He does need me to make the ends meet. The ends already meet.”

In essence, that describes reification, trying to make things more real than then they are. And this perhaps arises from our inability to look the emptiness that we feel in the face for what it is.

However, there is a larger elephant in the room that may be even more present and yet is almost totally invisible. And that is the myth that “Recognition” and Enlightenment is something that we somehow have to create or develop. In other words, we have to “get” enlightened.

This may be totally understandable conceptually, but that does not mean this misperception is easy to unravel. It finds us putting effort in our step which only further confuses our general bewilderment. Everything we artificially conflate has to be deconstructed at some later point in our dharma path. In particular, our efforts to become enlightened, our “trying so hard,” only pushes realization farther beyond our reach.

This is particularly evident when we touch into the realization practices like the special form of Vipassana (Insight) as used in Mahamudra meditation, and so on. If I grasp the teachings correctly (or even close), just as it is said that Buddha Nature is innate within us, fully there in all sentient beings (only not recognized), so too is what is called Insight or discernment -- Prajna.

In fact, one of the most fascinating teachings I have studied states that Prajna (innate discernment) is not something that we develop over time, but like Buddha Nature, it is inherent within us and only has to be discovered, uncovered so that it can shine through and discern. That way of seeing

discernment was a new concept for me, that it is not something we somehow get. It's already there..

In other words, the discernment (prajna) is already inherent in each of us and is always working (and on duty), only obscured by the veils of karma and ignorance on our part. As we work to remove obscurations through the purification practices, our innate prajna (discernment) is revealed and can be seen as already functioning; it becomes available to us. Maybe it has always been what we could call our better judgment, way down in there, only we were never fully aware of it.

And so, in this sense, Vipassana is already always with us, but misdirected outwardly (like we would shine a flashlight) at the world instead of inwardly on itself. In fact, the teachings clearly say that Vipassana in this regard is fully present, only masquerading as ordinary thought like heat lightning in late summer. Once again, it comes down to a lack of realization on our part. We don't (are unable) to recognize our inherent sense of discernment that is flashing before our eyes every moment and day of the week. It's the brilliance in our thought.

I know. This concept takes some real contemplation, at least for me, to begin to grasp it properly; it reminds me of those fossil hunters that very carefully separate the petrified bones of a dinosaur from the matrix in which it is embedded.

And all of this because in reality this is just one big ball of wax, meaning that to call out as anything more than distinct practices (like Shamata, Vipassana or whatever) is to lose the sense of the whole to the parts. This is a living breathing meditation that has been called "No Meditation." Since everything is present, of course all the parts we can examine are present (or can be called out), but to make a point of that is to allow the parts to conceal the whole.

And so, the Vipassana that we all seek to realize is alive, well, and so close to us that we can't see it. In other words, we can't discern "discernment," so to speak. It is so much part of the matrix of our own confused mind that it is in constant use in every way, but just not focused on itself.

And just as we can't see our own eye (but we can still see), there is "seeing" without something being seen, seeing

without the duality of a see-er and something to be seen.
There is seeing "seeing" itself, with nothing to be seen but the seeing itself.

DHARMA: THE RING-PASS-NOT

February 19, 2019

Not to put too fine a point on yesterday's blog, but rather to underline it, here is a quote concerning Shamata (tranquility meditation) and Vipassana (insight meditation). In the words of Tibet's greatest yogi, Jetsun Milarepa, as quoted in a teaching called "Lamp of Mahamudra" by Tsele Natsok Rangdröl (as translated by Erik Pema Kunsang):

"Therefore, when you become adept in the flawless Shamata,
You stabilize the foundation for meditation training.

"The original wakefulness of Vipassana belonging to the main part,
Depends exclusively on having or not having,
Received the blessings and pointing-out instruction.

"Apart from that,
Even the thoughts of worldly folk,
Are indeed Vipassana manifest as conceptual thinking.

"Even that which sustains the meditation state of Shamata,
Is nothing other than Vipassana.

"That which sees, notices, or feels
Whether there is stillness or movement,
Distraction or no distraction,
Is also the knowing wakefulness of Vipassana.

"There is no other Vipassana superior to this,
Which needs to be separately accomplished.

"Therefore, from the very outset,
The supreme Shamata and Vipassana,
Co-exist and are spontaneously present."

Well, that about says it all, IMO. Vipassana (Insight Meditation) is not something we have to acquire, somehow develop, and get from somewhere. We already have it innately with us. Not only is it present, it is working non-stop, 24x7 to power what we call awareness and thought.

It becomes a question of recognizing Insight Meditation as it exists "in the wild," so to speak. Obviously, this is not a simple

task because in all the time (and rebirths) we have had until now, we have never managed it.

And Milarepa tells exactly what must be done to recognize our innate prajna or Insight and that is:

“It depends exclusively on having or not having,
Received the blessings and pointing-out instruction.”

And when Milarepa says “Blessings,” he means the blessings of an authentic guru, someone who has themselves recognized the true nature of the mind. And, of course, the “pointing-out instructions” refers to that authentic guru successfully pointing out to us (so that we get it!) the true nature of the mind.

Of course, reading this is easy and it’s also easy for these words to, as they say, go in one ear and out the other. However, there is nothing else that needs be said or can be said. If we are listening with our heart and take what has been said to heart, then it is up to us to do something about it.

If we mumble something in our head such as that in this modern, busy world it no longer works like that or that it seems impossible for us to find an authentic guru, then that is the end of the story. But we have read the story, nevertheless. What happens next is up to us.

In my own case, I came within a hair’s breadth of not meeting my own dharma teacher. Had it not been for a striking dream, it never would have happened. This story has been told before, but I will tell it again here for those who might benefit from it.

It was 1983 and I was busy running my company Matrix Software, having moved from Ann Arbor to Big Rapids in 1980 with my family. A close friend of mine, James Coats (who lived in Ann Arbor) called me up one day and said that he had met a dharma teacher he thought I might like to meet. The teacher was a Tibetan lama named Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche.

James was always looking to check out spiritual teachers who visited the Ann Arbor area. Years before, I guess I also did that too. However, at the moment, I was a businessman, running a business and raising a family.

I thanked James, but told him I had no time to drive down to Ann Arbor to see another “guru.” I had been there, done that, and kind of had burnt that bridge, so to speak. And we said goodbye.

It was a couple days later that I had this vivid dream, just before dawn. In the dream I was driving to Ann Arbor to see this radiant oriental gentleman and was happy beyond words. And with that I woke up and sat bolt upright in bed. And Margaret, my wife, had a similar dream.

I didn't know what to make of it and I told myself that I was businessman and tried to shake off the dream. But something swept through my heart leaving me with sadness that I could not or was no longer open to an event of a dream such as this. And with that, I decided that I was not going to work that day. I felt sick to my heart. I would drive to Ann Arbor to see this teacher.

So, by that time it was about 7 AM in the morning and I called my friend James Coats, getting him out of bed because he was always a late sleeper. I told him I was coming to Ann Arbor. “Ah,” said James, “it is too late. Rinpoche is leaving that morning at 10 AM.” By that time, I was awash with feelings and said to him. I don't care. I'm not working today. I'm coming to Ann Arbor anyway. If the rinpoche is there, he is there. If not, then not.

It is a 3 hour trip and, as mentioned, it was already 7 AM. So, we jumped out of bed, grabbed our kids, and got in the car (toothbrushes in hand) and headed for Ann Arbor. It was going to be close. In fact, our friend James was down at the end of a long driveway waiting to flag us in. When we arrived, he told us the Rinpoche was still there.

As we drove up the driveway, there was this dark-haired Tibetan man standing outside waiting for us. He was young, handsome, but he was not the man in my dream. My heart fell. Then James said: that's Rinpoche's translator, Ngodup Burkhar. I breathed a sigh of relief and we went inside.

Well, the long and the short of it was that when Rinpoche came into the room, he was exactly the man in my dream. And the rest is history. It was a short meeting, but one filled with light. In fact, for the next several days, Margaret and I

went around in a swoon-dream, very, very happy and being so kind to everyone we met.

Well, that didn't last. LOL. However, it was the beginning of a close relationship with Rinpoche that is still going on. He is 95 years old today and we are still working together; Rinpoche has changed our lives forever.

So, mind the signs around you and if you find a gap in your life that you can leap through, leap! Take a chance, reach out, and make an effort to contact dharma teachers. You might just get lucky as we did.

DHARMA – JUST DESERTS

February 20, 2019

I found an interesting discussion about karma near the end of very long teaching (six days) that I doubt that many will labor through. It is just audio/video and I don't think that it has been transcribed for reading. I've never found it. It's about karma and its effects.

This reminds me of the old chestnuts "Things are not as they seem" or perhaps "You can't judge a book by its cover." And this has come up in my own life as well, so I will get to that in a moment.

The teachings clearly say that if you do good things, you create good karma and if you do bad things, you create bad karma. It was part of a question-answer session and this question was something like: when we look around in the world, we quite often see people who are very good in their conduct suffering many calamities and difficult times, while people who are very bad are getting rich and living the good life – something like that. How can that be? And this is where appearances don't always seem fair. In answer to that question, Rinpoche explained the following.

Rinpoche said it is very true that many very good people, even lamas and fine practitioners, are beset by all kinds of hard times, while real scamps, people who deceive and hurt others only get rich and prosper. What's fair about that?

Rinpoche pointed out that quite often it has to do with our next life and the kind of rebirth we will get. Even though we may live an exemplary life, a life of good conduct and kindness to others, many difficult things may arise to confront us and block our path. This may have nothing to do with our actions in this life, but rather are the residue of "bad" actions in previous lives that are ripening in this one. Rinpoche went on to say that this is a good sign, a sign that our bad karma is finishing up and may signal that our next life will be a rebirth in a higher rebirth, with even greater opportunity for enlightenment

By the same token, with those who do nothing but “bad” deeds” in this life (yet are rewarded with wealth, health, and prosperity), this is not a good sign because they are in the process of using up the very last of their good karma, while busy sowing seeds of very difficult karma to come in future lives. And it suggests that the next life will be rebirth in a lower rebirth, which may be very difficult to get out of.

So, before we freak out in self-examination, Rinpoche went on to say that the emphasis in what he said is on people who commit bad deeds in this life, but prosper, and those who do good deeds in this life but suffer. The first case may be headed for a lower rebirth, while the second is headed for a higher rebirth. The rest of us are as we are.

I find the above interesting; and now my personal story: When our dog Molly (Molotov) was nearing death from old age, it became very difficult for him and for us. We had to carry him outside many times a day and cover the floors with washable water-resistant clothes because he was incontinent, and so on. It was a downhill slide toward death and we were busy with it all the time. It was horrible to see someone we love suffer so.

When we asked Rinpoche whether it would be kind to put him down and save him suffering, he responded as in the above teaching that I just went over. He said that if we put him down and saved him the suffering (this karma of a hard death), he will just have to do it all over again in a subsequent rebirth. But if we allow the difficult karma of a hard death to play out, chances are that he would have completed and exhausted this hard karma and be ready to move forward.

We took Rinpoche’s advice, which was very hard on Molly and us as well. It was day and night care. And even with pain pills, the suffering was all-consuming. We stayed with Molly until his last breath, holding his head, comforting him, and so on. It was a huge learning experience for all.

DHARMA: EMANATIONS

February 21, 2019

This quote from a teaching of Tsele Natsok Rangdröl:

“Thus emanated to tame beings, these reflections of the moon correspond to the number of vessels of water where they appear.”

IMO, this bit of what I would call pure poetry does not go in one ear and out the other. It imprints and stays in my mind for me to reflect to you, just as the quote suggests.

Like the compound eye of a honey bee or dragonfly, where there are hundreds of reflections of a single image or as in the quote above of Tsele Natsok Rangdröl, where the number of emanations of a particular quality or being depend upon the number of pools or lakes out there that are calm enough to reflect them clearly.

I can't speak to this analogy in the dharma literature, because I only have this one quote. Yet, for me this concept of the emanations of great beings depending on the number of those who are pools able to reflect them clearly is beyond brilliant. It is awe inspiring.

It reminds me of one spring day when I witnessed a total solar eclipse in the brightness of midday as reflected through the pinhole-camera-like interstices between leaves in an overhanging tree. The ground was covered with thousands of tiny images of the eclipse reflected on the ground below.

Perhaps as this teaching suggests, emanations only appear in proportion to our ability to reflect them. If we are muddy water, there is little to nothing reflected. To me, this speaks to the very real need for the preliminary practices such the Ngöndro to help calm the waters of the mind so that we can contain a reflection.

I love this concept because it puts the onus and emphasis on us the students to sustain emanations.

DHARMA -- THE SCHOLAR THAT I AM NOT

February 22, 2019

I'm not a scholar and can't even emulate them. It's hard to say what it is I am, but I'm sure that I'm not that. And, in my life, this started early-on, when I was just a kid. In my own defense, it might help that I believe there are different kinds of approaches to the mind. I'm sure that mine is not that of a scholar.

This was evident early in my life. I am very good at studying field guides or finding out everything about the life and times of this or that bug, mammal, or bird, etc. But the moment that a text gets abstract and rockets into the stratosphere, I fall to earth, so to speak.

To give what is probably the archetypal example, I can cite my learning algebra in high school. I never got beyond algebra-101. I just couldn't get it. It was too abstract for me and I would end up counting things out on my fingers or drawing a diagram, which never really helped. In fact, I had to take Algebra-101 three semesters in a row (repeat) and I still never got it. It was torture. They finally pushed me through with a "D," but both they and I knew that I knew little to none. They just wanted me out of there.

On the other hand, I got all "A"s in geometry because it was visual. As you can tell from my photos, I am very visually oriented. And therefore I believe different people have different approaches to the mind and approach things differently. The visual side of my brain, whatever that is, functions. And so, how does this relate to dharma?

Well, for one, it lets you know I'm not a dharma scholar. God knows, I've tried to follow the threads of various teachings beyond what I can comprehend or understand, but with very little success. Part of it is just language. While I do understand English and have even learned to read a little Tibetan, that's not enough. I not only don't know Tibetan worth a darn, but in many scholarly dharma works, that Tibetan itself references Sanskrit and I really don't know Sanskrit. LOL.

I have a great many very technical dharma-discussions (white papers), treatises, and books that morph into Sanskrit or even Hindi. I have tried to follow these scholars, but I just plow ahead until I fall asleep in them and wake up back on Earth, so to speak, none the wiser. And so, that's my gambit here. Now, let's look at what for me has been a solution to all the lack-of-scholarship on my part.

On the one hand I am genuinely interested in all facets of dharma-understanding, especially when I don't understand it. LOL. How's that for a tautology? And I especially am interested when it comes to the Mahamudra approach to dharma because it comes more naturally to me.

Of course, I have completed all the perfunctory dharma preliminaries, a few of them more than once. And I have done various deity practices as well, some of them quite complex. However, for me, they, like algebra, somehow just never connected. And the only realization I got from them was that I didn't realize them, which realization was very painful. LOL. Why not?

However, on a positive note, the moment I encountered the Mahamudra teachings I was all ears. Intuitively, it seems I am naturally in synch with this approach; for some reason it just speaks to me, perhaps because it is not as conceptual as it is hands-on. At heart, I am a hands-on person or need to be.

And here is the point of this blog: There is more than one way to approach scholarship. As mentioned above, one way is the path of the scholar, which I am apparently not fit for. The other way to accomplish the same thing is to actually do or practice what all the scholarship is about. This seems to be the only path that actually makes sense for me.

Instead of trying to reason everything out abstractly, as I had tried to do, another approach (and the one that works for me) is to actually do the practices that all these papers are discussing and see for myself what they are about.. Just as a picture is said to be worth a thousand words, so actual practice and seeing for ourselves is worth a lifetime or two (or a hundred) of study... IMO.

DHARMA -- SEEING "SEEING" ITSELF

February 23, 2019

There is something that I want to share with my kids before I am too old. I would like to sit each of them down (if they would) and explain the following. It's about "Awareness."

Let's say you don't feel well. You are sick or getting sick. That awareness that knows you don't feel well itself does not itself feel unwell. It is just fine, perfectly clear. If you will just actually check, you will realize that that our innate awareness is in fact always perfect and unaffected -- inviolable. That within us that is aware of anything (and everything) is itself not stained or tarnished by what it is aware of.

In fact, it's a little scary that this inner awareness is not more personal in any way. And that is just a bad habit, the fact that we don't identify with our awareness. We ARE it (or it is in us), but we don't know it better and are not much in touch with it. We do well to become familiar with it. Most of us don't fully identify with this awareness, even though it is what allows us to be aware. LOL.

Now, some of us may be aware of this awareness. Yet, even if we are not aware of this awareness, we can be aware that we are not aware, and that awareness of our unawareness is also awareness. In fact, it's the same awareness I am talking about here.

And that's my point. We might want to pay more attention and get to know (become familiar with) that basic awareness within us. And that basic innate awareness can't be compromised or influenced in any way by what it is aware of. It's untouchable, pristine.

All of the highest pith-dharma teachings tell us not only to become aware of our innate awareness, but to rest in (or on top of) that awareness. Turning awareness on itself, like shining a light on a light, is at the heart of the advanced Mahamudra teachings.

Yet, just as the eye cannot see itself, so awareness being aware of itself somehow short-circuits our ingrained dualism

and forces us into a nondual state, a state where seeing sees itself seeing, but with no object to be seen other than itself. It's either that or nothing happens and our mind remains normal (in a bewildered state). It reminds me of Peter Pan's quote "Second star to the right and straight on till morning." When non-duality strikes, we are flat out.

And so, any dharma practice that we might do has at its heart what I am attempting to describe above, launching ourselves beyond duality. And beyond duality is by definition singular, i.e. non-dual. It's like we are standing on our tiptoes, leaning into the wind of non-duality until it is our sole support. There are no witnesses and nothing to be seen, yet we see (and are one with) the seeing itself. We are all-in or all-out or both.

DHARMA: THE RAIN OF BLESSINGS

February 25, 2019

“Things are not what they seem” is an age-old adage that we all know. Not only is that true, but things often are the opposite or reverse of what they seem. Just like all eyes are on an idol like Elvis Presley or Lady Gaga, that’s only true because of those who look. We have collectively buried our role as a looker in what it is we look at. Yet without looking, nothing would be seen.

I was struck by this recently in a powerful dharma teaching about the emanations of great beings like a buddha. Rinpoche pointed out that the moon is only reflected as many times as there are receptacles to reflect it. In a similar way, dharma emanations are only as numerous as there are those receptive enough to reflect. And that would be us.

It is also said that a buddha emanates 84,000 dharmas; and often added to that is the statement that there are infinite gradations for each of those 84,000 dharma. Or, the truth of a buddha is reflected individually in as many sentient beings as can reflect it. I hope you are getting the point here.

The rain of blessings of the dharma, like raindrops, fall everywhere and are all different depending on the conditions of their placement on the ground. The more perfectly formed the raindrop, the clearer and less riled the water in each drop is, the better the reflection.

The teachings of a buddha only exist for those of us who are reflective enough to mirror them. If our reflective ability is unclear or filled with muddiness (or whatever), then our ability to reflect is diminished until we can purify its surface. This is why all the preliminary purification practices exist, to polish our mirror so that we can reflect the dharma perfectly. This is just an analogy.

The Buddha is not out there somewhere, but right here within us. Buddha Nature is in each one of us. It is written that we are all buddhas; we have just not realized this. Like a receptacle that mirrors the moon, we can polish our internal mirror until it perfectly reflects the buddha nature within us.

There are as many perfect emanations as there are perfect reflections.

DHARMA: REVERSE-SCHOLARSHIP

February 26, 2019

[Here is another run at why (at least for me) scholarship and conceptuality is a practical impossibility.]

If we try to learn dharma just from books and concepts, good luck. When it comes to intellectualizing the dharma (so to speak) through books and concepts, using only conceptuality, I can't read the road signs ahead well enough for that to be all that useful.

I can try (and I have), but learning dharma is not, IMO, just a linear path. In other words, we can't extrapolate through guesswork from where we are right now in our dharma practice to where we will be. At least I can't. I don't always know where I am! Extrapolation must be some kind of curve other than a straight line, whether that be exponential or whatever. Book learning along doesn't cut it or even come close.

Instead, it's imperative that we "realize" where we are at the present (and that's hard to impossible!). Only if we can and do realize where we stand would any of the very abstract scholarship that we might read make sense. That's if we could realize, which mostly we can't.

Of course, if we could realize where we are at, we wouldn't need concepts because we would have the real-time experience. And from that we may eventually be able to actually realize where we are. Yet, even that is doubtful. LOL. Dependence on dualistic (relative) methods (conceptuality) only makes them more habitual. It's a massive Catch-22.

According to the teachings, trying to realize the nature of the mind through conceptuality (through scholarship), is not impossible, but yet it "IS", practically-speaking, impossible. The teachings say that enlightenment via concepts takes at least (and probably more than) one aeon -- an aeon being something like one billion years. I think I will take the stairs, thank you. LOL.

In other words, each of us always has the option of not trying to scope-out enlightenment conceptually as a scholar might (to just think about it), but rather we can forget about all that and just ourselves go and look at the nature of our mind on our own, which is what all the pith teachings are asking us to do. It not only takes relatively less time, it is just easier all around and less of a headache, as in: it's actually possible. LOL.

To me, trying to figure out the dharma conceptually has been (basically) a waste of time compared to learning to look at the nature of the mind (all by myself) with the help of an authentic guru. And for me, I have no choice. My mind naturally has trouble with concepts; I need hands-on experience to make any sense out of the dharma. I am very touchy-feely. I have to immerse myself in experience to feel anything at all, much less to realize something as difficult as what my experience means or just where I am at in all of this.

The time I spend trying to figure things out conceptually (or with books) is better spent actually doing the practices that the scholars and their concepts teach or only talk about. By practicing, at least I can actually experience something real until I can realize what all the abstract scholarly texts are trying to say. The pith teachings say "In the midst of experience, realization can arise." I hope so! And this is my kind of reverse-scholarship. LOL.

I find it much easier to realize the dharma through practical experience (practice) than by books, after which I know for myself through experience what these abstract writings by scholars are all about. Yet it takes trust and time. I have no choice but to ride the road of practice rather than try to travel the road of dharma by reading conceptual maps. For me, my internal dharma-GPS is a better guide.

As mentioned, this reverse-scholarship puts realization first, after which (if I get some realization) I can easily understand what all the scholarship is all about. And to get that realization), first I experience the dharma until I have some realization {however small) and then, second, with that realization I can perhaps relate with what the scholars write about my realization. So, instead of the traditional "Think and do," I belong to the "Do and then think" tribe. I do the practice

until some realization arises and then see what thoughts come. It's so much easier on my brain. I struggle through experience (rather than think) until the relief of some modicum of experience arises. Thus, I let my experience through practice be my guide, if only because concepts alone don't work for me.

DHRAMA: THE VIEW OF THE PARTS

February 27, 2019

[One blizzard is barely shoveled when another comes in. This must be winter.]

The sum of the parts make a whole, but any one of the parts is not the whole. In fact a popular phrase is that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. This “whole” conundrum is not solvable other than by unification.

This is what in dharma is called “relative truth,” the story of duality, of subject and object. And relative truth is by definition divisive. It is divided. Remove all the division and you have the whole, but there is nothing we can say about the whole without dividing it, because that is what a whole is: indivisible. And all of these words are just conceptual, relative. Even by saying that the whole is whole, we are already divisive because we are contrasting it with what is not-whole.

I don't think these words are difficult to understand, but when applied to dharma they are the difference between samsara and nirvana; and that's a difference that is not easy to unite and realize as a whole. Samsara and Nirvana are said to be connate (co-emergent), yet it seems that most everyone I know only knows one side of that equation: samsara. Realizing that whole is difficult to close-to-impossible or so it seems.

In the advanced dharma practices, what has been called the “realization” practices, virtually nothing can be stated. For example: we can't say that we exist in any permanent way or that we don't exist. We can't say we both exist and don't exist or that we don't exist and don't not-exist. Why? Because these are all relative (dualistic) statements.

So, you won't find Mahamudra practitioners saying any of the above for that same reason, that they are neither totally true nor untrue. Again, all relative statements are divisive, ways of dividing the whole. There is nothing wrong with dividing the whole except that it is not the same as the whole, about which nothing can be said without being divisive. It's kind of a case of “put up or shut up.”

And so, if we are talking about the realization dharma practices, it is case of going single-file, not hand-in-hand or two-by-two as in dualistic. Like birth or death, we are alone, unitary. As the great German philosopher Gerog Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel put it:

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

DHARMA: THE THREE R'S

March 1, 2019

I see there is a lot of misunderstanding about the difference between what is called "Recognition," "Realization," and "realization;" let's see if we can clear this up somewhat.

"Realization" with a capital "R" stands for "Enlightenment," what the Buddha achieved, and the path toward enlightenment is lined with the process of realizations with a small "r". The Buddha became Enlightened through the path and process of realization.

It is important to understand that "Realization" (ultimate Enlightenment) itself is a process and not a state. Just as breathing is a process of staying alive, so Realization is the process of realizing the true nature of the mind continually.

On the other hand, "Recognition" of the nature of the mind is a realization (with a small "r"), but it is NOT Realization in the sense of being Enlightened. Recognition is just what the word says, recognition as to how the mind works so that we can begin working with it. Before that, we don't know how. We "Recognize" what has to be done and how to do it.

To repeat, "Recognition" is a realization (small "r"), but it is not "Realization." Until we recognize how the mind works, we can't travel far on the path of realization toward Enlightenment. And this is because we don't understand how to do it. We should all be able to recognize that we have not recognized how the mind works; otherwise, we would have worked it by now.

This is why so much emphasis is made on recognizing the true nature of the mind. Without "Recognition" as to how the mind works, we are just spinning our wheels. If we can recognize the nature of the mind on our own (without a guru) wonderful! It's just that ALL of the great siddhas, Mahasiddhas, and enlightened gurus agree that without having the nature of the mind pointed out to us by an authentic teacher, we will never be able to recognize how the mind works. We have to let that seek in and acknowledge it as the truth.

Otherwise, we would already have done that many lifetimes ago. Yet, we haven't. That's the point: we need help. What's the shame in that? If we don't raise our hand or bother to seek out and get help, that is our choice and no one else's.

DHARMA -- RECIPE FOR REALIZATION

March 5, 2019

The results of any realization (as described in the dharma teachings) are not necessarily themselves a recipe (or roadmap) for attaining that realization. This is complicated, so let me try to explain. What this means IMO is that any advance in realization on our part brings about certain signs and changes within us. Many dharma teachings describe in great detail a litany of signs to look for that we have achieved whatever degree of realization is in consideration. Buddhists love lists.

My point here is that we can't reverse-engineer a realization based on the results of that realization. In other words, it is easy to fall into the habit of assuming from what dharma we read or hear that the classic or traditional signs of progress (or realization) are themselves a guide to that realization. I can't say that it never works, but in what little experience I have had with such things, the telltale signs of realization as described in the pith teachings are not a grocery list or even a rough guide to having the realization for ourselves.

Another way of saying this is that we can't put the toothpaste back in the tube or, more exact: from a nondual result like a realization, we can't revert to a relative (dualistic) view of that realization with any sincerity. Another way (perhaps) to describe this is that the fruit of the tree of dharma-realization does not produce a seed that can be planted. Why? Because that is a definition of result, i.e realization.

Using a classical analogy, the rope that at first appears to us as a snake cannot be re-believed to be a snake once we realize that it is just a piece of rope. The two (duality) can be seen as one, at which point the one cannot be re-seen as two. The process of dharma realization is a one-way street. That's the idea.

Here I am discussing the problem of mistaking the results of dharma realization as a map or path to achieving that realization. Perhaps an example will help.

It is common in dharma teachings to describe how realization changes us. After a realization, we become less fixated or attached, and so on and etcetera. And in response to this, there are endless teachings that go on to say (or assume) that because these are the result of realization, we MUST therefore remove our attachments in order for realization to occur.

This is, IMO, at best a half-truth. The danger is that we fall into the belief that we must forcibly remove our fixations, etc. and this laundry list of “have-to-do” items become a series of austerities on our part that we believe are required for any dharma progress. In other words, dharma practice becomes an ordeal by effort which it was never intended to be. And this comes about by mistaking the signs of the result of a realization for a recipe to achieve that result. That dog will never hunt.

And this is why almost every textbook of dharma makes such a huge point or deal of Bodhicitta and the necessity of attaining it. More correct perhaps, at least in my own experience, is that sustained Bodhicitta or enthusiasm for the dharma safeguards many tendencies for attachment and fixation and so they naturally subside. There is a difference and it is an important one.

Mistaking the listed results and byproducts of realization as a recipe to achieve that realization is what I am pointing out here. Just because with realization we naturally lose interest in attachment and fixation, it is easy to just say or assume that to gain realization we simply have to remove all this fixation we have. It's true that fixation on appearances is the problem, but it's not true like in Shakespeare's Macbeth's “Out, damned spot, I say,” that simply scrubbing will remove those deep-down stains. IMO, that approach is too often just another fixation, another thing we “have” to do. Effort is done at the start of the bobsled run; after that we make no effort but that of steering.

This is why, IMO, the enthusiasm of an enlightened heart, what is called Bodhicitta is more important than anything else I can think of as a natural guide to dharma practice. Yet, if we say that Bodhicitta is something we HAVE-TO-DO, even that

won't work if we make a point of it. Sheer effort is not a recipe for realization as far as I know.

We could say that this is just a Catch-22 (and that may be true), but what does that tell us? It's just a sign that we are still in the vestibule, which is not news. We have been waiting to become realized for innumerable lifetimes if I am to believe the teachings.

This is perhaps an odd analogy, but it comes to mind. I am reminded of my watching the huge salmon in Oregon (years ago) drive upstream to spawn. They finally reach a deep pool where they can go no farther and there they sit, almost motionless, layer on layer of them deep down in the pool. And they then spawn and die.

As in the New Testament according to John, it says "Verily, verily I say unto you, unless a grain of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone; but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit." In a similar way, unless we die to the effort of duality, there will be no realization.

So where is the trigger? The trigger, IMO, is to receive the blessings (the grace) of an authentic guru and the guidance they can provide us.

A STORY FROM THE LEELANAU

March 10, 2019

The Leelanau peninsula is at the top left of the mitten of Michigan's Lower Peninsula, or as we say, the little finger. It comes from a Native American word for this land "ke-ski-bi-ag," which means "narrow body of water and Lake Leelanau, from a word "lee-lan-au,," which means "delight of life."

Living downstate as we have for the last many decades, we would take the trip up into the Leelanau whenever we could manage it, usually an all-day trip up and back, with mostly going up and back, and whatever time left spent in the Leelanau.

The leelanau is a large finger of land that one can traverse in less than an hour, either north-south or east-east, and we would. It was like having a natural-world smorgasbord of features compressed into a half-an-hour trip. We would trek out to Empire Bluff and watch the huge salmon swim in Lake Michigan a couple of hundred feet below. Or, we would hike to Pyramid Point Overlook where we could see the north and south Manitou Islands. Or to Sleeping Bear Dunes and the dune climb. Or tour the many orchards and vineyards.

Indeed, it was (for us) a magic place when travel took no time, and in the summer the weather was warm and the features were many. It was like a natural Disney World, one with many rides, all of them natural and native. We used to rent a cottage up on Cathead Bay a week at a time and I would look for Petoskey Stones in the waters of the Lake Michigan, while the kids swam. Or go to the town of Northport and climb the nearby lighthouse. And, on and on.

Here is a story from back in the days when I was running AMG, the All-Music Guide, All-Movie Guide, All-Game Guide, etc. For those who don't know AMG, it is the largest music review and biography database in the world (<http://allmusic.com/>), while the All-Movie Guide is one of the two largest film web sites in the world, and so on.

Anyway, I founded and created AMG, was its president, and at the time of this story we had about 150 full-time staff and

over 500 free-lance writers. Aside from a massive web site, we also produced a series of printed music guides. To make this happen meant that we had to divide up all of the great musicians and composers in the world among our music editors and the hundreds of free-lance writers we worked with, having each music writer doing this or that band or musician.

Of course, great musicians like Bob Dylan, Billie Holiday, and the like were picked by the most well-known writers, and so it went on down the line. When all was said and done, there was only a single group of musicians that none of our staff or any the free-lance writers wanted to do, and that was those easy-listening musicians you sometimes see selling their albums through infomercials on late-night TV, singers like Roger Whitaker, Tom Jones, Richard Clayderman, Roger Williams, and sometimes even John Denver and Barry Manilow. You know the type of commercials.

Many were crooners that you seldom saw on sale at record stores (except in the remainder bins), but they were all over the late-night commercials. You get the idea. This story is about one of those lounge singers, Englebert Humperdinck. Not one of the hundreds of writers working for us wanted to do his biography and rate his albums. The same was true for a number of these easy-listening types.

As the founder and head of AMG, it fell upon me to do something with these elevator-music late-night wonders, and so I held my nose and just did it myself. This was years before I could openly admit to myself that I (when in the right mood) actually liked some elevator music. Anyway, that is off topic.

The bottom line here is that I wrote the biographies and went through the album chronology of many of these easy-listening singers and groups that seemingly only appear (selling their special kind of romantic elevator music) through late night TV commercials, and this included the singer Englebert Humperdinck. And that completes the prolog for this story. Now, on to our yearly family vacation.

My wife Margaret loves to go to the lake and once a year this usually involved renting a cottage somewhere on Lake

Michigan and spending an entire week there. Now personally I hate vacations. To me they are the most boring times in the year, times where I sit around and tap my fingers waiting for them to be over. This was before I really got interested in nature photography. Of course, Margaret and the kids had a wonderful time, which is as it should be. I would just wait these vacations out, impatiently.

For me, because I love what I do, my day-to-day life already was a vacation, so, as they say, you can't salt the salt, thus my attitude toward vacations. This particular year we had rented a cottage up on Cathead Bay near Northport, at the very tip of Michigan's lovely Leelanau Peninsula. It really is a beautiful spot, but not a place I want to spend a whole week at, at least back then. I had no computer, no Internet, etc.

And so, there I was, bored out of my mind and counting the days until we could get home and back to normal life. I feel the same way about the week between Christmas and New Year. I was looking through one of those local event newspapers when I came upon the name "Englebert Humperdinck." Of course, I remembered him as one of those creepy late-night crooners that I loathed. As it turned out, he was playing at the Interlochen Center for the Arts, some forty-five minutes or so from the cottage. Of course, I was no fan of Humperdinck's, but I had done his biography and all of that... and I mostly I was bored.

By God, thought I, for a lark we would just go to that show and have a good laugh. It would be a diversion from the sand and shore that I was already so tired of. And so we did. I got tickets and when the evening of the performance came, with our oldest daughter lotis minding the kids, Margaret and I headed off to Interlochen's great outdoor (partially covered) auditorium.

And we had good seats, right in the middle and close to the front. I was ready for this lounge-act featuring Humperdinck. As a professional music critic, I had reviewed all kinds of music, all kinds of singers, musicians, and so forth. So, I was totally ready to handle someone as inconsequential to my mind as a fellow named Arnold George Dorsey who had taken as his stage name a lesser-known 19th Century

classical German opera composer. Give me a break. This would be fun. And then it began.

Suddenly Humperdinck was there on stage in front of me. In the flesh he looked much more human than the musical caricature that I had envisioned in my mind. In fact, he was downright handsome and radiating charisma. Whoa... this was not what I had expected. And then he began to sing.

And did he sing. I was stunned. Before I knew it I was sitting there with tears running down both cheeks, absolutely mesmerized, thrilled by the music (I am a romantic at heart). Try as I would to hold the tears back, I couldn't help it. The music was overwhelming wonderful and I was swept away before I could catch myself and resist. That was just how it was.

And so it went. It was a great lesson to me and a great concert. Humperdinck had the audience, including me, in the palm of his hand and he took us on a trip we did not know how to take for ourselves. It was incredible. That is one story from the Leelanau.

A DHARMA STORY -- THE DRAWING

March 11, 2019

Since many of you like these stories, here is what I consider a marvelous story.

Many years ago, in the 1980s, I had a dream. It was very vivid. And in that dream I presented my dharma teacher Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche a drawn image or portrait of himself. It was one of those dreams that is magical, somehow more real than waking life. For that reason I felt it was important that this dream be made real and acted out in actual life. After the dream and its imprint in my mind, I began actively to consider how this could happen. I tried on many ideas.

I finally settled on a sketched portrait, but finding an artist good enough was not easy. I only knew of a single such artist, one of the finest draftsman in Michigan, a man named John Felsing who was renowned for his life-like portraits of wildlife, especially birds.

I contacted Felsing and asked to visit him. Then Margaret and I traveled to Lansing where he lived and sat down with him. I explained my dream and what I was hoping he might do. After some discussion, he agreed to do a drawing and I gave him a really nice photo of Khenpo Rinpoche.

Several months went by and I heard nothing. Then one day a large envelope came in the mail. It contained a first sketch of Khenpo Rinpoche. To my dismay, the drawing he sent was a sketch of an elderly oriental gentleman, but not the dynamic rinpoche I knew. This would not do. I got on the phone and carefully explained this to John Felsing and he said that he would try again. To assist him I then sent him some of Rinpoche's dharma teachings and one of his books, a book I also worked on called "Dharma Paths."

Again, several months went by and then one day another large manila envelope showed up in the mail. I hesitated to look inside; and then with baited breath I carefully opened the package. When I did, this time the image was actually of the Khenpo Rinpoche Margaret and I know and love. Apparently

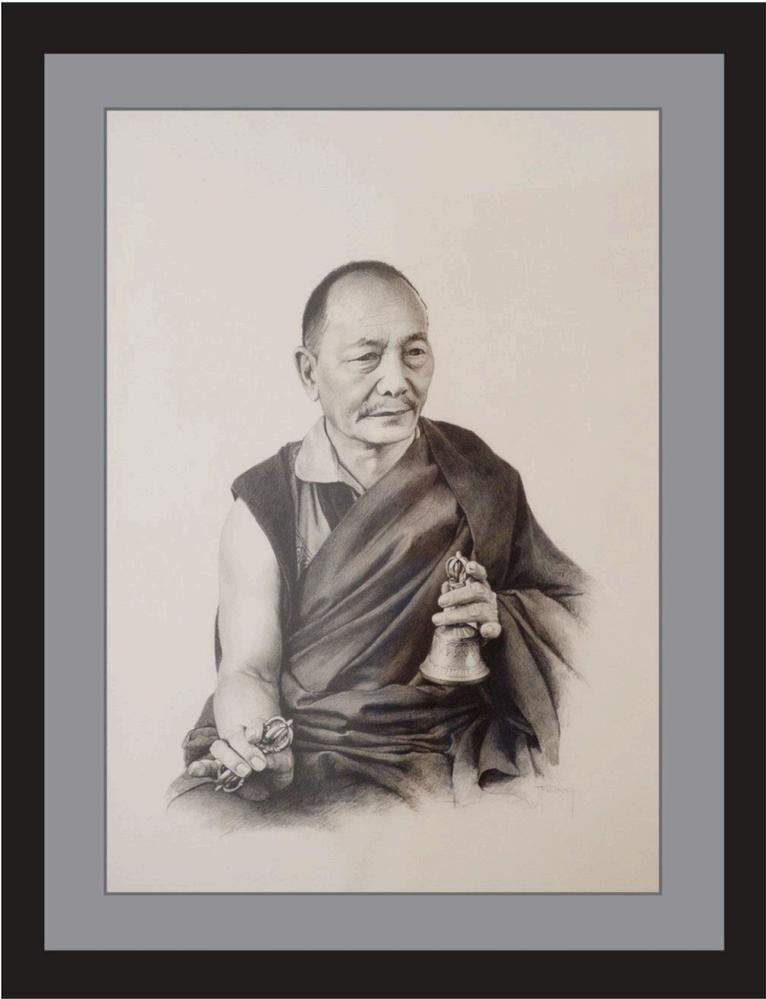
the books and Rinpoche's own teachings helped to communicate the idea of the man himself. I let Felsing know that he could now do the finished drawing. And the ending to this story is remarkable.

When the artist Felsing finished the final drawing he personally called to notify me of that. And as it happened Khenpo Rinpoche, who (of all things) was visiting our dharma center that very day, was about to do an empowerment for our local group that evening.

Felsing did not hesitate a moment, but said he was coming to Big Rapids to see Rinpoche. He jumped into his car, drove through the oncoming night to our center and, when he arrived, he formally asked Rinpoche to give him "refuge." Refuge is a short ceremony that takes place when someone discovers that they have great respect for the dharma, respect not only for the historical Buddha, but also for his teachings (the dharma), and the sangha (those monks and nuns who embody the living teaching). It is a request you make of a teacher. Felsing's request was honored and Rinpoche gave the refuge ceremony, which includes giving those who ask for it a dharma name.

Apparently during the months that John Felsing was working with Rinpoche's image and reading some of the teachings, he was moved by what he learned and had developed a true respect for the dharma. He was inspired to become more actively involved in the dharma and so asked to receive the refuge ceremony. I am struck by how a simple contact with Rinpoche, even at a distance, made such a difference.

[Here is the drawing that the artist John Felsing made of Khenpo Rinpoche]



DHARMA: VISIT FROM A HIGH LAMA

March 12, 2019

In and around the 1980s, a great many very high rinpoches were wandering around North America and willing to visit their affiliated dharma centers. As I have shared here before, there were a great many that came to our center, the Heart Center KTC (Karma Thegsum Chöling) located here in Big Rapids, Michigan.

Well, as this story goes, one of the highest rinpoches in our lineage came and stayed at our center for almost a week. He was one of the four “heart sons” of H.H. the 16th Karmapa, an eminence. I am not going to name him because someone might not like His Eminence in such a story. Who knows? Anyway, here he was and we were busy hosting him. In fact we had a local newspaper crew here to interview Rinpoche.

We were all sitting around in our living room, being courteously a little formal, when two of our kids came racing in, all out of breath, and very excited. They could hardly keep from yelling.

“There is a cat outside about to eat the baby robins! Come quick dad!” This was indeed an emergency and Margaret and I jumped up and raced outside. I forgot about our guests, but they followed along too.

And sure enough, high up at a fork in the large branches of a tree we had a nest of tiny baby birds. And as the kids said, the neighborhood cat had gotten up there and was sitting right at the edge of the bird nest with his two front paws tucked under his chest. And he couldn’t have been happier, either. He was contemplating his lunch. And these were little bitty babies.

On the way out, I had grabbed my BB gun, which was hardly very powerful at all. It was the weakest BB gun I had been able to find and the BBs just bounced off of anything it hit. I kept it around for just such emergencies as this.

I reached the tree and could see the cat was well out of reach from the ground. Do something the kids cried. I raised the BB

gun and popped off a couple of shots. And they just bounced off of the cat, who paid no attention to them, but just sat there as before, contemplating his dinner. I tried again, but no use.

I had forgotten all about His Eminence, but suddenly there was a hand on my shoulder. I turned around and found myself facing the Rinpoche, only inches away. I had completely forgotten that Buddhists don't harm other beings. The Rinpoche said very firmly. "Give me the gun." I meekly handed it over to him, feeling awful.

And His Eminence then said, "Where's the cat?" And I pointed him out up on the tree branches. To my surprise, His Eminence raised the gun, fired a single BB, which hit the cat, who leaped into the air, and ran down the tree. Baby birds saved.

We all had a good laugh. And afterward, Rinpoche and I went out in the back yard and had a shooting contest at targets. I won. And that's a true story.

DHARMA -- A PICNIC IN TIBET

March 13, 2019

I came across this photo taken (with an old Nikon Coolpix 950) some years ago during one of my trips to Tibet, just a point-and-shoot camera. But I like the image and there is a story that goes with it and it has some humor.

This lama in the photo is the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, the abbot of Karma Triyana Dharmachakra Monastery, which is located in the mountains above Woodstock, New York. Rinpoche has been our dharma teacher for almost forty years now, so I was thrilled to get to accompany him to his homeland, perhaps for the last time. This story was when Rinpoche was then in his high eighties. He is 95 today.

At the time Rinpoche was visiting the area of Kham in eastern Tibet where he was born, the high plateau regions. His family were nomads and they lived in tents, moving as the seasons dictated. Rinpoche was a shepherd before he became a monk.

In 2004 Rinpoche had traveled to Tibet with a group of his students (Margaret and I were included) and on that day we were in a small field of flowers by the edge of a meandering stream. Tibetan streams are more like channels in the ground that water rush through rather than what we call streams; they are narrow, deep, and cold. Rinpoche had taken us to this place for a surprise picnic with a packed lunch and all.

There were just a handful of us present and, aside from the sheer beauty of the place, Rinpoche decided we all should entertain one another in whatever ways we could. Each of us was asked to get up and perform for the group, and no one was prepared for this. Some people danced, others sang, recited a poem, or put on a little skit or whatever they could. Others just hammed it up and were funny. It was quite spontaneous and I cast about in my mind for something I could share.

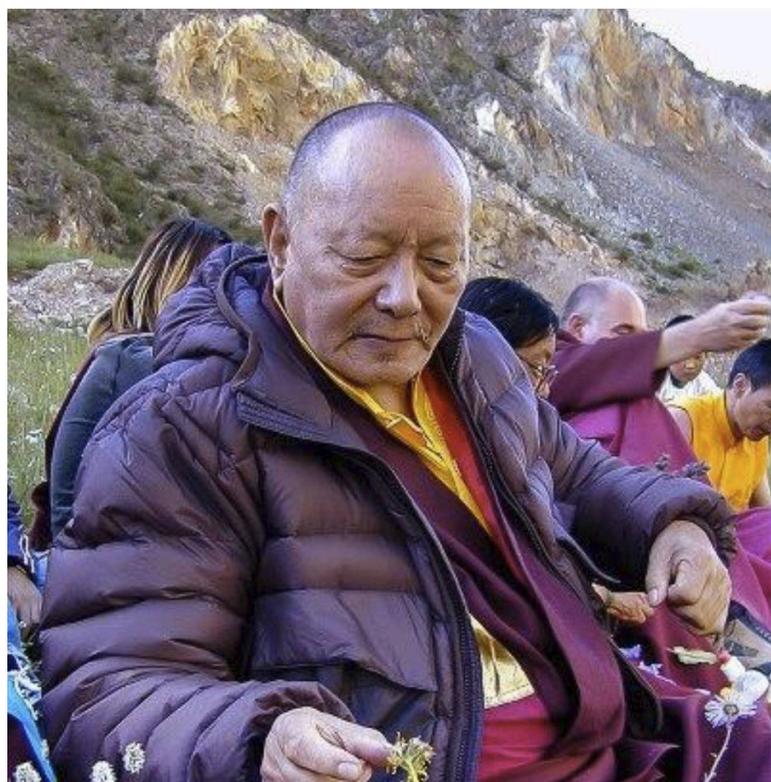
It is not likely I would dance. Sing a song? Perhaps, but I had a better idea. Back in the Sixties I used to play a mean blues harmonica professionally and I was pretty good at it

sometimes. I just happened to have an old harmonica in my day pack, so I found it, blew out the dust and stood up to entertain everyone. They were all ears as I began to play. However, I failed to remember one thing.

And that was the fact that we were high in the mountains of Tibet, somewhere well over 14,000 feet above sea level. What I failed to take into account is that the atmosphere is different up there, less oxygen or whatever in the lungs, like: not enough air.

Everyone was watching, but as I began to play, no sound came out, nothing, and then finally just a kind of hissing noise. Well, that was a surprise, so I tried even harder, but only more hissing came out and maybe just the tiniest squeak of music. I tried and tried, but still nothing. I finally just sat down. There was not enough air in my lungs to play the harmonica. Everyone laughed, including me. It was part of the entertainment and a great picnic nevertheless.

[Photo of Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche at the picnic in Tibet taken by me.]



THE VAJRAYOGINI-TARA CAVE AND THE BIRTH CANAL

March 14, 2019

[Here is another story, this time of our trip to China with Rinpoche. Meanwhile, I continue to pack for our move to Traverse City. Still have not found the right house, but we are looking.]

In 2004 Margaret and I were lucky enough to accompany our teacher Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche to Tibet and visit Thrangu Monastery, where Rinpoche originally came from, along with a group of his retreat lamas and practitioners. In addition to Tibet (which is a story in itself), Rinpoche wanted to take us to one sacred place in China called Mount Wu-Tai-Shan, where we spent about a week doing puja and practices.

In a nutshell, Mt. Wu-Tai-Shan is a series of five mountains arranged in the shape of a number-5 die, with four mountains in a square and one in the middle. Legend has it that it was here that astrology entered this world through the magical blessing of the Bodhisattva Manjushri, who appeared as a youth. Out of his head poured the 84,000 teachings on astrology, which he then gave to mankind. I don't have space here to tell you the whole story, but I will include a link at the end for those who want to know more. As an astrologer with 50+ years of experience, I looked forward to visiting Mt. Wu-Tai-Shan.

Here I just want to share what happened at an incredible place called the Mother-Buddha Vajrayogina-Tara Cave near Wu-Tai-Shan. Deep within the cave is a tiny opening about chest level that is shaped like a birth canal, through which (with some luck) one can, by extending your arms above the head be passed up through the birth canal into the womb of the cave. As you will see, not everyone is worthy of this feat.

This very special cave found us standing in line single-file with other pilgrims and very slowly moving deeper into the cave itself until we reached a solid wall in which was the one very small opening. This took a long time. You are said to literally walk between the legs of the mother Buddha to where

her yoni is, a very small opening about the size of a flattened mediation cushion at an angle. It is not like a hole in the wall. You can't see through it because the opening extends upward and also at an angle into a small airless room, with no other ventilation or openings. It is dark in there. If you have the right karma, it is said that the yoni will open for you and you can crawl and be pulled up through the channel into the inner womb areas, where it is said you can see all of her inner organs and secrets. No matter what size you are, not everyone can pass through the opening.

It is said that those who can pass through the channel will be reborn in Buddha Amitabha's Buddha field called Sukavati. It took maybe an hour to even get to the opening, a line of people moving like molasses deeper and deeper into the cave. It was not long before the mouth of the cave was out of site. And now for the test.

My teacher Khenpo Rinpoche did not pass through the opening; he was just too big. He laughed and tried really, really hard to get through, but no go. As for me, I also tried but did not pass through, although I probably could have. It is not like there is a hole and you can put your arms or stick head through, look around, and see what is inside. Oh no, nothing like that.

Instead, this is a longish channel of several feet that like the birth canal extends upward (and at a sideways angle) about chest height from where you are standing. You have to put your arms over your head to make yourself narrower, turn sideways, and somehow wiggle up into the channel until you can get through. Actually, someone already inside needs to sort of pull you in. One of our group was already up in there and tried his best to help pull people through. I managed to get my arms over my head, my head and upper body into the channel, and could barely see someone at the end above me... I think. Then, claustrophobic as I am, I chickened out and decided I did not want to put all of my body through that passage, into that pitch-black cave, where there was perhaps a small flashlight, much less turn around and try come back. So I did not pass the test. I am sure this tells you something about me, but I don't care. I ain't goin' through that hole

willingly. I guess I am one of those babies that doesn't want to go through the birth process. LOL.

However, my wife Margaret slipped through into the inner sanctum and back out easily and received that very special blessing. More power to her! She is, after all something of an expert, having home birthed some of our kids and I have never met any woman who loves babies more than Margaret.

HOSPITAL

March 19, 2019

I am sorry to report that I am in the hospital. I had a small stroke and am undergoing a series of tests. Not sure when I will be able to blog.

Finished MRI, Ultrasound Carotids, ECHO Cardiogram....all done and waiting for the doctor. Then go home. It turns I do not have a TIA or a small stroke, but rather a real stroke.

THE SITUATION

March 20, 2019

Two separate doctors decided that there is not a TIA, but a regular stroke. Not the best news,

I can't read at the this point. I can't do much for a while. I have to be patient. I need a rockin' chair. Can't not do much. I cannot practice. These words are very hard to write.

I hope to be able take photos of Flowers.

A CLOSE FACSIMILE

March 20, 2019

I seem to be coming out of the pain, mostly. It's basically just on my left side, which makes sense. I have like a god-awful headache and I have almost been unable to write in sensible language until now and then only for a while. Margaret has had a good laugh on me. I have been unable to talk clearly unless I am very refreshed. And the more tired I get, the more undecipherable I get, until its gobbledygook.

I might have to become like the inscrutable Zen monk, saying nothing at all, and just raising one finger and gesturing in the air once in a while. LOL.

Unless I keel over, I believe I will gradually recover. We have decided not to move up north for many reasons. Instead, we will just stay here and fix anything that needs fixing up. Also, we did not find a single house (after looking at hundreds) online and a few in person. Our kitchen and bathrooms are just way better than any that we have seen. It could be just us, but I doubt it.

And so, I have just zapped the external envelope and cleaned out the cobwebs. It will take me a while to get back online again with my own body, but I feel it is going to happen. Aside from some downtime, I should be just as good as new again or a fair facsimile.

Now, what I am I going to with all those hundreds of packed boxes!

GLEAMING

March 22, 2019

Well, I'm not allowed to do much for a while, like unpack the hundred boxes I had carefully packed. There the boxes sit, blocking the whole center. Not much I can do for now. I have to cool it. Apparently, a stroke is like an earthquake with aftershocks. It takes time for them to "ring" out and settle down if they have do. I'm waiting and keeping my head down.

As for my comments on the entire experience, it's hard to crystalize. I certainly know what it's like to have ups and downs and even to have my "Self" crash and burn. And while I had a TIA-stroke a couple years ago, this one was as they say "more different," like surgical steel. There was no messy fuzzy-stuff, at least in my experience – just a clean cut.

I am left with no questions. Nada. Just an exclamation mark ringing in the silence! And no echo.

It's like I wiped all the bric-a-brac and cobwebs out with one swell swoop. It reminds me of when ladies (mostly) use adhesive (waxing) to rip out unwanted hair. It hurts and it's over quick. In other words, I got reamed out pronto.

If you want to talk about no thoughts, try having a stroke. The mind is as clear as you can see, not a thought in sight or at least not one that disturbs you. It's like you are mentally straight-lining it.

Days have gone by since my stroke. It's like the little denizens of my mind have been hiding out and now are starting to come back up for air. I don't wish more of the same treatment by life, but the cleanness of the mental air is remarkable. It goes on forever.

It's hard for me to be still and just take it easy. However, I've been told to cool my jets and give it a rest. I am very sensitive to sound just now, same with taste. Things tend to irritate me because I'm still very touchy from the stroke.

For example, I don't like to think a lot just now. Thoughts are for the birds; they just fly away.

“A BEAUTIFUL MESS”

March 23, 2019

Indulge me, if you will. Here is a song written by my daughter May Erlewine. Since I am somewhat out-of-sorts these days, I find it comforting to wander into a tune like this and rest for a while. Won't you join me? All of my four children have given me so much over the years. In this song, the words “Find a little love, along the way; die a little, every day.” Here you can hear this subtle creation.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XAq_6ehZp2o

I was totally moving to Traverse City and then it didn't happen. Instead, I will stick around Big Rapids and work on our dharma center, which is fine by me. I was going to have some outreach dharma-discussions in Traverse City, but I can do the same here in Big Rapids on perhaps a Sunday afternoon at the center. People are not different. I used to think Ann Arbor people were better (“Special”), as in the professors and students, and the same for Traverse City but to a lesser degree.

But, when it comes to dharma there is no “special.” Dharma-wise, people are the same everywhere; few get it, and even then it's seldom the “smart” or intellectual ones. LOL. The smorgasbord of life is available and open to all and dharma is the most egalitarian thing around.

When I was a young man, my wife and I ran commercial greenhouses here in Michigan and we then moved down to Apopka Florida where we ran 19,000 sq. ft. of glass. If you can grow plants, you can grow dharma. Dharma is nature and natural. That's my view.

However, I find it very difficult to just take it easy and sit around. I don't feel like reading because right now it is difficult for my eyes. As for movies, yes, but I tire before the end is reached. Mostly, here I am, just sitting around for long stretches of time. I hardly let Margaret get her stuff done because I would rather sit around and gab with her. She is

not used to that. Usually I am like a blue hornet, busy, busy, busy.

Yet, right now I'm all ears all the time. LOL. I am quietly putting back some of the shelving over in the center, although I am supposed to just do nothing until next week. And I can't exercise until I talk to the doctor next Tuesday. Etc.

So, you get the idea. Here I am floating around the house, trying to remind myself that I am not being sidelined or benched, but just resting up. Not too much of an appetite either and since I am wearing this heart monitor, it makes showering a pain.

Spring is beginning to happen. How wonderful. I have a desire to eat Baklava. And that's about all the news fit to print.

MY CURATION DILEMMA

March 24, 2019

My recent brush with impermanence, which term I call the “smelling salts of the dharma,” woke me up from my cryogenic-like sleep (as in the movies). Looking around, as I am right now, it is clear to me that I’m not going to live forever. “Who would ‘a thunk it, “as they say. LOL.

There are lots of loose ends for me to consider and the one fact that only I have been taking care of all of them. My family, Margaret and the kids, don’t know how (or want to) care for all of the various things I have been tending.

And, so it’s up to me work this out. Many of my responsibilities have already been shipped out to various libraries and universities, but the cause of this all is still alive and living, for now. That would be me. My mind is the cornucopia that keeps producing.

I have to laugh. Here I am, someone who is not a history buff, and who is not interested in the past, yet ever so carefully gathering all the popular culture around me and saving it for the future. I know that Samsara is impermanent, that everything changes, and everything fades away. I know that.

And yet, I have spent the greater part of my life (with my Sixth-House Moon in Taurus) extending the culture I grew up into the future. I came up in the 1950s and saw and heard first-hand the birth of rock-n’-roll and other music. With the help of some 150 full-time staff and 500-700 free-lance writers, we created the largest single music database in the world, everything from 10”-records onward. That is All-Music Guide (allmusic.com).

I have no idea how they are keeping up today (probably not well), but we saw to it that all of that earlier music was locked-in with albums, tracks, biographies, discographies, and so on. Then we turned around and did movies, all recorded film and video (cast and characters), one of the two largest film databases in the world (allmovie.com), the other being IMDB.

And I personally did this for 33,000 rock concert posters, including photos I took myself. I have placed that database in several non-profit organizations around the country. Which brings me to astrology, which is my point here.

Some years ago I donated what may be the largest astrological library on the planet. It took a full-sized moving van to relocate it to the University of Illinois, where it now is part of their permanent collection. And they followed that up with a UPS-sized truck full of my papers and correspondence. And now I have just one more lap to go.

I still have a lot of the sources, taped interviews and videos of famous astrologers, documents, digital, and graphic creations -- on and on. I need to find a curator, an astrologer or group of research-oriented astrologers who could care-for, work through and make available whatever makes sense to be released and shared. This could also be a source of income if used properly.

So, I'm tossing this idea out in case there is a young person or two who knows and loves astrology and wants the responsibility of bothering with all of this.

Is there anyone? Are you interested? You can message me here on Facebook or email me at Michael@Erlewine.net with your reasons for being interested.

[Graphic image showing my natal helio and geo charts and something about how each are.]

“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”

For those of you who would like to have access to other free books, articles, and videos on these topics, here are the links:

<http://traffic.libsyn.com/.../Links to Michael Erlewine-V2.pdf>

AFTER THE BAKLAVA

March 25, 2019

I have not eaten honey for many years, except very occasionally. Lately, I have a strong desire to eat some baklava and have sought it out. I ordered some online and it clearly said “made with pure honey.” And when it arrived, it said cane sugar on the box and tasted nothing like honey. I don’t eat sugar and although it said money-back guaranteed, they would not take it back. I no longer trusted what the online ingredients said.

And so, I made my own baklava. It looks like hell, but it has only a few simple ingredients, Filo dough, cinnamon, freshly ground walnuts, some olive oil, and a good quality honey poured over it. Aside from the looks, my baklava tastes perfect and a little piece of it saves a whole lot of trying to satisfy that sweet itch without ingesting a lot of stuff. I am tired of deserts that don’t satisfy. LOL.

Unfortunately, the residue from my stroke has left me irritated and raw. My patience is very thin and everything hurts. It’s probably best I not see friends or family just now, for their sake. LOL.

I find myself being very direct, which I already thought I was, but now I really am. “Direct” is not round-about, but rather instantaneous. Of course, I am trying to relax, which only points out that I’m not. It’s all involved and convoluted, goes round and round, and ends up in the present tense. There is no escaping reality even though we think we have. LOL. I am reminded of this short poem I wrote years ago:

THE REST OF THE MIND

You cannot rest the mind,
But you can let the mind rest.
Just let go,
And don’t mind the rest.

Right now I am too tightly wrapped to fully float free. Relief would be nice, but is not likely for a while. It’s like I’m at right-angles to everyone and everything until time gradually

desensitizes me so that I can rest. Meanwhile, here I am, a silhouette against the sunset trying to keep his head down. How exhausting! LOL.

Nevertheless, I am OK. Nothing is paralyzed, at least not yet. I'm hoping there is no other shoe to fall.

ASTROLOGICAL EMPOWERMENT

March 26, 2019

A few words about empowerment through astrology, something I know about. I wandered off the beaten astrological path some 50 years ago, which path ceased to exist for me because it was soon obvious that it led nowhere but just on. The funny thing about “realization” is that it’s a one-way trip; you can’t walk it back or put the toothpaste back in the tube. You turn around one day and find there is no longer any trail of breadcrumbs. Like Saturn, with “realization” we consume our own child, in this case “Time.” “Realization” marks the end of time as we know it. It’s up to us where we want to go in life, which is the beauty of astrology.

More difficult is the fact that whatever realizations we manage to have effectively separate us from the community, not because the community would not be interested, but rather because if you lack the faculty you can’t see the phenomenon. In a very real sense, with any sort of realization we have just vanished into thin air as far as others are concerned. You are henceforth invisible because your very realizations are not a common experience. The larger community does not know what we are talking about. It is not in their experience, much less their realization.

And so, like a mother hen with her chicks, I have some concern for my astrological realizations. As it turns out, I have carefully documented most (but not all) of my astrological realizations and laid them out in very clear (and illustrated) books. For almost every major astrological realization (technique), I have a book that goes with the idea. I’m so responsible. LOL.

The only problem with books is that they are at best mere skeletons of a realization. Like freeze-dried food, concepts and books need the water of realization to be breathed into them. An astrological technique is nothing more than the residue of a realization of the astrologer who had the initial realization, hopefully something that can be repeated or enacted afresh as a technique. Otherwise, there is no lineage.

I apparently am guilty of this. I have no students. All these decades have gone by and while I have intellectuals who have tacked my techniques, I have not one that has shown me they have fully realized the techniques. I would know, of course. That is a little sad, IMO. It has to be my fault. I am not making myself clear enough.

Just as there are dharma empowerments, so there are astrological empowerments and the two are similar. The typical dharma empowerment consists of three parts, the Empowerment, the ‘Lung’ or reading transmission, and the actual practice instructions.

It’s no different with astrological initiation. There is the empowering initiation, where one is exposed to the realization from someone who has actually realized the technique, not just from someone who repeats the technique by rote. There is also the description, basically the book about the technique, and then there are personal instructions from the realized teacher, an invaluable pointing out of the essence of the technique. We have to be shown or have it pointed out to us!

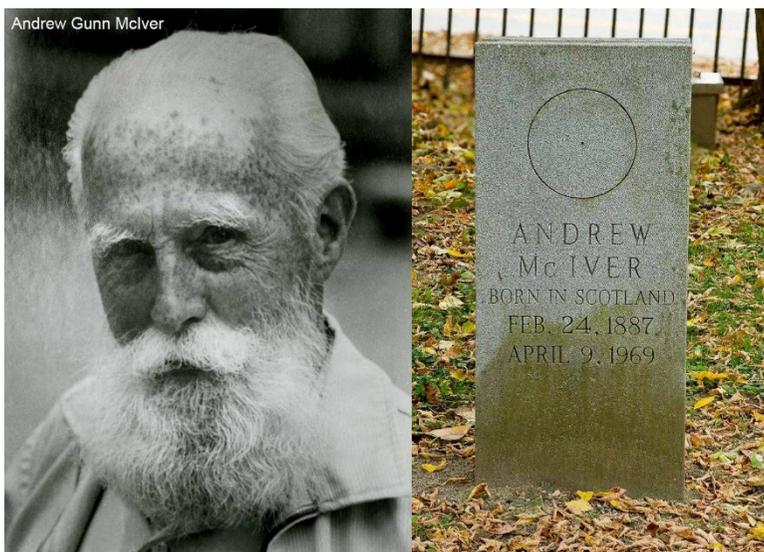
As for me, I have had to work for it. I have travelled to Tibet, Nepal, India, China, and so on to see teachers and receive teachings. Receiving teachings is not realization, but rather the understanding and perhaps experience from which realization may arise.

I have worked with authentic teachers since the 1960s and not through ordinary school systems. Much of the more traditional coursework, schoolwork, and classroom etiquette are foreign to me. I never got out of high school. And although I was accepted at the University of Michigan, college smacked (to me, mind you) of everything but the natural learning I was used to, teaching myself or working with authentic teachers. I have stayed true to that approach. I have had the most wonderful teachers in the world, IMO.

The photo here is of my first dharma teacher, Andrew Gunn McIver, a traveling initiator for a Rosicrucian order who came to this country from Scotland. Andrew taught me of Saturn and its return and helped me to go through my first Saturn return (in my late 20s) with my eyes open – consciously. That

was an empowerment. When Andrew passed, I saw to his burial and designed his tombstone, marking his grave with the symbol of the Sun.

I am considering how best to empower any fellow astrologers who might be interested in those astrological realizations that I have realized.



“STRANGER IN MY OWN HOME TOWN”

March 27, 2019

An original song by the great jazz-blues singer Percy Mayfield comes close to communicating my current state of mind. If you have never heard Mayfield, he is a very special songwriter, one of my most favorites. Give him a listen.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ubp1QVvL1k0>

This blog is about how I vary (minutely) within myself from day to day, but when an event like my recent stroke comes along I have trouble recognizing myself because the change in me is so palpable. You can't miss it. Suddenly I am of two minds and you know I hate that. LOL.

In a word, I outgrow myself and witness it. I'm remarking how close a fit I am to myself, yet still I'm now somehow different enough, so much so that even skipping the beat or rhythm for a day or two is enough to find me beside myself like a sore thumb. I stand out. In other words, I've changed just that much and no longer feel comfortable in my own skin. This happens slightly all the time, but when a sudden event like this health crisis imprints me, it marks and changes me.

It's one thing to forget stuff, but another whole thing to not quite forget, but yet not be the same either. LOL. I coined a line years ago: "To fail ignorance by a meter or a foot." That's how I feel about now.

My resent stroke and the time in the hospital was more than enough to see me skipping a beat, losing track of myself as I know me, and finally turning up as a relative stranger to myself. Surprise! That's how fine-tuned the beat that we live by is exact. But what has changed?

Well, perhaps I have not changed all that much so that you would notice, but certainly enough for me to find me beside myself and slightly out of whack. In a word, I've changed or at least grown enough in the last week that I now zig when I used to zag and vice-versa. In that short time I've outgrown myself by just enough that I can see around it. Usually we don't witness our own change.

It could be the solemnity of the health event or the more sobering nature of it all. Whatever the case, I've managed to pop out of my cocoon or familiar shell just enough to notice the difference. And you can't shoehorn your way back into what you once were; at least I can't. We can't go home again, so to speak.

So, I have to somehow catch up with myself, but it's impossible to catch up with the past. The past catches up with me and has to be updated or fails to. Instead, I've got to soldier on with the future and let the past go, cloying or clinging as it can. I have to reform my habits, update them; it's like molting my skin and I find it very uncomfortable.

At least I have a handle on it now; it took me a bunch of days when, as the song goes, I felt like a stranger in my own skin. I am just enough out of step with how I remember myself to not fit back into the shell I was in only days ago. I find it very irritating, but find myself facing it at every turn. Just my luck. LOL.

Anyway, I get it now. I've changed in these past days, probably via the hospital and all of that. As they say, we can't go home again. This is why they say that with marked health-events like this one, we have to get used to a new normal. That old normal won't cut it anymore.

I morphed! This is another kind of pain, witnessing my own change.

A CODA TO CHANGE

March 28, 2019

Yesterday, I blogged about when sudden change intrudes on our sense of self creating a kind of temporary “schizophrenia.” There are two of us. We are used to each day (like the sun coming up) bringing its degree of change to our life. That’s how change normally ripens. We change gradually.

However, change can also appear through the depth or impact of sudden change. The example I used was the stroke I experienced recently. The stroke demanded change beyond my experience and not at all gradually. I was unprepared for what I had to go through. I wrote about waking up kind of beside myself, with the new (and altered) “me” upstaging and pulling away from the old me I was used to. That’s the idea.

Something I perhaps did not mention clearly enough was that this whole doppelgänger-thing is not something passive, something that I can suffer in silence. In other words, I don’t take this person-doubling lying down. One of me is enough. I imagine that eventually the old me will wear out and the new me will wear in, but that’s not how I approach it; it’s just not my style. The sudden-changed “me” is foreign.

As a remedy for this, “Carpe Diem” is very much the order of the day, IMO. I have to make sense out of the moment. I have to seize the time and go with the new-me and politely jettison who and how I was (and used to be), even if I am fond of it. My point is that it is BEST to choose the future, the emerging self, and not backpedal trying to regain or stay the way we were. It is hard to do, like: impossible.

But as the reality of sudden change emerges, I find it generally confusing. I am torn. Here I am as whom I have always been, but the ring of truth is no longer there. In reality, I’m already marching to a different drummer and don’t like it. So, I’m torn between trying to surf on as I have been and facing the new music I’m presented with. It takes me time to make (to accept) the transition from how I am used to be to the emerging circumstances, the updated me. It is humbling at best.

And this in my experience is not a lazy-option, but one that requires, as mentioned, a positive choice on my part and with as little delay as possible. Clinging to the past, fighting these unavoidable emerging changes, never works and this is true on principle. And, IMO, it's harder than it seems.

And this is because we come from our own history and giving up that comfortable history goes against the grain. After all, the past is everything we know and are; at least we think so. And shoving off from one personality and being forced onto a new (and more foreign) personality is not a natural act, at least for me.

In my case, it takes persuasion (and copious trial and error), comparing my old personality flavor with the new one, deciding whether to give up on who I have been until now. But the writing is on the wall and like the Gertrude Stein line "Before friendship faded, friendship faded," eventually, change is unavoidable, as the old is dying and the new is being born.

However, I come to this choice in the beginning reluctantly and only later with acceptance, and only much later yet finding some of the silver lining in the emerging personality. Of course, there is no choice regardless. LOL.

Really, my only point here is to remind readers that resolving this mini-schizophrenia (the two personalities) into one is best done actively and not dragged out, like masochistically. The sooner we can close the gap the better, IMO. It feels better, truer.

MY HUMPTY-DUMPTY SELF

March 28, 2019

Now we have to talk about Humpty-Dumpty, familiar to us all.

“Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall;
All the king's horses and all the king's men
Couldn't put Humpty together again.”

No one's immune from change and sudden change at that. It's like on my elliptical machine, when there is no resistance; life just turns the intensity level up. It's a sure cure for getting too glib. Like the ancient mariner, we wrench the helm from fate and try to find safe passage through the narrows. Perhaps if we relaxed this would all be done for us naturally. LOL.

The Self is a very precarious fabrication, certainly a house of cards. The Buddhists endlessly articulate that there is no permanently existent Self. They don't say there is no Self, because of course there is. What they do say is that there is no eternal Self or soul, no unchanging existent that is called “Me, myself, and I.”

The self is basically the sum-total of all our attachments and fixations, positively, negatively, or neutral. Or, as I like to talk to myself, my attachments are the glue that holds the Self together.

And the Self can crash and burn as near as the hour's heartbreak, a death in the family, or a crushing blow. The Self is easily devastated and our coherency is wiped clean in a nanosecond. The self is an assemblage that easily shatters into a million pieces. And once shattered, it takes hours, days, months, or in some cases years to recover. This is true.

And while we struggle to stabilize the self, it does not occur to us that perhaps the most valuable experience is with our Self blasted to smithereens, blown wide open, with no cover and total vulnerability. Yes, the Self re-animates itself, pulling itself back together like the undead until we feel secure, but by that

point we are no longer sensitive to the quick and are snug in our cryogenic sleep as we usually are.

SONAR PINGS

March 29, 2019

Recovery from a stroke takes time. You can't rush it; at least I can't. And I'm not saying I can make a complete recovery or that things add up exactly to the way they were. They wouldn't add up even without the stroke. Things change all the time. However, usually we are not aware of any difference in ourselves.

Concurrent with my recent stroke experience it seems I have a type of natural ultrasound scan, a natural probe or sonar ping that creates something like an echogram from where I am right now to where I used to be.

About the best I can do is continue to check in on where I'm at. I like to think of it as "pinging," sending a ping that bounces off my state of mind. If that ping comes back with a bit of a lead thud or thud, I know that I am not back yet, at least not back so that I don't know any difference. I look for the ring of a bell, not the thud.

It's like a piece of frozen ice that has not yet thawed. We just have to wait a bit longer and perhaps work the wrinkles out of that frozen stiffness. Yet, the fact that I can hear a ping or an echo is encouraging. Otherwise I would not notice a thing. Something would just be gone, missing, without leaving a trace.

Resolving the difference between call and echo will take time, but the fact that the difference is there means it's doable or still in transition.

LIFE GOES ON

March 30, 2019

I don't want this blog to be only about my health, so my health is going to the back burner for a while. All this recovery stuff is going to take time. Reading is readable, but not easy or enjoyable just now. My hearing is less acute than it was. And my attention or interest in movies or films is shortened. It is clear I need to relax more deeply.

I have various doctors to see, tests to take, and on and on. I am wearing a heart monitor for a month and you know how I like that.

It may be a good time to pick up with my close-up photography again, especially now that spring is coming and we will have flowers. Photography seems natural for me and is all visual and time intensive. It could be something that is natural for me to do just now.

TERTONS: THE TREASURE FINDERS

March 31, 2019

[While I work through my own personal changes, I share some of my previous blogs. For me, these health issues are unavoidable, but they get old fast, so I'll post some other writings as well.]

The photo below was taken during my trip to the town of Jekundo in Kham, Tibet in 2004. It is when I met one of the reincarnations of the great tertön (treasure finder) Tsikey Chokgyur Lingpa Rinpoche.

One of the more intriguing areas of Tibetan Buddhism (especially for me) are what is called "terma," which are precious dharma treasures that are hidden (and waiting to be found) in the earth and also right in the mind itself. These terma or mind treasures come to light and are found only when the world is ready to receive them.

The Tibetans have so many areas of life where they have done something really elegant, while the equivalent approach has never occurred to those of us here in the West, although we have the same opportunities. No one ever pointed it out to us. Terma is one of these topics that should interest us and I will attempt to explain why.

There are four major lineages in Tibet and the Nyingma Lineage of Tibetan Buddhism is especially concerned with the concept of 'terma' (hidden treasure) and those who manage to find these treasures, called Tertöns. Generally speaking, there are two kinds of terma: earth-terma and mind-terma. Earth-terma are teachings that are hidden in physical locations, like in a crystal, in or under a stone, at the bottom of a lake, in a statue, temple, or even in the sky, etc.

On the other hand, mind-terma are just that, terma (treasures) hidden in the mind itself, the same mind that you and I have access to. All terma are, in essence, mind terma, something that has been inserted or placed within the mind itself, even if only as a pointer to an outside location. Perhaps the most well-known terma is the Bardo Thodol, the "Liberation by

Hearing in the State of the Bardo," commonly called that "Tibetan Book of the Dead." How are these terma found?

Terma can be stimulated by a sound, by a series of letters or numbers that appear in the mind, by a symbolic script, and so on. And they may also come by way of a vision, which is an experience more vivid than ordinary life, one that once resonating, begins to work within the mind, sometimes for an extended time, much like a pregnancy, finally giving birth to the transmission of the terma itself. However, first there is always a sign or stimulus.

In other words, a terma is not so much something written down and hidden that is found, as it is a seminal spark or glimpse of a truth that blossoms (expands) in the mind of the tertön (finder) and is THEN written down. It is most often the tertön him or herself, fueled by this inspiration and insight, that becomes the author of what is considered the hidden document and treasured information. This is an important point.

The tertön receives the transmission or insight from within the mind, grasps it completely and, as tradition indicates, then writes it out in a single session. Often two complete copies are written out in separate sessions and then compared. If the two copies are considered identical, then it is deemed an "authentic" terma. However, that is not the end of the process, but more like a beginning.

The tertön or treasure finder has to first grasp the meaning of the transmission intellectually (manage to understand it), and then practice with it until the terma blossoms in their life as an actual experience. This often takes many years. It must be fully experienced. Even that is not enough. Finally, each terma must be realized, realized in its fullness, and only then may it be transmitted to the general public or to whomever it is destined to reach.

All this is very interesting, of course. And it is interesting because it should strike a chord in us that sounds familiar. Dharma terma are not the only mind treasures out there. In truth, as mentioned earlier, there are ONLY mind treasures, because all products and every invention known to humankind came from one and only one place, the mind

itself. Think on that for a moment. We are all tertöns; it is only a matter of to what degree and what kind of terma we respond to.

This is what I meant when I stated earlier that the Tibetans frequently come up with elegant uses for things common to us all, in this case the mind itself.

I have been working with terma for over fifty years, astrological terma. In fact, in 2004 I had the rare opportunity to go with my dharma teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, to China where we visited a sacred place called Mt. WuTai-Shan, five mountains arranged in the shape of a square, with one mountain at the center.

It was at Mt. Wutai-Shan, so Rinpoche explained to us, that astrology first entered our world system by way of the bodhisattva Manjushri, who appeared there as a youth. From the top of his head, as the legend goes, poured forth the 84,000 astrological dharmas or teachings, which were then given to humankind.

People got so infatuated with the astrology that they began to neglect the dharma. Rinpoche explained that astrology is one of the limbs of the yoga, but not the root. Dharma is the root. Astrology is what is called a relative truth, a way to get us from here to there around the surface of the sphere of life, a way to change or modify our approach or attitude, but it will never take us to the center. The dharma is the root of the yoga, the absolute way to the center.

Manjushri, to protect humankind from the loss of dharma, removed the astrological teachings from our world, which made humans very sad. It was then that Guru Rinpoche (Padmasambhava), often called the "Second Buddha," intervened and pleaded for Manjushri to reinstate the astrological dharmas.

Manjushri finally agreed to do this, but insisted on secreting them in the mind as timed- release capsules so that they could appear gradually over time, rather than all appear at once. They became astrological mind-termas, and are there to this very day.

As mentioned, I traveled to Mt. Wutai Shan with my teacher and others, where we spent about a week offering prayers

and pujas on the top of each of the five sacred mountains. That trip along with a trip to Tibet at the same time had a profound effect on me. When I returned home, all kinds of astrological treasures poured from my mind, which would be another story to tell sometime.

As pointed out, I had already been involved with finding astrological terma for many years before that trip, and I have been finding astrological terma ever since. It is not so difficult, just an unknown technique here in the West.

How are these mind treasures originally inserted into the mind and why do we not simply stumble over them every day? "Inserted" here simply means formed or created, like a diamond is made, through great pressure and concentration. These insertions are symbols with power and these kinds of terma cannot be opened or found except by someone in a similar state of mind or for whom the doorway of the mind has opened at a certain time. In other words, they are self-secret. We also have termas here in the West, but just have never had the technique of finding them pointed out.

For example, take the words of William Shakespeare. His works were inserted into the mind centuries ago, and are so powerful that they have defied the combined ears of centuries to hear the end of them, to unwrap and expose the extent of their depth. As we listen to Shakespeare, we are knocked into trance by their depth and never get beyond or behind the words themselves. The songs of Billie Holiday are another example, rich beyond hearing. In other words, they last or endure. Someday the works of Shakespeare will unravel, be fully exposed, releasing the bound energy they contain so that perhaps Shakespeare's very spirit will again walk the earth.

It has been many decades since I turned away from studying books on astrology and ventured into reading astrology in the mind itself. I have been advocating for many years that my fellow astrologers not just look in the old Greek and Roman languages (astrological texts) for truths, but also turn inward and become astrological tertöns as well. It is so much easier, and the truths to be found there are evergreen. Astrological terma are always true and waiting to be found, understood, experienced, and realized.

The point of writing this is to introduce the concept of mind terma not only as some exotic Tibetan practice, but as something we here in the West have every right to access as well. We may not be accessing dharma-terma, but we can find, as I have, astrological terma, or perhaps terma in whatever field of inquiry you happen to be interested.

[Photo: As mentioned above, during my trip to China we also went to Tibet, where I met one of the reincarnations of the great tertön Tsikey Chokgyur Lingpa Rinpoche. This took place in Jekundo in Kham, Tibet.]



