

2021 Essays Winter



by Michael Erlewine

2021
Dharma Essays

WINTER

by
Michael Erlewine

© Copyright Michael Erlewine 2021

These are not all, but they are the most useful essays from 2021, sorted by the seasons. I don't have time to 'fine edit' them and still get them out there, but these are certainly in good-enough shape to be readable. And I don't expect many, but hopefully 'any' folks will find these useful. They are eclectic, yet the overriding theme is dharma and dharma practice. Those of you who reach a certain point in your own trajectory of dharma practice may find some of these useful.

Michael@Erlewine.net

Contents

LET THE MUSIC PLAY	8
THE FRINGE OF FIRE UP FRONT	12
“THE FOUR THOUGHTS THAT TURN THE MIND”	15
HOW I GOT INTO THE DHARMA.....	23
THE FIRST THOUGHT THAT TURNS THE MIND	32
THE SECOND THOUGHT THAT TURNS THE MIND : PART 3 OF 5.....	36
DOUBLE IMPACT CORONAL MASS EJECTIONS WILL HIT EARTH	41
COMPASSION AND LOVING KINDNESS	42
THE THIRD THOUGHT THAT TURNS THE MIND: PART 4 OF 5	45
” THE FOURTH THOUGHT THAT TURNS THE MIND : PART 5 OF 5.....	51
” THE KARMAPA: “DISTANCE IS NEAR”	60
ATTACHMENT TO DHARMA IS JUST THAT.....	72
THE GREAT CONVERGENCE	80
EXTENDING WHAT REALIZATION WE HAVE.....	82
“THE UNDISTRACTED MIND LOOKS AT ITSELF”	88
THE COURSE OF CHANGE	94
SCALING THE DHARMA	97
FREE DOWNLOADABLE DHARMA PRAYERS AND SADHANAS.....	99
OUR PRECIOUS INTEREST	103
INTEREST: HERALD OF INSIGHT MEDITATION.....	105

TIME OUT FROM MNDING	107
THE LAMA OF APPEARANCES	112
FEW FREE BREAKTHROUGHS	117
MORE FREE SADHANAS AND PRAYERS	121
SHADOW LIFE	123
NON-DISTRACTION	129
A MAJORITY OF ONE	130
FINISHING UP	131
CAPTURING MYSELF	132
AN EVERYDAY RARITY	135
WE DO WHAT WE HAVE AND BECOME WHAT WE WANT	137
WANDERING IN THE HALL OF SYMBOLS	141
TIME OUT	148
THE ORACLE THAT SPEAKS TO US	152
THE MOST EXPENSIVE RESTAURANT IN THE WORLD	160
ANN ARBOR MICHIGAN: A WISHING STAR	167
ORGANIC FOOD AND ANN ARBOR.....	172
ANN ARBOR AND BOB DYLAN	185
ANN ARBOR'S OTHER BOOKSTORES	198
SHADOW PUPPETS ON THE WALL.....	208
IS SAMBARA UNREALIZED NIRVANA?.....	210
ALL IN A DAY... ..	213
TIBETAN ASTROLOGY.....	217
AN ARCHIVIST OF POPULAR CULTURE.....	220

BURN RATE	226
“EXPERIENCES INTRINSIC TO REALIZATION”	234
TIME FOR NOTHING	238
FROM A DREAM	238
FINDERS KEEPERS	239
PRACTICE A HABIT	239
COSMIC BREATHING: SOLAR ACTIVITY	244
COSMIC BREATHING	248
“WHAT, ME WORRY?”	250
NO HEAVEN IN THAT	254
“CLOSE YOUR EYES AND FORGET IT ALL”	258
IN PRAISE OF WORRY BEADS	265
INSIGHT MEDITATION IN MAHAMUDRA	271
INTERNAL BAGGAGE FROM THE GET-GO	279
THE EDGE KEEPS ME.....	283
COMING EVENTS CAST THEIR SHADOW	286
THE CIRCLE BKS. ASTROLOGICAL CALENDAR.....	287
HAVE YOU EVER SEARCHED THE MIND?	290
UNABLE TO LIFT A FINGER.....	296
OUTSIDE OF TIME	299
SEEING WITHOUT SHADOWS	303
THE DARK OF THE MOON	305
REALIZATION IS NON-LINEAR.....	307
REALIZATION IS NON-LINEAR.....	311
SNAKES ON A BUS	314
FIRST INSTRUCTIONS FROM RINPOCHE	320

THE ALCHEMY OF REACTIONS	328
MEASURING DHARMA PRACTICE.....	345
THE WHITEOUT	347
GONE WITHOUT GOING.....	349
TAKING NOTE	351
GETTING COMFORTABLE WITH DHARMA PRACTICE	354
TAKING THE PLUNGE: INSIGHT MEDITATION	356
IT IS ALL GOOD.....	369
SELF DOUBT AND IMPERMANENCE	372
FOOD FOR THOUGHT: IMMERSION	376
THE EDGE OF NONSENSE	382
THE DEPTH OF IMPRESSIONS	383
WE BECOME WHAT WE WANT	385
CAN WE MAKE AN EFFORT TO RELAX?	387
CAST IN THE FORM OF DHARMA.....	391

LET THE MUSIC PLAY

I had little to no idea how much my own obscurations and limitations clouded my vision until I did. It took the arousal of Insight Meditation for this to be made clear to me, because Insight Meditation, being non-dualistic, automatically (and by definition) removes any objectifications, like criticism, comments, confusion, and so on. Nondual Immersion is just that, full immersion to the exclusion of objectification with a subject and object.

My response to being able to do Insight Meditation was immediate and addictive. It was such a relief from the swarm of thoughts that usually buzzed around in my head, that all I wanted to do was Insight Meditation every chance I could manage it. As I have written many times in the spiritual history of my dharma, my reaction to being able to do Insight Meditation, which was enabled (and suddenly appeared) through close-up photography in nature, was to go out each morning before dawn with my camera and lens and watch the sun come up. I did this for over six months straight, until the freezing weather drove my camera and this insight inside for the winter.

And I have moved on from there, with Insight Meditation continuing to be the highlight of my day, although I should probably better describe it as Mahamudra, which is a combination of Insight Meditation (Vipassana) and Tranquility Meditation (Shamata) thoroughly mixed like a cocktail.

I have been feeling guilty for some years now that the way I use Insight Meditation is not more granular, like examining each thought as it arises, but I have come to see that I have been there, done that, and don't even notice it anymore. I just automatically look at any thought that comes to my attention. It is now a habit.

The result is that whatever granularity I originally worked with (thought by thought) is now sort of strung together like beads, and instead of a thought at a time as I started out, what happens now is that I find myself working with whole swaths or streams of insight and what is realized. In other words, this is a process that can eventually be seamless or increasingly moves in that direction.

I'm sure I have much to learn, because Insight Meditation is a process and not some state we arrive at, yet I can say that what Insight Meditation offers me now is much more than I ever imagined or could (knew how to) imagine would be possible. And this appears to be because I have relaxed enough so that instead of (for example) writing in jerkiness, like a bad

clutch, whatever thoughts are realized, now align as sentences and just flow along more naturally. It is almost as if I (me, myself, and I) am just to the side and out of the way of this flow, still there, but not important enough to be an obscuration.

This will perhaps be a stretch for readers, but the Burt Bacharach song, "Let the Music Play," as played by The Drifters (the original 45) keeps coming to mind as to what nondual realization is like. Just as we say "Relax, as it is," so the title of the song "Let the Music Play," to me, says the same thing. Give this song a listen and see if you can get anything from these lyrics as the process I have been describing. Here it is:

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

LET THE MUSIC PLAY

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

Make the music play

Just a little slower
Till she's in my arms to stay
Please let the music play.

Jan 1, 2021, 10:22 AM

THE FRINGE OF FIRE UP FRONT

I will dig out some more stories from my past, which some of you seem to enjoy, Yet, I don't want to just be an entertainer. At the same time, here I am right now in this present moment, as usual, engaged in what I am currently doing, which most often is some form of dharma study or practice. And I know that many of my blog readers may not be interested in the dharma all that much. While I can understand that, I feel that at some point a few of you will understand and be interested in what I write. And there is the fact that, for me, dharma is very important in my life, and my Facebook page is where I blog about it.

In other words, I'm all about the dharma and am in the midst of working with my particular practice of the dharma. And that, my friends, is what I probably will continue writing about. If any of you are interested in the dharma and have questions (and if I happen to

have any suggestions), I will always do my best to be of help.

Where and how do I spend my time? The fact is that I spend most of my time in post-meditation, doing what is called Vipassana Meditation, more commonly known as Insight Meditation. It's what I like to do with my time, if only because Insight Meditation is timeless. I appreciate the pristine clarity of Insight Meditation and the lack of the usual subject-object dilemma, which I find obscuring.

When I look back over the trail I have left behind while getting here to where I am, there are questions I have that remain unanswered. I am working those out here on my blog.

In fact, I'm lucky that I emerged from my past at all and am still on the planet! And I can't help but want to smooth out the kinks and understand what I've been through better than I do, and also try to make it easier, if I can, for those who come after me in the future. We are each alone, but we are all alone together and can learn from sharing with one another.

When I read the more elaborate dharma texts on Insight Meditation, I keep looking for something that pertains to how I use and practice Insight Meditation as I have come to know it, and I sometimes wonder:

just where do I fit in? Perhaps the most difficult point to keep in mind, at least for me, is that any realization that I have or could have will NEVER come from the outside but has to come from within me as streamed through all the filters of my personality and obscurations while I'm "Waiting for Godot" to show up from the outside. It will never happen. We have to abandon that habit.

I see Insight Meditation not as some state of mind I am trying to get to, but rather as an ongoing process I am attempting to join, a process that requires some kind of fuel to function, fuel which, when ingested, reveals the results (and is the point) of this whole process I am writing about. And what are those results?

I sometimes liken all this to the image of a field fire, where a long thin line of fire and flames marches across a dry field, dividing the dry foliage in front from the blackened earth that remains behind, after the fire moves through it and onward.

The dry grass is the fuel (Samsara), the leveled ground is the what remains, perhaps not the best analogy, and the fringe or line of fire is the incendiary realization of Insight Meditation. Yet, the idea is that the fire of realization consumes the fuel of the surrounding Samsara by revealing it to us through Insight Meditation as Nirvana in disguise, usually piece

by piece, so to speak. Yes, for most of us, it does this incrementally, a day and an incendiary focus point, at a time.

Insight Meditation starts out as like we might first strike a match or light a candle in a dark room (the Tibetans call it the darkness of ignorance for eons) and, in time, becomes more like a flashlight that illuminates one the edge (line of fire) or part of Samsara at a time, wherever we can manage to point the flashlight. And finally, the illumination of Insight Meditation (I imagine, but have not experienced) is like the sun coming up, exposing our Samsaric world in its entirety as what it naturally is, Nirvana. In other words, this is a long process, not a flash in the pan or a lightning strike. It is the line or fringe of fire up front in the present moment that incrementally reveals the nature of Samsara. This is how I see Insight Meditation in the process of “expanding and extending” realization.

Jan 2, 2021, 6:48 AM

“THE FOUR THOUGHTS THAT TURN THE MIND”

[If you ask me, at what point did I know that I was into the dharma, “big time,” as they say around here, that would have to be when I met the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche in 1974. That was the turning

point. I also will share, as part of this story, the particular piece of dharma that caused me to identify with the dharma. Here is the story.]

As mentioned, when I am asked how I got into the dharma, I mean “really” got into the dharma and knew I was hooked, the story goes way back into the late 1950s and starts from there. Yet, in those early years, I was kind of just flirting with the dharma, not really knowing what it was and so on. The dharma has been recurrent theme in my life, like successive waves rolling up a beach approaching high tide.

Each wave of dharma enthusiasm would take me a little higher, but then roll back leaving me wherever I was at that point. However, as mentioned above, if you ask me what was the deciding wave, so to speak, I would have to say it was in February of 1974 when I met the great siddha Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche and here is that story.

As mentioned, I grew up in the late 1950s and early 1960s with Buddhism as one of the topics (along with Existentialism, etc.) that were sometimes savored in late-night discussions, fueled by plenty of caffeine and usually cigarettes. By the early 1970s, it was becoming clear that Buddhism, and Tibetan Buddhism in particular, held something special for me. I had been reading the early books of Chögyam Trungpa, at first stunned by the incredible art on their

covers that totally spoke to me, and later by the content. In particular, I read Trungpa's book "Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism."

One day, while walking around the campus of the University of Michigan, I spotted a small flyer, just a mimeograph or something like that, and was thrilled to see that Trungpa Rinpoche himself was actually coming to speak in my home town of Ann Arbor, Michigan. This event was scheduled for February 12th of 1974.

There was a phone number on the flyer, so I called the folks that were putting his talk to find more details, and found that they were really short-handed. I was a total stranger, but ended up as Trungpa Rinpoche's chauffeur for the weekend, plus I even designed the final poster announcing the event (shown here). I was pumped.

The days slowly ticked by and I couldn't wait to go and pick Trungpa Rinpoche up at the airport. I went early to the airport, driving my old beat-up ford station wagon and waited breathlessly at the arrival gate for Rinpoche to deplane. This was while they still allowed folks to go right up to the jetway. People began pouring out, but no Tibetans.

I knew that Rinpoche was travelling with Larry Mermelstein, who later headed up the Nalanda Translation Committee, so I looked for the two of them. And finally, almost the last person come down the ramp, there Trungpa was, standing right before me, almost too close, and looking directly at me. I could see that his eyes looked very tired and somehow the whites of his eyes were all yellow. Then, while still looking directly at me, Trungpa rolled his eyeballs upward toward the top of his head until I could hardly see the pupils, and when they came back, all the tiredness and yellowness were gone, and I was staring into the eyes of perhaps the wildest human being I had ever encountered. It was an incredible moment. Suddenly, there HE was. Wow! No disappointment. From that point on, I was just gone. He pushed all of my normal critical faculties right out of me.

I drove the two of them back to the professor's house, the home of Pete and Judith Becker from the university, where they were to stay. I had done my job as chauffeur, but did not want to leave, so I kind of hung around the edges of the room hoping to get some more clues as to what this incredible man or being was all about. I didn't know if I was welcome there or should politely leave, I just stayed way back.

And to my astonishment, suddenly everyone but Trungpa got up and left for a tour of the U. of M. campus. Trungpa said he wanted to take a nap, so I

let them all file out, and as I also turned to leave, Trungpa Rinpoche beckoned me and said to stay. He then led me into a small library/office room and sat me down on a chair. Well, this was beyond my wildest fantasies. And there I sat, not knowing just how to behave or what was happening.

Next, Trungpa opened a small bottle of sake, drank some, and proceeded to inspect just about every item in the room. He was very animated, lifting each little memento from its shelf, sometimes holding things up to the light and peering through them, and so on. He did a pretty complete inventory of whatever was in the room. And all this time I sat there, afraid to move, taking this all in. I was learning what 'activity' could mean. I would never have been brave enough to do that, go through all the things in someone's room.

Then, before I knew it, he was inspecting me, and he then proceeded (for the next hour and some) to instruct me in meditation and topics like that, but he never called it that. He never said anything about what he was doing. He just told me what to do, and had me breathe, teaching me to follow my breath, watching the breath go out, and watching it come in again. And he carefully monitored what I was doing. In particular, he was concerned with my "out" breath. I was not letting it go out far enough for him. "Michael," he said, "Let your breath go all the way out... all the way out!" As I struggled to exhale, he remarked, "Don't worry, it will come back!"

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

And although, after that weekend, I did not see Trungpa Rinpoche again, I have never forgotten his concern for and kindness with me. I went on to discover my root lama in the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche and become very involved with KTD Monastery in Woodstock, NY, and have trained there for the last 36 years or so. However, Trungpa Rinpoche opened a door for me that has never closed.

I have a couple more anecdotes from his visit to Ann Arbor that year. One was the local occult bookstore owner, a good friend of mine, Robert Thibodeau. We were back in the wings behind the stage of Rackham Auditorium on campus, kind of hanging out with Trungpa Rinpoche. Robert was shocked to see Trungpa standing there and smoking a cigarette, and he was brazen enough to ask Trungpa in front of everyone about his smoking. Trungpa, who never

missed a beat, responded with “Someone might like to see me smoke.”

The other event was when, after the weekend was over, and I dropped Trungpa Rinpoche and Larry Mermelstein off at the airport. I tried to tell Trugnpa Rinpoche that he was just about the first person I had ever met in my life that I did not feel any personal resistance to or criticism of. And his response to me was: “Well Michael, we are both married men and we are about the same age.” With that he said goodbye. And here is the reason for this blog:

While we were in the professor’s house, and walking down a hallway together, there was the poster I made for him, hanging on the wall. Trungpa stopped at the pointed and asked me if I knew know what this dragon was about. I told him that I did not know, and that to me the image was just striking and suited (in my mind) his visit.

He then proceeded to point out to me that the flying dragon in the woodcut holds four precious pearls or gems, one in each claw. As long as the dragon has a grasp of all four pearls, he can fly, but if he drops even one of them, he plunges to the ground. I later came to understand that these four jewels represent the Common Preliminaries, the “Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind to the Dharma,” also sometimes called “The Four Reminders.” These four thoughts are

essential for any further dharma practice – all four of them.

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

- (1) The Preciousness of Human Birth
- (2) Impermanence
- (3) The Inevitability of Karma
- (4) The Undependability of Samsara]

These are the four thoughts that turn the mind, and for many of us, these are the door through which we entered the dharma, why? Because these four thoughts are obviously so important to all of us. When I first encountered the Four Thoughts, they were almost exactly what was in my own mind. They struck me to the heart, not only then, but decades later, as I was being introduced to the more advanced Mahamudra Meditation, I took them up again, for several years and intensely, at perhaps another level. I wrote a little poem on the four thoughts.

THE FOUR THOUGHTS THAT TURN THE MIND

This precious life,
Impermanent and brief,
I know.

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

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

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

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

Jan 2, 2021, 10:00 PM

HOW I GOT INTO THE DHARMA

THE COMMON PRELIMINARIES PART 1 OF 5

THE FOUR REVERSALS

What follows is how I (and many people) got started in the dharma. This is simple, painless, and never fails to work if you are earnest. This is why it is called The Common Preliminaries, because it is open to all and the access is easy to learn, even for rank beginners, and I was one.

In the next few blogs let's look at the Common Preliminaries, which are also called "The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind Toward the Dharma," "The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind," or just "The Four Thoughts." They are sometimes called "The Four Reminders" and "The Four Reversals."

However you want to spell it, the import is that these four thoughts or concepts are capable of turning us away from our everyday distractions toward discovering the actual nature of our mind. And that is the whole point of dharma practice.

They are termed the Common Preliminaries because they are common to all forms of Tibetan Buddhism and they go before any other practices. By "go before," it is meant that before you begin any dharma practice, one should review the Four Thoughts. And by "review," it is not meant to simply read through

them, but rather to bring their import to mind, as in: get serious about them. In other words, we usually have to turn our mind away from our everyday preoccupations in order to get anything done dharma-wise. So, we have to actually contemplate these four thoughts as they pertain to us. If these four thoughts do not impact us, then we have a problem; we must be ignoring them to protect ourselves from feeling.

I was raised Roman Catholic, so I was used to things such as the Ten Commandments and the like. But “The Four Thoughts” are not written in stone somewhere; rather they are inherently inscribed into our mind and consciousness, already an intrinsic part of who we are. All we have to do is bring them to mind and become aware of them.

In fact, a large part of why I originally became serious about Buddhism and the dharma was because when I encountered the “Four Thoughts,” I was already instinctively familiar with them and had been thinking the same things myself. They were as natural as anything I knew and I already were in the back of my mind much of the time.

So, for me these four thoughts were a sign that the dharma is something that I could easily understand, and that proved to be true.

And unlike the Ten Commandments, which are imperatives, the Four Thoughts are meant to serve as just reminders of something we intuitively already know, at least the first three of them. These four thoughts were how the dharma first caught my attention and what flagged me down in the first place. It was like finding my own form of religion, although I consider the dharma more of a psychology and a path than a religion, but you get what I mean.

As I have written in previous blogs, the “Four Thoughts” were not only my introduction to the dharma as a newbie. When, after a great many years of practice, I finally was ready to start learning Mahamudra Meditation, said to be the tip of the top of meditation practices in our lineage, the first thing I was told to do is to spend some time once again on the “Four Thoughts.” I then spent something like three years working just with those four thoughts. They are that important.

So, as they say, without further ado, let’s look at the “Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind Toward the Dharma.” We will do this in the next few sections, but as we go in, here are the “Four Thoughts” as I originally encountered them. This is how they appear in the Tibetan practice sadhanas:

THE FOUR THOUGHTS

(1) This Precious Human Birth,

This precious human birth,

So favorable for the practice of the dharma, Is hard to obtain and easily lost.

At this time,

I must make this meaningful.

(2) Impermanence and Death,

The world and all its inhabitants are impermanent. In particular, The life of each being is like a water bubble.

It is uncertain when I will die and become a corpse.
As it is only the dharma that can help me at that time,
I must practice now with diligence.

(3) Karma and its Consequences,

At death, there is no freedom,

And karma takes its course. As I create my own karma,

I should therefore abandon all unwholesome action,
And always devote my time to wholesome action.

With this in mind,
I must observe my mind-stream each day.

(4) The Shortcomings of Samsara,

Just like a feast before the executioner leads me to my death, The homes, friends, pleasures, and possessions of samsara, cause me continual torment by means of the three sufferings.

I must cut through all attachment and strive to attain enlightenment.

As mentioned, it was the “Four Thoughts” that got my attention when I first encountered Buddhism. They indeed turn my mind. I had looked into many spiritual directions, had read about the trinity of this and the sacredness of that religion, all of which seemed so abstract to me, so distant and other-worldly – a world I did not know.

When I came across the “Four Thoughts,” they seemed so down to earth, so very natural. In fact,

they made clear to me what I had pretty much come up with on my own. They spoke right to the heart. They were better than any religion I knew, and I had enough experience with organized religion.

Having been raised Catholic, I went to Catholic school for a while, was an altar boy, learned church Latin – the works. But I left that. I never had a quarrel with Christ (still don't!), but organized religion and the behavior of its authorities appeared arbitrary and cruel to me. It lacked the intimacy laced with the taste of blood or reality that Mother Nature showed me – something real. Enough said.

That First Thought, that “Life is Precious,” did not need to be explained to me. I had always thought that my life was precious and hoped that I might be put to some good use and not just wasted. And here was an acknowledged spiritual direction telling me straight out that my life was precious. I just inhaled it. And that was just the “First Thought.”

It was the “Second Thought” that struck me to the core, impermanence. Death and impermanence had always hovered just out of eyesight in the peripheral vision of my life. I had never looked it straight in the eye and here was an instruction to do just that. There was nothing churchy or ‘clergy’ about this. It was what was always in the back of my mind anyway, part of

what I sensed to be true. And Mother Nature had always confirmed this.

And the idea of rebirth (that not only had we lived before and would again, but had done this innumerable times) was more than I could hope for. After all, I was raised with the deep impression that (as the beer commercial says) “we only go around once” and that without warning we are tossed into this world and have to figure it out (heaven or hell) on our own, and in one shot. No “Groundhog Day.”

It took years for me to realize that the great majority of people in the world believe in rebirth and it was still more years before I dared believe it myself, and that only those of us here in the West are stuck in the view that at our core, beneath everything, we are sinners.

The Dharma teaches just the opposite: that our obscurations, our so-called “sins” are just on the surface and that beneath that we all have Buddha Nature. All we have to do is to become aware of this by removing our obscurations, one by one. After all, the word “Buddha” simply means “awareness” or “the one who is aware.”

To a young person, this seemed too good to be true. But when I began meeting these high Tibetan lamas and rinpoches, arguably the most authentic

authorities I have even known, they spoke of rebirth as a fact, as a personal experience and not as an abstract idea. Here were authorities who actually were authorities. Imagine that!

And it was those “Four Thoughts” that first got my attention, that turned my mind or that I recognized without a doubt to be the truth as I already dimly knew it. All I had to do was to work on removing my own obscurations, which is what mind training or ‘meditation’ is all about.

[The original woodblock print, which is on the wall on the right of my desk, large, and a pleasure to see. The Ven Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche pointed out to me that this flying dragon, holding a precious gem in each claw, can only fly when he holds all four of the jewels. If he drops even one, he falls to the earth. These are the Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind to the Dharma.]

In the next sections, I will describe each of the four thoughts in more detail.

Jan 3, 2021, 7:05 PM

THE FIRST THOUGHT THAT TURNS THE MIND

THIS PRECIOUS HUMAN BIRTH: PART 2 OF 5

“First,

This precious human birth,

So favorable for the practice of the dharma, Is hard to obtain and easily lost.

At this time,

I must make this meaningful.”

The “First Reversal” or first “Thought That Turns the Mind Toward the Dharma” is the precious human birth. I have been to Tibet, China, India, Nepal, etc. and I have watched the lamas carefully brushing mosquitoes off their arms, so I know that Buddhists value all sentient beings, even gnats and mosquitoes. In Nepal I was told you get life in prison if you hit and kill a cow with your car, and there are cows wandering everywhere in the streets over there -- that kind of thing. How “foreign” to those of us over here in America.

The Buddhists are even more concerned with human life. And while all human life is to be treasured, Tibetan Buddhists reserve the words “precious human

life” to refer to those of us fortunate enough to be born physically able to learn the dharma (have the necessary senses) and in a country or place where the dharma is available. The fact that you are reading this here and now means that you are such person.

It might sound trite, but the Tibetan Rinpoche I have worked with for almost thirty-six years has reduced me to rapt attention (and tear-filled eyes) a number of times when he has gently and clearly pointed out to me that if we are here right now learning the dharma, we are one of the very, very few — the 99th percentile. He states that to have the good fortune to be born in a place where (and time when) the dharma is actually taught means that we have accumulated an enormous amount of merit in our past lives to (no pun intended) ‘merit’ this.

He goes on to point out that many of us might be alive now but born not in a country where the dharma is taught. Or we may glance over these words and never take them in or actually even be repelled by them entirely. Or we could have severe mental or physical problems that make learning the dharma impossible. Or we may be so obscured by anger and desire or just busy with nonessentials that there is no way we can overcome our condition enough to actually hear and practice the dharma. We don’t get it.

Rinpoche's point seemed to be that if we are open to these concepts, we already have come a very long way and that in our past lives we have somehow accumulated enough merit to deserve such a precious human birth as we have now rather than some other birth, like an animal, in which bewilderment and desire may cloud any other possibilities. In other words: in our own way we already have great merit. That's the idea.

And in Tibetan Buddhism, as I mentioned in a blog not too long ago, they put great value on the concept of motherhood. In fact, they say that all beings (not just human beings) have been our mother in past lives and have given birth to us, wiped our bottoms, and cared for us like no one else ever would. Every being has been our mother and we have been the mother of every being. I grant you that this concept is foreign to those of us here in the west and takes real time to sink in, that we are all that close. Every Tibetan is raised with this thought. Anyway, you get the point.

Buddhists feel that all life is sacred and that this precious human life in particular is a rare opportunity to be able to hear and practice the dharma, the path to greater awareness of our own mind. In this short article it is difficult to present in enough detail the "First Thought That Turns the Mind," how very precious our life is and how each of us wants to make it count for something and for it not to be wasted.

In summary, the first of the four thoughts is that this human life we have is precious and rare, hard to come by. It should not be wasted. Buddhists believe that all life is precious, not only that of every last human being, but all the way down the tree of life to the very tiniest sentient beings, perhaps some kind of microbe. All sentient beings are precious. Life itself is precious, human life in particular, because as humans we can have the opportunity to encounter and learn the dharma. Animals can't do that.

This first of the four thoughts instantly rang a bell with me the moment I heard it because internally I had always felt the same way. I worried about wasting my life, having it amount to nothing. I wanted to be used up in some meaningful way, for this life I live to count toward something.

My point here is that I became a Buddhist, not because of rules and thoughts laid on me from on high, but rather I discovered that I already was (and always had been) a Buddhist. I just didn't know it. I don't even really like being labeled a "Buddhist," but rather that I hold the Dharma to be true. Before the any Buddha, there had to be dharma, because that is what the Buddha discovered and taught.

The "Four Thoughts" made perfect sense because they had already always been on my mind anyway,

ideas like not wasting my life, coming to terms with my eventual death, watching the results of my actions, and hoping to find ways to wake up from the rat race I often found myself in.

None of this was news. This was my life.

Jan 4, 2021, 9:20 AM

THE SECOND THOUGHT THAT TURNS THE MIND : PART 3 OF 5

IMPERMANENCE

“Second,

This world and all its inhabitants are impermanent,

In particular,

The life of each being is like a water bubble,

It is uncertain when I will die and become a corpse.

As it is only the dharma that can help me at that time,

I must practice now with diligence.”

Notes: Impermanence is a fact worth our consideration. Of the four reversals (The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind to the Dharma), the best known of course is this second one, “Impermanence,” but it is also the most ignored -- our great ignorance. Ignorance can also be willful, as in “to ignore.” We agree to ignore what we find too hard to remember.

It is a cliché that most of us act like we are going to live forever and it takes some life-shattering experience (the death of a loved one, etc.) to remind us that death is perhaps the one thing we do know for certain. However, our eventual impermanence is something that we tend to acknowledge only when put on the spot. Otherwise, it remains unspoken, goes without saying.

I call impermanence the “smelling salts of the dharma,” because even a little whiff of impermanence wakes us up to the actual reality. The great Tibetan Rinpoche Chögyam Trungpa once opened an evening talk with these words:

“Some of us will die soon, the rest a little later.”

Steve Jobs, who was a practicing Buddhist, was very aware of the Four Thoughts, in particular of the thought of impermanence since he was dying of

cancer. It is said that his awareness of his mortality (the Second Reversal) kept him focused almost mono-maniacally on perfecting the iPhone and the iPad. At least that's what I understand. In a eulogy read by his sister at his funeral she said that Jobs had "achieved death" and that his last words were "Oh wow. Oh wow. Oh wow."

This is why these are called "The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind," because only they are strong enough medicine, or remedy enough, to tear our attention away from our often-mindless day-to-day busyness.

Only these four thoughts are capable of turning the mind from its freight-train rush at nowhere to an awareness of what is important in life.

Now, let's look at the thought of impermanence, so appropriately listed as the second thought, because we all have second (and further) thoughts about death and impermanence. The Buddhists state that this universe and everything in it is impermanent, and moreover that the lives of beings are fragile like bubbles on the surface of water.

Nothing lasts forever. Even the hardest diamond-like substances eventually wear themselves out of time and into essence. Any of us over thirty have at least begun to realize impermanence and those of us over

sixty have probably begun to be humbled by it. And I expect to become increasingly more aware of impermanence to the very end. At almost 80 years now, certainly that is happening.

The goal of considering our impermanence is not to have us huddle in a corner afraid of our impending death. Rather, it is to realize that all that we have, including our entire self, is ephemeral. It will not last.

Instead of being paralyzed in fear and fruitless worry, our time is better spent working on those things we do take with us when we die, like our karma, any merit we may have accumulated, and our potential awareness of and realization of the true nature of the mind. These are treasures that survive the death of the body and the inevitable abandonment of the Self and its personality, as lovely as it may be.

In my opinion, there is no better teacher and constant reminder of our own impermanence than Mother Nature. She treats every sentient being absolutely equally and never blinks when showing us exactly where things are at. For me, even a morning walk can suffice.

It can be as simple as a country road filled with night-crawlers struggling to get across the tarmac before the rising sun fries them to a crisp... or the huge Luna

Moth fluttering to seek refuge in a tree after a long night, about to rest on a leaf, when a passing bird swoops down to make a meal of it. The list of these events is endless and obvious.

Most living beings struggle to avoid being eaten, while at the same time struggling to find some other critter to eat. I mean, the writing is on the wall my friends, if we will just read it. Nature is a harsh mistress indeed. And we are subject to Mother Nature (the laws of physics) from the moment we are born.

Impermanence informs us that our fear of death is only adding insult to the perceived injury of death itself. I am reminded of that great film by director Arthur Penn, "Mickey One," a Kafkaesque study of paranoia, where the protagonist (played by Warren Beatty) has to choose between, as he puts it, the "crush out" or the "fade out." I put it this way: we can masochistically wait until the forces of time drag us to our eventual fate or we can stand up and look fate in the eye. We can choose to go to meet our maker.

I favor the second option over being dragged kicking and screaming to the end of life. I would rather learn to become increasingly aware of the nature of the mind (and thus of the nature of death itself).

A whiff of impermanence, as I mentioned, is the smelling-salts of the dharma. It is one of those four reminders or thoughts capable of waking us from our tendency to snooze our lives. A close brush with death sobers up even the most jaded of us rather quickly.

Jan 4, 2021, 8:36 PM

DOUBLE IMPACT CORONAL MASS EJECTIONS WILL HIT EARTH

WEDNESDAY JANUARY 6, 2021

[We interrupt our ongoing series on “The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind” to bring you a solar update.]

I sometimes wonder if everything is programmed in advance, meaning do solar changes cause effects on Earth or, a more radical thought, do these changes simultaneously occur here on Earth. I'm not saying this is true, IMO, just that I marvel at the synchronicity of the following, which we should prepare to experience internally as turmoil.

For example. There were two explosions (dark filament eruptions) on the sun on January 2, 2021, CMEs (Coronal Mass Ejections) that were timed quite close to one another, although one is slow moving and the other faster. They are said to hit Earth tomorrow, January 6, 2021 and the scientists say these two CME's may "pile up," one on top of the other to cause a more intense impact on Earth.

What I find remarkable is that these impacting CMEs will occur on the very day that the election results are confirmed in Congress, with all the promised brouhaha and shenanigans. I'm just saying... "What the hay?"

Jan 5, 2021, 5:29 AM

Michael Erlewine added 3 new photos.

The first two pages of the sadhana.

The beginning of the actual sadhana, some 40 pages...as a PDF. Works well on a laptop or you can figure out how to have it printed.

COMPASSION AND LOVING KINDNESS

[A complete practice to download and use on a laptop computer]

There are many dharma practices, and almost all of them require that you first have an empowerment by an authentic master of the practice. There is one notable exception that I am aware of, and that is the practice of the Chenresig, the Bodhisattva of Compassion. For that practice, we do not need an empowerment, so anyone can do it.

I created a little (but complete) Tibetan-style sadhana that anyone can download and use. I offer here to anyone who would like to use it,

CHENRESIG SADHANA

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Chenresig%206200%20One%20Sheet%20Master.pdf>

And here are a few words by my dharma teacher and guru of 36 years, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche.

“The six-syllable mantra of Chenrezik – OM MANI PADME HUM – is the complete embodiment of the enlightened awareness of all buddhas...It is the heart

of the five families of awakened beings and of all masters of secrets. In fact, each of its six syllables constitutes a pith instruction that stands alone as a condensation of the 84,000 collections [the Buddha's teachings]...It is the root of all spiritual attainments, including all forms of benefit and happiness..."

(from Chenrezik: For the Benefit of All Beings by Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche)

And to go along with that, here is a concise teaching on Chenresig. For more than that, you will have to seek out someone who practices this. And this is no beginning practice, and I can tell a short story.

When I have finished what I call "Dharma Boot Camp," which is in Tibetan called "The Ngondro," of which I was asked to do it not once, but twice, and I did, I then did a number of what are called deity practices, some of which were quite involved. Yet finally when in a meeting with Rinpoche, I asked him what might I now do as a lifelong practice? And his answer was "Chenresig," so that should say something about how important this practice is, that of genuine compassion and loving kindness.

"The Teaching on the Practice of Chenresig"

By Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche

[http://www.rumtek.org/index.php?option=com_content
&view=article&id=114%3Athe-teaching-on-the-
practice-of-chenrezik&catid=36%3Adeveloping-the-
mind-through-sadhana-practice&Itemid=163&lang=en](http://www.rumtek.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=114%3Athe-teaching-on-the-practice-of-chenrezik&catid=36%3Adeveloping-the-mind-through-sadhana-practice&Itemid=163&lang=en)

I have a great many more sadhanas created at our center that have gone out of print. I am considering bringing them all back in digital format.

[Graphics and sadhana designed by me.]

Jan 5, 2021, 12:45 PM

THE THIRD THOUGHT THAT TURNS THE MIND: PART 4 OF 5

KARMA

“Third,
At death there is no freedom,
Karma takes its course,
As I create my own karma,

I should therefore abandon all unwholesome action.

With this in mind,

I must observe my mindstream each day.”

Karma has been a buzz word in the West for decades, gradually working its way into the popular idiom. What is meant by karma I am sure varies widely, but the basic idea is that for every action there is a reaction, for every statement, a response. A drop of water hitting a calm pool creates a circular ripple effect every time.

And, yes, there is good and bad karma, although what we worry about as bad karma may not be what really takes a toll. The Ten Commandments in the Bible are definitely karma producing when they are violated, but habitual micro-karma appears to be even more overwhelming for us in the long run.

Of course, actions like killing and stealing create what we could agree is” bad” karma, but what really adds up is the gradual accumulation of low-level karma due to our own thought processes. Let me give an example.

You might say something accidentally (or purposefully) that hurts my feelings. I walk away from our conversation thinking about what you said, going

over and over it in my mind, all the time recording this in my mindstream. This might go on for hours, all day, or even persist for weeks on end. Every time I review it in my mind, I am inscribing this event deeper and deeper in my mind, digging a groove until it becomes a trench. This too is karma, big time.

And this particular kind of micro-karma really adds up. It not only obscures our mind as it goes down, but like all karma, it has an afterlife. It grows and eventually ripens in our mind, creating even more obscuration.

And unfortunately, most of us do this all the time, day in and day out. And it is mindless, meaning we are not even aware of it. Or we may be dimly aware of it, yet think nothing of it.

One concept to take to heart is that karma, large or small, is infallible. What goes up, comes down, and what goes down in our mindstream will eventually come up as ripened karma. You can count on it. As they say, "You can take it to the bank." It is also said that karma burns twice, once when we create it and again when the results of our karma eventually ripen.

What was harder for me to understand, at least in the beginning, is that karma is infinitesimally fine, as exact as exact can be. And it is not just limited to what we might have a conscience about. Ignorance is not

bliss when it comes to karma. You don't have to be aware that you are creating "bad" karma to accumulate it. This should be obvious to any reasonable person. Just consider what various societies (in particular our own) are accumulating.

Look around you. Global warming and ozone holes are probably examples of collective karma that the entire earth is accumulating, whether or not we are aware of it, whether we believe in it or not. Like the proverbial ostrich, we can stick our heads in the sand, but the clock of karma ticks on, nevertheless.

My point here is that karma does not only depend on our ability to distinguish right from wrong, although "intent" is important. It is way finer (and more insidious) than that. Karma goes beyond ourselves (the Self), so great care is required when considering actions, like each and every one of them.

Not to upset you, but in evaluating actions, we can't just assume we have good sense when it comes to our actions and the karma they accumulate. After all, we are not examining the world outside ourselves, but in mind training we are examining the mind itself (our attitude) that projects this world around us. Even a tiny change in attitude (a slip of the mind) can produce a big change in how we see things and influence our actions one way or the other.

My point here is that we may want to err on the safe side of karma, and not just assume that our mind (just as it came out of the box) is good-to-go, and that we actually know what is best for us and can tell the good from the bad. Can we? We may be walking a high-wire karmic tightrope hundreds of feet in the air and not even know it. That's how vulnerable we are in this area.

The older I get, the more I realize that my approach to karma has been way too general and that, while avoiding the "big-bad actions," I have consistently engaged in a myriad of smaller karmic actions (of which I am only somewhat aware) that I never take very seriously. And karma sneaks up on you. Karma adds up.

And while I don't want to become a mind-Nazi to my own life by second-guessing every last decision, I need to clean up my actions and stop laying waste to my own potential clarity through micro-karmic accumulation.

To use a phrase from Aleister Crowley: "To snatch at a gnat and swallow a camel." In this analogy, I have to reverse Crowley's phrase to something like: While watching to avoid the big karmic mistakes, I habitually and often consciously) accumulate and record an avalanche of micro-karma, my every passing reaction, like and dislike.

It is possible to stop recording all this micro-karma, but it takes some serious mind training, which I have detailed elsewhere, i.e. Reaction Tong-len. Suffice it to say that it involves relaxing the mind and learning to recognize and drop the obsessive thoughts or see through them. If you don't record them, the karma does not accumulate. Less karma accumulation means less obscuration. Less obscuration means greater clarity. It is that simple, but is easier said than done.

In this short blog I have only scratched the surface of this topic. The bottom line is that it would help if we can become more aware of what we are doing in each and every action. As we better understand the laws of karma, we stop acting like the bull in a china shop and suddenly find ourselves walking on tiptoe.

I am reminded of the cliché often used to explain chaos theory, that a butterfly flapping its wings in Brazil sets off a tornado in Texas. Karma is sensitive like that.

Jan 6, 2021, 8:54 AM

”

THE FOURTH THOUGHT THAT TURNS THE MIND : PART 5 OF 5

THE FAULTS OF SAMBARA

[This is the last in this series on the Common Preliminaries, “The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind to the Dharma.” I can’t express enough how important these four thoughts are to those of you contemplating absorbing the dharma. There is nothing more important that I know of than these four thoughts. As I have explained before, after decades of practice on my part, when I spoke with my Rinpoche about the advanced Mahamudra practice, his response was for me to spend real time, like years, doing nothing other than contemplating these four thoughts all over again. So, don’t think there is anything down the road any more important, IMO.]

(4) The Shortcomings of Samsara

“Fourth,

Just like a feast before the executioner leads me to my death, the homes, friends, pleasures, and possessions of samsara cause me continual torment by means of the three sufferings. I must cut through all attachment and strive to attain enlightenment.”

The language is a little strong, especially that fourth thought. I also spent a few years on these same four thoughts when I seriously begin to study and practice Mahamudra meditation. They were all I needed to get my mind right, with one exception, which is what I want to discuss here, and that was the fourth thought, the one about the shortcomings of Samsara, you know, the problems with this world we live in.

Sure, I understood it somewhat, but I also found that I wanted to edit it a bit, give my own interpretation. I insisted on having a little more wiggle-room, which is not a good sign with dharma teachings. For some reason I could not as deeply embrace it as I had the first three thoughts, the preciousness of human life, impermanence, and karma.

"The Shortcomings of Samsara," Samsara being this cyclic world of existence we all find ourselves embedded in – our ups and downs. Sometimes the fourth thought is translated as "Revulsion at Samsara," suggesting that we reach a state of being repelled by this world. Well, I didn't like that translation at all, the idea of being revolted by this world, because in so many ways I love this world. So, I kind of translated it for myself as "I will never get my ducks all in a row." In other words, we can't game the system. Not only does death claim each one of us (second thought) but, like a casino, the odds are in the house's favor (fourth thought). We will never game

life. It games us, if only because we lose everything mortal at death.

Now, that was hard for me to accept, because I am reasonably clever and somehow thought that at least I could game the system. I could probably get all my ducks in a row, at least enough to be content, if not happy. But I failed to understand one basic principle, and that was compassion.

Compassion is like what happens when a drop of water hits the surface of a still pond; a ring of concentric circles gradually spreads out embracing more and more of the pond. Compassion grows and is ever more embracing, the more realized we become. It is a simple law of nature, but one I failed to understand coming in.

Way back then, it was just me. I was on my own and could take care of myself, and everyone else was in the same boat, taking care of themselves. This was before I had a wife, before I had kids, before I had grandkids, and before I was that much interested in the welfare of my fellow travelers in this world we live in. That was a simple mistake (missed-take).

Like the ever-widening embrace of those concentric circles in the pond when a drop of water falls, my care for just me, myself, and I gradually broadened to

include a wife, kids, grandkids, friends, co-workers, and more. It was no longer just me I cared about.

I knew little to nothing about compassion early on. Sure, I felt compassion for the animals that suffered in the harsh Michigan winters, and beings like that, but people? I didn't dare start caring about people. That was just too much responsibility for essentially a kid, a kid that, as concerns compassion, refused to grow up. It was too painful.

My point is that as compassion grows, and as it does with age and experience, our mandala or the envelope of what we can embrace and care for widens. It becomes ever more inclusive. It is no longer just myself that I care for, whether I am personally content or not, but all of those I have come to know and love. How is it with them?

Sure, I can try to maintain a cheery attitude when all is well with me, while others I love around me are suffering and in trouble. My previous attitude was something like "Of course I wish everyone well, but not at the expense of my feeling content" – that sort of thing. But I find that this kind of attitude does not extend to my family, to my wife, kids, and grandkids. When they are hurting, I am hurting. And where does the line stop? The simple truth is that it does not stop unless we stop growing inside.

This simple principle is what leads to what is called the Bodhisattva Vow, the vow (as Buddhists point out) to not find peace until every last being is enlightened and finds peace. I don't see there is a choice here.

The moment we care or feel compassion for at least one other person (or being) in the world, our choice is made for us. There is no turning back. We are ultimately all bodhisattvas in the making, like it or not...

And so, at my age I finally begin to understand that "Revulsion at Samsara" is a natural correlate to having compassion. How can I be happy if one of my family or friends is deeply suffering? The bottom line is that I can't, not if I care, and I do.

When I witness the sufferings of those around me, I get world-weary, just tired of ignoring all the suffering in the world, and I feel less game, not willing to just go along with my normal attachments, not feeding them so much.

I guess what I am saying is that, at long last, I am beginning to understand that "Fourth Thought That Turns the Mind," the "Revulsion of Samsara," this world and its shortcomings.

As John Donne said: "No Man (or Woman) is an island."

In summary, it was that fourth thought that gave me pause. What was that all about?

To repeat, this fourth thought was hard for me to grasp, not because it actually is that difficult to understand, but because like years ago when I first tried to give up smoking or coffee, inside of me I did not yet really want to give them up, so my non-understanding was driven by my secret joy in still pursuing them. That secret joy had to be plumbed to the very bottom and found to be wanting, what was causing me real physical suffering before I could tear myself away from it. And it took me a long time. I was sure that there was a backdoor to life, a way out. This is not uncommon.

With that fourth thought that turns the mind, the idea is that life is inherently undependable and the fact that this cyclic existence we are attached to (life as we know it) will eventually wear us down and out of memory before we figure it all out, before we actually get all our ducks in a row. But we keep trying anyway. Only we know if we are successful.

And with the end of life, with death, there is no such thing as success, except learning to fail successfully. That is as close as we come.

Anyway, I was certain that I could somehow game the system and, in fact, get all my ducks in a row. I could master life so that it behaved as I wanted it. All around me, if I looked, other people were suffering, struggling, dying, etc., but somehow, I knew I was the exception and that I (perhaps only me) could beat the system. I could make it all come out right. If I was only good enough, worked hard enough, and was careful enough to think of everything, that then, for me at least, life could be mastered. It all could be good. I could have only the high parts of the cycle and escape from the low sides of life's cycles that I repeatedly found myself mired in and unhappy about.

We each have to find out for ourselves if life is cyclic. Does your life go up and then down, and around again? If it does, we go with it, like it or not. And so on, which brings me to my point here:

Life can't be rigged, no matter how smart we are. "Smart" is not the same as intelligent. A wound smarts. Life can't be taken by force, by cleverness, by scheming, planning, or any other approach than that taken by the historical Buddha, which is why he took it.

And that approach or path is “awareness.” In fact, the word “Buddha,” in ancient Sanskrit, simply means “aware one” or “awakened one.” It is all a question of awareness. We all are aware, but to what degree?

The Buddha’s entire path or method, which is called the “dharma” is about one thing only, waking up, becoming more aware so that we can respond appropriately to the ups and downs of the life we now live, so that we can learn to fail successfully as life ends, which it, of course, eventually will.

Without that awareness, we are subject to being torn apart by the tides and cycles of life, a piece at a time, and we can’t seem to control it, can’t get all of our ducks in a row, so to speak.

So, the point is that in my priority list, at the top of that list, before everything else, is the need to develop increased awareness, so that I can respond to the exigencies of life that confront me daily in a useful and successful manner.

It came as a real shock to me to learn from the highest Tibetan lamas that we have about zero chance of figuring out how to become aware of the true nature of our mind and existence WITHOUT guidance and help. In fact, they use this analogy, which was a show-stopper for me:

Imagine the entire earth covered by water. Into this we toss an inner tube with a single hole in it. Winds from the four quarters would push this tube every which way, constantly. In that ocean of water is one blind turtle that comes to the surface only once in a hundred years and pokes his head out. How long will it take for that turtle, as it surfaces, to coincidentally stick his head through the center of the inner tube?

That is how long it will take us, life after life, to discover the true nature of the mind and be able to respond to life in a workable and enlightened way...WITHOUT a guide from someone who has themselves recognized the true nature of the mind.

That is something to think about. We need help to learn how to become more aware. We need someone to point out to us how the mind works.

One last comment that points out how we may not yet be sensitive enough to grasp the traditional concept of the “revulsion of Samsara.” This excerpt is from a teaching by Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, translated by Lama Yeshe Gyamtso:

“It says in the commentary on The Abhidharmakosha, If a hair were to be placed in the palm of our hand, we would not notice it particularly and certainly would not

experience it as painful. But if the same hair were to be stuck in our eye, we would not only notice it, we would experience it as uncomfortable and even painful. The childish are like those with the hair in the palms of their hands. They do not realize or recognize pervasive suffering. Aryas, Bodhisattvas, and Arhats are like those with the hair in our eyes. They see pervasive suffering as suffering.”

So, the idea here is that we, you and I, are not sensitive enough to what is called the all-pervasive suffering around us. We are the “childish,” with the hair in the palm of our hands, not aware enough to experience it as a hair in our eye. That is why we feel so little “revulsion.” If you lack the faculty, you can’t see the phenomenon.

Jan 7, 2021, 3:34 AM

”

THE KARMAPA: “DISTANCE IS NEAR”

In a recent talk, the 17th Karmapa (Ogyen Trinley Dorje) made what I feel is a very convincing point about all the great saints, adepts, gurus, or what-have-you? He pointed out that we are mistaken if we think of these great beings that have passed on as somehow distant, at remote distances from us, or even as outside us, in other words: unreachable.

The Karmapa essentially said that all distance like that is near, already part of us and as close to us as our own heartbeat. He went on to say that reaching these great spiritual beings is not a matter of distances, somehow traveling to them in our mind, but only a matter of intent and sincerity on our part.

Of course, now that the Karmapa mentioned it, it is obviously true, and the takeaway here is our own sincerity and how much we mean whatever supplications or invoking of our guru's blessings we do.

Rattling off prayers by rote may (or may not) cause any harm, although my guess this is harmful because of missed opportunity to do otherwise, if nothing more. Instead, carefully tending to our intent, meaningfully invoking these great saints and gurus is up to us and that entirely.

Hurrying through our practice so that we can make lunch or whatever other reason, such as just to be done with our dharma practice, cannot but muddy the waters, confuse the issue, which issue would be us and our clarity.

And so, all the great siddhas and enlightened saints are right with us, we are separated by a curtain of our own inability to be sincere,

separated only by a curtain of our own obscurations and failure to be heard, due to our lack of meaning what we mouth.

And lastly, but to me very important, the Karmapa said that there is no hierarchy in reaching these great beings, no VIPs and no “grandfather” clause. Every one of us (that includes you and me) are equal in the eyes of these saints. They are separated from us only by our heartfelt intent and sincerity.

There are many dharma texts and sadhanas that list out the great saints or yogis of various traditions. And while words describing these dharma heirs are helpful, one can also just look at such a list and bring each great dharma guru sincerely to mind, one by one.

For example, in my lineage, the Karma Kagyu Lineage of Tibetan Buddhism, I practice with what is called the Golden Garland (rosary) of Kagyu teachers each day, and with no words at all other than their names and a little picture.

I once gave these following “picture books” of the Golden Garland to a good friend, who wrote back

asking where the words were? I explained there are no words and none needed other than to go through the practice, one picture (and name) at a time, and sincerely bring that dharma saint to mind with all the intent and sincerity we can. That is the practice and I do it every day, without fail. In fact, here are few of them, if there is any interest. They are free, two are laptop ready) and one can be taken to a copy center and made double sided in the long-form pecha style used by the Tibetans.

Kagyu Golden Garland (laptop version)

<http://spiritgrooves.net/PDF/e-books/Golden%20Garland%20%20NON-PRINTING%20SCREEN.pdf>

Kagyu Golden Garland (printing versions)

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Golden%20Garland%20PRINTING%202020.pdf>

Kagyu Golden Garland (laptop large-image versions)

https://hwcdn.libsyn.com/p/8/1/8/818a7bc3189d34df/Karma_Kagyu_Golden_Rosary.pdf?c_id=38989130&

cs_id=38989130&expiration=1609958321&hwt=5ecd
52625e0c289142513b30cc7748b8

Jan 7, 2021, 6:24 PM

”

“ALL THE WORLD A STAGE,
AND ALL THE MEN AND WOMEN MERELY
PLAYERS”

[The title above is from Shakespeare. This post is not for the faint of heart. It's not really for the eyes of many and even reading it may compromise readers, so unless you are into and interested in the depths of the dharma, I suggest you just pass on this article. This blog is about Awareness, with a capital “A.” Here is my dharma takeaway from an extraordinary experience, one I am still trying to place.]

A byproduct of a major stroke that I had in March of 2019, something I stumbled on, is directly related to the dharma, at least my take on it. It is still somewhat difficult to put into words, so an image that I find communicates to me the essence of my stroke experience is that of an empty theater stage. You know what I mean, bare floors, perhaps a single light up in the catwalks, no hanging scenery, and no players, not even myself, and, above all, no entertainment whatsoever taking place.

Originally, the way I saw my stroke experience (almost immediately) was as if I was suddenly out somewhere on a barren salt flat or the snow-covered tundra, with a single light (high overhead and behind me) impossibly bright and nothing else present as far as the eye can see.

The light was so bright that I could not bear to look at it directly, but only glimpse out of the corner of my eye that it was there. And so, I turned away, sought out the shadows (which, because of the stroke, were not there for me yet), kept busy, and did my best to ignore the light by endlessly doing things. This was not a dream, but a reality. I had never noticed the light before, although I realized that it apparently has been here all my life. And I certainly did not want to be left alone with it, but there I was. I had no choice. My sense of Self, shattered in the stroke, had completely blown out. Yet, still I was there or some facsimile of me.

The brilliant light, just a symbol or placeholder used here, was actually a light, but the true “reality” of my situation, or whatever we can say is going on here in Samsara where we all live. Yet, as mentioned, I could not bear to look directly at it. It was so horribly bright.

In my case, the light was (and here you may to have to think on this) not an actual physical light, but rather

this light was the LACK of any cover or entertainment. It was this that shown or got my complete attention. It was that LACK of any cover which shone so bright. That was the basic idea early-on in the stroke, but it became increasingly visible and apparent during the time I was in the hospital. I was trapped in the present moment, without access to either or any imagined future.

And then, as time progressed, I found that the analogy of a bright light on a barren plain, although perhaps fierce enough, was still just too limiting a description or did not quite lend itself to describing the stark reality which was dawning on me. I came to see that bright light was more a metaphor for the total LACK of any of the entertainment that I was so used to in my life. Now, think about this please. What am I pointing at here?

Until the stroke took place, apparently, I had been constantly entertained all of my life, as in: busily entertaining this or that. Always, I was busy! And this is where the photo of an empty stage comes into play.

What the theater stage in this photo is “empty of” is all the trappings of a performance or show and what is especially lacking is me as lead actor in my own life, not to mention the other players and the sheer “entertainment” and show of it all, which is what a stage is for, an outer display. That stage was empty.

And so, although through dharma study and practice I am familiar with the concept of attachment and fixation, another and overwhelming term that occurred to me after this stroke experience, which I am sharing with you here, is simply the concept of “entertainment.”

We are (or at least I am) totally entertained and involved with myself almost all of the time and so very, very used to it. Either that or I immediately suffer from its absence, the lack of it, which the stroke brought on so vividly. At least, this is how it seemed to me once the fog of the stroke began to clear. I had been stripped of my personal history. There was just this being in the present moment. That’s all that remained.

What I missed after the stroke overtook me was this “Entertainment,” being entertained or otherwise being constantly busy about something or other, anything but face the now obvious bright light high above my empty stage, which glaringly bright was in fact nothing other than the harsh shock of my being exposed suddenly to an utter lack of “entertainment.” In the moment of the stroke, I had no entertainment and no means to find any. Here I was stuck only in this present moment. My past and sense of self had vacated. I was empty of Self.

After my stroke took hold, I went cold-turkey and was suddenly not entertained at all, but “in a lightning flash” left all alone by myself with, you guessed it, no entertainment or cover whatsoever. And, although it may sound silly, this was devastating for me, to NOT feel fully entertained and involved all the time. Ouch! I had never, never, never experienced or seen that emptiness before in all my life. The very thought never occurred to me. And what I would like to impress upon readers is that this experience was devastating for me. I had NEVER been alone without entertaining myself in some way and suddenly I was unable to escape the sense and feeling of utter vulnerability and sheer isolation I was experiencing.

And so: obviously, for me to be devastated, I must mean something different here than you understand by the simple phrase “lack of entertainment.” And this is where it is going to get subtle, because you may lack that same stroke-experience and probably never have had anything similar happen to you. Neither had I, until I had it. And I don’t wish it on anyone ever, including myself!

In a word, that is because, at least from my point of view at the time, this life we live suddenly seemed all about entertainment, keeping myself occupied, and never (ever!) looking up from that. Previous to my stroke, like all of us, I assumed any idea of entertainment to be just that, the cream at the top of our daily experience and not something (like an

addiction) we just had to have all of the time. Obviously, through the stroke I found myself broadening the definition of entertainment.

However, when, because of the stroke, I was instantly stripped of my Self, my past, my future and found what was left of me trapped in this immediate present moment (which yogis like to extol!). Yet, I felt naked as a J-Bird, totally exposed and excruciatingly vulnerable, and did not know what to do with myself, except to keep my head down in some kind of fabricated busyness all the time. Ignore it was my first action. I did not dare to look up or around. And if I dared to and did, I would see out of the corner of my eye that strange light that lit everything. That stark light was there all of the time, day and night. This was, as it turned out, apparently the natural awareness of the mind itself.

Without my constant busyness and entertainment that I was used to, I didn't know what to do with myself, because my attachments, fixations, and usual entertainment were my required filter for life as I knew it. Of course, I wouldn't have copped to that before the stroke because I kept any thought of such entertainment as quite separate from the serious business of being "Me."

As mentioned, I liked entertainment as I used to consider it, but had not realized I was addicted to it

beyond measure and comprehension. Looking at it now, this life we all share is almost total entertainment! Samsara is a fabrication we each create and support to the exclusion of any gap in it whatsoever. The cracks are all hermetically sealed.

And then, to have my Self (and everything else) wiped out in a single moment was a little much to, well, entertain. I had always thought (and always assumed) that my attachments, my fixations, and various entertainments were something like veneer on the top of what was my inner “essence.” And beneath all that veneer was the real me and the authentic reality of life. The horrible shock from the stroke was that there was nothing else, no inside essence, only my endless fabrications and this obscuring entertainment that I could no longer find and maintain. You might want to read that last sentence again, please.

The problem is that, as the Buddhists point out (but I never got until now) is that this life is an illusion, a fabricated dream that we are having, as opposed to a “Reality” as I had liked to imagine it – something permanent and more real or substantial. And perhaps that is why we perpetually reify everything we like or dislike, that it might be (or we make it seem) more solid and less like the construct or dream that it actually is. At any rate, in a lightning bolt of a stroke moment, I saw through the back of the mirror that there was nothing there and that I (and my whole life)

was empty of true being. And that even I myself was a fabrication, a dream I had and was having!

And for many decades I had handled those dharma concepts fairly well. However, what if you were to wake up and realize that you are in a play, a theatrical production of your own making, in which you were the star. And what if that play or dream were to be suddenly over and played out? What is left? That's the \$64,000 question, if anyone remembers back to the old game show.

What I realized from the stroke is that aside from the dream and theater version of me, myself, I didn't know what to do with life just straight. When the character I play in the theater of life is done or vacated and shattered, and all of the entertainment (clothes, makeup, props, and fellow actors have gone home), just what am I supposed to do? Apparently, I had no idea because I had never seen through the charade until the moment of my stroke and its aftershocks that kept rolling in as realizations.

Thanks to that stroke, I got stripped of all that entertainment while still alive and before death takes me and while I am not yet at death itself. And no, I can't say whether that is what also happens at death, although when I had a translator explain my stroke to my dharma teacher (who was 96 years old at the time and sharp as a tack), his response was that my stroke

event was good preparation for after death. And my response to that was, whoa! I'm NOT ready for that.

And I thought I had been getting ready all these years through my dharma practice, but I never imagined what I was now experiencing. If THAT happened after death, in the bardo, I was not anywhere near ready.

So, there you have an introduction, a peek at the present moment without the filler of entertainment.

Jan 8, 2021, 10:03 AM

ATTACHMENT TO DHARMA IS JUST THAT

Yesterday, I acknowledged that along with the history of my major stroke, its effects on my dharma practice should be commented on, so here goes. This part of my story is perhaps the most personal and is not intended to be discouraging. It is just what happened.

What does it mean that in the aftermath of my major stroke, when the smoke of that event slowly cleared and the cascade of changes stopped changing, I

found that my Self (“me, myself, and I,” as I knew it) had been cleaned out like a chimney? Just gone!

I had experienced something like this shattering of the Self before in my life through various untoward life events, including a previous TIA (small stroke). So, I knew what it was to have what I call the Self instantly deconstruct, vacate, and go void on me for a time, but not for anywhere near as long as this major stroke demanded. Yet, I’m not here to talk about my stroke further, but rather to look at attachment.

What was total news to me this time (and most worrying) was that the part of my Self that had done dharma practice for 45 or more years had also been cleaned out and vacated too. I did not expect that, nor had it ever crossed my mind as a possibility, yet my dharma cupboard too was bare or seemed so. And that realization (as it dawned), that I had lost what we could call my “dharma Self,” was perhaps more terrifying than the stroke itself. It came as a total surprise and shook me to my bones.

My investments and attachments to this or that in my Self had been voided by the stroke, as mentioned in earlier blogs. Yet, I had no idea (and was not remotely ready) to find out how irrevocably and totally attached I was to the dharma. In other words, my personal investment in the dharma all these years was huge, and I had never fully realized this until it too was

shattered, vacated, removed, and just plain GONE!
And the resulting realization and takeaway was that, which I should have anticipated, attachment is attachment. Period, end of story!

To repeat: I didn't care that much about my attachment to all the things that my Self was historically fixated on or attached to. Seeing them vacated was nothing but basically good news, at least temporarily, because even I could recognize how much BS or how unessential most of it was, especially when it came down to push and shove.

However, I had never (and could not even imagine) that anything connected to the dharma on my part was also pure attachment and just as much BS. I had always thought and assumed that being attached to "good" things like the dharma was OK. After all, that was "good attachment," right? I couldn't have been more wrong!

The proof is always in the pudding, as they say, and as it turned out, the truth of it was that I was horrified (terrified!) to find out that the slate of my dharma-attachments, also part of my collective Self, had been wiped clean and it too was just gone. I couldn't believe it. How unfair! LOL. It has to be funny, but at the time, not at all.

You know I was not laughing. How upsetting that fact was for me is hard to convey. There I was, finally, after the initial shock of my stroke passed, able to sit down on my cushion for my daily dharma practice and almost nothing happened. It was as if the wheels of my decades of dharma practice were no longer greased with familiarity through my long history of practice. It was like it suddenly was all gone. It was just gone! I had to go to the back of the dharma-line and start over. That idea. And for me, that's a lot of years in time. As mentioned, it has to be kind of funny, but I was not laughing at the time.

I never even imagined that when it came to dharma practice and the stroke, that I would not somehow be grandfathered in, because dharma history was, well, a good thing, was it not? However, this was the dharma's way of telling me that no matter what I think, there is nothing special about my attachment to the dharma. Nada.

Attachment is attachment. If anything, perhaps I had more bogus attachment to dharma (and my practice of it) than anywhere else in my life. As they say, "Who woulda' thunk it?" Certainly not me. And it seemed that, in many respects, I had to go back to square-one and I didn't collect \$200.

It's like I was stripped of all dharma-rank from 45 years of sincere practice and told to start over. All of

that built-up attachment to the dharma was, as mentioned, just gone and nowhere to be found. And you know I looked, but it did not come back. That's about as bad as it got and eventually that was true only for a time, but for quite some time, many weeks, and some parts forever.

In the "good news" department, which was more of a footnote back then, I found I had actually accrued SOME benefit from all those years of dharma practice and perhaps even some tiny bit of realization. And these qualities stood me in good stead. How could I tell? Because they are still there! I already had and kept whatever realization I had earned and that part of my practice was untouched. And THAT, my friends, IMO is what you and I will take to the bardo, and nothing else.

And, as truth would have it, being humbled by my obvious attachment to dharma was ultimately a tonic for me, but certainly not at first. After all, it was spring in the year 2019! The stroke cleaned out my dharma house, so to speak, ready or not, and I eventually came out better for my self-humiliation than I was before, stripped of a lot of excess attachment and perhaps even better streamlined for actual dharma practice. However, I had to pick up my bed and walk on. That took a while. I had to get over my pissing and moaning.

Yet, it was at first a very bitter realization to find that attachment to dharma was still attachment and had to go. It had to go because it went, just like that, instantaneous! And it happened the first time I was able to sit down on the cushion.

In other words, it was permitted to occur and there was no court of appeal. We know that attachment to bad habits have no place, but I had to experience first-hand that attachment to good things is no different. Attachment is attachment and has no place in our future. I had always thought that good attachments were at least harmless. I don't know about that, but I do know they are useless when they are not existent. So, much of my attachment to the dharma had just evaporated. After my stroke, when I was able to look around, it was nowhere to be found, just gone. I had lost my attachment to the dharma.

It's a valuable realization that when death comes and the bardo beckons, my attachment to dharma will be no more help to me than any other attachment. I had to think on that and what to do about it. There was no choice! A start would be to stop unreasonably attaching myself to anything, including dharma. Reification is not acceptable because it is not accepted. It is not true. When it comes down to where the rubber meets the road, it won't be there.

I knew that decades ago, when learning Tranquility Meditation, where one might focus on a stick or a stone, yet that was not considered as “good” as focusing on a little statue of the Buddha. You got points for making the Buddha statue your focus, but I found out that I got no points for reifying the dharma by undue attachment to the dharma. None whatsoever.

One of the characteristics of “realization” is that it is irreversible and stays with us. And although I probably have only the tiniest bit of real realization, nothing, neither stroke nor bad weather could take that away from me. So, in a nutshell, the kernel of my dharma practice was still there, but a huge amount of the patina (call it dharma plaque) was sloughed off like a snake sheds its skin. However, discovering that in real time, all at once, was like a punch in the gut.

All I had to do, which took time and more than a little doing, including reorientation on my part, was to rework the more formal and outward form of my dharma practice, the part that was more like rote recitation.

And what this boiled down to was to stop parroting or blindly reciting prayers, practices, sadhanas, and instead do my practices from scratch and with heart. And the fact was that I had no choice because

mouthed empty words was just ineffective; the words just went in one ear and out the other.

And, as painful as it was, nothing but good could come from that realization and it did. Sure, I'm not as arrogant as I was about my practice after the stroke, and the kernel of dharma had seen me through the hurricane of the stroke, so that I have come out more or less in one piece.

I had to learn to find the words with my heart and utter those rather than rote read what was on the page. This was like physical therapy, in that if I did not gather my wits, so to speak, nothing changed. To repeat what I feel you need to hear: I had to recreate, from scratch, prompted by the printed word, the meaning of those words. Only that resulted in being able to feel that dharma once again. That took not only time, but actually doing it.

If it doesn't kill you, it makes you stronger. That's some truth! The stroke has done nothing but make me stronger, although perhaps I'm a little more physically frail. So, there you have what, at heart, was the most painful to experience, that dharma is unflinching even when it comes to itself. Attachment of any kind is still attachment.

Jan 9, 2021, 4:51 AM

THE GREAT CONVERGENCE

Don't get excited. I am not talking about some astrological convergence, but rather the great convergence of all the peaks of spiritual realization in our life as time moves on. That's why I like the image of Atlantis rising, where at first we see the tops of tall spires, and only slowly, as the city rises into view, do we see they are all connected together at the ground. That's the theme here.

I don't have an image of Atlantis rising to share here that's worth seeing, so this image of cypress knees which rise above the surface of the water will have to do. It is the same idea. What am I saying here? And this is a wee bit subtle, so I will have to work my words.

I'm saying that just like there often are a few drops of rain before a deluge, so in dharma realization, we often have various peak realization experiences that, while they can at first perhaps appear unconnected, rare, and singular, in time define the shape of a yet larger realization on our part, more complete and embracing. In other words, we realize that all of realization peaks in our life will all eventually converge

into a confluence, which is the shape of our mind itself, as we know it. Let me rephrase and make another pass at this.

And, at least in my experience, dharma realization does not arise like the exposure-slider in Photoshop, meaning evenly and all at once to the whole landscape, but rather what happens is that certain areas of realizations, with increased familiarity to us, appear first. This, rather than the light of awareness lighting everything evenly all over at once, as if the sun just came up. Got it? There is not an even flow, at least for most of us.

And, as mentioned, the overall effect is like Atlantis rising, in that increased realization on our part unites more and more of what otherwise we might have thought to be separate. What once was separate is now seen as one and also the fact that it has always been connected. We just did not realize that all the connections taken together creating a shape that defines the mind, at least our take on it.

I know, small potatoes, perhaps not very meaningful. IMO, this insight sheds light on the dharma concept of familiarity on our part with the mind. Some areas of Samsara are or become more familiar and workable, as in “realized,” than others. However, in time, as our view changes and becomes more mature, we realize them as all quite connected and part of one large

realization on our part. In other words, our peak spiritual experiences combine to form a single shape, the mind itself as we have come to know it.

Nevertheless, the index to these particular realizations is the degree or amount of personal interest on our part that is involved. That, for me, is the takeaway here. Those areas where we have intense interest and familiarity seem to come into focus before any others do as our overall realization emerges. That, as opposed to everything being revealed in an even outward exposure flow, like the sun coming up. Our take on the mind is tied together by our points of interest.

This may not be a useful observation, but I find it helpful.

Jan 9, 2021, 8:43 PM

EXTENDING WHAT REALIZATION WE HAVE

Where does our dharma training come from? In my case, aside from my daily at-home dharma practice, I have trained through various intensives around the country, in particular the 10-Day Mahamudra

Teachings at KTD Monastery, some 31 years of these intensives, with 1600 miles of driving each year. That's enough driving to circle the Earth's equator twice and then some. In those intensives we were trained to look at our mind, in particular the nature of individual thoughts as well as to look at the looker of these thoughts (the awareness we identify with that is looking) as well. And I trained such that looking at the nature of a thought and not at the content of that thought (what the thought is about) has become automatic at this point. I now do this as second nature and have for years.

One of the most valuable pith teachings I have ever absorbed is this:

“Don't follow after a lot of wild thoughts.”

Exactly. That seems to be the heart of it, but not the end of it. Along with this training that I just described is the suggestion (and pretty much an imperative) to continue to expand and extend the realization that accompanies the dharma event called “Recognition,” the result of the classic pointing-out instructions as to recognizing the true nature of the mind and becoming familiar with it.

“Familiarity” is what many Tibetans call Recognition, becoming familiar with our own mind, which has been

right there all along, waiting for us to familiarize ourselves with it. In fact, the final words my beloved teacher said to me, the last time I saw him before he passed on, was for me to continue to expand and extend my realization. It's that extension and expansion that I am talking about here. And anyone can work at that.

Just because you have not familiarized yourself with your own mind enough to claim that you have been introduced to it and have recognized it, does not mean you have no realization, have not realized anything. You have and you can also extend and expand that introduction and become more familiar.

Before we can focus on expanding and extending our realization, we have to be clear what that realization is, and this is not all that easy to put into words, at least for me.

First, as mentioned, at least in my experience, is Recognition as to the actual nature of the mind, familiarity with how the mind works, and this is synonymous with the advent and arising of Insight Meditation, at least in my experience. In fact, my teacher, Khenpo Rinpoche, used to refer to "Recognition" as our being introduced to the nature of the mind. We each need that introduction and should see it out.

Insight Meditation of the kind being mentioned here arises at and with the event called Recognition, familiarizing ourselves with our own mind, and with it (like the snap-back of a rubber band), facility with Shamata (Tranquility Meditation) is right there too. The mind has to be allowed to come to rest and stabilize before we can attempt to use Insight Meditation.

The two, Shamata and Vipassana, are reciprocal (binding each to the other) and for all practical purposes identical in nature, two sides of one experience. This is called being connate or co-emergent; they arise together. In Mahamudra practice, together, Shamata and Vipassana make up that practice. We can't have one without the other and still call it Mahamudra.

Yet, what is it that happens in Vipassana (Insight Meditation)? If Shamata is allowing the mind to rest in stillness and stability, then Vipassana is being aware of the nature of the resting mind. That should be enough of a description, but in my experience, there is more to clarify. I like the analogy of threading a fine needle with shaky hands. Shamata (Tranquility Meditation) removes the shakiness of the hands so that Vipassans (Insight Meditation) can thread the needle of insight.

It was important for me to understand that Insight Meditation can be “directed,” meaning that we can look at the nature of any part, physical or conceptual, of the outside (or inside) world, meaning any part of Samsara (this world of confusion), and we do.

In my case, at least in the beginning, it took an incredible effort for me to direct the focus of Insight Meditation other than where it first naturally occurred, which for me was through photography, focusing on tiny worlds and beings through very highly-corrected camera lenses. Although I had always assumed, such a realization would happen sitting on my cushion, my love of Mother Nature was so strong, that it happened there, just like dogs seek out a secure place to have their pups. Nature was that for me.

I suppose that with some folks, the flexibility of the focus for Insight Meditation could be as easy as (figuratively speaking) turning their gaze to any area, but in my case that was not true. For me, it was like learning to walk all over again, unable to just will myself or raise one finger toward pointing other than where I first learned Insight Meditation, as mentioned, with a camera and lens. It is very similar to the recovery from having a stroke, which I have had two of. Expanding and extending our realization is similar to that as to difficulty.

For example, trying to expand and extend the range and subject matter of Insight Meditation to something other than photography, to writings like this, for example, took me a year to a year and a half of intensive work to be able to immerse myself in writing as I could with photography. It is only a question of familiarity, our home base so to speak. That was photography in my case, yet I needed to extend this focus to other areas of my life.

I believe this is just my own limitations. I was lucky to get what I have in the way of awareness, but it was not immediately transferable to other disciplines, which is the theme of this blog. It took excruciating work to extend and expand the range of my ability to use Insight Meditation. Yet, I persisted because I wanted to be able to do Insight Meditation on those areas of my life that most interested me.

After years of work at this, I can see that I can expand and extend the range of my Insight Meditation, but I'm still limited by the degree of my interest in the subject area. If I am not intensely interested, nothing happens. At the same time, I can also imagine that, in time, my use of Insight Meditation will be globally flexible. As I become more equanimous (not attached), perhaps this will be less of a problem. Still, I feel this is something to be discussed and talked about. There is no reason why anyone reading this can not begin to clarify their own mind.

My point here is that beyond a certain point, the extension and expansion of any realization we gain has to be extended and expanded by intention and focus; otherwise, realization can go fallow.

Jan 10, 2021, 1:06 PM

“THE UNDISTRACTED MIND LOOKS AT ITSELF”

This line from the Mahamudra tradition of Saraha may give some context to what fellow dharma practitioner Jon Norris is pointing out in his Facebook blog “The Seventh Consciousness.” Saraha wrote:

“The undistracted mind looks at itself.”

Meaning, since Samsara is the sum total of our distractions, we therefore cannot see that brilliant light although it is shining all around us.

Philosophers tell us that this present moment is too brief to measure, yet it seemingly lasts forever. Not only that, but every last thought, word, and deed emerges from this same moment, like an eternal cornucopia.

What is or what is beyond or behind that repulsion from “looking at the looker?” My thought is that it is something beyond what we call our personal Self, meaning we can’t be in that blinding light and also have attachments, like to a Self. After our Self is transparent (through dharma practice) or left behind at death, perhaps that is when we will fully confront that brilliant light face-to-face, stripped of every attachment and all the reification plaque that we have accumulated.

And naked of all our obscurations accumulated through this life, we will then be exposed to this brilliant light in the bardo, which (without preparation) I am told we will be totally unable to endure, instead seeking out the darkness of a more samsaric cover for a rebirth in which to hide.

In other words, this most brilliant light is almost encountered when we try to look at the looker, that is, when we use awareness to be aware of itself, yet the vastness of the light fails to be seen because we habitually ignore or turn away from it due to distractions, although, like the ever-present sun, it is always shining right in our face; still, we can’t see it.

Jan 11, 2021, 7:01 PM

THE BRILLIANT LIGHTS OF THE BARDO

[The reason I keep talking about my experience with having a major stroke and the realization that came out of that is not because the medical details of the event are that interesting, but rather that what resulted from the realization that emerged should interest each and every one of us, especially those who follow the dharma.]

And so, I would like to revisit this classic dharma sentence of the great Mahasiddha Saraha that I posted yesterday:

“The undistracted mind looks at itself.”

The above sentence reads volumes, IMO. Couple that with the concept that Samsara itself is the sum total of our distractions or attachments, and we could have a conversation.

Therefore, the takeaway has to be that until Samsara is fully realized as Nirvana (as presented in the Kagyu Lineage Prayer), we are not fully enlightened. That’s a tautology.

This also means, as a byproduct, that as far as “looking at ‘looking at’,” when the “awareness that we are” looks at itself, it is blocked by the degree of our distractions and attachments. We can’t see beyond our own obscurations and thus cannot see clearly. This is true for each one of us that are not enlightened, certainly me.

Where I get a bit radical (and ask for forgiveness) is that it has been my direct experience, when I had my major stroke, and was completely deprived of my familiar Self for days and weeks, I realized then that most of what I called my dharma practice was actually reification on my part, sponsored by Samsara itself, and that I had yet to come even close to seeing, much less enduring what in the after-death bardo has been called a “bright light.” It’s not really a light, which I will get to later in this blog.

And by saying that I was “deprived of my Self,” I mean that the stroke cut off any access to my own personal history, which was grayed out (so to speak), leaving me confined to this brilliant present moment alone, with NO shelter or escape back into Samsara, my familiar refuge since time immemorial. There was absolutely no relief from the stark reality (and beauty) of this present moment. Why? Because there was nothing else other than that moment.

What was most horrifying for me was the shock of being exposed through the stroke to the nakedness and vulnerability that resulted from being without my attachments and cover, without the shadow-comfort and pure entertainment of Samsara that I am so used to. This starkness was unendurable.

I could not bear to look at that brilliant light all around me directly and, at the same time, due to the stroke, I was unable to take refuge in Samsara via my usual Self, history, my busyness and work, and what not.

That Self was, and for a considerable time remained, completely unavailable to me. In other words, it was still dimly somewhere back there, but I was unable myself to get back into it, to take refuge in it. It had gone void for me and was no longer reachable. This, for me, unique event was thus unforgettable, hard to get out of my mind, and hard to stop wanting to talk about it.

So, talk I did, first sharing it with my dharma teacher of 36 years and he confirmed that this powerful experience was healthy, and a good preparation for the bardo we each will experience after death, and that he had had something like 11 smaller strokes himself.

However, I feel I have to communicate to those who can stand to even listen, the huge difference between what I had imagined or read about the after-death bardo (with its various lights), and what the real-time actual experience for me was like. There is almost no similarity whatsoever and we should realize this now, while we can take steps to prepare for it.

So, of course I am looking for anyone who wants to talk about an event like this, which was for me not something I read, but something I directly experienced in real-time. The terror was realizing that, if that is what the bardo holds for us, I am NOT ready to die yet, but I better get to work on my inability to endure this “light.”

And to close, please be clear that what the dharma books call the “bright lights” of the bardo after death are not, per se, lights at all, but the fact that having been stripped of our Self and attachments at death, and thus suddenly totally exposed (with no refuge or respite), we are unable to endure this present moment without the comfort and entertainment of our familiar Samsara as our refuge. However, we won’t have that Samsara of attachment we have now, when we enter the bardo, which I always thought was a good thing, and probably is. However, the sheer nakedness and vulnerability, the unpreparedness that I experienced, was beyond my imagination by an order of magnitude. Please look up what “an order of magnitude” means. No matter how much we read

about this, we can have no idea as to the actual reality.

Jan 12, 2021, 7:17 AM

THE COURSE OF CHANGE

I've got a question to ask and would like to know your feedback here on these comments, please.

For an example, take anything you do that is creative or requires some creativity on your part. It could be music, a piece of art, something you wrote like a poem or in my case an essay or blog.

I write essays often, like much of the time. They just come out and either I am happy or not so happy with what I write. Since I very much believe in the present moment, like fresh baked bread, everything I write has some kind of lifetime, usually at least a few days. Yet, this is not always so, and this is because of what we call "change." As they say, "change" is the only constant in our lives, and this is true here too.

Sometimes, not often, I write something the night before I am to post it, get whatever night's sleep I can get, and when I wake up and read what I wrote, I already have changed so much that I no longer identify with what I wrote and don't want to post it for others to read. I have to start all over finding some inspiration in the present moment that moves me to write about. This happens. I assume you can follow what I just wrote, but that is not all of what I am writing about. That is routine. Now for what is not routine, in my experience, but also sometimes happens.

It seems that there are waves of change, like tides in the ocean. There are little waves that are regular, and then larger waves that don't come through all that often.

Every once in a while, there is a wave of change that is so strong or overwhelming that just about everything I wrote in recent history turns void. I don't like what I read of what I wrote and don't recognize myself in whatever in what I have written. It's like the whole view from which the writing was written is not useful, meaning I don't feel good about posting it.

And now, the only cause that comes to mind for this is that when stronger change comes along, like when someone close to us dies or something untoward happens, our usual self and its comfort base is to various degrees shattered. Suddenly, we are out

there, without any cover, all alone and perhaps feeling vulnerable.

And finally, I have found that given a few weeks, some considerable time, then rereading what I wrote that at first appeared unsatisfactory, suddenly is again readable. Well, perhaps I have to tweak it a little here and there, but there is nothing wrong with it. You have the idea.

So, the article at this point becomes “Can I get a witness?” Do any of you reading this have the same experience or do you have similar yet different experiences that you can describe and share for me.

As for the ultimate cause and reason, my guess is that it all depends on the degree of change in the air. Mostly there is not that much change from day to day, yet every once in a while a tsunami rolls through, something that drains the swamp of everyday whatever. If I am sobered all the way up, much of the mundane that I usually do, suddenly appears wanting, and so my day to day chattering and posts here, while interesting at the time of writing seem not worth posting. That is how I see it, but I hope a few of you are similar experiences to share here.

Jan 12, 2021, 10:37 PM

SCALING THE DHARMA

Dharma “realization” is natural and precious. Once we are introduced to the nature of the mind, that realization needs to be extended and expanded, and not allowed to go fallow.

I liken the dharma journey of extending and expanding what realization we have to climbing a sheer rock face or like the way a spider moves across its web, handhold by handhold. In other words, this process is incremental, and anything but a slam dunk.

When all easy avenues of extension draw a blank, we tread water waiting for a well of insight to spring up or, again, like a rock climber, blindly feel around for a handhold. It is slow going, folks, at least for me, this dharma stuff.

Looking to see dharma progress on a daily basis is futile. That’s something that takes place months down the road, if that. Waiting for dharma realization is like, as mentioned, treading water. Like the old phrase, “When you said wait, you meant a long time.” Realization is in the waiting, and not to be found somewhere else or at some other time. That’s the whole point. Overcoming frustration is required dharma practice, and so a sense of humor is handy.

It's a case of "All dressed up and no place to go," meaning there is no place to go other than right here and now. In other words, this urge for more and other, for there or then, for some place else than here is itself the problem that dharma practices are meant to solve.

It's a lot like "pie in the sky" or the concept of heaven as a place we are trying to reach other than by way of the here and the now. Every counselor knows that their chief objective is to have the person they counsel first accept their particular situation just as it is, if only because that is the way and the means to arrive at any future. Without accepting, nothing is felt, nothing known. Advanced dharma practice is all about accepting things just as they are.

A little poem for a coda.

SOMETHING FOR NOTHING

Expect nothing,

Except nothing.

Accept something.

Jan 13, 2021, 4:45 PM

FREE DOWNLOADABLE DHARMA PRAYERS AND SADHANAS

Back in the 1980s, our dharma center (Heart Center KTC) produced many sadhanas and prayers in the Tibetan pecha style (long rectangular format). They were very useful to folks. However, like all things, they sold out, were expensive to make, and so on.

I miss that they are not available, so I recently bought a tabloid-sized scanner and scanned a bunch of them. They would be useful on a laptop. Or, if you are crazy like me, you could print them out, piece them together, and end up with a printed version.

Here are a bunch of them. I could also (and am thinking about) making ones for Ngondro, Karmad Pakshi, and Ngung Ne, if there is an interest, but those are large sadhanas. Meanwhile, check this group out and there are a lot more not shown here at:

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

Scroll down, way down to near the end of that section..

SADHANAS

CHENRESIK SADHANA

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Chenresig%206200%20One%20Sheet%20Master.pdf>

AMITABHA SADHANA

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Amitabha%20Pecha%20FINFIN.pdf>

VAJRAPANI SADHANA

[http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Vajrapani%20\(Dorje%20Tumpo\)%20Pecha%20FINFIN.pdf](http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Vajrapani%20(Dorje%20Tumpo)%20Pecha%20FINFIN.pdf)

MEDICINE BUDDHA SADHANA

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Medicine%20Buddha%20to%20PDF%20FIN.pdf>

THE FOUR THOUGHTS THAT TURN THE MIND
INTRODUCTION (teaching)

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/The%20Four%20Thoughts%20Book-2%20UD.pdf>

DAILY PRAYERS

THE FOUR THOUGHTS THAT TURN THE MIND

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Four%20Thoughts%20FINFIN.pdf>

BODHISATTVA VOW

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Bodhisattva%20Vow%20FIN.pdf>

DEDICATION OF MERIT

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Dedication%20of%20Merit%20FIN.pdf>

THE FOUR THOUGHTS THAT TURN THE MIND

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Four%20Thoughts%20FINFIN.pdf>

PRAYER FOR KARMAPA'S ACTIVITY

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Karmapas%20Activity%20FIN.pdf>

MAHAMUDRA LINEAGE PRAYER

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Mahamudra%20Lineage%20Prayer%20FIN.pdf>

Jan 14, 2021, 1:36 PM

OUR PRECIOUS INTEREST

[Got my first Covid vaccination today, so that's a start.]

I never tire of interest, of being interested in what I'm doing. For me, interest is synonymous with engagement, being full engaged. I have been this way since I was a small boy, although my main interest while growing up was Mother Nature and natural history.

I kind of came up against it with the dharma. Back in the late 1950s I was interested in talking about the dharma, yet I didn't know how to do more than talk. I didn't know that the dharma was actually something to do and practice. In the beginning, I didn't even know that dharma was a path and certainly not how to walk it.

I certainly knew how to be interested in my mundane life. No problem. As for galvanizing me, meeting the Ven. Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche in person in 1974 and spending time with him certainly got my attention. And he was interested in everything, as far as I could tell. And I was interested in him.

The problem with dharma came when I found out (or was told) what one has to do, which was mainly learn to “meditate,” whatever that was. It soon became clear, from my point of view, that the entrance to dharma, at least so people told me, was pretty rote, like trying to concentrate on my breath, a stone, or a stick, etc.

I had never done very well learning by rote, like when my mom had me take piano lessons. Yes, I liked music and I wanted to play music, but as for learning it by rote practice, not so much. I did a little better on guitar, but not enough to be really good at it, and for that matter, this has been true for me with any kind of rote learning – learning without interest.

By nature, I was a free bird, so to speak, and I liked it that way. Yet, like the parable of the grasshopper and the ant, I liked being the grasshopper, but not the drudgery of the ant. It was always about this interest thing. Unless I was interested, I didn't see any point in doing it. And this was especially true for learning Shamata -- Tranquility Meditation.

Of course, I tried. I tried for something like 32 years and never got anywhere much with sitting meditation, but that's another story. Here I'd like to focus on this idea of interest, if you don't mind. As mentioned, I don't seem to get anywhere without interest. Am I the

Lone Ranger or is everyone this way? I would like to discuss this. (To be continued)

Jan 15, 2021, 9:46 AM

INTEREST: HERALD OF INSIGHT MEDITATION

Not everything is interesting or we wouldn't have the word interest. I think it is not worth spending too much time defining interest. Interest is what we are interested in, plain and simple. I feel we will define it as we go along here. And I see that people vary in what interests them.

With the dharma, it gets complicated because, with something like Insight Meditation (Vipassana), which is a process, it's a bit like, pardon me, a meatgrinder. You have to have something fed through the grinder for the process to work. And with Insight Meditation, the fuel is driven by our interest in the very process of Insight Meditation itself, and not so much by what the process is fueled by or consumes, i.e., the "meat." At least that is true for me. It could be whatever you are interested in, as opposed to just anything at all, and especially not what you are not interested in.

This is why, while I originally discovered Insight Meditation through photographing, doing close-up shots of plants and small critters, yet I did not want to be restricted to having to photograph each time I wanted to practice Insight Meditation. However, at first, if I did not do photography, there was no Insight Meditation. When I went home, put my camera away, my mind was quite ordinary once again. I was happy to have found Insight Meditation, but frustrated that it would not just work at whatever I turned my mind to, and that was true even if I was interested in the topic. And that was a real roadblock.

For me, this became an ongoing problem, and it took me over a year and a half of VERY hard work to learn to do Insight Meditation other than through photography, which in my case was writing things as I am here. I could not just turn my attention from photography to writing blogs and expect to find Insight Meditation. It didn't happen, although I was very interested in writing, but the technique of Insight Meditation in my case was not that easily transferable. I really suffered learning to write with Insight Meditation as the medium or process. Yet, in the end, persistence paid off.

And so, I learned right off that I am a victim of habits, and the realization that came out of using Insight Meditation with photography was not just naturally there when I wrote. I could not just turn my gaze from photography to writing and pick up with Insight

Meditation. It didn't work. My mind remained just ordinary, which does not mean that was just terrible, but a real comedown compared with Insight Meditation. It turned out that this problem was very much common for those introduced to Insight Meditation. (to be continued).

Jan 16, 2021, 4:43 AM

TIME OUT FROM MNDING

[I guess I have just drunk the Cool Aid, folks. Some of you will find these series posts, in this case on insight and Insight Meditation, repetitive and perhaps tedious. For this I apologize, but it won't deter me. I have to choose between being an entertainer and doing what my heart tells me to do, and this is the second. If even one person is benefited by this theme, it's worth it.]

HEART HEARING

Although I won't,
Often listen,
My heart,

Always,

Wants to hear.

What is Insight Meditation like? Well, it was like I had opened a pinhole or a wormhole into another dimension. I had more than a peephole, but the Insight Meditation process still needed to be widened, expanded, and extended to things other than photography, as I have pointed out. Until we are completely enlightened, it seems that we will always have to be expanding and extending our realization; this is a very important topic, IMO.

For me, in my case, it seems that for Insight Meditation to work I need something (some topic) or area of my life) that is detailed enough to be seen as a continuing process, like taking photos or writing a blog like this. And this is because the process of, for example, writing is continuous enough that I can get involved in it long enough to lose myself in it to the exclusion of duality's habitual distraction, which amounts to a breakthrough.

With Insight Meditation, the duality of subject and object, me writing this or that, is forgotten through the involving process of writing, so that the clarity and luminosity of Insight Meditation becomes the means or vehicle that, while it results in something written that I can post here, the process of Insight Meditation itself is the main thing that is happening.

I could say that the process of writing, done with Insight Meditation, is a “super” process, something that itself is the reason for doing the writing at all, and what is written just reflects that super-process in a magical way, and the written piece is merely a byproduct of the process. So, I can produce what is good writing to me, good enough that I can post it here, but the process of writing this is not a task or a chore, but rather, the dharma practice of Insight Meditation, nonduality, during which I am probably not recording any or much karma, because I am oblivious to duality, being just immersed in the process. I can look up from Insight Meditation and almost an hour has gone by, yet to me it seems like a moment. That kind of thing.

And while I am always writing about something in particular, realizing some part of Samsara as Nirvana, in reality I am practicing or exercising Insight Meditation and learning to not need the obvious duality of conceptual thought to experience my life. Another way to say this, perhaps, is that Insight Meditation is liberating, liberation from duality, and this includes all of the conceptual debris that results from dualistic thinking. The dharma texts seem to say that Insight Meditation is free from the duality that records karma. It is liberating.

Insight Meditation is a process of immersing ourselves in nonduality for increasing lengths of time,

while not losing track of what I am doing (one-pointedness), and this is actually more clear than ordinary thinking, yet does not seem to accumulate or add on any increased obscuration to our karmic filter. In fact, Insight Meditation is such a profound relief that, given the opportunity, I would do it all day and all the time. I'm working on that. I sometimes feel guilty because Insight Meditation is so addictive and such a relief. So, what does that tell us about interest?

Well, it suggests that while we think of interest and our having an interest in something (in "some thing"), with Insight Meditation, what is interesting is not the thing I am examining (the topic of this post), but rather the process of Insight Meditation itself. So, you can point at the subject of this blog, for example, which happens to be "interest," yet the most important part, IMO, is the process itself (Insight Meditation) used to examine whatever the topic of the writing is. However, the two are intimately related. In other words, WHAT I write is not the subject of the "movie," so to speak, but the act of being immersed in the movie is the point, if that makes sense; and that is Insight Meditation.

Insight Meditation is like an opening into another dimension, a magical journey or porthole where clarity, brilliance, and certainty are dominant, in which we immerse ourselves to the exclusion of second thoughts, criticism, thinking, and instead allow our mind to rest in that lucid clarity, while the nature of

Samsara in its many facets is being revealed to us, an insight at a time.

And so, its “watch the birdie,” while our picture is being taken, meaning Insight Meditation distracts us from our distractions, and by doing that is clarity itself and keeps at bay discursive thought.

Or it's like a dip in a cool pool in the heat of summer. When we are immersed in Insight Meditation, all of the fog of thought or concepts is ignored and forgotten. Everything is clear, luminous, and is revealed to us, rather than our having to reveal anything by effort. And while we can go from theme to theme, or facet to facet of Samsara, what really is happening is that we are immersed in clarity without concepts, and luminosity without obscurations.

This process of Insight Meditation is one of becoming ever increasingly familiar with our own mind. It is time out from conceptual thinking because Insight Meditation is time out from time itself. It refreshes and liberates us. I sometimes can't believe we're allowed to do this in the midst of Samsara. And because of that, is why I attempt to explain and share this technique with my fellow travelers.

Jan 17, 2021, 12:07 AM

THE LAMA OF APPEARANCES

[I'm still here and still on the subject of "interest," although I have kind of morphed, as I usually do, into Insight Meditation and its value to dharma practice.]

How is Insight Meditation different from our ordinary mind? The short answer is very, as in "very different." There is no way one could mistake Insight Meditation for our ordinary mind, as I know only too well. This is why I have worked so hard to extend and expand my Insight Meditation to include more areas of my life. It's not because I like that difficult an exercise, but I realize that the more I can do with Insight Meditation each day, the very much happier I am.

And I can well remember when the only way I could achieve Insight Meditation was to take a camera and go out in nature and do close-up photography of micro-environments. In the midst of the experience of close-up photography, one fine day, Insight Meditation just naturally arose. It was a perfect storm, but that is another story, yet one that is revealing.

I found out that when I went back home from photographing each day, my mind was just ordinary once again, and the difference was palpable. There

was something in the process of patiently waiting for the wind to die down, while I crawled around in the wet morning grass on my belly, looking through ever-finer lenses at pristine small worlds of critters and plants. And I became skilled at what is called focus stacking, taking many photos of the same subject, each at a different focus range, and combining the photo that resulted in a photo that was (basically) in perfect focus. This took lots and lots of patience. I was looking, looking, looking.

Anyway, along in there, one day, Insight Meditation clicked in and I was no longer just looking at the subject of my photography, dualistically, but rather I was seeing the “Seeing” itself, one with and taking in the whole enchilada at a glance, with no thoughts or commentary. It was stunning.

The long and the short of it was that I was soon addicted to Insight Meditation, such that I was out photographing at dawn every day. In fact, aside from rain, I watched the sun come up for six months straight, only stopping when the winter drove me inside. That should tell you something right there about Insight Meditation. When is the last time you watched the sun come up?

As wonderful as that breakthrough was, and it was, I had to return home each day to my ordinary state of mind, which was, sorry to say, a bit of a bummer or at

least a comedown. I tried everything I could think of to rectify this, but nothing worked. Ordinary was ordinary, with photography it was extraordinary, but never the twain met at that point. And I was confused about what to do.

Lucky for me, a good dharma friend came to visit us, Lama Karma Drodhul. He had done two three-year close retreats, and I explained to him what was going on. He then told me that what I was experiencing was the result of what is called “The Lama of Appearances,” which I had never heard of. He went on to explain that there are several kinds of “lamas.” Of course, there is the “Lineage Lama,” the lama who is our teacher, Rinpoche, with whom I had been working for years, but had not yet a chance to share these recent experiences with.

And then, Lama Karma went on, there is the “Lama of the Scriptures,” basically the extant teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha. And there is also “The Lama of the Dharmadhatu,” learning from the profundity of the mind itself. This “lama” is less known than the first two types of lama and at that point unknown to me.

The word “Dhatu” in Sanskrit means “space,” and traditionally Dharmadhatu represents the expanse of all encompassing space from which all phenomena, both samsara and nirvana, arise and dissolve back into This refers to the realization that comes with

Recognition, recognizing the true nature of the mind, and the realization that comes with that recognition. And this “Lama of the Dharmadhatu too is our lama or teacher

And last, and here is what he pointed out that I was experiencing, which is called “The Lama of Appearances.” Mother Nature herself is a perfect reflection of the dharma, from which we can learn. Apparently, this is what happened with me, and that is a long story in my personal case. I might fill this in sometime if I have time and space.

Anyway, I understood what he had pointed out; it made sense to me, yet I still had the problem of this form of meditation being confined to my photography. And, of course, I read whatever I could wherever I could find it. And what I learned from that is: realization such as I was having was not the end of anything, but just the beginning. That realization, which was more like a first realization, one restricted to where I had it, with photography, has to be extended and expanded. Those are the terms that the dharma texts used, “Extending and expanding” our realization.

And the person who had to do that was me, and not anyone else. Well, OK. I would try, and I did. However, it was very, very, and very difficult, one of the hardest things I have ever done and I have done

some. It took me well over a year, a year of continued effort and exploration, for me to expand and extend my Insight Meditation to include what I do a lot of, writing blogs like these.

I finally did it, and it was so very helpful. As for other areas in which I might extend my realization, I didn't have that many or any others that came to mind. I would try some that I had no interest in, and nothing happened. And so, this is why I feel that our natural interests are so important for us.

Also, after that exercise, and when I had no pressing subjects for inclusion, this expanding realization reached a point where it was not an issue anymore, meaning I had no areas I cared enough to push through and, as mentioned, I feel the process globalized enough by that point that whatever urgency it was that I felt was not there any longer.

I can't say that everything is of "one taste" as the dharma texts point out, but something similar seems to be the case. My Insight Meditation has expanded and extended enough that there is plenty of room for whatever I turn my mind and interest to. Sharing this, discussing it, helping others get into it is what I am all about these years.

Jan 17, 2021, 7:07 PM

FEW FREE BREAKTHROUGHS

Don't assume that you are going to have a dharma breakthrough with no extenuating circumstances. For me, it took what we could call a "perfect storm" for that to happen. I say this not to be pessimistic, but just because, at least in my case, that's how it was and often is. I tend to like to float above it all and by that I mean that I probably never have removed the deep-down stains because I don't go deep-down. I try to surf the surface waves, so to speak. I don't want to dwell on this, but why not tell it like it was for me, for those who can see the beauty in it.

It's worth noting that just before the advent of Insight Meditation in my life, external conditions on the popular level of life worsened dramatically. After all, who is going to voluntarily invoke or welcome adversity into their life? Certainly not me. It's hard enough to keep my head above water as it is, as opposed to stepping in front of oncoming traffic.

For me, the adverse circumstances was being laid off (along with a great number of people) from my job then as a senior consultant for NBC. Suddenly, I was out of a job and unable to support my family. It was a

major punch in the gut and it brought me right down low, just like that. One day things were fine and the next not at all. There are lot of finer details about how all this came down, but it would be a major sidebar for a blog like this. For those who want to read the whole story, you can here:

“MAHAMUDRA,: A STORY.”

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Mahamudra%20-%20A%20Story%20Version%203.pdf>

The point of the whole story, IMO, is that good times don't necessarily mean good dharma. I would never have volunteered for what I went through with losing the job, but without that experience I don't think life had my undivided attention. I was too distracted. I had to sober up from my good times to get in the state of mind to where the rubber meets the road, and was able to listen up.

Now, you may well be different, yet again, you may not. And if I had to bet, I would bet you are more like me than not. The freight train of our lives hurtles on through time and space and if we don't slow it down or get off it once in a while, we just may never wake up to what is right there in front of our eyes. I don't believe my little dharma breakthrough would have happened the way I was going before losing that job. Sure, perhaps some day and some where, it might

have happened, but I would not bet on it. Things were good and the distractions too great.

This distraction stuff is really handicapping. We don't realize it and worse, we don't realize that by continually invoking distraction we just distance ourselves from any dharma breakthrough ever happening. That was true for me. Falling on hard times was a wakeup call and, as painful as it was (and it was), ultimately, I am grateful for that opportunity.

Why would any of us want to have untoward events happen, especially when we do everything in our power to provide the best environment for ourselves that we can, to live, work, have friends, a family, enjoy ourselves, and the like? I mean, we work hard to do well. I'm sure none of us know how to do poorly; that just happens effortlessly.

Anyway, I was flagged down in my spiral laps of time, and in the midst of (ostensibly) doing well. And there I suddenly was, once again, down in the dumps. And it was a deep dive, because I pride myself on being a provider for my family. And then I was not. You get the idea.

Moreover, I don't recommend that you go right out and jump off a cliff, just so you have something to

worry about. Not that, but what? And I don't want to fall into telling you what to do, but instead, together, we could agree on this:

If all we do is forever keep reifying our life, you know, gilding the lily, adding layer on layer on layer of heavier distractions, well, it does not take a genius to tell us that seeing through all that crap to any kind of spiritual breakthrough is not about to happen. We would first have to deconstruct all that brikabrak, the layers we have piled on ourselves so deep and thick. We can't see through it, much less see what is beyond it, especially if it is nothing.

So, there you have it. That's a problem standing between us and any spiritual breakthrough. At least, that has been my experience. Somehow, someday, we are going to have to reverse that trend and begin deconstructing what obscures us. Not just you, but me too. So, we might consider beginning to remove some layers of that stuff while we are young enough to do that more painlessly.

As to how? Well, the dharma, at least what are called the Preliminary Practices are nothing other than ways trim back our distractions and get ourselves down to what they call a "fighting weight," undistracted enough that we can see beyond our self. That is idea.

It's not a case of if you have lemons, make lemonade, but if you have lemons, your chances of being serious enough for dharma increase. That has been my experience. Take advantage of that fact.

Jan 18, 2021, 7:00 PM

MORE FREE SADHANAS AND PRAYERS

Here are a few more FREE Sadhanas and prayers for those interested. I will be adding more as I can. To get them, here is the link. Just scroll down until you find the ones you are interested in and download them. Enjoy.

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

AVAILABLE NOW

Amitabha (pecha format)

Medicine Buddha (pecha format)

Karma Pakshi (pecha format)

Vajrapani (Dorje Tumpo) (pecha format)

Ngondro (pecha format)

Ngung Ne (pecha format)

Green Tara (pecha format)

ALREADY AVAILABLE at SpiritGrooves.net, Free E-Books, Dharma

Chenresik (pecha format)

Kagyü Golden Garland (pecha format)

Golden Garland Images

84 Mahasuddhas (pecha format)

Karma Kagyü Lineage (pecha format)

Dedication of Merit (pecha format)

The Four Immeasurables (pecha format)

Refuge and Bodhicitta (pecha format)

The Tashi Prayer (pecha format)

The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind (pecha format)

Mahamudra Lineage Prayer (pecha format)

Jan 19, 2021, 8:59 AM

SHADOW LIFE

We all know that light and dark represent a dichotomy. Darkness is defined by light and light by darkness. It goes both ways. My question is: for we humans, which way does it go? What are we pointing toward of looking at?

Well, that is simple. We are looking for the light, which by definition means we are in the dark, the shadows. We are not living in the light and looking toward the shadows, or are we? Do we prefer the shadows? Let's talk about it.

As humans, we are used to seeing the fiery ball of the sun, up there in the sky illuminating everything here on Earth. Perhaps we take from that our idea that there is the Truth, the Sun of the Dharma, and then there is samsara, this world of shadows where we dwell. We are looking for the light at the end of the tunnel of what? Darkness.

As I see it, we have a problem with that view that there is a sharp division between the Sun and the Earth, between the nirvana and samsara, between black and white, darkness and light, etc. Yet, IMO, these two opposites are not exactly equal, 50/50. And not even close. Where we live, wrapped in samsara, it is mostly dark, not light. In fact, it is so dark that even

the light in our own dharma sky is fashioned from shadows, and in that shadow world is where we mostly dwell. This is not just a cute twisting of words.

Just as we can't look directly into the sun without going blind, so we cannot look at the light of the dharma straight on. We like to think that we can, but we can't even look at it obliquely. Like the dark side of the Moon which we humans have never seen, so in our shadow world, we cannot see the brilliant face of the mind shining before and around us. We have never seen it. For us, everything is shadows, shades of gray. In other words:

We cannot endure exposure to the brilliance of the "no-shadows" light out there in the open sun of pure dharma.

And by "shadows," I mean our filters, the various obscurations and distractions, layer on layer, from which we weave this world of shades that we call samsara, this accumulation or plaque that burdens us and that we forever have labored under for time immemorial. Not sure how to say this, but what I find hard to believe (but I believe it) is that our whole current idea of dharma, the "world of dharma" so to speak we share, is not even beyond the city limits of samsara. It is kind of like "The Buddha Dharma," brought to you through the courtesy of Samsara Enterprises. We have never seen much of the true

dharma, not yet, anyway. As mentioned, we have yet to even reach the county line of samsara, much less cross that line and enter the state of dharma. Bear with me.

Selfish is as selfish does, meaning not what we think of as selfish, like “gimme, gimme, gimme” and “grab, grab, grab,” but rather, where we are and where or how we live (samsara) is nothing but attachment and its results. I might have to slow these words down so that they register and make better sense.

Making sense is what words can do. In other words, and I’m sure that I sound like an old-time preacher, “Selfish” is our entire refuge. We are like a hermit crab, who finds an abandoned shell and lives in it. Selfish is not just something we are just a little bit of, but this samsaric world we live and take refuge in itself is pure selfishness, pure shadows or obscurity. Of course, I’m going to have to better define “selfishness.”

It’s not that we are trying, as most dharma practitioners believe, to just see through the shadows of our obscurities in order to look at the light or sun of dharma, but just the reverse. We like to believe we are doing that, yet we have spent innumerable lifetimes up until now avoiding the light and we also actively seek the shadows. Sure, we “mouth” looking for the light, but at heart we live in the dark and

always have. Worse, we have no intention whatsoever of abandoning the dark. I know, we think we do. Darkness is our home and our refuge; it has always been. I'm saying that aside from coming from the dark, we also ignore the light. That's why it is called samsara. Samsara is the obscuring of the light through our actions, a habit, and an unfortunately it has also become somewhat of an avocation.

Let's walk this through together.

The dharma texts point out that samsara and nirvana are connate, two sides of one coin. Samsara is NOT nirvana and nirvana is NOT samsara. It is often said that samsara is everything about us that obscures the light, the sum total of all our attachments that effectively obscures nirvana. That's where we are now, or so the dharma texts tell us, caught or wrapped in a samsara of our own making.

We are not just "IN" samsara, but we are USED to being in samsara and as comfortable there as we can manage it. According to the dharma teachings, we have ALWAYS been in samsara. The Dharma is not like Plato's allegory of the cave, or like Christianity with its original sin, that we once knew but have fallen away from knowing. In the dharma teachings, we did not once "know" or be in the light and then fall away from the light and are now trying to get back to it.

The dharma teaches us that we have never been enlightened, have never removed enough of our attachments to see, much less live in the light. That is all in our future, and not somewhere in our distant past. We are not trying to get back to the light. We have never even seen the light! Even all the ideas of light and the seeing of the light are just concepts, elaborations that are not based on seeing the light or experiencing the light for ourselves. We need to recognize and admit that to ourselves. We are shadow people. We come from the shadows.

This was a big question for me, and I questioned my dharma of 36 years real hard about whether we once KNEW and somehow fell from grace, because that is how I was raised in the Catholic church, that we are sinners and need to be redeemed. According to the dharma, we don't need to be redeemed, but we just need to become enlightened for the first time. This is an important idea to be clear about: no original sin!

A corollary of the above is the theme of this blog, that this samsara, this opaque layering of attachments that obscure our view of what we could call the "light" of dharma is something that must and can be removed. Yet, we assume that removal is like taking a blindfold off and seeing the light. IMO, it's not like that. Let's review the next sentence.

Practicing the dharma is learning to endure (be able to stand) the exposure to the brilliance of no shadows.

We can't do that. We can't stand the light directly, but are and have been for millennia creatures of the shadows. It's all we know and love. We but dream a bridge to hold back what we have.

Exposure to the light means dying to the shadows. As the Tibetans say, "A single match can illuminate the darkness of countless eons." We get that. We even like that image. However, we cannot yet endure being exposed to the absolute brilliance of the light. There is a contradiction here that I feel is crucial to our understanding dharma.

And that is that light threatens to clarify and remove the shadowy world of samsara. We more want to have a glimpse of the light of dharma and then run back into the shadows of samsara to think about or savor it. In other words, we want to have nirvana so that we can properly enjoy samsara, yet nirvana is, by definition, the full realization of samsara. So, how are they different and yet the same?

In the Kagyu "Mahamudra Lineage Prayer," it clearly states "Grant your blessings that the inseparability of samsara and nirvana be realized." We can't have one without the other. Ponder that.

Samsara and nirvana are inseparable. Nirvana is not some other place and time from samsara and vice versa. The two are connate or coemergent, meaning

they arise together and exist together, like light and shadow.

This blog, unlike most dharma blogs, is not about the light, but rather drawing attention to the shadows in which we live and have lived for (so they say) innumerable lifetimes. Meanwhile, the Sun, just like the light of the Mind, is shining right before our faces. How is that?

Jan 20, 2021, 7:55 AM

NON-DISTRACTION

The Mahasiddha Saraha Spoke:

“First, I teach unwavering non-distraction,
Then, as you drink the elixir of non-meditation,
Self and other are forgotten.”

“Unwavering non-distraction” is just what it says, one-pointed mindfulness, 24x7. This becomes non-meditation. Self is not removed or opposed, but just sidelined and rendered inert. And as we embrace the

nondual nature of Insight Meditation, the overriding importance of the self and, by definition, duality, become transparent and of decreasing importance.

Jan 21, 2021, 5:41 AM

A MAJORITY OF ONE

The great Mahasiddha Saraha wrote:

“Though diverse, rivers are one in the ocean.

Though myriad, lies are overcome by a single truth,

Though darkness is manifold,

The rising of a single sun clears it away.”

[Comment:: When it comes to truth, there can be majority of one. The quote is from “A Song for the King” by Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche, translated by Michael Martin.]

Jan 22, 2021, 5:23 AM

FINISHING UP

Still working on my paper project, sorting out and organizing, not to mention digitizing, over 1200 pieces of art, posters, drawings, and so on. Today I finished most (not all) of the scanning and all of the large images that involve a camera and a vacuum table. Then I sorted it all out on a huge table, filed the resulting groups, and stored them in 13 very large flat files. The table is empty, the paper squirreled away. I am nursing a sore back from all of the scanning on my feet (over 1000 pieces just for the scanning), and so on.

Here are three books of Sange Wangchuk's line drawings, if anyone is interested. Will be making a series of dharma drawings grouped by project, books like mudras, Kalachakra, Bija (seed syllables), making pechas of sadhanas, and many others. Check it out.

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Sacred%20Images%20of%20Sange%20Wangchug%20FIN%20V3.pdf>

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Word%20Images%20Dharma%20ART.pdf>

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/e-books/Dharma%20Pecha%20Images.pdf>

Jan 23, 2021, 4:19 PM

CAPTURING MYSELF

I have a theory that, while each of us keeps growing physically until we reach that prime of life, after which we enter the downward curve physically, spiritually

(internally) we stop growing at a certain age and (inside) remain at a constant age from then on. In a way, we die at that point or at least stop aging inside. As for me, I was 26 years old when I stopped changing essentially. And I have remained like a 26 year old on the inside and still feel that same way today and I approach 80 years of age.

While digging through all of the various art projects in these last few days, I came across one that I had forgotten, the time when I was doing self-portraits of myself. This was in the 1967-1968 era of time, and it followed one of my few spiritual breakthroughs, of which I have had only three in my life, three big ones. Of course, like all of us, I have little realizations all the time.

However, this spiritual breakthrough, which happened on May 12, of 1967, was for me a real breakthrough, one followed by all kinds of creative effort on my part to understand what was happening to me, including prose, poetry, and in this case a bunch of self portraits I did of myself in my room at 114. N. Divisions Street in Ann Arbor, Michigan. I had a mirror and I would draw myself in that mirror. I found about 150 drawings in an old manila envelope, pretty big, like 12-x 18" in size, and strange enough they are. I will share a bunch here with you.

I would draw my own self portrait as a way of seeing my own mood. I was trying to grasp what was happening to me internally. And no, this is not fine art, but just the best I could do at the time. My mother was a fine artist, in all senses of that word, and all of her five sons were brought up at least with an appreciation for art. I never became a draughtsman who could really draw, but I did learn from my mom what is called “contour drawing,” which these portraits are examples of. They are simple to do and anyone can do them.

All you have to do is look carefully where you start the first line and then NOT look at the paper as you draw, but just look at the subject and draw. When that line is drawn, then you look where to place the next line and, again, draw but keep your eye on the subject. And the result is a contour drawing. Anyone can do it and something interesting always results. It’s the closest I come to being an artist. Most of my later attempts at art are logos and poster designs, and not real-life drawings.

Well, this is what I did in those years in the way of self-portraits, and the results, while a little strange indeed, do capture the many moods of those years. They reveal something of what I was going through. There is something captured that reminds me of that time.

Jan 24, 2021, 4:24 AM

Jan 25, 2021, 4:10 AM

AN EVERYDAY RARITY

A problem with spiritual experiences is that what at first is rare, like the raindrops before a storm, is later a deluge and loses its definition in the flood. We have to cope with this, either way.

If we are flooded in the commonness, the sage advice is to wait for the waters of the flood to recede and allow what's coming next to appear or float up and be apparent. We can't have it both ways, or rather, we must have it both ways, the have and the have-nots of our own situation. That's what a cycle is all about, like a spiraling pendulum.

It's also real dharma to internalize the written and taught dharma within us until realization dawns from our own take on things, not just something we read or have taken from a teaching or a text book. In other

words, if we feel ourselves drawn away from what we might call the official “dharma” (our initial take on texts and teachings) and instead manage to find in ourselves our own voice, one that is coming more from our inside and in our own words, so to speak, that is good or, at least that is natural. Again, “cyclic” is what samsara is all about, the cycle of ups and downs, ins and outs, fat and thin, good and bad, etc.

What I am saying here is that what at first may appear as a breakthrough insight, with time and encouragement, usually becomes more common, until its totally common and what was unique at first is lost in the commonness. This can be confusing, and is NOT a time to panic, but a good sign, a sign we are developing the dharma from within, which is the only way it will ever come to us. And, as mentioned, the smart money is on patience and relaxation, while we wait until the next unique breakthrough takes place, and we do it all over again. That, as mentioned, is what cycles are all about.

My first dharma teacher had a little trick with string on the fingers. The way to solve the problem was that you could not take away (remove) any string, but you could add on as much string as you want... and that was the key to a solution.

What I am saying here is similar, that dharma realization is never removed, but it can become

ubiquitous so that what was “special” to us is no longer that special. And it is the nature of cycles and cyclic behavior that, given time, the whole “cycle” will repeat itself, with new uniqueness appearing, and then increasing, mixing, and so on and on.

I don't know where I first heard it, but I love this phrase “When you said wait, you meant a long time.” That's patience.

“Patience is a virtue,
Have it if you can,
Seldom found in women,
Never found in men.”

Jan 25, 2021, 9:53 PM

WE DO WHAT WE HAVE AND BECOME WHAT WE WANT

Whether it is a film or digital negative, photos have a negative from which a positive can be made. The same is true with astrology, which is what I would like to discuss with you here.

As a budding astrologer, early-on I more or less mastered the little things in a natal chart, the “your Moon is opposed to Saturn” or “you have more earth than any other element,” and on down the line of astrological interpretation. And then, somewhere along the way I discovered what we call the “whole chart pattern,” meaning that all of the planets that orbit our sun, working together, themselves create a shape, a large pattern that links by Ptolemaic aspect from planet to planet all the way around the chart. This is true using the traditional (geocentric) natal chart (Earth’s view of the solar system), but it was especially true using the heliocentric chart, since those are the true positions each planet has to our Sun in reality at any given time, and not just how they appear from Earth’s view of them. It was a bright day when I first realized that not only was I born at a certain day and time here on Earth, but I was also born at the same time as a member of the entire solar system – heliocentrics. We also share in the life of our whole solar system too.

Once I could see the whole-chart pattern, I realized how piecemeal and fractured what I had been doing up to then was. I never got the whole picture, and then I did. It changed everything for me as to the way I approached astrology, especially as to how I did a “reading” for my clients. The above is a little bit of my story, but not the reason for this blog.

What I would like to share with you here is that no matter what whole-chart pattern you have (and let's use helio), we each have not only that particular whole-chart pattern, but we also automatically have its reverse or reflection, meaning we have the negative or reverse of that positive pattern.

In other words, we have the whole-chart pattern we were born with (positive) and we have the reflection of everything else but that, call it our negative or reflex. The two together make one whole, but separately each is worth examining carefully.

Every helio whole-chart type pattern has its own internal ability to respond to "What Is," meaning that wherever we are coming from and whatever StarType pattern we have, we automatically react to this world of everything else other than that pattern which we have.

In other words, whatever chart type we "HAVE," you will automatically BE and use. On the other hand, every chart type you "WANT" or lack (don't have), you will respond to that by your wanting to have it and perhaps even bend over backward to emulate or approximate that chart type that you most want (or lack), fill in the gap.

Both methods or situations work, the one we HAVE and the one we WANT. It's in our mind, one way or other, literally a positive and a negative, like a film from a camera. The positive is the print, the negative is the reverse, yet either way, the image is there and ingrained. Why is this important?

For one, we tend to identify either with what we have (our own chart type) or what we lack or want, whatever factors we don't have it, or both. In other words, we could state this axiom:

“We Do What We Have, and We Become What We Want.”

What we have, we have. We don't need it because we have it. On the other hand, we become (turn toward) what we want or lack, meaning we turn toward, emulate, or try to fill in those areas where we want. And again: people differ on whether they most identify with what they have or instead identify with what they lack or want. You would think that we would easily identify with what we have, but that is not always the case. Many folks don't know what they have or they consider it of no interest to them. Instead, they are all about what they don't have and they want to get that. Or, again, both.

The bottom line, IMO, is to get your helio chart and visually study that chart and the whole-chart pattern that it contains. I include here some sixty major StarTypes (whole-chart patterns), one for guys and one for gals. You can get your free helio chart here on this website I designed.

Astrologyland.com

Just go to the open wheel, enter your birth data (month, day, and year of birth), and your time and place if you have it, but time and place is not necessary. That SELECT "Helio" in the lower right-hand part of the area. And then press "CALCULATE." You will see your whole-chart pattern and below that your StarType and a brief description as written by me. Then, if you want to read more, go to SpiritGrooves.net, select "Free e-Books" and scroll down until you find the book "Dharma Chart, Karma Chart" and look up your StarType. Enjoy!

Jan 26, 2021, 2:31 PM

WANDERING IN THE HALL OF SYMBOLS

Back in the 1960s, after I built my little silkscreen shop to produce posters for our band, the Prime

Movers Blues Band, it was like I was all dressed up with no place to go. The shop was way up on the third floor of what came to be known as the Prime Movers House at 114 N. Division in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

And so, I found myself silk-screening full sized posters not just for music events, but what I felt were interesting symbols just for the heck of it. There is something about the hands-on duplication process of images that is trancelike, at least to me. Scores of the same poster images, silkscreened and drying on the racks that I built for them, was mesmerizing.

I had no where to put them up and no reason to post them, other than the sheer beauty of seeing a large symbol on a wall or building. That's about as far as it went, but later, after I met my wife-to-be Margaret, we actively considered going into images to a much larger scale, again, just for the beauty of it.

One of our ideas that proved (for us) financially and time-wise impossible was painting huge symbols (for free) on barns along roads and highways. I was born and raised (until the 6th grade) in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, home of Amish and Mennonite folks, so I saw large symbols of the Pennsylvania Dutch on barns as a kid. Somehow, the beauty of that sunk in and we thought, why not do it. However, on thought, we couldn't afford it or the time to do it in. However, I did have this little series I share here.

Another project that came much closer to actually happening was to make quilts and sell them at the local Ann Arbor Farmer's Market, quilts that contained (you guessed it) very large symbols on them. Yet, that too slowly passed us by, yet like in slow motion, and vanished in time.

One thing we did do, which I will probably blog about here soon was paint huge Japanese symbols on the walls of a local restaurant, Indian Summer. I loved them, of course, yet they proved to be to "foreign" looking or strange to people off the street, these large Japanese-style radishes, pumpkins, and especially huge honey bees, so they were removed. Not everyone loves the honey bee like we did. I was given minutes to photograph those designs before they were painted over. I will post them here soon.

Anyway, apparently I have a thing for large symbols and images. I also painted a large magic circle on the floor of a large vaulted and unfinished room on the Prime Mover House, where I lived, along with some of our band members. In that same room, we had, under the floorboards, a pound of really bad, pot. I was there until we smoked every last fiber of it.

Anyway, it is a very large PDF file, if anyone wants these symbols.

MICHAEL SYMBOLS

https://traffic.libsyn.com/secure/spiritgrooves/MICHAEL_SYMBOLS.pdf

Jan 27, 2021, 9:40 AM

ENDING UP WHERE I STARTED

It's often the journey itself that is the goal, not where we end up, especially if that is back where we started, but with better realization. I have to puzzle things out, a lot. Something gets stuck in my head and I find myself going over it for who knows how long, until somehow it resolves itself into some kind of unimportance. I often find this kind of question in the various translations of pith dharma texts. There is more than one way to translate a Tibetan phrase into English and too often I get caught up in the difference. One good example, for me, is the stanza in the Kagyu Mahamudra Lineage Prayer that traditionally is devoted to Shamata Meditation (tranquility practice).

“As it is taught,

Unwavering attention is the body of meditation.
Whatever arises, is the fresh nature of thought.
To the meditator who rests there in naturalness,
Grant your blessings that meditation is free from
intellectualization.”

There are all kinds of ways to translate the phrase in
the first sentence that reads “Unwavering attention.”
Alternates are “Unwavering non-distraction” or
“Unwavering mindfulness,” to name two of them.
“Non-distraction” is the essential idea, so I have been
told, and that seems most natural to me in actual
practice.

For years, decades, I have used the phrase
“Unwavering attention,” since that was the translation
in the prayer as I originally received it. It was printed
there, so I recited it, without a lot of thought about it.

However, after time (again: decades), I began to
question that phrase. In dharma, we are encouraged
to question everything until there is no question
anymore. I find my questions come later rather than
sooner, but they do come up.

And so, I found myself asking: what is the difference
between “unwavering non-distraction” and
“unwavering attention?” They seem to be reciprocal or

opposites of one another. The answer is “probably not much,” although in writing about dharma I find that it is best keeping our pointers pointed at the nature of the mind itself and not all over the place. I am a great believer in “schooling,” as in the way that fish “school” or all point in the same direction. In a similar way, I like all my dharma pointers to line up and work or point together at whatever makes the most sense to me. People differ about what makes good sense to them and that includes me.

“Unwavering attention” sounds like attention to “something,” thus some hint of duality, when all the pith dharma teachings tend ultimately to point to non-duality. “Unwavering non-distraction” is more to my liking, but a much more awkward phrase, IMO, but nevertheless I like it. Being undistracted suggests, again, more of a one-pointedness, or does it?

Yet, we can say “undistracted from what?” Or “Undistracted by what?” I keep wanting to say “Undistracted,” because I am focused on “what,” or is it just a skip and a jump to say “undistracted” because I’m interested in “what,” interested in whatever does not distract me.

If we are busy, as in interested in something, how is this different from Insight Meditation, which is focused yet resting in non-duality. Is non-duality the same as focused on something to the exclusion of distraction?

Is there a difference? You get the ideas as to how I go around and around. Where am I going and in where will this take me?

Either or “whatever” way, the idea is non-distraction, i.e., not being distracted. My guess is that unwavering attention is the same thing, although we could say unwavering attention to nothing at all. Or we could say “unwavering mindfulness.” Yada, yada, yada.

Non-distraction is not being distracted by something that distracts, so its six of one and half dozen of the other. Non-duality is just that, not dual. With non-duality, there is no “other,” but only all and everything, undivided, what is called a “realization.”

So, I’m not worried about being distracted by anything or being attentive to anything. These two are really saying the same thing. For me, the bottom line is that this stanza is traditionally connected to Shamata (Tranquility Meditation), which is dualistic and not non-dualistic. Therefore, whichever way we want to look at it, we are talking about a subject and an object, thus dualistic. It’s a matter of personal preference which version we like better, because there is no real difference between the two. IMO.

My point is mostly that this kind of conundrum is much ado about nothing. However, and here is the point: this kind of thing is an exercise, important in itself for us to go through, as this little poem I wrote back in the mid-1960s testifies to. After all, our journey is also but an exercise.

“I can clearly see all that clouds this stream of consciousness is but a searching, is itself but a frowning, a looking to see, a pause, a hesitation that, caught and unfurled in the eddies of time, finding nothing, becomes clear and, laughing, I leave it go clear and turn from a darkening or dimming of my mind [my own frowning] to light. And it came to pass, and I let it pass.”

TIME OUT

There is no rest in time, and no time in time itself in which to rest. And we need rest because rest is healing. Rest requires that somehow and in some way, we reach beyond time; not that we go beyond the end of time (like at life's end), but rather that we go between the clock-ticking seconds of time right here and now and find undivided rest. And so, how does that get done?

What I am saying here is that we need time out from time itself in order to heal, and that means, not some heaven at the end of life, but right here in the midst of this samsaric existence we are now living (with its ups and downs) is the door to Insight Meditation. I will admit that it's a bit of a bear to find, much less open that door and walk through, but that it is worth whatever price it takes to do so.

Perhaps it is as easy as jumping into life's stream and moving with the flow of change, instead of always trying to paddle upstream or create dams. That's hard to say, and the dharma texts all point out that Insight Meditation is ineffable, impossible to describe, as I have found out for myself. Otherwise, someone would be able to enter Insight Meditation just by reading these words, and I don't get anything coming back on that score.

What is clear is the clarity itself initiated by Insight Meditation, not just clarity, per se, but seamless, totally lubricated, uncongested, and effortless "Seeing," seeing without someone seeing and something being seen. Instead, Insight Meditation is a process of sheer revelation, of samsara being revealed for what it inherently is and always has been, which the textbooks state is Nirvana, and that the two, samsara and nirvana, are connate. That is: nirvana is the realization of samsara, a continuous, mouth open, Aha!

And THAT realization is, as I know, incremental, a process, and not a flash-bang all-at-once kind of thing, at least not for me and most of us. The incremental process of Insight Meditation keeps my nose to the grindstone of constant revelation, distracts me from my normal distractions, while at the same time isolating me enough from the impending karma of my habitual distractions, so that my mindstream can heal and become whole or one. I need the rest! Insight Meditation itself is wholesome and healing. We all need time out from our constant distractions. This healing from non-thought and not intellectually thinking is important.

Otherwise, up to now, I imagine that, through all my lives to date (which I can't remember a one of), I have never been able to rest, much less heal from, as Shakespeare put it, "The heartache, and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to." It seems that our mind has always been stirred up, provoked, and by that I mean we are obscured to the point that, as the old saying goes, there is no rest for the wicked. Well, I don't know about that, but I do know there is no rest for the provoked, the constantly distracted.

Insight Meditation is a balm for that, a cure for the constant turmoil of samsaric existence that we have been unable to escape from all of our lives up to now. Insight Meditation is simple and unencumbered by dualistic thought, which means that we are immersed in the clarity of whatever is being revealed in the

moment, not that we can't experience, but that we realize in or through experience the nature of all experience. Like folding pie crust, we are in-folded back into ourselves. And that process is healing.

The upshot of all this is that through Insight Meditation, we are not distracted by extraneous, critical, or second thoughts, but instead we realize what unites rather than what divides. We are all in, rather than hanging outside ourselves and watching, which is just more duality. We are totally involved because Insight Meditation is nondual. There is no room for commenting or annotation because we are fully immersed.

Let me repost the poem I wrote years ago, since it is right on the money.

“I can clearly see all that clouds this stream of consciousness is but a searching, is itself but a frowning, a looking to see, a pause and hesitation that, caught and unfurled in the eddies of time, finding nothing, becomes clear and, laughing, I leave it go clear and turn from a darkening or dimming of my mind [my own frowning] to light. And it came to pass, and I let it pass.”.

Jan 29, 2021, 4:38 AM

THE ORACLE THAT SPEAKS TO US

As we know from studying spiritual history, almost anything can be an oracle, from fish guts, tea leaves, to the I-Ching and the tarot, and so on. Astrology itself is just a very complex oracle, but an oracle it is or can be, nevertheless.

In essence, an oracle is some way for the universe to more directly speak to us. According to that view, the supreme “Oracle” of oracles would have to be the Dharma itself. Nothing speaks more clearly than that.

Like the old saying “Everyone has their own taste, the old woman said, as she kissed her cow.” It’s like that. The only question is what works as an oracle for us?

In my life, the oracles I have most used are the I-Ching, and less so the Tarot, but my oracle of choice, and the one I am most adept at is Astrology. It delivers the message for me and for those who I have worked with using it. And let’s not forget all the signs and signatures (and sometimes graffiti) that line the halls of time for us to read. I read them and carefully take note. Not only are we guided by the pole star in the heavens, but we can learn to depend on the signs in the mind to guide us.

And so, an oracle is what allows the universe (god, not-god, whatever floats your boat) to speak to us in such a way that we actually listen. As the psychics say, an oracle is what puts us “on our contacts,” so to speak. There are nothing but signs and they are all around us

In the dharma, our Root Guru is a living oracle, because through them we become able to recognize the actual nature of the mind. That idea, that the universe speaks to us and, more important, that we are able to hear it. The universe is always speaking, but we are not always on that wavelength. The problem is that too often we fail to listen or tune in.

I believe we each must find the particular kind of oracle that speaks to us, one that we are able to hear.

Jan 30, 2021, 2:56 AM

THE PROCESS IS THE RESULT

The process of doing Insight Meditation is more important than the “results,” whatever you think the results of mediation are supposed to be. We could say that the results of Insight Meditation, why we do it,

are the increasing realization from now until we are fully enlightened, and which this very process (and getting into that) may be many lifetimes from now. The process of Insight Meditation is what ensures that realization to continue and accumulate endlessly. If nothing else, the process of Insight Meditation itself is a relief from our otherwise constant distractions.

The fact that Insight Meditation is a process (rather than a static state to be reached) means that, above all, it is a way of living, a way of life, much like breathing. It would seem that we need to remind ourselves that there is no goal out there other than the process of life itself. In fact, there is no “out there,” either. “Out there” is also just another kind of “in here.” Years ago, when I was in one of my “Shakespearian” moods, I wrote the following.

“Look at yourself,

No better and yet not worse.

Now, Get yourself together in a bunch,

And call what carriage as ye may, your hearse.”

Like the above poem, if we are going to continue rebirth forever, until we are enlightened, and even that is a process, then where is it that we are going to arrive at has to be the way we travel to get there. If we are destined to travel well, we might as well get on with it.

Happy traveling!

Jan 31, 2021, 3:31 AM

Jan 31, 2021, 12:20 PM

ENTREPRENEURIAL MISTAKES

MY “INDIAN SUMMER RESTAURANT: STORY

This is the story about another fun entrepreneurial failure on my part. In most towns, restaurants come and go. When I was growing up in Ann Arbor, there was a restaurant near the University of Michigan campus at 313 S. State Street called “The Virginian”. It was not related to the TV show of that name, but rather was a typical American restaurant. I don’t recall ever going inside more than once. Young people just did not go there. However, in 1971 an organic farmer (and friend), Ken King, along with his partner Rick Peshkin, founded the “Indian Summer Natural Foods Restaurant” in the space where The Virginian used to be.

This was significant because it was one of the first examples of the old guard being replaced by the new alternative-culture (I refuse to call them “Hippies”). Suddenly, on one of Ann Arbor’s main streets was an organic foods restaurant where I was welcome, the owners of which I knew, and that actually had food that I would eat and did! Was I then suddenly a part of the establishment? People from all over the area would come and eat there, young new-age folks like myself; especially beloved were their natural-grain pancakes with maple syrup. Who could forget them? And they had incredible un-yeasted bread, made fresh each day, by Dana Wilkinson, a spiritually-minded baker.

What an experience to just walk uptown to Indian Summer and have a whole-food breakfast or lunch. It was amazing to me! Perhaps my generation was finally taking over; we were coming of age. And this was OUR idea of a restaurant and not just another greasy spoon. Everyone who meets me knows what an enthusiast I am. If I get my mind all wrapped around an idea I think might be fun, I am like a bulldog about seeing it through.

And it came to me one day that everything about Indian Summer was just great except the décor. The way it looked inside was a hangover from past restaurants that had been there – drab and almost depressing, something out of the 1950s. And I never pass up a chance to help create a new sense of

space or design a liberating mandala. And so, I offered to paint some designs on the walls for them and they were foolish enough to let me do just that.

And of course, being a good entrepreneur, it is hard to talk me out of whatever my dreams are set on. At the time, I was deep into macrobiotics (still am!) and along with the macro craze came a love for Japanese culture, design, and everything Asian. Macrobiotics more or less came from Japan. I wanted to make a visit to Indian Summer memorable by having simple food symbols all over the walls. And no one stopped me. LOL.

The Indian Summer staff were along for the ride, at least for a while. Of course, I knew very little about designing restaurant décor and not all that much about Japanese design. After all (so I told myself), I designed the logo for Eden Foods; why not do something striking on the “Indian Summer” walls?

I naturally love color, design, and making large images visible to all. At least that is how I remember it. So, in I came, paint brushes in hand and began creating these large 4-5 foot logo-like designs on the walls. Of course, I liked them. But I especially was enamored at the time with honeybees, the hive, the cooperation in the hive, and so on. I had read all kinds of books about bees and beekeeping, but had never kept any actual bees.

Anyway, I got it in my mind that along the back wall, where the servers endlessly came in and out, was a perfect place to put my bees... and I did. I had honey bees on the right and left side of the back wall and a huge honeycomb with yet another bee sitting on the comb stretching across the center. I was in hog-heaven, so to speak. You can check out the photos here for more details. So, what's the problem?

Well, the problem came when customers who were not so fond of bees (or any kind of "insect" at all) began to complain about these giant insects on the wall. It 'creeped' them out. And up to that point, the staff at the restaurant went along with me until customers started complaining and then, like any good business, they went along with the customer, who after all is 'always right'.

The next thing I knew is that I was given like ten-minute's notice that they were painting over everything I had done, which is why these few photos are kind of 'not good'. I cleaned up a couple photos since the light-reflection was drowning out the image. So, there you have the story of my very brief (early) career as a restaurant decorator and designer.

I later designed and built my own natural-foods restaurant, "The Two Sisters," but that is another (but also fun) story. In this case, I had failed to realize that

not everyone liked the honeybee and to many folks they appeared all too much like some nasty insect, which it was, but not nasty. Of course, I happen to love insects, especially bees! And yes, my feelings were a little hurt for, from my point of view, these were all very lovely images with a simplicity and boldness you don't find everywhere.

In fact, it was so true that soon we didn't find that kind of boldness and simplicity anywhere in the restaurant. They painted it over. LOL. I have dozens of these kinds of entrepreneurial failure stories I could tell (and some successes). As mentioned earlier, sometime I will tell you in detail how I created my own restaurant and what a fun fiasco that was.

And speaking of large logos or images, how about the time Margaret and I wanted to go into business making quilts with huge logos on them just to see the huge logos? Or, when we wanted to offer farmers that we paint huge logos (spiritual symbols) on their barns for free? LOL. I believe that is what distinguished my particular kind of entrepreneurism from a more conventional approach, that what inspired (or drove me) was a wish to see this or that visible mandala created and existing in the world. Sure, I wanted it to be successful and make money, but most of all I just wanted this or that mandala to define space and influence time, my own kind of seal or signature. It's no wonder that I wandered into Mahamudra

Meditation, which is called “The Great Seal.” LOL. Oh well.

[Photos take with a cheap camera in about five minutes]

Feb 1, 2021, 8:39 AM

Feb 1, 2021, 7:00 PM

THE MOST EXPENSIVE RESTAURANT IN THE WORLD

Most expensive in the world? For me this is true, because we owned it and my family and I ran it or tried to. It seemed like a wonderful idea at the time. We had this large building that had been built as a parsonage in the early 1900s. It had been a part of a business complex for a company I founded (AMG – All-Music Guide, All-Movie Guide, etc.), but I had moved that whole business to Ann Arbor and sold it.

So there the building sat. I tried to rent it, but no one seemed interested. Somewhere along about 2003 I

had the harebrained idea to turn it into a restaurant. My wife Margaret would want you to know that this was solely my idea. And so, it was, but the kids liked the thought and we could not rent the building and.... well, you know how that goes.

Pretty soon I had workmen in there tearing the building apart and turning it into a restaurant which was a lot more complicated than I would have guessed. As it turned out, we pretty much had to do all new wiring, all new plumbing, including mammoth gas pipes and gas service to deal with the large stove and pizza ovens.

That's right, homemade pizza was something we definitely wanted to serve. Where did this crazy idea (as some friends deemed it) for a restaurant come from? There are different answers to that question. One is that there was no decent place to eat in town, but I know you don't want to believe that was the only reason, although it has merit. Most of all I was appalled at what restaurants had done to food in the ones I knew, like process almost everything. We would not do that.

Having been trained in macrobiotics years before I knew more than a little about whole foods and what is healthy and what is not. But when I really look deep into my soul I feel that somewhere in there I always wanted to have a restaurant AND I saw it as a way to

bring the whole family together on a project. What fun and it was!

And I love designing space and creating mandalas – signs of something greater than just my linear life from birth to death. There have to be an oasis or two in every life and the “Two Sisters Café” was going to be one of them. In actuality it was financially a train wreck. The name of the café came from my brother Daniel, the second in line of five boys, I being the oldest. Since my daughters May and Michael Anne were going to help run it, we ended up calling it the Two Sisters Café and that stuck. It was a great name. Thanks Dan!

Of course, I was in full swing and high gear in creating atmosphere for the place. This is my specialty – actively creating space to live in. There is little I like more, and I was soon head over heels involved in the look and feel of the place. Of course, the whole family helped, only it was me that was down there from dawn to dusk, so to speak, directing the work team. That is my idea of fun.

Then there was the menu. Everyone pitched in on that and the girls (my wife Margaret and two of my daughters) knew a lot more than I did about recipes and cooking. We all knew that we wanted to create a menu with no processed food on it, as in “home cooked,” made-on-site, etc. And we did. We made our

own salad dressings, peeled all our potatoes, fashioned all our soups from scratch, and on and on. For the towns sake, we would serve meat, but no booze.

Crazy as I am, I insisted on only the finest ingredients, like \$6 a pound (our cost) for the corned beef that we used in sandwiches, real Genoa salami, really fine olives, and so on. You get the idea. It was from the start way over the top. As mentioned, we did serve meat because not to do so would be instant death in the small conservative town we live in. But even our meat was handled with care. Our homemade meatballs were just incredible, and we cooked our Salisbury steak all night in slow cookers. We ordered only the finest Ahi Yellowfin tuna and our salmon was hand-hooked in Canada. I could go on and on.

You would like to eat at the Two Sister's Café I can assure you. Maybe I just did it to make sure that somewhere in the world such a place existed! Even I don't know for sure. We had a \$6000 espresso machine and served up all the wonderful drinks you would find in Seattle and San Francisco. We had rare gourmet teas and all kinds of special coffees. And food and drink was not the end of it. We wanted to make the café a community center of sorts, so we had entertainment.

I had a special red theater curtain custom-made in Italy and a track of theater lights installed with spots out front. On Friday and Saturday nights we would curtain off one room and have bands, folk acts, magic, and even poetry. I am still a wannabe beatnik at heart, and a coffee-house atmosphere is part of this dream I call life.

We opened our doors in the fall of 2003. Let me start out with the good news, which was that the food was wonderful. It was all home cooked, handmade the old-fashioned way, and delicious. I should know. I put on a lot of weight eating there every night. We pretty much stopped cooking at home. In fact, we had a little table just inside the back doorway where the family would sit. I called it the “mafia table” because we were like Tony Soprano, eating spaghetti at the back of the restaurant. I loved that and I ate all kinds of things I should not have eaten, and repeatedly.

And a certain group of townspeople saw it for what it was and loved it. The rest (I am sorry to say) could not tell the difference between us and Applebees, incredible as that sounds. And now for the bad news.

We knew nothing about running a restaurant. Nada. And my penchant for serving only the best was a pipe dream I smoked and it cost us to the quick. I am sure we were losing money on all kinds of stuff. And waste! We knew neither how to control waste or portion.

From the get-go, it was way over the top. We managed to limp by for about two and one half years before the economics really sank in. We were not making any money. Worse, we were losing money. And to top it off a general manager that I had hired was ripping us off until we caught on to her. She was not paying the taxes, but pretending to. This cost us a mere \$40,000 when the IRS came calling.

Also, one of the two sisters, my daughter May's music career suddenly began to take off and she was out of there and on the road. This was her chance. This left one sister, my daughter Anne, who bravely carried on with help from the rest of us. And so on. Michael Anne later became a gourmet chef who catered to large groups every now and again.

The bottom line was that the place could not keep its doors open and had to close. Perhaps the biggest lesson learned was that just because you make a superior product does not mean people can tell the difference or care. We did not serve alcohol (on principle) and that hurt us big time. Kitchen and serving help turned over like a Ferris wheel and it seems like we were endlessly training new folks. And half the workers were alcoholics or druggies. This is standard in restaurants.

We hit a brick wall. On the entertainment side, we had a mini-theater right in the restaurant, with lights, curtain, and a solid sound system. It was like an old-time hippie coffee house. We had poetry, magic, and lots and lots of music. My daughter May's partner Seth Bernard courted her from the stage, singing love songs to my daughter. I totally approved. And so, it went. I must say that it was a wild ride and (aside from the cost) a fun ride, although I will never again drive by a restaurant parking lot without counting the cars in it and wincing if there are few to none. I have enormous compassion for anyone gutsy enough to open and run a restaurant. The profit margin is so narrow that you have to be totally dedicated to even survive. And you really need to have a family to make it economical. I had the family, but none of us knew the business. Still the food was great and good times outnumbered the bad ones. So, I can say without blinking that for a couple of years I ate at the most expensive restaurant in the world. I include some photos for your enjoyment!

Feb 2, 2021, 4:10 AM

Feb 3, 2021, 4:39 PM

ANN ARBOR MICHIGAN: A WISHING STAR

Most of us have a hometown where we came from. Ann Arbor Michigan is my hometown; I grew up there. In the 1960s Ann Arbor was very different from the overly-caffeinated and sophisticated city it is today. For one, it did not used to take me 20 minutes to drive across town, but that is beside the point. Back then, Ann Arbor appeared much less sure of itself (or was it just me growing up?). It seemed to be overly self-conscious and busy playing second fiddle (weak sister) to other college towns like Cambridge, Madison, and Berkeley.

Ann Arbor had not yet found its place in mainstream America and what it lacked in bravado, it made up for in introspection and a quiet humility. What I did not fully grasp back then is that Ann Arbor is fecund, a fertile place, indeed a womb. It is pure feminine if there can be such a place, or mostly so.

I should explain that this kind of thinking I am sharing here probably came from my travels and trips to Asia, in particular Tibet. It was in Tibet that I first became aware that places, especially the land itself (hills, valleys, rivers, and so on) have an anima and animus, what we might call "soul." In Tibet, these indwelling souls are called "Sadak," Earth Lords, literally lords of

the earth. At the time, it never had occurred to me that here in America, places also have animating spirits or “essence,” and in the case of Ann Arbor, this would be an animus, a guardian spirit that is essentially female, IMO. And a correlate that has become increasingly clear to me, is that towns are not just where people gather, but people gather because of sensing a certain innate soul of essence of a place. It seems right.

In the 1960's, Ann Arbor's innate receptivity and 'femininity' might well have been mistaken for passivity and naiveté, not that there was not some of that also present. Ann Arbor in the Sixties was not fully aware of itself, a city yet to awaken to its mission, but nonetheless already busy taking a direction that time would reveal as significant. And, IMO, it took a while.

Most city names are feminine, but that is not what I mean by saying that Ann Arbor is “feminine.” There are two kinds of sculpture, one made by adding clay until we have a form, and the other by cutting away stone until we have a form. Ann Arbor is definitely of the second variety. It reveals rather than posits; it is passive rather than active, passive enough to give (as in give way) and actually allow natural birth.

At the time, growing up in Ann Arbor (and never really knowing any other city) I was only dimly aware that

my hometown was more 'passive', more giving (as mentioned, 'giving way'), and generally just more receptive and understanding than some. I might better say that I felt that other college towns (like Berkeley or Cambridge) were in some way more aggressive or just 'on their game'. It was natural to assume that Ann Arbor was perhaps busy bringing up the rear. Obviously, it had not yet found itself, at least in my experience.

Exactly when Ann Arbor did find itself (in the contemporary sense) I cannot say. I was too busy finding my own self and that mostly happened in 1967. In 1980, I moved with my family (wife and kids) about 180 miles northwest to Big Rapids Michigan where we live to this day. As near as I can tell, Ann Arbor became an adult somewhere after I left town. Certainly, it is confident and sure of itself today, and I am not just talking about students walking right in front of your car either. They always did that.

My best guess is that Ann Arbor became aware of its feminine qualities the same way I discovered my own gentler side, gradually but certainly, by surrendering to surrender, so to speak. In time, the passive qualities of the town have become a power, not a defect or liability. The attributes of the sign Virgo come to mind: caring, healing, and conserving. It is my opinion that this fertility, this receptivity that Ann Arbor has in such high degree, is very rare

among cities. At least to me, in this regard, Ann Arbor is very special indeed.

And sometimes I used to wonder just how many of us there are who grew up and lived in Ann Arbor beyond our college years (not that I went to college) and were somehow unable to be all that we could be while living there, and yet blossomed almost as soon as we left the town. This has always puzzled me and perhaps every town is like that. 'A prophet is never known in his own country' kind of thing but is immediately recognized when they step outside that mandala. I don't have enough data to even make a guess at this, but it often comes to mind.

Or is the deep receptiveness and anti-macho quality of Ann Arbor Michigan something that makes traditional superficial success more difficult-to-impossible to achieve in this town, yet at the same time builds strong habits for responding and accommodating life. This I wonder.

It is interesting that my first real business (incorporated) was formed in Ann Arbor, Matrix Software. I chose the word "Matrix," not for its mathematical meaning, but because it meant 'womb,' a place where something could be born. In an article for Red Herring Magazine done on my company, they found that Matrix Software was the oldest software company still on the Internet, second only to a little

company called Microsoft. In lieu of my remarks here, I find that fact fascinating. And I find that when I grew up my company AMG (All-Music Guide, All Movie Guide, etc.), I brought it to Ann Arbor and planted it there. When I left, we have 150 fulltime staff and some 600 freelance writers. I believe AMG is still in Ann Arbor, but has downsized.

My point here is that Ann Arbor has always seemed for me to be a sacred womb from which good things come, a kind of natural cornucopia. Whether this just works for me I cannot say. I can only say it is true for me.

After all, how do towns come to be located where they are? Is it only because this road is connected to that road, is connected to another road? Or does the natural world have springs or wells of spirit just as it has natural springs of pure water flowing? I like to believe in the later take on this, that land has indwelling spirits and a nature that also speak to us or for us -- an oracle.

It is my belief that Ann Arbor is such an oracular place in America. At least in my life, it has functioned like an oracle, that rare vortex through which the universe has spoken directly to me, albeit not in words that I have always immediately understood. In essence, Ann Arbor has been a wishing well for all my hopes and dreams, a vortex of receptivity.

In ancient Greece they had oracular places, why not here in America? What great female spirit indwells in a city christened after two women named Ann and a stand of bur oak? The Anns' arbor -- Ann Arbor. Tree Town.

"When you wish upon a star,
Makes no difference who you are,
Anything your heart desires,
Will come to you."

Feb 4, 2021, 10:21 AM

ORGANIC FOOD AND ANN ARBOR

"Mighty oaks from little acorns grow." It has taken 52 years, but that aphorism has proved itself true regarding natural foods. There certainly was nothing very natural about Ann Arbor food back in the early 1960s. And I am so tired of ne'er-do-wells telling me that "The Sixties" was a mistake and has brought the country nothing of real value. Are they serious?

A topic for another article would be the fact that, while the establishment banished the Sixties children and closed the front door to their inner circles, they left the back door open via the Internet, and programmers like myself just walked in and took over the means of technology. The Internet was mostly created by Sixties folks. And that's a hoot all by itself, but I digress.

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

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

It was only in the later 1960s, after the onset of what we now call "The Sixties" that my interest in WHAT I ate stirred, and I can't remember just how that went down. I do remember reading (and re-reading) "The Mucusless Diet Healing System" by Arnold Ehret, with his emphasis on fasting and the value of alkaline over acidic foods. Certainly, I went on all kinds of raw-foods diets back then, mostly my idea of salads, and probably more so in the summertime. Even today, I still believe the best first step when I reach a food crisis (and it seems I reach these all the time) is to fast from eating for a day (or part of a day), until I see what's going on with me.

And it's not like Ann Arbor was already "green" or obviously into healthy foods back then. Sure, Ann Arbor had restaurants and they were mostly run by Greeks, but they didn't serve actual Greek food, but just the same old mashed potatoes, meatloaf, and olive-drab peas kind-of-thing. I know, because as a musician (Prime Movers Blues Band), I was playing four days a week down on Ann Street in a little bar called Clint's Club, which would be another story. Getting out at 2 AM, we would head straight to one of Ann Arbor's Greek-run restaurants, which were open all night, and stuff ourselves so that we could sleep.

And Ann Arbor also had a handful of good-to-great German restaurants, but there is nothing healthy about that food either. I can't remember when I first fell in with the Eden's crowd. For one, they weren't

even a crowd yet back then, but just people like myself coming together. I knew Eden Food's original founders Bill and Judy Bolduc early-on, just as folks about town. I believe they were astrological clients of mine. In fact, early on, the Buldocs and Margaret and I had discussions of joining forces and creating some kind of "communion" center, where diet and spirituality mixed and all were welcome.

As for Tim and Pattie Redmond, who also helped found the Edens, they were good friends. In fact, I married Tim and Pattie Redmond, something I used to do now and again back in the day, and they are still together!

I'll bet I knew most of the natural food-folks in Ann Arbor at the time. There were not that many. It probably got more real for me when Eden Foods asked me (as an astrologer) to pick the exact date and time for their company's incorporation and opening. As mentioned, I was an astrologer-about-town, even back in the day. And the date I picked turned out to be November 4, 1969. Other people involved in Edens back then were Ron Teeguarden, Gloria Dunn, and Linda Succup.

I guess it was propitious, because Eden Foods is still going strong. I am told that Eden Foods is the only large natural-food company that is not today owned by conglomerates, and this probably is thanks to the

tenacity and vision of Michael Potter, their current CEO.

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

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

And while I don't want to lean on the horn, I owe you younger folks at least a tiny reminder of how hard-fought the fight has been to bring healthy food to the table in this country, some 50 years later! Back in the 1960s, there were no natural-food restaurants in Ann Arbor, Whole-Foods stores, or anything close to that.

Sure, we had health-related stores, sometimes even called "health-food" stores, like the one that was down on N. Ashley in Ann Arbor, but there was no real food there, just rows and rows of vitamins and supplements, mostly for older folks. I would hike down there from time to time, but could never find anything there I wanted to have. To me, they always seemed like a throwback from the 1950s or earlier. In late 1971, Julian Moody opened Applerose Natural Food Grocery at 404 W. Liberty and it actually had some natural foods. It was a wonderful place, but it lasted only about a decade.

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

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

4th Street Coop and all of the inexpensive (at the time) food. You could always find something healthy to eat on their food bar.

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

So, way back then Eden, Foods was just a tiny store with a new idea run by people we knew, our friends. I can very much remember macrobiotic dinners and cooking classes, where we would go to someone's home, learn to cook a macrobiotic dish, and then all sit down and have dinner together. For me, it all kind of started there.

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

In January of 1971, Michael Potter, currently the CEO of Eden Foods, came into the picture. Potter is a piece of work, and that's a compliment. To use

macrobiotic terminology, Michael Potter as a person is very "yang," something macrobiotic folks seem to prefer. He is tough, bright, and not about to be pushed around by the exigencies of life. Michael has been a leading force at Eden for all these years. I am proud to call him a friend.

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

By the early 1970s, there was a core group of us that were all about macrobiotics. Teachers like Mishio Kushi and Naburo Muromoto would come to Ann Arbor to teach and examine us. I can remember having a consultation with Mishio Kushi in his room at the Bell Tower Hotel. When he was all done, after he poked and prodded me, about all Kushi said was "Don't eat squash!"

Keep in mind that there was no tofu back then. Sure, you might find some overly- processed soy curd at an oriental grocery, but who knows what was in it or how it was made. We learned to make tofu ourselves, at home, and it is quite a process, boiling the soy

beans, mashing and straining them, pressing them into curd, and all of that. And we pounded sweet rice into Mochi too.

We also made our own pickles by fermenting daikon and all kinds of vegetables. There was no tamari in the stores back then, only Chinese restaurant style soy sauce, so we had to import it in little wooden kegs and casks, which we then stored in the basement. Once again, Michael Potter and Edens got it for us. In fact, our damp Michigan basement at 1041 N. Main Street in Ann Arbor (right across the street from Lanky's junkyard) was full of all kinds and sizes of wooden tubs from Japan. There was Mugi and Hatcho miso, and other kinds too, plus tiny kegs of omeboshi plums, tins of twig tea, and so on. We were our own bulk-food store. My wife reminds me that I also had a little touch of the survivalist back then and tended to hoard food. It was not that so much hoarding as that we could not get this kind of food anywhere.

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

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

Of course, personally, as I get older I have found myself dropping certain foods from my diet in order to stay alive, so to speak. I gradually realized that certain foods make me sick, like sugar. I don't eat sugar in anything but natural fruits at this point, and dropping sugar was one the best choices I ever made. I immediately felt stronger and better, because every time I ate a bunch of sugar my body would go into a kind of swoon or shock until I recovered some hours later. I don't mean I would pass out, but I could feel my body struggling with the sugar-high, and that didn't seem worth it. Easy solution: stop eating the stuff. I honestly believe refined sugar is like a poison.

And caffeine too. As much as I loved it, If I drink coffee or eat chocolate, I don't sleep, etc. And in my house, we don't eat processed foods anymore. We make everything we can from scratch. I could go on, but you get the idea. What we do eat are whole foods that we like and that are nourishing too.

As mentioned, Eden (and a few other Ann Arbor stores) is something that The Sixties brought us, and

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

I would go in there around Noon and they would hand me a large warm chapati that was lightly scorched on the outside from an open flame, but still soft within. And inside would be various steamed veggies (onions, carrots, cabbage, broccoli, perhaps parsnips) bathed in a sesame-tahini sauce, with a touch of salt. This much of the recipe I know from an old friend, Steve Sailor, who actually got up at 5 AM in those days and began to chop veggies in 5-gallon buckets to prepare for lunchtime at Eden's.

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

And before I end this, I should say something more about macrobiotics. I owe you that. In the late 1960s, I was all about Macrobiotic food balancing, and still am today for that matter. Unfortunately, the macrobiotic

diet has gotten a bad rap over the years, something to the effect that if you are macrobiotic you only eat brown rice until you die from malnutrition, and yada-yada-yada. What a bunch of baloney that is.

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

For me, Lundberg short-grain brown rice is like the air I breathe or the pure water I drink, a common staple (and stable) food, almost like a wrapper, to which other foods are added. Brown rice is a basic life-food for me, something I always go back to, especially when my health gets sketchy.

Anyway, a macrobiotic diet refers to how we balance foods, and not what foods we eat. The actual foods depend on our locale and the climate, like when it is cold outside I eat more roasted root veggies, oatmeal, etc., and when it is hot outside I eat more yin foods like fruit, and so on. That is the balance I am referring

to here. That is macrobiotics; it's not just about eating brown rice, although fresh-cooked short-grain brown rice, if you know how to cook it, is mighty special.

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

There you have my view of Ann Arbor and organics. What do you remember about the natural food movement in Ann Arbor? I would love to hear.

[Here is the Eden Foods logo I designed, on an early poster advertising Eden Foods. And no, the photo of stuff drying in our yard at 1041 N. Main Street are not baby diapers, but various seaweed from offshore the coast of New England. This must be in the early 1970s.]

Feb 5, 2021, 6:24 AM

ANN ARBOR AND BOB DYLAN

[I keep being asked to share the time I spent travelling and hitchhiking with Bob Dylan, so here it is, with additions, and a bit of a preface – the history of the folk-revival in Ann Arbor, at least seen through my eyes.]

By the 1950s, more and more young Americans were interested in their own indigenous music – American folk music. In the later '50s and early '60s, folk music had become increasingly popular, in particular on college campuses and among more affluent white Americans. Along with the interest in folk music came the folklore societies and eventually the festivals. Ann Arbor was no exception.

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

We were all just 'folk' and it was a culturally rich scene.

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

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

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

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

In the late 1950s and early 1960s I would hitchhike to New York City often. Back then, unless we had some old junker of a car to borrow, we hitchhiked. Heading out of Ann Arbor, the bad places to get stuck hitchhiking were down by the prison in Dundee,

Michigan or trying to get around Toledo, Ohio, that sharp left turn, heading East. Once you got past those areas, it went pretty smoothly, usually. And we would hang in the Village in New York City until we felt like heading back to Ann Arbor. I believe I hitchhiked to the Big Apple something like five times.

I remember being there with Perry Lederman and Bob Dylan back in the late spring of 1961. Lederman is how I met up with Dylan. They were already friends. Perry Lederman was a phenomenal instrumentalist on the guitar. If Dylan and I were in touch today, we would still marvel at what a player Lederman was.

Perry Lederman played Travis-style, which we used to term '3-finger picking' and his playing was unmatched. Lederman was not a vocalist and when he did sing it was not special, but he could play instrumentally like no one I have ever heard. When Lederman took out a guitar, people would listen and marvel. Each song was like hearing a mini-symphony, with an overture, the main them, variations, and an ending.

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

not of his early playing, but something later and not representative, a kind of shadow of himself, at least compared to what I heard back in the early 1960s.

Perry Lederman was also expert at finding and selling old Martin guitars, scavenging them out of attics and garages, fixing them up, and selling them. While traveling with Lederman I have seen some of the best and rarest old guitars in the world, like double and triple-0 martins with intricate perfling around the edges, rosewood and ebony bridges, and intricate inlaid necks and headstocks, sometimes with the Tree-of-Life design. It would be hard to put a price of any kind on these guitars today. I had one for a while, an old koa wood Hawaiian guitar. I wonder what I ever did with it? Anyway, back to New York City and Bob Dylan.

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

I don't know how many days we were in the city on this trip, which was in June of 1961, but it was probably a while. We were hitchhiking and tended to

spend at least a day or so at each main stop before moving on. Plus, Lederman's mom lived in Brooklyn. I remember visiting her one time and she served us matzo ball soup at a small kitchen table by a window. I quietly ate my soup and gazed out that window while Perry and his mom got caught up. I don't remember how we got out to Brooklyn or back to the city. It could have been by bus.

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

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

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

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

Keep in mind that back then Bob Dylan was still trying to find out for himself who he was. This was before he recorded his first album. I can remember another time in Ann Arbor when I was with Dylan, sitting on a Monday morning in the MUG (Michigan Union Grill) at one of those small Formica-topped tables. We sat there for hours drinking coffee and smoking cigarettes while we waited for a review of a concert or 'set' that Dylan had done the night before.

This was Monday April 23, 1962 and Dylan had played a set the night before in the Michigan Union Ballroom as part of the U-M Folk Festival that had

featured the incredible Jesse Fuller (from San Francisco). They even spelled Dylan's name wrong, that's how new he was to publicity, calling him "Bob Dillon." I have been told by others that I helped work on setting up that gig, but I don't remember much of that. I was there.

I remember that Dylan was very concerned about how his gig went over. That is most of what we talked about. He wanted to know how he was received. This was before he had the world at his feet. He still put his pants on one leg at a time like the rest of us back then. When the local Michigan Daily paper finally came out and we got a copy, sure enough Dylan got a good review by Hugh "Jeep" Holland, who later became the manager of our band, the "Prime Movers Blues Band" for a time. With the review of his gig, Dylan that he was soon at the edge of Ann Arbor and hitchhiking to Chicago and the folk scene there.

Back in the late 1950s and early 1960s, there was an established route that folkies like Dylan and myself travelled. It went from Cambridge to NYC to Ann Arbor (sometimes to Antioch and Oberlin) to the University of Chicago to Madison and on out to Berkley. It was the folk bloodstream that we all circulated on, either hitchhiking or commandeering some old car for the trip. Most of us hitchhiked. Early folk stars like Joan Baez and the New Lost City Ramblers did not hitchhike, but they still sat around

with us in the Michigan Union drinking coffee and hanging out.

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

And Cambridge was another whole city and atmosphere. For some strange reason I seem to remember the Horn & Hardart automat there and trying to get food from it. Club 47, like “The Ark” in Ann Arbor, was one of the premier folk venues in the country, even back then. Today it is known as Club Passim.

Cambridge was where we left Dylan that time. He was heading out west hitching along the interstate toward (I believe) it was Saratoga Springs or perhaps Schenectady, New York for a gig. Perry Lederman and I were hitchhiking over to New Hampshire and the city of Laconia to attend the annual motorcycle races there, which is another story. I don't know

where we slept at the races. I remember it being just on the ground, but it was still kind of cold out at night.

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

This all took place in mid-June of 1961. The Laconia, New Hampshire races were held from June 15 through the 18th that year. This would put us in New York and Gerdes Folk city some days before that. As to what kind of "person" Bob Dylan was? In all sincerity, he was a person like any of us back then, a player or (in my case) a would-be player. Dylan and I are the same age, born a month or two apart. All of us were properly intense back in those days. I was 20 years old in 1961. Imagine!

I vaguely remember Dylan telling me he was going to record an album or just had recorded one; it could

have been the Harry Belafonte album where he played harmonica as a sideman on “Midnight Special,” I don’t know. I believe it was later that year that Dylan recorded his first album on Columbia. I don’t remember seeing him much after that, except in Ann Arbor.

Something that I got a lot, mostly years ago, was the comment that Bob Dylan really can’t sing. I addressed this in an article I wrote years ago, some of which appeared in the biography of jazz guitar great Grant Green in the book “Grant Green: Rediscovering the Forgotten Genius of Jazz Guitar by Sharony Andrews (Grant Green’s daughter) and published by Backbeat Books. The full article is called “Groove and Blues in Jazz,” which is at this link for those interested, and below is an excerpt:

<http://www.allmusic.com/explore/essay/groove-and-blues-in-jazz-t672>

Grant Green: THE Groove Master

All that I can say about Grant Green is that he is the groove master. Numero uno. He is so deep in the groove that most people have no idea what’s up with him. Players like Stanley Turrentine, Jimmy Smith, Kenny Burrell, and many other really great soul jazz artists are also groove masters. But the main man is

Grant Green. He is so far in the groove that it will take decades for us to bring him out in full. He is just starting to be discovered.

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

Billie Holiday is another voice that is filled with microtones that emerge through time like an ever-blooming flower. You (or I) can't hear the end or root of her singing, not yet anyway. As we try to listen to Holiday (as we try to grasp that voice), we are knocked out by the deep information there. We try to absorb it, and before we can get a handle on her voice (if we dare listen!) she entrances us in a

delightful dream-like groove and we are lost to criticism. Instead we groove on and reflect about this other dream that we have called life. All great musicians do this to us. Shakespeare was the master at this. You can't read him and remain conscious. He knocks you out with his depth.

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

[So, there you have it. Sometimes I will tell you when I opened for Eric Clapton and Cream at the Fillmore West in San Francisco, and watched Clapton and crew shoot up speed in the Green Room.]

Feb 6, 2021, 5:49 AM

ANN ARBOR'S OTHER BOOKSTORES

I'd like to tell you something about how I learned to read books; I mean, as Pee-Wee Herman might say it, "Really, Really" learned to read books. And if you are in a hurry, don't bother to read on, because I plan to take several sidebar stories into consideration. This is about non-college bookstores in Ann Arbor, not as they are today, but as they were back in the 1960s.

Ann Arbor, where I grew up, was a great place for discovering books, because it has them, and a lot of them. I used to work in the graduate library as the mail clerk, and later searching the stacks for materials that needed protecting. I've seen a lot of weird stuff in there, and I don't mean books., Of course, I could tell you about the Border brothers and their little shop on State Street, or David's Books (and the time David showed up at my door in the middle of winter with just his underpants on. I gave him a camelhair coat I picked up at Treasure Mart, and have not seen him since), or West Side Books and friendly Jay Platt, and others. Most of you might know or have hear of those bookstores.

Instead, let me go back into the late 1950s or very early 1960s and tell you how I really learned to read.

As a teenager, I had worked at a couple of the Ann Arbor college bookstores, and even drove a delivery truck for a while, delivering stuff, but those bookstores for the most part only had college books and I was a townie in Ann Arbor. College kids and townies, well, we didn't get along all that much. Speaking of not getting along, I have this story as a sidebar:

And this was is from 1966. Our band, the Prime Movers Blues Band, would play at the Schwaben Inn at 215 S. Ashley, and often. The Schwaben was a large low-ceiling place in the middle of the block, and upstairs were some pretty nice meeting rooms and in later years some gigs (more like catered parties) were held there, but back in 1966, we are talking about the ground floor at street level, a very wide room with a cement floor and the bar all along the back. On your left and toward the back as you came in was a little bandstand raised not more than a few inches. That was where we set up our equipment and would play until 2 AM.

The place stunk of stale beer and cigarettes. Perhaps it was the low ceiling and lack of air or perhaps they never really washed down the bar or the floors. It kind of caught you when you came in and took a minute or so to adjust. Of course, back then we drank and smoked as much as anyone there, well, perhaps we didn't drink as much.

Washboard Willie and the Super Suds of Rhythm would also play there on other nights of the week and

we were geeked that we shared a stage (not at the same time) with this Detroit bluesman who used to play behind the great Eddie “Guitar” Burns. I can still remember Washboard Willie singing the line “See the girl with the red dress on; she can do the boogie all night long.” When we were not playing there, I would sometimes come and listen to Washboard Willie like everyone else. I love the blues and R&B. And here comes the story:

I remember one night when my band, the Prime Movers was playing at the Schwaben. We regularly played the Schwaben Inn and our friend Peter Meek often was the doorman. This was when James Osterberg (aka Iggy Pop) was still our drummer. While we were playing that night, a fight broke out between the college kids (we called them “pinheads”) and the townies, of which I was one, but we were not about to join this fight. We couldn’t even keep playing, eventually cowering behind our equipment while stuff got thrown, including fists. It took nine police cars parked at all different angles all over the street to break it up. I’ve seen worse over on Ann street, where we played at Clint’s Club, like when the police blockaded the one block of Black businesses with sawhorses during the race riots in Detroit. We couldn’t play there that week, so we packed up the band into our 1966 Dodge van and drove all the way to San Francisco for the Summer of Love, but I digress.

The Schwaben Inn later cleaned up and the venue became Mackinac Jack's, featuring acts like Radio King & His Court of Rhythm (with my good friend Robert Sheff-- who passed recently-- on piano), Lightnin' Slim, The Rockets, New Heavenly Blue, and none other than Washboard Willie all over again with his Super Suds of Rhythm. Some things never change. I'm trying to tell you about books.

As mentioned, all of the college bookstores, and there were plenty, had no books that I wanted to read in the late 1950s. But there was one bookstore in Ann Arbor that did, and they didn't carry college books at all, at least to my memory, and that was Bob Marshall's Books at 211 S. State Street, kind of one step down into the basement which, partly underground and with low ceilings, had books going about as far back as you could see. I never went back there.

In fact, I never got past the first few feet into the store because, it was there that they had all the books I could imagine myself reading, and those were by any and all of the Beat authors, like Jack Kerouac, William S. Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, and others. And they had a long low, open-top, book shelf that you could walk all the way around right out front. And in those shelves were all the books of the Beat authors, and I mean all of them. Many were these huge novels from authors like Jack Kerouac from Evergreen Press, hundreds of pages each, with super-slick thin covers,

so that you had to hold them by two hands just to keep them from flopping over on you.

Of course, there were books like “On the Road” and “Dharma Bums,” but also other books by Kerouac like “The Subterraneans,” “Doctor Sax,” “Mexico City Blues,” and so on. These are what I read, while I dreamed of being on the road and not in high school. And it was not too long before I quit high school and found myself hitchhiking across the country to Santa Monica, taking up residence in Venice Beach, and living in an old abandoned wooden walk-in cooler in the basement of one of the last Beat art galleries, “The Gas House.” That’s another story, for sure.

And when I had enough of travelling, which took some time, and had been not only to Venice Beach, but to North Beach San Francisco, and to Greenwich Village in NYC, I eventually came back to my hometown Ann Arbor as quite a different person.

The next real involvement with books for me was when my younger brother Stephen and his partner John Crofoot Sullivan decided to open a metaphysical bookstore in Ann Arbor, actually only a few feet down State Street (215 S. State) from where Bob Marshall’s Books had been. They called it “Circle Books,” and before I knew it, I was knee-deep in helping out.

It was on the second floor, right at the top of the stairs, so if you kept on walking, you would step down right into it. Both my brother Stephen and I were into divination, astrology, tarot, the I-Ching and all of that. Stephen was probably more of an astrologer before I was, but I later made up for lost time. After all, I had spent a year living in Berkeley, California; I had seen things out there that Ann Arbor had yet to see. Berkeley was like a whole other world or like suddenly being in future times, compared to Ann Arbor back then, which was still a bit like a lazy river.

So, by the time that Circle Books opened, on the spring Equinox of 1968, I was totally ready to be part of it. For starters, with the help of the guys, I pitched in and we rebuilt the shelves and the whole décor with redwood, which was totally available back then. We had built-in fish tanks, both fresh and saltwater, globe lights, plus a lovely second room where I ended up teaching astrology classes in the evenings. My wife Margaret and I did most of the astrology charts for customers in the store, which kept us busy. This was Ann Arbor's first metaphysical bookstore. It lasted for six or seven years and was sold after the college bookstores started picking up all the bread & butter books on our topics, but that did not last long. It just kind of drifted away. So, that's another early (and different) Ann Arbor Bookstore.

I would like to share one more unusual Ann Arbor bookstore that became a real feature in my life, again

a bookstore not specializing in college course books, but in “books” of all other kinds. Every college town probably has a local bookstore where everyone who is ‘anyone’ educated hangs out. In Ann Arbor during the late 1960s (pre-Borders), that was Centicore Books, originally on Maynard Street, but eventually relocated to 1229 South University. Somewhere, I read that the official title was “Paper Back Bookstore and Centicore Modern Poetry Shop.” It was the South University period I am writing about here.

Sure, there were other bookstores in Ann Arbor, but this particular one is where both the students and professors may have bought some books and also hung out. And townies like me just kind of melted in. Centicore was the place where you might run into Andy Warhol, Norman Mailer, or John Cage when they were in town. Centicore was to me more of a university than the university was. And, although I never finished high school, I later was accepted by the U Of M, even without a high school diploma, which was hard to do. However, to the great sorrow of my parents, after only a few weeks I decided college was no different than high school, and quit that in favor of just following my intuition. I headed for California to savor the last of the Beat Movement.

And what made Centicore special was, at least for me, a single individual, Russell Gregory. Russell didn’t own the store but, IMO, he made the store what it was. He knew more about books and literature than

any of us, professors included. And he was not simply a walking inventory of book names. He had read them all and could talk to you about them with real intelligence. Literally everyone, grad students and professors who read, knew Russell.

And Russell not only read books, understood them, and could guide any of us to where the best parts were, he also was a poet and writer (journals and essays). It was not enough for Russell to hold forth at the bookstore, he also had years of weekly get-togethers at his home at which all were welcome and great discussions took place. While the above is remarkable, that alone is not what endeared Russell Gregory to me.

Russell Gregory was a living American Transcendentalist, and I kid you not, just like Whitman, Emerson, and Thorough, the only one I have ever encountered who not only carries that lineage but is able to project it into your consciousness and: what a view!

Russell Gregory in the Centicore bookstore pointing out which books on a topic are important, and just why, is one thing, something in itself, but Russell, after hours or off in a corner of the shop, actually reenacting the mental landscape of the Transcendentalists, empowering you in its vision is quite another. His ability to make that unique

American philosophy actually come to life and live again or breathe its life into your soul was quite another. Gregory's sense of local history, his sense of "place" and locality was profound. This was what education is all about, IMO, at least for me. So many of the talks I had with Russell Gregory were empowering.

I am not talking about imparting the history of people, times, and places from a bygone era, but rather a sheer transport into those realms now. You are there and those thoughts live again in you, now! Russell had that power and he shared it with those who he thought could receive it, whenever possible. I would say Russell Gregory lived for those moments, and folks like me listened and found life in them.

Personally, Russell Gregory was about as polite and careful in his dress and mannerisms as a human can be and yet he was also able to show you just enough of the edge of what he did not like about a topic for you to be guided. He was no stranger to opinions, just very careful to deliver them in such a way as not to be offensive. I wish I had that talent!

In time, Centicore and the 1960s went the way of the world and two brothers name Border took over and launched a completely different kind of bookstore in Ann Arbor. Russell eventually left Ann Arbor and moved back closer to his roots in Ionia, Michigan,

where he grew up. He served as the editor of the local Ionia newspaper for many years and I wish I had time to research what he did with that newspaper. I am sure it was remarkable. Later, Gregory worked part-time at Schuller's Books in Grand Rapids, still guiding readers to the best of the best and I am sure occasionally empowering lucky souls in American ideas and spirit. He passed on some years ago now. You can't replace what there is only one of.

I can remember one time I was being a little assy and chided Russell for not writing any poems recently. He turned and looked my dead in the eye and said: "Michael, these days, my best poems are walking around Ann Arbor." Enough said. I got the point.

A couple of posters I designed and silkscreened for Circle Bks.

Anyone else here remember Russell Gregory and care to comment?

Feb 7, 2021, 7:51 AM

SHADOW PUPPETS ON THE WALL

If someone asks me why I am not posting on dharma concepts of late, I might answer, deflecting the question: first, it has been wicked cold around here, often at or below zero. Second, I have been working for days digging out old documents and have been very busy scanning and photographing almost 3000 documents from my own past, and still have a lot to do.

On the other hand, and closer to the point, I have kind of reached a point of there (at least seemingly) being no return for efforts on my part to document the obvious. Isn't that always the case? The "obvious" is apparently just too close. And this results in general myopia, no big-picture or long-range thinking, i.e. failing, as they say, to see the forest for the trees.

It's virtually impossible (meaning, it can't be done) to convey in words how deep seated is our general myopia, which means that we have about no idea how obscured we are from witnessing or attempting to see the brilliance of the mind itself, even though, like the Sun in the sky, it is always shining, and this despite our own obscurations and inability to perceive it. That goes for all of us.

I feel like the preacher asking everyone to get down on their knees and pray with me. IMO, this point is so profoundly serious that I can't get anyone's attention, no matter how I try. "Self-secret" is such an all-powerful concept.

Tightly wrapped in the obscurations of our samsara, as we are and always have been until now, it is clear that there are two trains running, so to speak. On the one hand we practice meditation (and various dharma practices) to remove enough of our obscurations so that we can see the light. And, on the other hand, as we do, we find ourselves squinting until our eyes shut down because we are blinded by the brightness of the light we are discovering and somehow can't stand it. The light has always been right there. As I see it, that's the dilemma that we all face, each and every one.

And, if there are sides, the "shadows" obviously always win because that's where we are and have always been through all time until now – in samsara. In truth, we can't (and won't) see the light and have never seen it, even though it is in front of us right now. We use the light of the mind as our flashlight, but cannot look it in the face. We are blinded if we look. If we are to see anything at all, it would be by gradually being exposed to the brilliance of our own mind. Let me repeat: the dharma texts tell us that up to now we have NEVER seen the light of our own awareness head on, none of us here in samsara. Well, to be

generous, perhaps the merest glimpse. Instead, we call out and preach from the shadows of samsara, but that just more clearly shows that it is within the shadows that we dwell and for all time up until now have dwelt.

Just as seedlings are burnt by too much sunlight, yet if they can take it, they grow strong and not rank, it seems to me that we are attenuated shadowy beings that at best can but reach toward the light yet cannot actually endure it. We are merely casting shadows -- shadow puppets on the wall. Like this illustration poster here, we always look at the shadows and never the light.

Feb 8, 2021, 6:01 AM

IS SAMBARA UNREALIZED NIRVANA?

Let me qualify that a bit: What if Samsara is Nirvana, just not yet realized. Let's unpack that.

Life goes on, and has gone on, and there is no way to stop it and still be on the planet. This is just another way of saying that the river of samsara will continue

and has done so for each of our many lifetimes (so the teachings say) up until now.

This river of samsara we are in is not like hailing a cab. We can't just raise our hand and step out of it. It reminds me of the old saying that we can't step in the same river twice, and I've even seen a Zen statement that we can't step in the same river once, whatever that means. In other words, we are caught up in this samsara.

My point, which I'm inching toward here, is that we have a long history and habit of riding time down the line of life until we exit, as if that would solve anything. Given that rebirth is true as the dharma teachings point out, we would just pick up another life and continue on with what we now know, which apparently is not all that much. What if the only useful exit to life would be, as the dharma teachings actually state, to actually realize samsara as nirvana. While that is wishful thinking, the reality is that we mostly just drift down our samsaric river and try to avoid any rapids or turbulence, if we can.

What seems harder to keep in mind is that, again, according to the dharma teachings, we have been in samsara's arms for a very, very long time, so long that we have become totally inured to it, longer than we can even remember. What are our chances of just

waking up from this dream of life as we know it? What would it take to raise our head and look around?

Apparently, that is not so easily done. It reminds me of the bobsled rider that launches down the icy hill and then tucks in their head until they reach the bottom. Unfortunately, with samsara there is no bottom to the hill and so our head never gets untucked. For those of us in samsara (and that's most of us), it's head down and out of sight all the time. We never manage to look up. And so, consider this.

What if Samsara "IS" Nirvana, just not realized. That would certainly solve some problems and that is exactly what the dharma teachings state, that Nirvana actually is and comes from the realization of Samsara. The Mahamudra Lineage Prayer states that the "Inseparability of Samsara and Nirvana be realized." That makes Samsara and Nirvana the same thing exactly, just that Samsara is not yet realized. The implications of that statement are mind-boggling, and if they are realized, it takes the wind out of our sails as far as looking for a heaven other than here and now.

What if we don't realize this as Nirvana?

Feb 9, 2021, 3:04 AM

ALL IN A DAY...

A little Shakespeare in the morning and here it is:

“Now is the winter of our discontent,” and so it is. Here in northwest-Michigan, we have continued cold, day piled on day of very cold temperatures.

My office, where I spend a lot of my time, is not well heated, and these very cold days seem to accumulate bringing the temperature of my office down to an uncomfortable point, a point where my electric and forced air heating can't keep up. When it gets below 69 degrees Fahrenheit, I feel chilly.

I also don't like the lack of humidity in winter and struggle against it. I have tried all kinds of humidifiers, like on the furnace, in my office, and on and on, but they never work well. Humidifiers accumulate bacteria and require cleaning and, unless you have filtered water, they build up mineral sediment, and yada, yada, yada.

What I do for that is that here in my office I have a trusted hotplate, upon which sits a very thick-walled

stainless-steel pot, one that can be used on the stove if you like. And into that pot I pour a lot of filtered water and then bring it to a near boil so that it fills the air with humidity. It's all very safe and since we have neither kids nor pets at this point, there is no danger. It also contributes much-needed heat to my office. However, turn the pot off and it does not take long for the humidity to plunge back to where I don't like it.

Sometimes these days, time can seem inexorable and it just keeps on coming. With the bitter cold, I seem to have trouble keeping up with just the simple things I have to do each day, which can only be some kind of stupid protest on my part. That, and the endless politics crackling from the Internet TV, make me edgy. There seems to be nowhere to turn, like I should turn off the TV, but I don't. LOL.

This river of time just carries me along, ready or not. It's the same with food. Because of health conditions, I can't eat too many different kinds of things, and I have zero interest in cooking, other than simple foods like short-grain brown rice, beans, root vegies, tempeh (a special kind of tempeh that we order and freeze), very-thin whole-grain pita that I order in from Yasmeen Bakery in Dearborn, Michigan in bulk and freeze, cooked vegetables, and lately (especially in winter) it has been all-about soups.

Margaret has been making wonderful soups this winter, based on broth either from the leftover bean water that comes from cooking one or another kind of beans (black, pinto, garbanzo, etc.) or from perhaps red or yellow lentils. Into these bean waters go various vegetables and we have a soup that can last for a couple of days and be used in different ways.

As for the soups, I usually am commandeered to cut the vegies; Margaret makes the soup. And into those soups, once cooked, we can put tamari or miso (South River Miso is the best I have found) to give it flavor.

I'm the tempeh cooker in this household, so I do that and I take my time. Tempeh has to be sliced and then marinated. To marinate, I like to puncture each piece, on both sides with a fork-like thing to let the marinade better penetrate. Then the tempeh is cooked in a little olive oil with just enough water to steam it a bit until it is golden brown. Then those pieces of tempeh are used in my pita-bread sandwiches.

I like cereal in the morning, but usually not hot cereal. My internal temperature is usually warm, so I tolerate cold cereal. I use Ezekial Original sprouted-grain cereal, which is like Grape Nuts, only healthier. On that, I like to slice a banana, put some over-sized raisins, and fresh blueberries and, since I can't eat

dairy, I use oat-milk (Oatly). And my body tolerates that well.

I can't drink coffee, so I so like a cup of Cafix grain-coffee in the very early morning, like 2:30 or 3:00 AM, which is when I get up. I eat very simply and I like the flavor of simple foods. We are vegetarian other than my doctors want me to eat some fish (salmon), although I have not done much of that lately. I use no spice other than black pepper and tamari.

I spend the least time on food as I can get away with, because I would rather do other things with my time. I have no interest in long-winded recipes with many ingredients and lots of spices. Forget-about-it is my approach. And we are all organic, as much as possible.

The taste of the vegetables, grains beans, etc. is just perfect for me. I can't have much salt, so I am accustomed to foods just as they are, and am quite happy with that. I like a little bit of heat now and then, so Cayenne pepper or some southwestern chile powder takes care of that.

We no longer eat tofu, but we eat a lot of tempeh. Here is how I make tempeh.

<https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.10154705020752658&type=3>

We do eat oatmeal, so here is the best way I know to cook that.

<http://spiritgrooves.net/pdf/articles/Misc/WHO%20EATS%20OATS.pdf>

And that's what's happening. As I glance at the outside temperature, right now it is minus six degrees at 6 AM, so there you have it.

TIBETAN ASTROLOGY

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

Years ago, when I was translating Tibetan with my dear friend Sange Wangchuk from Bhutan, we would translate some of the astrological teachings from the 3rd Karmapa, Rangjung Dorje. Sange spoke seven languages and lived with us for several years. We translated the sixty animal-element combinations (sexagenary cycle), among other things. Here is what one traditional text has to say about the qualities of

someone born in the Year of the Female Iron Ox, also known as the Yin Iron Ox or Yin Metal Ox.

“The Iron Ox is physically small, somewhat lazy, and very skilled when it comes to arts and crafts. They have generally good health and are ethical in their behavior. They are ever stubborn, even to the point of fierceness. They like their sleep and the company of superiors. The average lifespan is 55 years and there will be seven obstacles. Two children.”

As mentioned, the Tibetan New Year (which is called “Losar”) does not start on January 1st as does the Western calendar year. Instead, the beginning of the year in Tibet is a fluctuating point that (in general) starts with the day after the New Moon that is nearest to the beginning of February. But even that is not written in stone.

For example, the Tibetan and Chinese New Year celebrations can differ by an entire month! Even the two most popular Tibetan-style calendars, the Tsurphu (Karma Kagyu Lineage) and the Phugpa (Gelugpa “Dalai Lama” Lineage) can, on occasion, differ by one whole month! It can only differ by an exact lunar month because no matter which system you use, the Asian year begins on a New Moon and is then celebrated the day following a New Moon. And the Chinese New Year can also vary, although these

three calendars share only two possible new-year dates, exactly one lunar month apart.

This year, 2021, all three calendars agree on the same date, so that also happens. LOL. The Phugpa System used by the lineage of the Dalai Lama is the most divergent from the other two, and the Tsurphu system generally agrees with the Chinese New Year, but not always.

You and I are not going to solve this calendar question for the Tibetans and the Chinese, so the most we can do is note it and not be surprised if we discover that two different astrological calendars for the same year have the start of the New Year on different dates. Since so much depends on when the year starts, you can imagine the problems.

On these last three days leading up to this New Moon, very special dharma practices take place at Tibetan Monasteries, practices dedicated to the fierce dharma protectors. And the days before any New Moon (but especially these that lead to Losar) are always somewhat difficult, and a time best set aside for practice, for finishing up things, rather than starting new projects.

The fact that the Democrats finish up their account of the riot at the Capitol on these days is very significant or auspicious.

Be that as it may, Happy year of the Female Iron Ox.

Feb 11, 2021, 2:56 AM

AN ARCHIVIST OF POPULAR CULTURE

Something I have never shared much with readers here, yet something I know a lot about, is digital media, in particular music and movies, yet that's what I am and have been for many years, as an archivist of popular culture.

Yes, I am a well-known astrologer, a skilled photographer, a system programmer, and a few other things (like a long-term dharma student), but I am mostly best known for creating massive databases of information on music, film/movies, rock concert posters, and a very large astrological library. In other words, I am an archivist of popular culture. How did that happen?

By the late 1960s, I was already half an archivist, mostly after doing scores of audio and video interviews of the great Black blues musicians in 1969-1973 area of time. So, where did that go?

Yet, I really found my forte when I got into documenting music and film (movies) on a big scale, mostly because when music CDs starting to appear. I was quick to realize that not ALL of our music was being (or going to be) transferred from vinyl to cassettes or CDs. That was disappointing, because a lot of great music was left behind. Worse, and what really irritated me, I will give you an example:

The rock legend “Little Richard” reached his peak around 1957. That’s perhaps when he was the white hot and had no imitators. No one could sing at that pitch or intensity, IMO. Yet, when Little Richard first came out on CDs, there he was, still singing his greatest hits. It said so on the CD cover, but that was misleading because, while it was Little Richard singing his greatest hits, he was singing them many years later. Little Richard was just re-recording his hits, but with nothing like his original energy and intensity. And for quite some time, Little Richard’s original first recordings were not even available on CD at all. Ouch!

So, what upset me is that the younger generation, buying CDs would hear about Little Richard from

music lovers, then listen to these half-baked re-runs and shake their head and say, “What’s the big deal about Little Richard?” and walk away. That made me cry foul!

And so, originally, I set about creating the All-Music Guide to rectify that mistake, and to let folks know that they were not hearing “THE” Little Richard if they listen to re-recordings made 25 years or so after Little Richard had peaked. To me, that was just sad. Worse, it was unfair to younger folks who would never know the difference unless someone told them. As it turned out, I was that someone, and that’s how the All-Music Guide was originally founded.

I guess my point is that there are different kinds of archivists, those that love the past for its own sake and those archivists who want to share in order to maintain the continuity of creativity in music or whatever other area that interests them. And, I was mostly the later.

One byproduct with the advent of CDs was that they kind of damaged and even cut-off the lineage of recorded music, so there was no longer a contiguous trail of breadcrumbs from one generation of music to the next. The complete lineage was broken or at least minimized. And today it’s happening all over again (in the last few years), with digital services like Spotify. An enormous amount of music is no longer available

on these services. It has vanished as far as listeners are concerned.

Take Jazz for example, but the same goes for classical music, folk, and other genres. Sure, the cherry-picked tunes and the “greatest hits” hits are there, but an enormous amount has been (and is being) lost by the lack of transfers from CDs to digital services. Somebody, somewhere is just making a decision to accept some and leave the others behind. And you know, it is the bean-counters who are doing this, and not the music experts, would want the whole panorama to be available..

When I created and ran AMG, the All-Music Guide, and moved it to Ann Arbor, we had 150 full-time staff members and over 500 free-lance music and film writers, the best experts we could find. When I sold AMG and no longer had full control, the first thing the bean-counters did was demand that any negative ratings, meaning music from an artist that was not their best, no longer be shared, at least the negative ratings were removed and set to neutral. And so, suddenly our coverage of music was diluted by having countless thousands of lukewarm albums not being labeled as just that – not the artist’s best.

My staff and I had spent years honing the best music experts in the world to correctly rate and describe the whole of any artist’s work. Where before AMG, ratings

were mostly dependent on a few music experts around the country telling the rest of us what to listen to. That got tiresome.

And what we did was simply not try to compare artists to one another, but instead, for each artist (great or small), is show you the best, next-best, medium, and poorest albums they did. You saw the output of each artist , their whole gamut, and could trust the ratings. Of course, you might not like an artist, which is natural, but if you liked an artist, we could show you where their best work was, as well as their worst or most-different work was, and usually why. You were forewarned of their stinkers.

We actually listened comparatively to vast numbers of albums, thanks to our staff and the hundreds of off-site freelance writers who worked with us. My personal CD collection grew into the companies CD collection and today it is housed as part of a permanent library at Michigan State University, and contains more than 720,000 CDs and probably many more, since I have not gotten any figures from them for years.

However, today all that has changed. Music has become even more of a commodity than it had been before. In fact, today music is more of a utility than a commodity. You pay a monthly fee, and you turn on the tap and drink as much as you want... which

sounds good until you realize that you are drinking from a very restricted selection. Much of the beauty of variety is gone.

More and more people are dumping their CDs, without a thought about finding the more esoteric music anytime in the future. One of my kids got rid of all her CDs and doesn't have any left. That is scary to me.

Music as a utility is a far cry from the music in my life. And the same is happening with film and movies. We pay a monthly fee to a company like Netflix and we can watch as much as we want, like a smorgasbord, yet we are limited to what's on the menu and an enormous number of movies are just not available.

And I know something about what I am talking about. I founded one of the two largest databases of film/movies on the planet, the All-Movie (allmovie.com). And I started Netflix out with all their data, list of movies, cast, ratings, etc. They licensed it from my company, AMG, for many years. And the All-Music Guide (allmusic.com) is still the largest music database in the world.

And my point is that skimming the cream off the top of music or film and offering it like a utility is, unfortunately, seems to be the way of the world these

days. However, I know more than the average bear about what is no longer available, and I feel we are losing vitamins, so to speak, that are necessary to a well-rounded healthy diet of media – music, films, what-have-you.

There is no longer a contiguous stream of music or movies open to all. Someone out there, probably the bean-counters, based on demand or albums sold, is sayings yes to some tunes or films and no to the others. It's already happened. Period.

I feel this is very unfortunate.

Feb 11, 2021, 11:43 PM

BURN RATE

Here is a way of displaying the most important information and data relating to someone's birth chart as concerns Burn Rate. Here is my own Burn Rate display. You can see have a lot of planets that are future oriented, either by being ahead of the Sun or pointing toward the Future. I have no retrogrades. My Mercury, at 81.1% is deep in the past, but pointing Direct at the Future from the past. And you can see that my Mars and Saturn are very high Burn Rate. They are in the future and also pointing into the

Future, so I am “future oriented,” probably even a dreamer. Saturn is my most extreme planet, so I can plan on going through a lot of Saturnian changes in order to balance out. Again, a high burn rate means that there is a big difference between reality and how we perceive it and our job is to work through these changes, to join or “yoga” then until they are one and the same. This we do through living our life.

Here is my geocentric natal chart, and I have drawn in red the elongation (angular separation) between both Mercury and the Sun, and Venus and the Sun. This is what we want to look for. The average LIMIT of Mercury from the Sun is Mercury $22^{\circ} 46'$ and Venus $46^{\circ} 19'$. You should easily be able to see whether your Mercury or Venus is close to a conjunction with the Sun, and thus has a very low Burn Rate, or whether it is closer to the limits and thus has a higher Burn Rate.

The universe is always on display, almost begging to be seen and understood. As my first dharma teacher taught me “My god is no beggar! We don’t have to make the ends meet; the ends already meet.”

Astrology is an oracle, albeit a complex one, meaning it can provide valuable information about our life and where we are headed. Yet it is all laid out astronomically exactly and is easy to read. Let’s take an example, in this case planetary Retrograde Motion, and here we will just look at the retrograde phenomenon using the planets Mercury and Venus (the so-called inferior planets) as examples.

Looking at retrogrades involves noting where the planet is in the zodiac as it goes around the Sun in its orbit, which is heliocentrically, and then noting how the same planet appears (is seen) from Earth's perspective. That difference can be zero (when the planet is conjunct (in line) with Earth, of an average limit either ahead or behind the Sun. This is true for what are called the Superior Planets, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus, and Pluto. However, with the inferior planets of Mercury and Venus, we only need to look at our familiar geocentric natal chart. We are going to start there today, with the inferior planets, Mercury and Venus.

For example, the planet Mercury can get an average of $22^{\circ} 46'$ either ahead of the Sun in the Zodiac or behind the Sun in the Zodiac. For example, if the Sun is at 0° Aries, the farthest that Mercury can be ahead of the Sun is to 22° Aries $46'$, and the farthest it can be behind the Sun is to 7° Pisces $14'$. That is the average. In actuality, those limits can be farther away (slightly) or nearer, and this happens too.

In other words, unless Mercury is Conjunct or Opposition to the Sun, it either is ahead of the Sun, meaning in the future of where the Sun is now going, or behind the Sun, in the past, where the Sun has recently been. This turns out to be very important news for those looking to interpret retrogrades.

And, at any one time, at least from Earth's perspective, Mercury is either going direct in motion (forward in the Zodiac) or retrograde (backward) in the Zodiac. These four parameters are important: direct, retrograde, and either ahead of the Sun in the zodiac or behind the sun in the zodiac. How to interpret all this? It is actually quite easy.

What I call "Burn Rate" is the amount of karma or energy it will take to bring the true place of the planet in the solar system and the place where Earth sees (and thinks) that planet is together. If Mercury is conjunct or opposition the Sun, there is zero difference and that makes for a very very low Burn Rate. Such a low Burn Rate means that planet, its meaning and effect, are very clear to you. In fact, you don't even have to worry about it, because for all practical purposes, you ARE it, a perfectly clear version of it.

On the other hand, we have a very different story, when it comes to a high Burn Rate. For example, I have a high Burn Rate for the planet Mercury, something like 81% of its maximum. This means it will take a lot karma (experience) to join (yoga) those two factors into one, to resolve them in this lifetime. And so, I can expect a lot of mental change, even turmoil, in my mental life.

And my Mercury is behind the Sun, in the past where the Sun has recently been, so my mind dwells in the past to a degree. However, my Mercury is not retrograde, meaning it is not in the past and still looking to go deeper into the past. In fact, in my chart Mercury has recently turned from retrograde to direct, so while my mind is very much in the past, it's direction, where it is looking or pointing at is in the future or looking toward the future, "future" meaning ahead in the zodiac from where Mercury is.

As so, while I am an archivist of popular culture (music, film, astrology, posters, etc.) I don't archive the past simply because I just love the past, but because I see what the past can contribute and that it is needed by the future. There is quite a difference. By the fact that Mercury is Direct, suggests that I have been there, done that, and am taking my knowledge forward in the zodiac.

My one clearest (least separation) planet is Pluto, with only 15% in separation between the Heliocentric and Geocentric positions; it too is in the past, but also looking forward to the future (direct). Yet it is very close to being conjunct with the Sun, and will be soon. So, when it comes to vulnerability or depth psychology (Pluto), that planet is clear and natural for me. I don't have much karma there to resolve, but am just able to do that kind of work naturally.

Perhaps you are beginning to see how this technique can be used.

There is only so far any of us can go into the past or into the future. This is determined by the planets Greatest Elongation, how far it can reach away from the Sun, with the inferior planets Mercury and Venus, or, with the Superior planets, it is determined by the greatest possible different between the heliocentric and geocentric positions for that planet.

We could almost say that we dig in the past during retrograde into the zodiac where the Sun has recently been, previous to where the Sun is now, and after the planet turns from retrograde to direct, we carry back what was found to feed the future. And, on the other hand, we forage in the Future (ahead of the Sun in the zodiac) until the planet turns from direct to retrograde and we bring then back what we can from the future to nourish the present (conjunction and opposition).

In other words, we tend to be either Future or Past oriented.

And so, for a useful interpretation of the Retrograde Phenomenon, we need to keep in mind:

(1) Is the planet Direct in motion or Retrograde.

(2) And is it in the Past (earlier in the zodiac than where the Sun is) or is it in the Future relative to where the Sun in our chart is – ahead of the Sun in the zodiac.

(3) Direct motion is always looking toward the future, and Retrograde motion is always pointing toward the Past.

(4) If our Mercury (or Venus) is retrograde and in the Past, then we are not only in the past, but we are going yet further in the past. We are into it.

(5) If our Mercury (or Venus) is in the Past, but has turned Direct, then we are in the Past, but pointing at or toward the Future. We are coming out of the past, hopefully with some knowledge.

(6) In a similar way, if our Mercury (or Venus) is Direct and in the Future (ahead of the Sun in the zodiac), then we are not only future oriented, but hell-bent on going even farther into the future. Maybe we are dreamers of the future.

(7) And, if our Mercury (or Venus) is Retrograde AND in the Future, then we are returning from the Future and headed back to the past, perhaps bearing knowledge.

And so, that is a very brief introduction as to how to use Direct and Retrograde planetary motion in interpretation. I have just worked here with Mercury and Venus, because you can check them out using your existing natal chart. I will try to look at the rest of the planets in another blog. Please give this some thought.

[Graphic of Burn Rate, the Retrograde Phenomenon, is meant to give you an idea what this could look like. I am in the process of working with my brother Stephen to program the Burn Rate technique in the program BlueStar, with the approval and help of my friends David and Fei Cochrane who now own and operate Matrix Software. Hopefully, there will be an upgrade option available soon, for those who can see the beauty in this technique.

Here is a whole free book on Burn Rate, for those interested.

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

Feb 13, 2021, 6:07 AM

“EXPERIENCES INTRINSIC TO REALIZATION”

In the great book, what amounts to a “Bible” for me,, by the sixteenth-century adept Dakpo Tashi Namgyal, “Moonbeams of Mahamudra,” the particular translation by Elizabeth M. Callahan, there is this passage:

“Those types of experiences are called ‘experiences intrinsic to realization’ or the ‘experiences intrinsic to essence.’ They are explained as being meditation in which experiences and realizations are inseparable, free from strayings and errors. They are discussed by the exalted Gampopa:

“Now you may ask, What are the experiences connected to meditation? They are called ‘experiences intrinsic to the essence,’ ‘experiences intrinsic to the connate state,’ ‘experiences intrinsic to the natural state,’ ‘experiences intrinsic to Mahamudra,’

“What do they refer to? They refer to the essence of your own mind. What is that? It is not something existent: It does not have even one-hundredth of a hair tip’s worth of something to be identified. It is not nonexistent: it is something that is experienced and is realized. The essence of mind is clarity-emptiness, unidentifiable. It must arise uninterruptedly as empty clarity. When it does, meditation is connected to experiences. When it is said that experiences and realizations are simultaneous, that’s what is meant.”

-- end of quote --

As mentioned above, “When it is said that experiences and realizations are simultaneous, that’s what it means.”

This is what I call the Vipassana of Mahamudra,” which is a combination of Shamata and Vipassana. The “realization” of experiences instead of just the experiences themselves, whether spiritual or what-have-you.

When what are called “experiences” are themselves realized and are to a certainty clarified, that is what I look forward to each day, when I can manage it. Call it Mahamudra or whatever. I call it Insight Meditation, based on a lifetime of very careful work as a

programmer and compiler of detailed information – where I learned Shamata.

Vipassana or Insight Meditation, for me is a like “gift of the gods, so to speak. It is exactly what I never had with conceptual thinking, the utter lack of annotation, doubt, extraneous comment, or criticism.

In Vipassana, like the old stories of Atlantis arising from the sea, the samsaric world is revealed in its certainty, incrementally, yes, but revealed, nevertheless. This is the process (realization as a process) that Rinpoche reminded me never to abandon, as his last words to me – the expanding and extending of the process of realization.

I first discovered it in the natural world in what I call a perfect storm of dharma, and which very, very, very painfully I expanded and extended from my close-up nature photography (where it naturally occurred), and then, after more than a year of very hard practice, it also worked with my writing, and eventually, now is pretty much a constant, sometimes. But then, I am a minimalist. I don't need to travel and am very content in a limited everyday life. Of course, Covid provides this now to almost all of us.

“To see the World in a Grain of Sand

And a Heaven in a Wild Flower

Hold Infinity in the Palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.”

-William Blake

I am not putting any “fruition” on it, as a good friend mentioned, or would know how to quantify it, if asked.

The pith point of it is the gradual process of realization of samsara (meaning whatever arises in our samsaric world moment by moment), an incremental realization, bit by bit, revealing experiences (whatever arises), meaning this process of “Realizing” experience directly and simultaneously. This, for me (and in my opinion) is what the yidam is in dharma practice, and this, in my understanding, is (for those of us who don’t get it all at once) the process of realization that leads continuously until and to: enlightenment.

I’m sorry that I don’t understand (other than by lip service) what all the levels of attainment are. All I know is this and by that I know that “this” will lead me to where I should go. I am content with that, and I am resting, but not resting on any laurels.

Feb 15, 2021, 3:57 AM

TIME FOR NOTHING

“Excuse me for the moment,
No matter the reasons why,
I just need more time to do nothing,
But gaze into clear empty sky.”

[A poem I wrote years ago, which I now invoke since I am totally wrapped in completing a project that takes, so it seems, my every moment and attention to it. I intend to resume my usual mode as I am able.]

Feb 16, 2021, 10:15 PM

FROM A DREAM

“I have gone to paint the sunrise in the sky,
To feel the cool of night warm into day,
The flowers from the ground call up to me,

The self I think I am is hard to see.”

[Just a little poem to say I’m still alive, and very busy. Scanning and organizing images is very tedious and repetitive, just the kind of focused work I like to do once in a while. It clears the mind and there is no hope to be done until you are. I must have a hundred pounds of images, probably much more.]

Feb 18, 2021, 7:01 AM

FINDERS KEEPERS

We are,
Both the finder,
And the found,
The silence,
And the sound.

Feb 19, 2021, 3:07 AM

PRACTICE A HABIT

Meditation,
While not practice,
Is a habit,
That can be practiced.

Practice builds habits,
But should not itself,
Become a habit.

In other words:
Practice,
To form a habit,
But don't make,
A habit of it.

As usual, I'm in over my head, now sorting through thousands of images, attempting to put them in some kind of order that they are useful.

The cold spell has not fully broken, but let's say it is half-broken. It is still not up to regular February temps, but getting there. I'm going with it.

The little poem above, written quite a while ago, is just an attempt to delineate the difference between practicing meditation and meditation. Ultimately, we want to just meditate and not work at or “practice” anything. Effort in the beginning to practice is pretty much required, but effort is not a part of actual meditation, IMO.

Feb 20, 2021, 5:11 AM

OUR BEING IS BECOMING

[I am getting so that I don't really care to have much of a point to what I write at all. It is more just some musings.]

Reckoning, I sometimes wish for. And by that, all I mean is to take a pause to look around, stopping a moment, taking a breath, and looking around. Just how am I doing I these days, and perhaps where have I been for a while?

I could say I'm doing “pretty well,” and that would be true, because when I am busily immersed in a project, with my head down, so to speak, time not only passes, but time pauses and is hardly there at all; that feels pretty good.

It seems that when I am engaged, that I am without edges or boundaries and that can make me wonder or question a bit. I guess this is where, as they say, samsara meets nirvana, along the borders and edges; that's where any difference is felt. Otherwise, what?

After all, where would light be without darkness to define it or dark without light? That so-called happy medium or balance between two extremes is a middle way or path every time.

Mostly, when I doubt, hesitate, or worry, I eventually find that everything is fine. It says in the pith dharma texts "Don't follow after a lot of wild thoughts." I know that's true and I try to do that, meaning not following extraneous or wilder thoughts.

Sometimes I wonder if I'm allowed to wander without one of those electronic collars that dogs have that tells me when I have gone a step too far from.... yet, far from where? Somewhere, of course, like perhaps the path I'm on. Freedom has its own issues.

I can tell you what the dharma texts say, or some portion of it, but that understanding is not the same as just drinking from the cup of this present moment. What if "not getting old" gets old, meaning freedom at any price also has a price.

Explore, explore, explore... There is no end to that. If the sky doesn't fall, what does that tell us? Does that alone tell me I'm on the right path or at least on some path? Or, is the path just where we happen to be in the here and now? Is the present moment itself the path? And is it that, "really" slowing down and taking a deep breath is when there is nowhere else or other-place to go? Is that like in the dharma what they call "One Taste?"

As the bard wrote "Something is happening here, but you don't know what it is, do you, Mr. Jones?" And who is it that wants to know? No one I know.

It appears that I'm moving so fast that I am at a standstill, like the hummingbird hovering at a flower. Not knowing what we know because we are not yet done knowing. Is that merely a hologram, this endlessly becoming, but not ever quite being? Being becoming is more like a becoming being than a has been. It has never been.

Non-duality has no object. However, kindness, compassion, appreciation is the object of non-duality. I wrote this little dharma poem some years ago in an attempt to explain this to myself.

DAKINI

Unconditional love,
Has no conditions.
It accepts,
The exceptions.

Total receptivity,
Takes you in,
Until you know,
Nothing.

Emptiness,
Contains everything,
And that includes,
Nothing.

.

Feb 21, 2021, 8:45 PM

COSMIC BREATHING: SOLAR ACTIVITY

There are signs, and astronomers support this, that this coming (and now current) sunspot cycle, instead

of being moderate to low in activity as expected, may instead be quite strong in solar activity. Witness the announcement that not only is the solar wind up, but that there is a CME (Coronal Mass Ejection) already winging its way toward us and scheduled to strike a glancing blow at Earth Tuesday February 23rd or Wednesday 24th, 2021.

Without knowing this, and for whatever reason, I felt it coming last evening when I sat down to write, and instead found myself writing more ephemeral prose, which I posted, often a good sign that solar activity is up.

My link to the Sun and to solar activity in general goes back some fifty years. I have been dedicated and have identified with solar change since then. And I was surprised (but not surprised) when in 1997 my family and I trekked to the high mountains of Tibet to meet the 16th Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje. And he gave me a name at that time, "Tenzin Nyima," which means keeper or holder of the Sun.

Anyway, all the signs and the reality point to my monitoring both externally and internally the solar flux and variation. I have tried for decades to point out this needed emphasis by astrologers on solar activity, but except for a few, their response has been not so much.

As mentioned, I felt the coming CME internally last night, which was confirmed this morning by the announcement by astronomers this morning on SpaceWeather.com

<https://spaceweather.com/>

Of course, my response is like a kid on a snow day, when I don't have to go to school. Such an event like the impact of a CME means my internal and spiritual life is going to be active and I like that.

Solar events like CMEs interrupt our normal life progression and inject into it a bit of chaos, at least stir the pot, of whatever we are currently immersed in like: life. What can this mean?

Although it takes light from the Sun some 9 minutes or so to reach Earth, slow-moving CMEs, mass ejection of solar plasma, take longer (and it varies), but usually a day or so. Yet, my experience tells me that although a CME takes 48 (or whatever) hours to reach impact with Earth, internally we feel it as it happens on the Sun in real time. How that is possible, I don't know, yet this has led me to the belief that our link with solar activity is immediate and that solar variation (and more commonly its constancy) is part of our spiritual lifeblood. You check it out for yourself, but that is what I have ended up believing.

Anyway, such events as this forthcoming CME usually mean a more active and richer internal (read: spiritual) time for me, and also an almost infinite variety of possibilities for change. By that, I mean opportunities to segue from life's freight train.

I used to hate change, because it is so disruptive, but then look at what it is disrupting, our headlong plunge through time and the myopic tunnel vision that usually accompanies it. Solar activity disrupts what seemed inevitable and interjects possibilities for alternatives. I have come to like that.

And I particularly like exploring these possibilities, these alternatives, that solar disruption brings us. Although it appears as a diversion, and it can be, seeing other possibilities, even briefly, injects oxygen into a life that seems to need it.

I call this "Cosmic Breathing" and we are all on life support given to us by the Sun and solar activity. I find that realizing this fact is liberating. My first dharma teacher told me the following, back in the late 1960s:

"Michael, we spend our first thirty years being born, the second thirty years repairing the damage we made coming out, and the third thirty years (if we are fortunate) activity participating in the creation of life."

Feb 22, 2021, 6:35 AM

COSMIC BREATHING

A Coronal Mass Ejection (CME) from a wild filament on the sun a couple days ago is due to probably hit a glancing blow to Earth, along with very high-speed solar winds, today and/or tomorrow. This kind of solar activity should not be seen as a negative thing, although it can (and does) inject some chaos into our carefully manicured plans.

Solar influx and variation should not be seen as an interloper, as something foreign or outside the dharma. How could it be? The influx or lack thereof, the rise and fall, of solar variation, like the lunar tides, control what I call “cosmic breathing,” our ability to expand and contract cyclically. It just naturally happens, whether we like it or not. As my first dharma teacher would say to me “We don’t break nature’s laws; they break us.”

So, it’s about getting with the program of Mother Nature. How to do that? Well, first, it’s not like we have a choice. We can either work with the solar tides or go against them, or both. Mostly, it seems to me

that most folks are not even aware of the solar influx and their tides.

We can expect during these times, but perhaps never notice, that whatever platform or security we have going for us will be inundated, probably not broken up, but perhaps fractured or seen as not stable. The most common experience, in my book, is that I wake up wondering what the heck I am (and have been doing), as much or all of the oxygen has been sucked out of my current plans, at least for a time. We most commonly can lose all sense of direction, as to where we are (or thought we were) going. As a result, we have to ride such solar bursts out, and there is no where to hide, other than to stick our heads in the sand.

As for me, I have learned (and am still learning) to rest in the changes that the solar tides bring us, to not fight against the stream, but rather to do my best to lay back in the mind and just go with the flow. One of the great pith dharma slogans is “Don’t follow after wild thoughts,” but just allow them to pass on. This is especially true now.

These times of greater or more intense solar activity are not something we negotiate without first letting go, but much like a narrow rapids of white water, we have to accommodate that intense solar energy and work with it. And the simple truth is that we can’t and that’s

the beauty of solar intensity. We have to let go and learn to float or be swept along.

What comes out of these solar-intensive times is us; we come out, more or less intact, but perhaps with our eyes held open long enough to take in the landscape of what we sweep by. Most or much of what we see in these mental inundations is lost; we don't take it in or find it too hard or painful to remember. It's like we blink or close our eyes.

Yes, it all comes back together again, but perhaps in a slightly different form. Most of us can't remember how we were before the solar event enough to make much difference. However, now and again, we know or sense that we have been taken apart and put back together again without realizing it. This is why in the dharma, "realization" is so important.

Feb 23, 2021, 4:07 AM

"WHAT, ME WORRY?"

In my case, the short answer is "Yes, I worry" and probably more than most. If it's not in my genes, it's in my blood, a kind of family trait. For me, unavoidable or not, worry has been a major obscuration most of

my life. It has taken several severe shocks to the system for me to learn how to override my tendency to worry over stuff. No, I have not had electric-shock treatments, but natural events served the same purpose. They forced me to either abandon worry or permanently ingrain it, which I am loathe to do. So, I am something of an expert on worry, but from the inside out and I am still not entirely out of it. LOL. However, I am getting there. I'm working on it.

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

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

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

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

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

The second way to rid ourselves of worry is not time (or fate) dependent, but it also takes some time. And that is to undertake to purify ourselves using the

classic Tibetan purification practices (as I did) and then learn (with the help of an authentic teacher) how to do Insight Meditation properly. Insight meditation, by definition, is a “worry-free” activity.

This second way (Insight Meditation) is very difficult, but you not only learn to drop worry, you also begin to realize and become familiar with the nature of your own mind, so this approach is doubly rewarding. As for me, I have done the second method, but often propelled and encouraged by several serious blows of fate from the first method.

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

I am too impatient for that. LOL.

Feb 24, 2021, 4:04 PM

NO HEAVEN IN THAT

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

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

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

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

And I am always pushing the envelope, interested in testing out rare and unusual lenses if it looks like they might be useful for the kind of close-up nature work

that I tend to do. Once, Klaus asked me why I keep searching for finer and finer lenses, when I have so many already. He said to me, why continue to search for my kind of perfection when, as he put it “You are already there” in his opinion. By “there,” he meant that my photos are good enough, professional enough, or whatever. Why not just use what I now have and enjoy. Why search on? I saw what his point was and my response to him was along the lines of what follows.

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

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

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

And although I sometimes post photos that I take here on Facebook, just for folks to look at, when what I write is not up their alley, that's not why I photograph. As mentioned, for me photography is a process that, if done well, can produce good results. It's not that I don't like good resulting photos, but the result is not the goal. The process of photographing, of seeing through a lens something of beauty, and the state or "zone" I get into. That is why I photograph, and not vice-versa.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Feb 25, 2021, 8:36 PM

“CLOSE YOUR EYES AND FORGET IT ALL”

The above words have been rolling around in my head like a song, but I could not place the tune, no matter how I tried. And then I realized that these words are from an early song written by my daughter May Erlewine called “Waterfall,” and the words go like this:

“Close your eyes and forget it all,
Just when you think you know the way the water rolls,
Waterfall.”

And the tune goes like this. Here is that tune and the cover of her album “Sleepless,” a drawing of May “over the moon,” by the great Texas poster artist Guy Juke.

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

[And now for the nitty-gritty. I must say that if you can plow through what follows here, I will be surprised. It makes sense to me, but just barely. And yet, I consider this ramble important because that’s where I find myself. And unless I can just forget it all and move on, I have to resolve this at least to some degree. And what follows is mostly one big question,

with no definitive answer. My guess is that this blog is for the very few, if any.]

Something we all know well, but that we may not be that aware of, is the role of conceptual understanding in our lives, a dualistic thought in general. What I failed to realize is that concepts and conceptual understanding is our guide to what is beyond dualism. By guide, here I don't mean "guru," but more like "guide" as in guiderails or the tracks we are on and tend to follow.

And while concepts are dualistic and have objective structures, the sense of "we" as subjects and everything else as objects, when we ride that train or follow those guide tracks from our ingrained dualistic habits into the nondualism of realization, we will no longer have those conceptual dualistic tracks to guide us once we don't have them. Why? Because nondualist is nondual. How does that work is my question?

I speak of wanting to "Be Here Now" and to immerse myself fully into the present moment, yet I fail to grasp that immersion is just that, full immersion, with nothing beyond or outside itself, such as signposts or reflectors, things which I am totally used to.

And so, if we are used to walking with the crutch of a conceptual-walker, there will be no reflection or mirror in the nondual practices, no object that is separate from us. What are the problems with that, if any?

I believe the above ideas may need time to sink in, and more than a momentary consideration. We can dip our toe in the water and pull it out, but if we dive into the deep end of the pool of nonduality, we will be 100% immersed. If we are used to measuring everything from “me, myself and I,” in contrast to everything else, that division or separation won’t be available in the non-dual practices.

For sure, on the one hand, with Insight Meditation, there is an incredible relief from the harangue and constant comment of our “monkey mind.” On the other, as mentioned, there won’t be any signs or guideposts to guide us, at least not of the dualistic kind that we are habituated to. It will be a new world for us to brave.

Sure, going in, after the dharma event called “Recognition” as to the nature of our mind is taken, what I might call the deconstruction of our dualisms, there are still plenty of shadows to guide us. Yet, the goal of all that is to even-out all the odds until some kind of equanimity is attained. Then what is and is there even such a state?

I'm sure I don't exactly know, but just as a few drops of rain can turn into a deluge, so can a few glimpses of nonduality eventuate as shadowless nonduality. After all, that's what we wanted and worked for, to remove duality, to be fully immersed.

My guess is that there is a whole set of rules to be learned in nondual meditation, rules that involve challenges in our learning process. I've yet to find any part of life that does not have a flip-side. As the macrobiotics used to say, "The bigger the front, the bigger the back."

The silence of nondual meditation is just as loud as the noise of dualistic meditation. It's hard to see in a snowstorm, because there are no shadows. Is the so-called "middle way" of dharma somewhere between non-dual and duality? Is there a proper mix, like the mixing of fuel and air in a carburetor, a mix that needs to be just right, the happy median?

Or sometimes it seems that non-dual realization must feed on something. Does it take two to make one? Does samsara feed our growing realization? I know that in the more advanced dharma training there is a point when we are told to get off our cushion, come out of our cave, and go into the marketplace where we can mix and see if we choke-up on contact with everyday reality.

My point is that there seems to be a middle way, a path of realization through samsara, as nirvana (the process of realization or whatever you want to call it) feeds on, consumes, and realizes samsara. That is what they call nirvana. Is there a middle way between dualism and non-dualism, between nirvana and samsara? If so, is the middle way between what two sides?

Looking at my own realization experience, such as they are, learning Vipassana, that non-dual experience of deconstructing or dissolving dualisms into nondualism, the process of becoming non-dual feeds on or depends on samsara, something dualistic that can be converted or realized as non-dual. Is the edge of that process the middle-way?

Is samsara a fuel that eventually runs out or does samsara last forever, only in finer and finer forms? In other words, nondual is nondual in comparison to what? The answer it seems would be compared to what is dualistic.

And if that dualism is gradually deconstructed, pared down to a diminishing amount, is it like the increasing white in a growing snowstorm, with the loss of shadows to distinguish the white from?

If there is an increasing equanimity, resolving itself into more and more of a one-taste and a lack of difference or duality, what does that demand of those of us who up to now only have known the separation of difference, however slight, and still depend on the existence of black in our white? Or are we talking here, not about what is separated, but rather on that fact that all separation shares a common nature? Is the common nature of the two sides of duality and nirvana what this is all about? Is dualistic samsara realized as nirvana by seeing the common nature all sides share? That would be an answer I might identify with. That could be an answer.

My point here is that, if up until now we have only known difference to see by, the dualism of subject and object, how do the rules of living change if “difference” and duality itself is gradually phased out? What is it replaced by, meaning, what are the new rules of such a condition or situation? To put it succinctly, is there even any “us” as a subject? What’s the referent? Is there any? I am reminded of the poem “The Leaden and the Golden Echo” by Gerard Manley Hopkins and the lines:

“How to keep – is there ány any, is there none such,
nowhere known some, bow or brooch or braid or
brace, lace, latch or catch or key to keep back beauty,
keep it, beauty, beauty, beauty... from vanishing
away?”

I do know that Insight Meditation (Vipassana) is a step beyond time, meaning that it can be so immersive that I look up and an hour has gone by, an hour in which I was fully engaged and aware, but not self-conscious. As this article is stretching on, I will try to wrap it up.

I only know how to extend and expand the realization that I currently have, as opposed to taking up an entirely new view, one not obviously connected to my experience and realization up to now. Of course, I cannot help but reflect that the last words of my root guru, before he passed, was that I was to continue to expand and extend my realization. It's like the knee bone is connected to the leg bone is connected to the ankle bone, and so on. We pick up and go from where we are or find ourselves.

What I (apparently) don't know is how to follow something like a conceptual description of the ten bhūmis and resolve those descriptions into experience I can use, but less realize them. I can read the words, but I have little to no realization as to what they mean or point to. They don't point to anything I know anything about.

And so, this brings me back to how do we enter the realization practices like the Vipassana of Mahamudra meditation, without depending on dualistic thinking or some dualistic pointers or reference? How can we see the shadows so to move toward the light?

Or is all this like a great koan? In Insight Meditation, what appears is certain, certainty beyond a doubt. It is non-dual in the sense that there are no second thoughts, comments, asides, doubts, etc. What is, just is what it is, with no elaboration. There are no ricochet thoughts bouncing back and forth. Perfect silence. With Insight Meditation, I'm not thinking about myself or "I and them," so in that sense there is no duality. Yet, what appears and is there, is perfectly there, again, as mentioned, without a doubt.

And, as more and more of life, until all is included, are equally whatever any part is, there is one taste. That must be what "equal taste" is like, or at least the best I can come up with. Samsara is not transformed; only our view of it is, and that view is that what it "is" is what it is. And one last question: Is realization the realization that the nature of samsara and nirvana are the same nature?

Feb 26, 2021, 7:54 AM

Mar 1, 2021, 2:50 PM

IN PRAISE OF WORRY BEADS

I was brought up Catholic, something I had no choice about. Nothing wrong with that, other than I didn't like it. One good thing about that religion is the sense of mystery and reverence that came with it, especially with some of the chants and music. Of course, when I was Catholic, the mass and everything was still done in a language I did not speak, church Latin. I even went to Catholic school, and was an altar boy, meaning I had to learn the Latin and recite it up there with the priest. And then there was the rosary, with its 59 beads. We used to say the rosary, but it was not used like worry beads, but probably couldn't help but serve for that purpose as well.

And so, I have to laugh that years later, after I left the church, I ended up embracing the Tibetan dharma, where everything was also done in a language I did not know and is used with a mala (like a rosary) with 108 beads, saying mantras as one moved from bead to bead. Anyway, I want to talk here about malas, whether the full mala or the much shorter wrist mala that many folks use. The same wrist mala has a purely secular use and is used by folks all over the world, often called "Worry Beads."

Using actual worry beads is the paradigm, yet the "worry" in worry beads can be based on doing anything repetitive. Worry beads are a form of distraction, but just what or who is distracted? Well, the Tibetans might say, as far as who is distracted, that would be our "monkey mind," the endless

chatterer within us. Worry beads distract that chattering, leaving us with greater mental clarity.

Like flint striking steel, it seems I am most aware when my endless distractions are themselves distracted, as in saying mantras or just fingering plain old worry beads. There is something about repetition, repeated actions, such as saying mantras on beads (mala) or even using readily available worry beads, that is enough to captivate and entertain our distractions, thus leaving us clear and awake.

In fact “worry beads” must be another or an alternate form of Shamata (Tranquility Meditation), where instead of stabilizing the mind with Shamata, by using worry beads, we entertain what is distractable in ourselves, while whatever in us that is not distractable is left to rest in greater clarity. Through the beads, we see the clarity beyond them.

Using a mala, wrist or otherwise, it’s not necessary to say mantras as you pass over each bead. It’s not only the sound or the mantra, it’s the attention to the beads and keeping them moving that seems to be important. With a wrist mala, the base of stability is the activity of moving through the beads one by one, repeatedly. And the clarity is what arises or comes from distracting our monkey-mind attention so that only the clarity that is natural to us remains and is available.

I always have a wrist mala with me and find myself reaching for it whenever I am nervous or at loose ends. Often, I don't even know I have the beads in my hands, but there they are and I am moving through them. And aside from that busyness, there I am, just clear as a bell, and aware of being present.

How I first was introduced to a mala used in this way is interesting. It was from my dharma teacher, the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, with whom Margaret and I worked for 36 years. One time, at the end of an interview, Rinpoche just spoke out and told me that I might want to use a mala in this way. Rinpoche never says something with no meaning, so I took it in. And of course, he knew that I knew how to use a mala and had for many years. It was clear in the moment he spoke that here he was talking about using a mala as I am presenting here, with mantras, to attract the busyness or interest of my monkey-mind and isolate the clarity that exists everywhere else but in that monkey-minded busyness.

You can find a wrist mala almost anywhere. They are all over Ebay and cost next to nothing. I keep mine not on my wrist, but in a pocket, where I can easily reach it so as not to make a spectacle of the process. And I also use the full mala, but mostly when I am sitting on the cushion doing dharma practice. In fact, my particular mala is an interesting story in itself. Here is that story.

It was in the year of 1989 and I was at our monastery in the mountains above Woodstock, NY, where we had finally completed the main gumpa or shrine room. There was quite a bunch of us there for the first 10-day Mahamudra Meditation Intensive (there would be 31 of them eventually and Margaret and I made the 1600-mile round trip every year), and our teacher the Ven. Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche was addressing the group, just before we were dismissed for the day.

Rinpoche spoke to us so frankly and from his heart, such that all of us present were in tears. He spoke that while we finally had built this great shrine room, he had also been asked by his root guru, the 16th Karmapa, Rangjung Rigpe Dorje (whom I had met in 1974), to also build the traditional 3-year retreat, so that lamas, retreatants, could be trained in this country. He had been unable to that up to now, and his words struck those of us there deeply.

As we filed out after the teaching, I remember going down the long steps from the gumpa. It was while I walked by a particular window of the shrine building that I thought... how could we ever build something like a retreat center, when we were exhausted from just finishing the main shrine room. Who could do that? It would take someone... well, someone like me to do that, and it would be a huge undertaking. Then I realized that, perhaps, only someone like myself, who knew how to get things done, could do so. And then it hit me!

Only I could do this. And, moreover, in the instant I realized that I had no choice. I must do this. It was a terrifying thought, to take on such a responsibility. I sent a note to Rinpoche and was told to go and see him in his little room. I did that.

Rinpoche spoke no English, and there was not a translator present for this exchange, so there was just the two of us. We stood close and Rinpoche took out his mala, his Tibetan beads, something all his students had seen and admired. He placed them in my hands and said, “Mala, my mala.”

He was giving me his mala, which I later learned from his translator, is the same mala Rinpoche had before he ever came to this country in the mid-1970s, a mala that he had used for who knows how many empowerments, the millions of mantras, the day to day use, etc. And he had used it up to that day in 1989 when he placed it in my hands.

His translator couldn't believe he would give this away. Of course, I was stunned, but also knew that I had no choice. He was asking me to help fundraise for the three-year retreat. It was a precious gift, but also a precious responsibility that I had to rise to. And I did, with the help of my wife Margaret and sangha , and especially with the help and generosity of our Chinese dharma community. The retreat center was

built, which today is known as Karmé Ling. Years have gone by, and many lamas have done the three-year retreat, where there now is a retreat houses for men, one for women, each holding a large number of retreatants, plus a large lama house with its own big shrine, and many other retreat houses scattered here and there. Also, there are a couple of stupas, a columbarium, and so on.

I include a photo of Rinpoche's mala. You can see how he had worn down the bodhi seeds from use. Rinpoche explained the mala to me, detail by detail. The guru bead was given to Rinpoche by the great Ven. Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche. And the stone green-blue slider next to the guru bead belonged to the previous Thrangu Rinpoche to the current one, along with one of the red-coral marker beads, the one opposite the guru bead. Things like that.

And so, that mala is very special indeed.

INSIGHT MEDITATION IN MAHAMUDRA

I am very interested to better understand the way I was taught Vipassana (Insight Meditation) compared to the dozens of ways it is taught elsewhere, such as in Theravadin dharma, and so on. The particular way I was taught Vipassana is part of the Kagyu Lineage of Mahamudra instruction. I find the method I know is very different from other methods I have read about. Let me attempt to describe what it is that I practice

that I consider as Vipassana. I will use “Insight Meditation” here, since that may be less foreign-sounding to some readers.

Insight Meditation, as it is “nondual,” is considered ineffable, not able to be properly described in words, language being dualistic. Nevertheless I will, as countless others before me, try.

I can’t always find the words, so it actually helps for me to write it down. So, here is one more attempt to explain the approach to Insight Meditation as taught as part of Mahamudra practice. At times I have felt that I am a little crazy or some kind of singleton, just out there all to myself. However, this is how I learned Insight Meditation, so you can see for yourself.

I was taught this practice by my teacher Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche (KKR) who, along with Thrangu Rinpoche and Trungpa Rinpoche were personally taught this technique by the legendary Khenpo Gangshar himself in Tibet. For me, this was part of the Kagyu pointing out instructions that KKR gave in 2005 at the yearly 10-day Mahamudra intensive that began in 1989. And so, after reflecting on my training, I can see that I am not so much of a maverick as I worried.

It is often stated that Insight Meditation is the analytical part of our training, usually called by KKR “The Analytical Meditation of a Pandita.” Yet, what this analytical analysis leads up to and is always directly pointing at is what KKR called the “Resting Meditation of a Kusulu,” which is not analytical because it is non-dualistic. A “kusulu” in Tibetan means a yogin who is uncontrived, and just does what comes naturally, while a “Pandita” is a learned scholar, more of a professor (conceptual) in dharma philosophy. These two methods or paths to enlightenment are contrasted, often pointing out that the first (pandita) can take innumerable lifetimes, while that second (kusulu) can be accomplished in a single lifetime, a bit difference.

In other words, Insight Meditation training consists of two parts, the analytical part which, because it takes so long, leads or points to the non-dualistic resting meditation of a kusulu. That’s the whole point of the instructions, to use the analytical approach to introduce us to the nondual part, the actual resting meditation of a kusulu.

In other words, what appears as analytical (Analytical Meditation of a Pandita), IMO, is, practically speaking, just an invitation to familiarize ourselves with our mind conceptually, but ultimately a gateway or portal through which to search in our senses and actual experience, learning to exercise our mental muscles and thereby STRETCHING our mind like we would

stretch pizza dough, pushing and pulling – exercises that stretch the mind to make it more pliable and adaptable. This would be part of the “kusulu” approach.

Again, IMO, there is nothing analytical about this particular kind of non-conceptual mental exercise, the resting meditation of a kusulu. What I am calling here “stretching” is learning to use the mind, not conceptually, but more as we would a muscle, through exercise. And, until we can do it, and actually do this, Insight Meditation (The Resting Meditation of a Kusulu) will not arise, i.e. will not be possible.

It seems that in some other kinds of Insight Meditation (in India, Theravadin, etc.), I do see the analytical conceptual element stressed, but not so much mentioned is the resting meditation of the Kusulu, which is the whole endgame of Mahamudra training, the main point, IMO. In other words, the analytical part, because it takes so long, is not practically effective, and thus leads to the non-analytical part, to this natural resting meditation of a Kusulu. That’s where we end up as a practitioner, at least in my experience, following those instructions, the path of the kusulu.

As for me, at first I got hung up in the analytical and conceptual analysis part of it all, using my conceptual mind to decide by thinking and not actually looking in

the mind itself, and I totally missed the non-dual resting meditation of the Kusulu. I assumed that I could answer all questions mentally, by conceptual means, without further search or investigation. I did not understand how to approach the resting meditation of a kusulu.

And an example might be, when Rinpoche would ask us questions like: "Is the mind the color "red?" We were then supposed to off alone and spend the entire day trying to decide if the mind was the color red. But I was far too clever for that. Of course, the mind is not the color red or any other color, thought I, and left it at that. I already had my answer in a flash and had no need to spend a whole day examining that. Silly. And by that bit of conceptual thinking, I avoided the many hours of searching within the mind for the answer as to if the mind is the color red or any other color. And of course I later realized that by avoiding the extended search I was asked to undertake, I also avoided any real exercise through the search process. It took me a long time to figure that out, and I can only thank Rinpoche for eventually getting through to me. I chose to live conceptually rather than experientially, and thus had no real experience when all this was said and done.

It was ONLY when I actually began to exercise my mental (not conceptual) muscles, stretching and working the mind (through a vigorous and exhausting search, like kneading dough), that Insight Meditation

for me was eventually possible. And this ONLY after I finally got the idea correctly and this required that I do some three years of very strenuous dharma practice, including intense contemplation (same three years) on “The Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind,” which is often where folks first enter the dharma, but these same “Four Thoughts” are also part of the more advanced Mahamudra training. That’s how important these are for practitioners Only then did Insight Meditation spontaneously occur, and in my case, that ONLY by means of what I call a perfect dharma storm, brought on by a life-changing loss-event that got me down from my high conceptual horse, so to speak, making me pliable and more able to accept and receive the teachings.

In summary, people seem to think and believe that Insight Meditation is perhaps primarily some form of analysis. I understand why they might think that, of course, because I have been there and done that. Yet, I have to say that IMO, this idea of analysis itself is but a misdirection. And this because the analysis is supposed to help us become familiar with the mind, at first perhaps conceptually, with ultimately our becoming actually familiar with our own mind through experience. However, that experiential familiarity itself is not conceptual, but has to make “sense” and be familiar. It is hands-on and visceral, however we could define that. We could talk about it here sometime.

As mentioned, Insight Meditation first occurred for me, as I have explained many times on this blog, while out in nature photographing close-up and macro images in the fields and so on. There I was, peering through ever finer (more corrected) lenses, with camera and tripod, crawling around (soaking wet) in the wet grass at dawn and, because Michigan is flat and the winds blow much of the time, having to painstakingly be still and hold my position until the wind died down, and this for long periods of time. It was there, in that motionless space, that Vipassana just happened naturally. It was seemingly spontaneous. There I was, the subject who was watching through the camera lens at the object, some plant or small critter, so it could not get more dualistic than that.

I was seeing the object, but I was not (and had never seen) what could be called “seeing the seeing itself, seeing,” and then I did, becoming one with the seeing. If we do see the “seeing itself seeing,” that amounts to short-circuiting the duality of our habitual subject seeing the object, at which time duality collapses, and suddenly we are part of the whole instead of separate, with everything included, and resting in the nonduality of the seeing, seeing itself, seeing.

This is what happened to me with close-up photography. It was such vivid awareness that I spent the whole summer going out at dawn each day, watching the sun rise, and resting in this special form of “Seeing.” I could do this Insight Meditation

repeatedly, but only when I had a camera and lens, and was out in nature. So, as you can imagine, I went out in nature literally all the time. Yet, when I came home, my mind was quite ordinary once again. I didn't like that. Of course, I wanted to extend and expand that Insight Meditation from nature photography so that I could do it in other areas of my life, like writing blogs like these. However, that was a very tough row to hoe, for me.

As for writing, it took me at least a year of strenuous practice, like learning to walk all over again, to be able to have the same Insight Meditation when writing. With writing, it reminds me of working words, like fitting a complex puzzle together until the words suddenly click or snap into place and the written phrase is complete, solid, smooth, simple, and of one piece. Or, like a key, that fits a lock, will turn and open the door. Insight meditation is a vivid clarity, a certainty, with no elaboration or second thoughts whatsoever. It is such that I wanted to do that all the time.

In winter here in Michigan, I can't go outside much and there are no flowers or bugs. Instead, I have grown to mostly doing Insight Meditation while writing. The texts speak of the difference between ordinary seeing and the vivid awareness that constitutes Insight Meditation, so I know some of you know what I am talking about. I'm just trying to get on the same page. I find that, given time, we can understand one

another quite well. We may just be using different terms and semantics.

Anyway, if you get this far in reading, thanks! Thanks even if you don't.

Mar 3, 2021, 2:17 AM

INTERNAL BAGGAGE FROM THE GET-GO

We all have baggage, the baggage of our genes and the baggage of our upbringing, not to mention the elephant in the room, the baggage of our own karma. I have that too, and some of it, as they say, "smarts."

If I think about it, most of my problems came at an early age, from feeling that I had to protect myself from what passed for civil society. And when I say protect "myself," I don't mean from my own selfishness, but the kind of protection I'm talking about was present long before I had any sense of civil self-consciousness. For example, I felt I had to protect myself from my teachers and school in general, teachers who tried to tame a penchant on my part to be intuitive and follow my own thread of interest. I

always wanted to fit in, but not at the cost of just going along to get along.

Perhaps unfortunately in some ways for me, I was brought up far from much influence beyond that of my family. This is because we lived in a rural environment, with not even a single house near us, at least at first. Ours was the first house in the area. My parents had it built. I grew up in that environment and had few friends beyond my family and my four younger brothers. I was always the oldest and had no peer or older person around my age to look up to.

In that space and for an extended period of time, quite early on, basically what I did was study natural history, Mother Nature, because nature was all around me. I had no choice. By the time I got to school age or a little older, I very much already knew how nature worked, and when it came time to integrate what I learned about natural law with the rules and regulations of the education system, I did not mesh well.

Those two conflicting laws (civil and natural) were not all that compatible. My response to hypocrisy was to ignore my teachers unless I saw something in them that earned my trust and respect. I was used to a loving family and that kind of environment, and I guess I was perhaps always quite creative as an individual. Nature was more than interesting to me.

Well, there was one teacher, Mrs. Althouse. She was my 4th grade teacher, someone that I really liked and was able to work with. However, she was immediately followed by Mrs. Rider in the 5th, grade, who was a martinet and a discipliner, so I paid her no attention. And so, it went. I was bused to school and TV was not invented yet. We listened to the radio, and to shows like Captain Midnight, Amos and Andy, Jack Benny, Superman, I Love Lucy, and so on. Yet, mostly I was affected by and studied natural history, which was as close as my own back yard.

My point here and why I bring it up is that I am still dealing with the hangover from protecting myself self from what, unless I could see the beauty in their approach to me, I felt was intrusive on my elders' part. I was not aggressive or rude, but just nonresponsive at school. In fact, somewhere back in that time, quite early, the school and my parents had me tested to see if there was something wrong with my ability to learn, something that would need special education. Of course, I never knew this.

What they found out, so my mother told me much later, was that there was not only nothing wrong with me, but just the opposite. I had a high IQ and mostly was just bored... and preferred my own mind to anything the schools were offering me. And that's how it was for a long, long time.

Which brings me back to this idea of my self-imposed seclusion, such as I experienced it, which no doubt left its mark, and the aftermath from all that eventually had to be absorbed and straightened out. I don't feel that has ever been completed. I am still working on it, but at least I am aware of it.

Being kind of on my own a lot and physically isolated, and the oldest child, I did not have many peers or support from my peers such that the rules and role of authority in my life could be clear to me, compared to what I was exposed to in Mother Nature, whose laws became obvious. I learned nature's laws and did not have the same respect for civil law and the politics of hypocrisy, when I encountered it.

I had no grandfather on either side, and one of my grand mothers was too rule ridden, IMO, while the other I got along with well. So, what's the point of writing all this?

I am still figuring that out but, in general, I have this sense that for all of my school years, some twelve years or more, for the most part I ignored school and its teachers. Instead, I was busy on my own, in my own mind, thinking about and working with what I would do after I got out of school each day, which mostly involved nature and natural law. I did this until my middle to later teens, when I discovered girls. I

even managed to flunk my sophomore year at high school, and in that same year I won the biology award at my high school (and was send to MIT to receive it), a study of the marine fauna of the North Shore of Boston. That kind of thing. There were always two trains running.

I am sure this may be an odd read, but I may continue it, since I find it helpful to look at this situation.

THE EDGE KEEPS ME

I have not had to worry about keeping my edge because the edge is more than able to keep me aware of itself. This is kind of a follow-up article to yesterday's post on my distancing from society's conventions. My not identifying with society so much or not wanting to smile when I don't feel like smiling and so on, is also a two-way street. There is always the other side.

For me, what's really at issue here is the sense of my worthiness, or lack thereof, in my own eyes, and this because I became an isolate so early on that I lost touch with conventional behavior. Because I was to some significant degree cut off from doing things as convention prescribed, I didn't know, one way or the other, what I was missing, but I probably self-

stigmatized myself, and did not identify with or was not identified by the public as being a whole part of whatever society was doing.

This probably was mostly in my own mind, but nevertheless the result was the same, I was outside the “in” rather than inside the “out.” Of course, as a kid I looked for support from outside myself, in others and the world, although intellectually I know (at least now) that the only support that works has to come from inside us. We have to have our own blessing, to bless ourselves. This is the result of being a bit of a maverick, of not trusting the formal “polite” systems more than I did, and insisting on finding my own way, even if that way turned out to be twice as difficult.

I trusted myself enough to persevere, but obviously not completely. Otherwise, by now I would just be on my way, wherever. Instead, I hovered just at the edge of complete confidence in myself and would hem and haw, not able to receive in full my own blessing, not knowing where I stood. There is humor there somewhere. Meanwhile, “tempus fugit,” while I dawdled.

As Popeye said “I am what I am and that’s what I am,” and also that’s just where I am in all this and when. It does not seem likely that I will turn around and go back toward society’s hypocrisy and somehow suddenly be able to fit in like a piece in their puzzle.

That has never worked up to now, and I see no chance of that changing. Also, I have no interest in just going along conventionally, especially as so many things are as politically corrupt as they often seem. Never have.

The odd thing is that I seem to HAVE found what makes me happy, the kind of dharma practice I seem to be capable of, yet I still worry "Is that OK?" Is this proper dharma or is it just too much fun and I should find something much more difficult, so that I feel more like I am working harder at it? Does progress mean suffering or am I allowed to be happy just as I am? What is freedom and will I allow myself to have it?

Also, to the degree that I felt estranged, I somehow identified with being a "bad" boy, with being slightly out of alignment with society and over time this has become important or at least ingrained in my sense of myself. If I give that up, that separation or sense of being somewhat of an "outcast," then how would I know it's me? That's the idea, which I agree is kind of sad. Mostly, I am too old to worry about it.

How do we feel ,unless we push up against something other than we know? That's the problem in a nutshell, IMO. Without opposition, my keeping my distance from conventions that seem unnatural to me, how do I know it's me? That's hard to give up because, without an edge, where am I and where do I

end and something else begins? Such a change in me as that would be the end of separation, which is nonduality. In truth, I need to accept people and society, just as it is, if only to help change it. This is my problem and the line from Sir Edwin Arnold keeps running through my head, “The dewdrop slips into the shining sea.”

Mar 5, 2021, 4:05 AM

COMING EVENTS CAST THEIR SHADOW

And give sign. While sorting through hundreds of pounds of paper, old photos, writing, and other documents, I came across a box of notes that my first dharma teacher Andrew Gunn McIver left behind when he passed on. I handled his burial, designed his tombstone, and picked out his burial plot. Anyway, among those materials were hundreds, probably over a thousand, small notes written in tiny script left by my former teacher. I’ve wanted to transcribe them, but have not had the time.

Andrew was a traveling initiator for a Rosicrucian order, but also knew the dharma very well. I spent some years with him, learning what I could. And the other day, just for fun, I opened one tiny notebook of his, about 2 x 3” in size, and read the first thing my

eyes saw, and it was this sentence written in tiny cursive:

“Samsara is Nirvana and Nirvana is Samsara.”

This was a shock and so serendipitous, in that this phrase is exactly what I have been studying and contemplating in the dharma these last years. This little sign meant so much to me. I am a sucker for synchronicity.

For one, such a message means for me to look no further for a heaven somewhere else other than right here and now. If nothing else, the present moment is the key or doorway to any future. Even if my current difficulties get tough, it brings to mind the old chestnut, “If you have lemons, make lemonade.” That idea.

THE CIRCLE BKS. ASTROLOGICAL CALENDAR

Here is a story and a bit of astrological history. In 1968, my brother Stephen Erlewine, his wife Morgen, and his partner John Crofoot Sullivan founded Circle Books at 215 S. State Street, Ann Arbor’s first

metaphysical bookstore. Prior to that, there was no spiritually-oriented bookstore around, other than the odd book or two on astrology and the occult at Bob Marshall's Books, just down the street. Since I was into some of the same topics, I got involved, at first helping to rebuild the store. We put in new shelves, fish tanks (salt and fresh water), and globe lights. It was really nice.

And I gradually ended up doing the chart calculation for store clients. Later, in 1972 or so, Margaret and I both did those calculations, and her writing and way of drawing out an astrological chart was way more beautiful than my scribble, so Margaret did a lot of those. I ended up teaching astrology and similar topics evenings at the bookstore.

One of the things my brother Stephen and I did was produce an astrological calendar. This was in 1969. We put it together ourselves, had it printed, and distributed it. In fact, we published the Circle Books Astrological calendar for 42 years straight, from 1969 until 2011. I ended doing most of the writing in the calendars and designing the covers for the first eleven calendars or so. Stephen did most of the calculations. You can see them in the accompanying photos of all the calendars. The only one I don't have or even have a photo of is the Circle Books/AFA Calendar for 2001. If any of you have a copy, please send me a fairly large sized photo of the 2001 Calendar. I would appreciate that a lot.

Later, in 1980, Circle Books and the AFA (American Federation of Astrologers) combined forces and, although Stephen and I continued to design the contents each year, the AFA published and distributed it. They began to do the covers, Stephen did most of the calculation, and I wrote the introductory articles and what-not for it.

I include all the covers I have, plus some larger versions of the covers I did, plus a little home-made flyer I must have done with Press-Type to advertise my astrological classes there in the evening.

The most controversial Circle Books Astrological Cover I ever produced was the 1969 cover, with a picture of the first home computer Commodore Pet (2001), with a program I wrote for it on the screen. Some people that cover because they did not want to see astrology computerized, but within a very short time, astrology was computerized, because calculating astrological charts with paper and pencil, log tables, and ephemerides was time consuming and not everyone could do it. I should know. I did many, many thousands of chart, either for clients, the bookstore, or just for myself.

In 1977, I wrote a complete astrological program in only 8K of RAM. Today it takes more than that just to press a single key. This program which was accurate

to a few minutes of arc, did geocentric and heliocentric charts, an aspect grid (as shown) and a lot more. There were no disk drives yet, so programs had to be recorded on cassette tapes, verified, and sent out. I sent these programs out on tapes, at first for free, and later, because it was taking more and more of my time, for a fee, and then finally as a company, Matrix Software. An article for Red Herring Magazine claims I was the 2nd oldest software company still on the Internet. A little company called Microsoft was the oldest. I chose the word Matrix, not for its mathematical meaning, but because the word matrix means “womb,” and I envisioned from this womb, a whole new world of astrology would be born. And it was.

Mar 6, 2021, 9:45 PM

HAVE YOU EVER SEARCHED THE MIND?

I find that we have to be very careful about discriminating what is called the “Analytic Meditation of a Pandita” when it comes to the pointing-out instructions as to the nature of the mind as part of Mahamudra meditation. I find this idea of “analysis” to be very misleading, as I mentioned, in particular when used to describe the introduction to Mahamudra Vipassana (Insight Meditation). The kind of analysis

required is NOT intellectual as we commonly use in purely conceptual thinking.

There is a need to separate conceptual analysis (mentation) from what I call (and I believe the Rinpoche I worked with would call) actual “searching” of the mind itself analytical, which I try to communicate as much more visceral, meaning we don’t think about it,” but rather get off our duffs and actually search our minds until we have totally exhausted that search or topic and probably ourselves.

It is this second form of analysis (actually searching the mind) that is what worked for me and not the first (conceptual understand). When I grasped the difference between conceptual analysis with mentation (thinking), drawing conclusions from concepts, and embarked on what I would call visceral analysis, actually searching the mind “physically,” so to speak, only then did I make any real progress.

And so, I asked myself, have I gone and looked, have I actually searched the mind until exhaustion? And the answer was, I had not. Instead, I had used conceptual mentation, thinking, to decide and answer any of the traditional questions asked of me, such as, for example: is the mind the color red?

Conceptually, I thought that of course the mind is not red. "Mind" has no color. Period, end of story. And that was my mistake, not to have physically, viscerally, actually searched the mind until exhaustion, and through that particular exhaustion begin to get some experience and sense of the mind itself. And, when I did search, viscerally speaking, everything began to unfold. I had to personally go into my mind (use my mind) and search, look around, and become familiar with the mind on a first-person basis.

I spent about 3 years of very difficult work (practice) to get that exhaustion down better (as in: exhausted) in conjunction with the Mahamudra training request in our texts to revisit the "Four Thoughts That Turn the Mind," which I did at the same time for three years. Only then did what I call Kagyu Mahamudra Insight Meditation spontaneously arise for me, and not through just the effort, but through the experience of the effort and unexpected by me. I believe we could agree on this interpretation of analytical understanding as opposed to simple conceptual mentation, or be close.

What this leaves to be done then, IMO, is to delineate the particular way I practice or perform Insight Meditation and discuss. Yet, it is here that, IMO, it gets subtle or perhaps confusing, because the path to liberation for each of us can or is so individual. That's the whole concept of the "yidam" and why the yidam is said to be secret by many. The yidam is not so

much secret, but individual, even unique, being the actual path that you or I take, even must take, to awakening. It varies so much.

We all know about the Bardo Thodrol, commonly called “The Tibetan Book of that Dead,” or “Liberation through Hearing” and sound, but less is said about the “Bardo Thongdrol,” the “Liberation Through Seeing,” although it too exists. There are only ways to liberation, just as there are only ways to be distracted.

As a musician, I am very sensitive to sound and hearing, but that is not the way the “Seeing” of Insight Meditation came to me, through sound. Instead, it was through sight and “Seeing” that it appeared. I believe that in the appropriate texts, this is often called. “Self-liberation Through Seeing with Naked Awareness.” I will try to unpack this phrase. And all this came to me through photography.

It is not enough to just say that in the process of my seeing as a subject an object through ever finer and more corrected camera lenses.., as this collapsed, leaving me without subject and object, but rather those two (subject and object) being enclosed together as one, meaning without a subject and object. I could say that and not be wrong.

The words of description of what I am presenting begin to elide together, concatenate, break down, or merge together as one. In that sense, everything was included, even the inclusion process itself and there is no way out, other than back to ordinary dualistic mind, which also cannot happen. Even that's not true, because non-duality also and especially includes duality, which no longer is a problem, because it is not attached to anything. Now, imagine this definition, but restricted to seeing and sight. That is liberation through Seeing.

I was out in the meadows and fields at dawn, crawling around on my belly or hands and knees, soaking wet from the morning dew on the grass, camera, tripod, and lens in hand, and holding still until the constant Michigan wind died down long enough to take a photo. Positioned immobile like that, peering through a near-perfect lens, my looking at the object, which was a perfect micro world, usually with a living critter of one kind or another in it.

I was seeing and being all that, dualistically, when, like stretching a piece of polymer plastic, pulling both ends until it suddenly elongates and becomes clear, I was no longer seeing an object, no longer a subject peering through a lens at an object, but rather, instead, I was seeing the whole seeing itself, Seeing. I fell into nonduality, down the rabbit hole, so to speak.

Like stretching that polymer chain, it was suddenly perfectly clear instead of cloudy. It had reconstituted itself such that it could not go back, and what was once cloudy was perfectly clear. The “I” that was me was no longer there and the “object” that was there was no longer there, yet they were there, but now embraced or enfolded together as one, non-dual. And in that clear state which, certain, yet timeless, was naked awareness, perhaps what is called in the texts “Self-liberation Through Seeing with Naked Awareness.”

I am reminded of a translation by John Myrdhin Reynolds of a terma text of Guru Rinpoche on Dzogchen, as rediscovered by the tertön Rigdzin Karma Lingpa called “The Profound Teaching of Self-Liberation in the Primordial State of the Peaceful and Wrathful Deities.” Which reads:

“With respect to these appearances, in the beginning they must arise somewhere, in between they must remain somewhere, and in the end they must go somewhere.”

“Yet, when you look into this matter, it is, for example, like a crow gazing into a well. When the crow flies away from the well, his reflection also departs from the well and does not return. In the same way, appearances arise from the mind; they arise from the mind and are liberated into the mind.”

Mar 7, 2021, 4:41 PM

UNABLE TO LIFT A FINGER

A good question is: what is it that we do once we have achieved Insight Meditation of the Mahamudra variety? Where do we go from here?

First, in my actual experience and from reading about Mahamudra Vipassana in the pith texts, most (almost everyone) of us are not “all at oncers,” meaning we are not just immediately enlightened upon achieving Insight Meditation. Insight Meditation is just a beginning and not the end of anything. A beginning of what?

I would say it is a beginning of more serious meditation, meditation fueled by what I call Absolute Bodhicitta, a relentless drive to share dharma with others. And by that, at least in my experience, Insight Meditation was a hole into or exit portal in Samsara through which Insight Meditation was possible for me. And by this I mean, more often than not, we may be limited in the way by which we can practice Insight Meditation. I, for one, was limited to doing close-up

photography, which is where I realized Insight Meditation in the first place.

What this meant for me, which I have explained endlessly, is that I was limited to, could only do Insight Meditation while doing close-up photography, using a camera and lens, out in nature. When I went back home after photographing in the woods, my mind was (or seemed) totally ordinary again. In other words, the window or portal into Insight Meditation for me was limited to my doing photography.

As you can imagine, I soon found I was doing a LOT of photography, because I loved Insight Meditation. To give you an inkling, I found myself out before dawn, crawling around with my camera, tripod, and lens on the wet grass, watching the sun come up, every day it was not pouring, from late May until the hard frosts drove me inside. That was about six months. Before that, I had not seen the sun come up more than a few times in decades, so something was getting me out there every day.

And so, I was thrilled to be doing Insight Meditation, but wanted to expand and extend this practice to areas of my life other than just doing photography. And I did not know much about what to expect or how to proceed from there. By reading and eventually talking with my dharma teacher and another lama who had done two 3-year retreats, I understood that

my limited experience was normal and that few to none get it all at once. What had to happen, so I understood, was that my “realization” or whatever we call it, had to be, and the terms are, “extended and expanded.” And the only person who could do that was me.

Well, it took me a while and it was no easy job. In fact, it could be likened to learning to walk all over again, and I am not exaggerating. It seemed that I was powerless to move even one inch toward extracting Insight Meditation from photography and extending it to something else I wanted to use it for, like writing blogs like these. It was as if I were totally paralyzed and could not lift even a finger. Hmmm.

Each day I would aspire to this, but each day I could not move a muscle toward accomplishing it. God knows I tried. And I tried, tried, tried. It took me about a year to a year and a quarter to manage it, and that includes working at it each and every day as hard as I was able. However, I did accomplish it and it was worth it. I pray that others are more facile at this than I was!

So, don't expect instant success or the ability to just will it so with your intellect and have it happen. As mentioned, I was totally paralyzed and unable to do even the least little thing for the longest time. It was indeed humbling, but it also was driven by my delight

with Insight Meditation and the sincere desire to, just as the texts say, expand and extend it to include more and more of my life. What starts as a drop of rain has to, over time, become a deluge of Insight Meditation. The operative words here are “over time.”

I gradually realized that this strenuous effort was normal and would last from here to eternity, eternity being enlightenment. This was just the very first step in a very, very long process, and I don't mean just expanding Insight Meditation from photography to writing. The takeaway is: be ready for a long haul, but it is possible. That's what I found out.

Mar 8, 2021, 2:08 PM

OUTSIDE OF TIME

Now, for something about what it is that I actually do to when practicing what I know as Insight Meditation. Of course, this will vary all over the place, but the general idea fits all of us.

After managing to extend and expand Insight Meditation from close-up nature photography to writing, I am no longer involved with “seeing” in the

sense of seeing visual images, although I am looking at a word-processing screen and distilling my thoughts to words. When I write, it is always about what I am interested in. Not sure I could write any other way, but probably I could. I just don't do that.

The key thought here is that in writing, I am trying to clarify whatever I am pulling out of the ether and bring it down to earth in words and phrases. It is something like pulling wool and making thread, only here "threads" are the threads of discerning thoughts woven into meaningful sentences, sentence that have at least the appearance of substance or meaning.

As I write, I am trying to understand, to better understand something that is often hard to verbalize and so I have this impression of cloudiness clearing and any confusion turning into certainty through the act of Insight Meditation. I do write articles that involve what I am describing here, but in writing as I am doing right here, all the threads of my thoughts have to come together, so to speak, woven into the rope of meaning, something that will tie down the thoughts and last at least long enough for someone else to read, if not for a while.

Something, anything, is either made well or not made well. Things made well last longer. That's why truth is the future, because it will last until then.

The Insight Meditation part of it is this very clear sense of clarity and certainty that resolves and determines what was confusing (or chaotic), fusing it into what, at least to my mind, is certainty. One of the hallmarks of Insight Meditation is, as I have mentioned, certainty, meaning there is no confusion, no second thoughts, criticism, etc. Whatever is resolved through Insight Meditation stands alone and is an isolate. It radiates like the sun.

Insight Meditation itself, at least in my experience, is timeless in the sense that I am undistracted, not distracted to the point of registering or pausing for time, but rather I'm immersed in the waters of the clarity that I am involved in. Through Insight Meditation, I'm realizing this certainty. I'm certain and I realize that, like an exclamation mark. Realization is an ongoing process and not a state or place we arrive at. There is no end in sight for realization, a process that just "IS."

And, another point, the process of Insight Realization, in my opinion (and experience) is healing by its very nature, as mentioned, a time-out from the rush of time in which to recover and rest. Insight Meditation is restful and heals.

I have never been addicted to drugs or used drugs that led to addiction, but Insight Meditation is addictive and for all the reasons mentioned above, especially

the time out from time itself, and the chance to heal within. We all need that time to heal. I am reminded of this poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins:

HEAVEN HAVEN

A nun takes the veil

I have desired to go

Where springs not fail,

To fields where flies no sharp and sided hail,

And a few lilies blow.

And I have asked to be

Where no storms come,

Where the green swell is in the havens dumb,

And out of the swing of the sea.

SEEING WITHOUT SHADOWS

No, I'm not in a blinding snowstorm. This illustration is just to illustrate a dharma point.

The 360-degrees are all the directions I know, aside from up and down. No matter where I look, no matter in what direction, I see nothing of immediate interest, nothing compelling me to go in that direction, no directionality known as The Bard might say. This has been coming on for some time.

It is interesting that there is nothing interesting. When I say "nothing interesting," I mean nothing especially interesting. We could also say that everything is equally interesting.

It's a bit like life in a snowstorm of white, increasingly with vanishing shadows to discriminate with, perhaps a sign that I must take another tack, another direction other than all those that are available to me, those 360 degrees. Or, perhaps, no tack at all is the right direction, just remaining where I am in the here and the now. Aside from when we die, do we eventually just come to rest naturally?

In what way does Insight Meditation depend upon samsara for fuel? If it is insight into the nature of...

well, of what? If it is insight into the nature of samsara, to realize samsara as nirvana, as the texts seem to say, then does that ever run out for an individual? Do we run out of using samsara as a touchstone to reflect its nature as being the nature of nirvana? What is the path of realization?

And does it wear thin or exhaust itself? Is that what something like “equal taste” is all about, the absence of anything outstanding enough to take precedent over anything else? In our lack of distraction, do we eventually close down to a standstill?

If what it looks like is that we can no longer find any threads of inspiration or clear direction, is that itself a direction? Is that being here and now is the only place to be and any effort or directionality is a distraction? These are things I wonder.

Insight into the nature of things, into the nature of a thought, a klesha, a you-name-it, etc. Do we finally get the idea and let our search or insight come to a rest? Is our search and searching over? Have we exhausted searching and found what we searched for, if only that is nothing? Is there an end to “search” and is it “finding?” Is it enough to find nothing?

Mar 11, 2021, 4:05 PM

THE DARK OF THE MOON

New Moon on Saturday March 13, 2021 at 5:21 AM EST

With almost 60 years of interest in astrology, I have studied not only western astrology, but Tibetan, Indian, Chinese and other forms of astrology. These various approaches to astrology can be very different, but there is one area they seem to agree on, the lunation cycle, the cycle of the phases of the Moon, especially the three days leading up to a New Moon.

These three days, which we are now in, were called the “Devil’s Days” in medieval times and in Tibet they are called the “Dharma Protector Days.” These are the dark days of the Moon, and they seem to sneak up on me each month, and I have to remember or be reminded by my wife Margaret that it is that time of the month again, a time not to push ahead or follow wild thoughts, but to gently work on and finish up whatever needs finishing.

These three days before the New Moon are not good for starting things, for turning over a new leaf, or setting off on some new adventure. Wait for and until after the New Moon to do that. Traditionally, these

three days are ones to finish up things you have already let go too long, or clean the basement, put things right, and all that. If nothing else, we can just quietly wait them out until the New Moon rolls around. They can be a bit of a rollercoaster ride.

As for right now, this month, for some reason these “three days before the New Moon” are particularly emotionally upsetting. I just woke up (minutes ago) from a full-scale nightmare, which I seldom have, just another sign or indicator that points to this particular New Moon of March 13, 2021 (and the turn-around involved with this New Moon) as unusually harsh emotionally, IMO.

Astrology is the study of astronomical cycles and what they mean, cultural astronomy, so to speak, anything that repeats itself, meaning anything that cycles, that returns again and again and again. In the dharma, that means any experience that is up, down, and around, repeatedly. And we ride with it, in it, or on it. We can surf cycles by realizing what they are, when they are happening, and how to work with these natural cyclic forces rather than be forever tossed and turned by them. Go with the flow, so to speak.

These are, traditionally speaking, more difficult days, what is called the “Dark of the Moon.” They are good for trimming down, setting things right, separating the wheat from the chaff, and coming up with a seed or

extract of ourselves that we can plant or renew at the New Moon.

The New Moon is like a little death each month, from which we are reborn. The anguish of that little death is something each of us must negotiate. It is also one of the two times (the other is the Full Moon) when our winds & channels, so the Tibetans say, come together and align. In Tibet, they used to (and still do) set aside New and Full Moon days, as “days of observation,” when it was suggested to observe our own mindstream and reflect. We can go through this with our eyes wide open, if we can wake up and remain aware.

Mar 12, 2021, 7:20 AM

REALIZATION IS NON-LINEAR

Dharma “Realization” is non-linear. What on earth does that mean? “Linear” means line, so “non-linear” means there is no line. Therefore, if we are hoping for heaven at the end of the line, through all our effort, we might have to think again. And there is good and bad news to this fact. The bad news would appear to

be that it may be best not to look for a reward, after awhile, at the end of the long line of our life.

The “good news” is that instead of a line, life is more like a convection-driven torus, with a coming together that may have the appearance of a line, but then expansion in all directions rather than a line and the whole process repeats itself. Thus realization may come at any point in our life experience. And, moreover, it is realization that drives the process.

Life is a learning “curve,” rather than a line and there is a point where we graduate from almost any kind of learning or training, a point where school is out and life looms large as experience for us to realize and not only study, observe, or contemplate. And, to repeat myself, dharma realization is non-linear, meaning realization of our experience can happen at any time and we go exponential. And that is because everything is cyclic or repeats itself.

Life is filled with cycles and plateaus. There is no such thing as a permanent plateau or static state that we arrive at and can take refuge in. Sure, we sometimes reach a point of pause, but never permanently, only momentarily or for a while. Then we move on.

The tricky part, IMO, is that we don't always move on in the linear direction we imagined we were on all this time, but instead, eventually there is change and almost always in a way we did not see or expect. That's the whole idea of chakras or levels that folks talk about, that we can't see what's ahead because realization (by definition) is not linear, but non-linear.

In other words, we don't end up where we thought or expected we would or were supposed to end up, like at the end of the line we anticipated, so to speak. There is no end to the line (any line), but rather always a new beginning and continuation. A circle or cycle has no end. Neither does a spiral. And the straighter the line, the finer the curve. We know the saying, "What goes around, comes around." This says the same thing. Life is cyclic and all cycles repeat themselves and only by coming around again do we know they exist.

If we can understand this, if we realize this, some adjustment has to be made to our imagined linear trajectory, where we think we are going, especially when we come to a crossroads or standstill. And the idea is simple:

The place (heaven, paradise, etc.) that we imagine that we are trying to get to, does not exist as other than right here and now. The only reality is that the path we are on itself becomes the goal rather than

some reward we imagined down at the end of the line, meaning:

The actual and realistic “goal” is not to get to some place (like Heaven,) but instead to travel our path better, to modify our way or manner of traveling. Our goal is not some future state or place, but the manner and way in which we live and travel right here and now. Our goal is to travel better.

The Zen Buddhist teachings perhaps demonstrate this most explicitly, and the whole emphasis of the more advanced realization practices in Vajrayana dharma do this as well, with the need to abandon all effort and, instead stop trying to get somewhere, and rest, as in: allow the mind to rest or just be as it already is. As if we could stop it.

[An image of a torus, where the linear component eventually goes non-linear, as in: exponential. It may help (or confuse you) to look at this diagram which shows a torus to help describe any cycle. Note the linear tube in the center, but also note that the end of that tube goes exponential and eventually wraps around and starts all over again. Every esotericist has some kind of crazy diagram to show you. Here is one of mine.]

REALIZATION IS NON-LINEAR

Dharma “Realization” is non-linear. What on earth does that mean? “Linear” means line, so “non-linear” means there is no line. Therefore, if we are hoping for heaven at the end of the line, through all our effort, we might have to think again. And there is good and bad news to this fact. The bad news would appear to be that it may be best not to look for a reward, after awhile, at the end of the long line of our life.

The “good news” is that instead of a line, life is more like a convection-driven torus, with a coming together that may have the appearance of a line, but then expansion in all directions rather than a line and the whole process repeats itself. Thus realization may come at any point in our life experience. And, moreover, it is realization that drives the process.

Life is a learning “curve,” rather than a line and there is a point where we graduate from almost any kind of learning or training, a point where school is out and life looms large as experience for us to realize and not only study, observe, or contemplate. And, to repeat myself, dharma realization is non-linear, meaning realization of our experience can happen at any time and we go exponential. And that is because everything is cyclic or repeats itself.

Life is filled with cycles and plateaus. There is no such thing as a permanent plateau or static state that we arrive at and can take refuge in. Sure, we sometimes reach a point of pause, but never permanently, only momentarily or for a while. Then we move on.

The tricky part, IMO, is that we don't always move on in the linear direction we imagined we were on all this time, but instead, eventually there is change and almost always in a way we did not see or expect. That's the whole idea of chakras or levels that folks talk about, that we can't see what's ahead because realization (by definition) is not linear, but non-linear.

In other words, we don't end up where we thought or expected we would or were supposed to end up, like at the end of the line we anticipated, so to speak. There is no end to the line (any line), but rather always a new beginning and continuation. A circle or cycle has no end. Neither does a spiral. And the straighter the line, the finer the curve. We know the saying, "What goes around, comes around." This says the same thing. Life is cyclic and all cycles repeat themselves and only by coming around again do we know they exist.

If we can understand this, if we realize this, some adjustment has to be made to our imagined linear trajectory, where we think we are going, especially

when we come to a crossroads or standstill. And the idea is simple:

The place (heaven, paradise, etc.) that we imagine that we are trying to get to, does not exist as other than right here and now. The only reality is that the path we are on itself becomes the goal rather than some reward we imagined down at the end of the line, meaning:

The actual and realistic “goal” is not to get to some place (like Heaven,) but instead to travel our path better, to modify our way or manner of traveling. Our goal is not some future state or place, but the manner and way in which we live and travel right here and now. Our goal is to travel better.

The Zen Buddhist teachings perhaps demonstrate this most explicitly, and the whole emphasis of the more advanced realization practices in Vajrayana dharma do this as well, with the need to abandon all effort and, instead stop trying to get somewhere, and rest, as in: allow the mind to rest or just be as it already is. As if we could stop it.

[An image of a torus, where the linear component eventually goes non-linear, as in: exponential. It may help (or confuse you) to look at this diagram which shows a torus to help describe any cycle. Note the

linear tube in the center, but also note that the end of that tube goes exponential and eventually wraps around and starts all over again. Every esotericist has some kind of crazy diagram to show you. Here is one of mine.]

SNAKES ON A BUS

[A little insight into my teenage years as a naturalist.]

I was raised in Ann Arbor Michigan and my being here unexpectedly now for some days finds me seeking out old haunts as one way to spend some time when I am not busy doing other things. One of them is the Alexander G. Ruthven Museums Building, which is part of the University of Michigan. I might as well tell some of that story, for those interested.

I can't remember when I first went to the museum, but I was young, for sure. My interest in nature started when I was just a kid, perhaps about six-years old, and that building played a significant part in my life, not only early-on, but it was even more important as I

grew up. In fact, it was in my late teens before the museum was not a primary focus for me, probably starting around the time that I discovered girls.

Walking yesterday (once again) through the four floors of exhibits, I was amazed at how little the museum had changed. At least three of the floors were almost exactly the same as when I was a kid. In fact, it was like they made a museum of the museum, perfectly preserving everything just as it was more than 60 years ago. This included the same dioramas with their faded poorly-stuffed animals and painted backgrounds. And there was the large fossil skeleton of an Allosaurus (shown here), a flesh-eating dinosaur, which as a smaller version of the later Tyrannosaurus Rex. As a kid, of course, standing in front of such a skeleton was amazing indeed. But there is more between that old museum and me.

There was a small zoo of Michigan animals located right behind the museum in a little round or octagon-shaped building. I would walk around the outside of that building admiring the live animals (bear, badger, raccoons, etc.) caged there. Over time I got to know the zoo keeper and before I knew it I was in that building and cleaning out the cages, helping to feed the critters, and happier than a pig in whatever. For a kid who loved nature, such an experience was like heaven.

As I grew up, I became more and more of a naturalist, with large collections of all the nature-things, rocks, minerals, insects, dried plants, seashells, and so on. And the live things were all over my house. I raised rabbits, skunks, squirrels, and so on. Over the years, my focus gradually settled on herpetology and my special interests, the study of reptiles and amphibians, with amphibians being my personal specialty, and among amphibians, it was salamanders that most captivated my interest. My house was filled with snakes, turtles, frogs, toads, and salamanders.

In my teenage years I became a voracious collector and gradually spent more and more time at the museum, not so much out in the exhibits, but back with the professors and grad students of herpetology. In fact, I became such a known entity to them that they made me a small office with a desk, etc. back in one of the ranges, where all the endless bottles of reptiles and amphibians were stored in pure alcohol. I guess I was a bit of a prodigy or something when it came to this study. I will mention here just two stories.

I spent one spring (1959) working with one of the grad students in the Edwin S. George Reserve out in Livingston County, not far from Ann Arbor. Together we picked six spring ponds, some of them quite large. We fenced off all of these six ponds with tiny screen fences, maybe 6-7 inches tall. It took a lot of work. We did this to stop the migrating salamanders trying to reach the ponds. Along the outside of the fences, we

sunk #10 cans into the ground so that the salamanders would reach the fences, and follow them, and then fall into the cans. Then we would collect the salamanders, many hundreds of them, measure them, and release them inside the fence. We did this late night after night. It was cold, wet, time-consuming work. I include some of my research notes, crude though they were.

Another project that I was co-author of was discovering a new way to gauge the age of salamanders. Previously to this work, salamanders were measured from stem to stern and then assigned an approximate age based on size. What I did was to stain the thin bones of the skull (the parasphenoid, for example), and then count the growth rings like we would count the rings on a tree. At least in temperate climates, this gave us an exact way of determining a salamander's age. That is the kind of stuff I did.

I also spent one summer collecting for the University of Michigan, traveling through Texas with a wonderful entomologist named Ted Cohn, who was researching a carnivorous genus of katydids called *Rhenia*. I was collecting specimens of reptiles and amphibians for the university. I worked so hard on it that I had heat stroke at a place called the Enchanted Rocks, where I was chasing lizards around all day in the hot sun, and so on.

I hesitate to tell the story of my two-day bus trip from Dallas to Ann Arbor in which I carried a large satchel of live specimens under my bus seat, including dangerous copperheads and rattlesnakes that I had collected. I remember one gentleman sitting next to me on the bus who I was talking about snakes with, and he was telling me how he was not afraid of poisonous snakes. I finally pointed out to him that he was resting his left foot on my satchel, in which was a large rattlesnake, and other deadly snakes. He about jumped out of his skin, drew back his foot, and changed seats. So much for his bravery.

And rat that he was, he told the bus driver and before I knew it I was off the bus and standing by the side of the road, satchel in hand, discussing this with the driver while people peered and gawked from the bus. After a long time, because I was so young (probably 17 years old), they let me back on the bus after making sure my snakes were securely locked up. There is no way the snakes could escape from the large satchel.

My mother was a saint to let me keep all of those critters, including the many snakes, some of which would escape around our house, and which she was terrified of. There are other stories that I will leave out for now about escaped snakes in the house. I do remember one dangerous event.

I lived in a room in our basement at 305 Wildwood Road on the west side of Ann Arbor. My dad had thrown together the room, and it was unfinished, mostly. It had walls and a door, plus one tiny basement window up high on the wall, through which water poured in every spring and fall. The water came in through flaws in the window casing, ran down the wall, flowed under my bed, across the room, and right out my door to a drain in the basement floor.

Well, I had all my snakes in the basement and in my room, including a good-sized diamondback rattlesnake. Well, one night, that rattlesnake got out of his cage and ended up on my bed, sitting on my pillow. I came home late and entered my room, which had like one light, which was all the way across my room from the door, next to my bed. I had to cross the room in darkness and feel around for the light in the dark to turn it on.

Well, this night I crossed the room and tried to feel in the dark for that light switch. For some reason, perhaps the tiniest of sounds, I sensed something was not right and pulled my hand back. At that same moment, the rattlesnake struck and, as I was withdrawing my hand, it could feel it brush past me, just barely missing me. Of course, I backed up, found a flashlight, turned on the light, and captured the rattlesnake. Perhaps it was around then that my mom put her foot down. Those snakes had to go.

Where else, could you come down basement stairs and find a snake hook leaning against the wall, which my mom used to protect herself when she came down to do the laundry. Some of my five-foot whip snakes were always getting out and having the run of the basement. My mom was a saint.

Anyway, you get the idea. I was deep into being a naturalist, and for me it was no idle pastime. So, walking through the university museums building yesterday was like going back in time for me. And the fact that the exhibits had never really changed put me in a bit of spell, all by itself. So, here I am, still in Ann Arbor working through some business and wandering in my past.

FIRST INSTRUCTIONS FROM RINPOCHE

It occurred to me early-on, shortly after meeting my main Tibetan dharma teacher (for the last 36 years) Khenpo Karthat Rinpoche, that the natural practice for Americans (and westerners in general) was a mind-training technique called Tong-Len. Perhaps even more essential than basic sitting meditation, Tong-Len, if presented properly, is instantly understandable to Americans. In fact, Tong-Len was the first practice that Rinpoche pointed out to Margaret and me on one

of the coldest days of the year, those Limbo days between Christmas and New Year. It was 1983.

We had first met Rinpoche in October of 1983 and were so moved by that meeting that we just had to see him again. Margaret and I, plus all our kids (three at the time), drove 800 miles across country (and back), from Michigan to the mountains above Woodstock New York, in a tiny dark-blue Toyota Tercel wagon. And we never even phoned ahead to say that we were coming. We just went. It was so cold that on the three-mile winding road up the mountain to the monastery where Rinpoche lived, that the heating system in the car was not able to keep the frost from forming on the windshield. I continually had to scrape a tiny window, only inches square, with a piece of cardboard just to see out. This was during that week between Christmas and New Year, when everything kind of shuts down. It was a long trip with small kids.

When we arrived high on the mountain, it was already night and, and we were in a 3rd Quarter Moon, it was dark and cloudy as I got out of the car and shepherded my wife and young family to the door. There was no outside light. My daughter May was only a year and a half old. We were all very tired as we knocked on the door of the old retreat house where Rinpoche was living and we hoped someone was there. A freezing wind was blowing all around us.

There was no monastery yet. However, a first pouring of the cement foundation had already taken place and high on the mountain where we were, the fierce wind whipped the plastic sheets covering it against the fresh concrete making an eerie sound. We could barely see the shadows of these great cement walls. At last, the door opened and a friendly woman named Norvie, who must have been wondering who we were arriving so late and unannounced, ushered us into a small waiting room. There we were, Margaret, me, and our three kids, 800 miles from home at night in a strange place.

Yes, she would see if Rinpoche could see us. And sure enough, in a little while, Rinpoche appeared smiling at all of us. His translator Ngodup Burkhar was with him, who later became one of our family's most loved friends. In that second any, doubts I had about making the trip vanished. I will spare you most of the details, but at the end of our interview, Rinpoche pointed out (through his translator) a chapter in a book called "The Torch of Certainty" by the great lama Jamgön Kongtrul Lodrö Thayé, sometimes just called "Jamgön Kongtrul the Great." It was about a technique I had never heard of called Tong-Len. Tong-Len is often translated as "Exchanging Yourself for Others," and sometimes as "Taking and Sending."

"Exchanging yourself for others." It rolls off the tongue pretty well and we might not even think to question

what is meant by the word "others." Of course, it refers to other people, or to put it more clearly people other than us. The implicit assumption is that of a duality between ourselves and all or some others. They are not us, and we are them, perhaps the archetypal dualism of me against the world, a world of others and otherness. And I am now getting to my point.

The classic Tong-Len technique involves breathing in and taking upon ourselves all of the pain and suffering in the world, often that of a particular person we hold in mind that is suffering, breathing it into ourselves and, in return, breathing out, sending back to them all of the well-being and goodness within ourselves, everything we can muster. And then we repeat this process, breathing in and out, until some kind of equilibrium takes place and whatever differences between the two are leveled out, at least for the moment.

When I first grasped what this technique was about, it horrified me. It was the exact opposite of what I had been taught by various spiritualists who showed me how to cleanse myself after doing a reading (I was an astrological reader at that time). These psychics and spiritualists showed me how to wash my hands and let the bad juju that might have passed into me from contact with another person go right down the drain. And I actually did this.

And here was this Tibetan lama that I so respected telling me everything opposite to what I understood. He was saying take it in, suck it up, all that bad stuff, and offer in return whatever goodness was within me. That was a 180-degree-turnaround, and it boggled my mind. For all I knew back then, it was black magic or voodoo. What did I really know about these Tibetans anyway?

When we left Rinpoche that night, after he blessed my family and me, we headed back down the mountain along with a copy of "The Torch of Certainty." We stayed in a tiny motel in Woodstock, NY, on this bitter, bitter winter night. The room had only a small infrared circular heater mounted in the wall. There we were, my small family, 800 miles from home, huddled together while outside the wind howled.

And it was there that Margaret and I first read about Tong-Len in that little book and wondered what would become of us. My trained response was to get out of there, protect my family, and head back home as soon as we could. Forget about all this Tibetan Buddhist stuff. It was literally just too foreign for me. On the other hand, here was this Rinpoche we had just met for the second time who was everything we had ever imagined a real teacher could be. And he was pointing this Tong-Len technique out to us from the get-go. It was a tough night, there, in that tiny hotel room with my entire family.

But with the dawn, and after the long ride home, Margaret and I decided to go with our gut feelings for this man. We would give this Tong-Len stuff a try. Count us in, and of course Tong-Len is an incredibly useful technique, despite my original doubts. And so that's my story and also at least a brief introduction to what Tong-Len is all about. Now I want to talk about another way to use Tong-Len that should interest some of you.

As mentioned "Exchange yourself for others" is one translation of Tong-Len. My interest here has to do with this word "others" and we can drop that "s" and just use the word "other" too. Tong-Len is all about duality, the difference between us and the rest of the world -- people, places, and things. It is about that thin skin that separates us from what we "think" is not us -- others and all that is other.

So, of course we can use this technique to take on the sufferings of others, to exchange ourselves for others, as the standard practice of Tong-Len suggests. But there is another "otherness" in our world that is just as dualistic, and even closer to home than doing Tong-Len with another person. And it is just as valuable as a dharma technique. There is a world of "other," all kinds of other just within our own skin, and a form of Tong-Len just for that. It is called Reactivity Tong-Len, or Reaction Toning. It is about learning to observe our own reactivity.

And once we learn to recognize and be aware of our own reactions, when a sense of “otherness” arises in our consciousness, we can do this form of Reactivity Tong-Len all day long, both on and off the cushion. It is perhaps the greatest karma eraser I have ever found and anyone can do it. Moreover, it easily allows us to accumulate vast amounts of practice while we carry on in our normal day. For those who find it hard to squeeze in enough time on the meditation cushion, this is a dharma gift.

I have described this form of Tong-Len in other blogs, calling it "Reaction Tong-Len," because we learn to become aware of our involuntary reactions and, instead of knee-jerk reacting, we learn to respond more naturally. This "otherness" we feel toward some people, including ourself, and this otherness we experience in a myriad of reactions throughout the day is perhaps the main karma accumulator for most of us. We are recording karma, digging deep tracks, every time we wince or react to something we don't like. Our ingrained biases, prejudices, likes and dislikes, guarantee that we are accumulating karma, well, much of the time.

It is not that difficult for us to begin to become aware of when we react. We walk around the corner and there we are, face-to-face with someone we don't like or who does not like us. We can't help but react, involuntarily. Every time we even think of this person, we are layering an ever-deeper groove that is nothing

but pure karma. And it is not just the wince or knee-jerk reaction that is a form of suffering. That deeply underscored groove we have created will in time have to come out and that will be even more painful. As the Tibetans say, that karma will ripen. And they also say that “Karma burns twice,” and by this they mean karma burns once while creating it and a second time when it ripens and we have to straighten it out. And we are doing this hundreds and probably thousands of times a day or even an hour. All of this micro-karma adds up.

Here's the thing. By becoming aware of our reactions, however minute, we can see that it is we who are reacting. These are “OUR” reactions, and no one else's. We learn to own them and at the same time begin to disarm and deconstruct them. Just like we built a karma groove by recording and re-recording a reaction, by underscoring it repeatedly, so with awareness of our reactions, we can cancel that groove by repeated awareness of the reaction and by not reacting, but instead responding in another, more appropriate, manner.

We may have to ride out the karma of our previous groove-making as it ripens, but we don't have to add to it and record still more karma. This reaction Tong-Len is a form of purification, where we manage to stop recording karma on that issue and it gradually drops off our karma radar-screen. Purification does not have to be a trial by fire, from which we arise

phoenix-like from the ashes. Purification is all about purifying, becoming pure. And pure feels good. As we neutralize our reactions by responding appropriately to situations instead of just reacting, our intent and life path gets purer and purer, with an increase in clarity and awareness. And that feels good.

And so, the recipe is to note a reaction as it arises, don't think about or dwell on it, but just note, own it, it and drop it. That all we have to do. The rest takes care of itself.

There are more details and a discussion of Tong-Len in the Book "Tong-Len: The Alchemy of Reactions" [here](http://spiritgrooves.net/e-Books.aspx#Dharma); just scroll down:

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

[Mar 14, 2021, 6:37 PM

T

THE ALCHEMY OF REACTIONS

I get asked a lot, what is the best and easiest way to ease into learning meditation, especially if we have a job and very little extra time. With that in mind, here is

what I consider the simplest and also the most productive i approach to meditation that I know of. And here is how and where I learned it. One of the most famous notions of Buddhism is what are called the Four Noble Truths. Here they are, all spelled out for you.

THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

- (1) The Truth of Suffering
- (2) The Truth of the Cause of Suffering
- (3) The Truth of the End of Suffering.
- (4) The Truth of the Path that Leads to the End of Suffering.

The technique presented here I came up with after being prompted by the dharma teacher Daniel P. Brown, a psychologist (and Buddhist scholar) on the faculty of the Harvard Medical School, who suggested that in the Four Noble Truths, the word “Suffering” might better be translated (make more sense) as “Reactivity,” thus the First Noble Truth, which is “The Truth of Suffering” might better be translated as the “The Truth of Reactivity, and so on, like this:

THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS

- (1) The Truth of Reactivity
- (2) The Truth of the Cause of Reactivity
- (3) The Truth of the End of Reactivity
- (4) The Truth of the Path that Leads to the End of Reactivity.

This kind of "getting it all at once" has seldom to never happened to me before, but the moment I heard those words, a light went on in my mind. It explained almost everything about my own behavior in a flash. I took it to heart before I even knew I had. For me, that is unusual.

After that insight, I spent some years practicing with my own reactions, which to my amazement were constant and innumerable. And eventually I asked my dharma teacher of several decades (Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche) about this for his comments and he said publicly that this was a sound idea, a valid technique. I was glad to hear it, since by that time I was deep into it, so I will be a little more forward about sharing it. Some have expressed wanting to know how this technique works, so here it is for those who are interested. First, a little background, please.

Tong-len was the first Tibetan Buddhist mind-training practice that I instinctively understood and warmed to. It was easy to do and I could do it anytime and anywhere; it was portable. And it also was the very

first instruction my dharma Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche suggested that Margaret and I do. I was asking him could I start Ngondro (a dharma boot camp) and he gently said no, but he suggested that we do Tong-Len.

Tong-Len is sometimes called, “exchanging yourself for others” or “sending and receiving,” because it involves our absorbing, breathing in, and invoking all of the suffering in the world (or in some other person), and then breathing out or sending from within us to an other(s) all the goodness, kindness, joy, and well being we can muster. We take in their suffering, we send back our joy. On first encounter, this practice scared the bejesus out of me, because I had been told by psychics never to take on ourselves the misery of others, and all of that.

Anyway, as scary as Tong-Len was at first, it somehow seemed intuitively American. I just got it. Perhaps everyone does. If there is a vaccine that is the antidote for an inflated ego, this is it. And like the perfect diet, you can eat all you want and still lose the weight of your attachments. The technique I will share with you here is a variant of Tong-Len, with a twist to the effect that instead of taking on the suffering of other people, we first start with removing our own, the constant suffering of our own endless reactions.

Instead of denying the self as so many techniques tend to do, Tong-len's genius is just the opposite. It gradually identifies more and more territory as our friend (part of ourself) until the Self implodes by inclusion instead of denial. It's like blowing up a balloon until it bursts of its own accord. In other words, tong-len uses the self's natural tendency to become attached to defeat itself. It is a miracle cure for the egocentric.

Here is an introduction to what in my opinion is the easiest to learn meditation method, called "Reaction Tong-Len" or "Reaction Toning."

THE KINDS OF MEDITATION

The kind of meditation practiced by Zen and Tibetan Buddhists is what is called "awareness" meditation, learning to allow the mind to come to rest in awareness -- becoming more aware. But here in America, we basically have the one word "meditation" to cover hundreds of existing mind-training techniques, and many of them are not awareness-oriented.

Meditation methods can be divided into what we might call uppers and downers. Downers relax us and uppers make us tighten up; Both make us more aware. The Buddha's teachings actually combines the

two such that we learn to relax or rest in awareness. Buddhist methods are all about awareness, being mindful and becoming more aware -- waking up.

As example of other kinds of meditation, there are "absorption" meditations, where we go inside or are guided in one way or another – eyes closed. Awareness meditation is typically done with eyes open. And there are literally hundreds of meditation types that are basically relaxation therapies of one form or another. You get the idea that there are different practices under the name of meditation.

In fact, meditation for many people simply means learning to relax. There is a somewhat subtle difference between this and the methods Buddha taught, which was to learn to relax "as it is," so to speak. However, the Buddha taught to allow the mind to relax and rest in awareness, not in relaxation itself. In other words, rest "as it is" means to rest in the awareness that always is, as in the awareness it takes to read this page. Rest in this awareness that it takes right now to read this sentence, rather than the content (what it means) of this sentence. Think about that. If you don't know how or if you are currently meditating but not getting the results you hoped for, you can easily learn this technique. That is the idea.

MEDITATION HURDLES

One of the potential problems with learning meditation is that it takes time and practice. Few people have enough time and fewer yet like to practice. A chief hurdle for many folks is finding enough time in a day to practice dharma, as in “I’m going to do my practice.”

Meditation, like any technique, has to be practiced until it becomes almost second nature. For most, this involves setting aside some time each day (or every day or so) to practice and learn meditation, which “practice” is not the same as actually meditating, any more than practicing to play a guitar is playing music, at least at the beginning.

For those of us with busy schedules, often the first thing to get scratched from our daily "to do" list is our meditation practice. Practice of any kind takes effort and spiritual practice has the additional problem that we really have no idea (yet) of what the results or outcome of the training is or will be. We are doing this on spec, and this can be discouraging.

These and other obstacles often lead to would-be meditation practitioners giving up and abandoning their efforts to learn to meditate. This is a generalization, but occasional practicing of meditation every day or so for a short time is a difficult way to reach the critical mass necessary for meditation to become spontaneous habit.

I am not suggesting practicing for a long time each day unless that is joyful to you. Instead, the great mahasiddhas suggest that we practice many short times. What is even more needed is some way to apply the meditation technique, not just for one-half hour every day or so, but all the time in whatever we have to do. IMO, that is the ticket, and here is an easy way to do just that.

PRACTICE PLACES

Typically, learning meditation technique, what is called "practicing," takes place in a quiet area, often a little cushion off in a corner of a secluded room, and so on. That is where the technique is learned until we are fluent and we can stop "practicing" meditation and instead actually begin to just meditate. It is like those little training wheels we had on our bike as a kid.

Practicing in a special room, on a cushion, when we can get to it for some bit of time each day (or every day or so) is something, but it is much like going to church on Sunday for an hour and expecting to get into heaven. Of course, every little bit helps, but given all the variables that can intervene, the amount of practice that accumulates may not amount to enough to reach the critical mass needed to become passionate about meditating.

Daily practice is fine, but too often there are several variables that can intervene and short-circuit our efforts. These include not keeping to our schedule. Often what happens on a busy day is that the first thing that gets cut from my schedule is my meditation practice. Runner-up is that we just don't feel like it that day and are sure that "tomorrow" will be a better time to practice, or we don't feel like we know what we are doing or we are not getting any results, etc. The list goes on. In other words, other methods are needed.

Enter "Reaction Toning," a simple technique that can be done all day long during whatever our normal schedule requires and one that accumulates serious amounts of dharma practice at no extra expense in time or concentration. And it is easy to do.

KARMA

The whole idea of "karma" very much relates to meditation practice and I will explain why, and karma is simple to understand. Our every action has a result. This is simple physics. And we have all heard about "good" and "bad" karma, at least from our point of view. The good karma produces results that we like, while the bad karma makes life more difficult for us. It is more complicated than that, but perhaps another time we could discuss.

And there is a popular misconception about karma to the effect that karma mainly relates to the kinds of "sins" listed out in the Ten Commandments, like "Do not kill," "Do not steal," and so on. Of course, those kinds of actions are "bad" karma, but there is a much greater source of difficult karma, in particular since most of us are not killing and stealing anyway. I call it micro-karma.

MICRO-KARMA

As mentioned, it is not just the big karma-forming actions (killing, stealing, etc.) that we should watch out for, but rather the myriad of small actions that we habitually do that create the bulk of our "bad" karma and which most folks have no idea they are accumulating. As mentioned, I call this our micro-karma.

The Tibetan Buddhists differentiate between skillful actions (which they call Skillful-Means) and un-skillful actions, those whose result impair or further obscure our minds. When we think of skillful means, we think of intentional actions, but the vast bulk of the "bad" karma we accumulate is "unintentional," only in that we are not aware of it, but it too has intent. Ignorance of natural law is no excuse for bad intentions. We don't break nature's laws, they break us.

Chief among our "unintentional" karma are the reactions we have to almost everything all day long. And by "reactions" I mean our knee-jerk reactions, those we apparently cannot control, mostly because we are not always even consciously aware of them. Keep in mind that the name "Buddha" means awakened, the one who is aware and awake. Buddhism is the method (and its practice) of becoming more aware, of waking up.

We react all day long, but are not aware that we are doing so. When we become aware of our reactions, we can learn to respond appropriately to them instead of just reacting involuntarily. Thus, I am distinguishing here between our uncontrollable "reactions" and appropriate responses. And by "reactions" I am not talking about the kind of reaction we have when we place our hand on a hot stove.

Instead, I am speaking here of the myriad of reactions we have, based on our personal likes and dislikes, our prejudice, bias, antipathy, aversion, repugnance, enmity, etc. that we have built up over the years, mostly thanks to our Self.

THE SELF

I am not going to go deeply into the concept of the Self. I have a whole book on it for those who are interested. Instead, here I just want to sketch out how our self can affect the accumulation of karma by its many attachments, particularly what it does not like. In brief, the Self is a montage of our likes and dislikes that we draw around us like a coat of many colors, only here it is a persona of many attachments, positive and negative. I always say that our attachments are the glue that holds the Self together. The Self does its best to pull everything it likes closer and to keep away (at arm's length) everything it does not like or does not identify with. We all know this.

Anyway, the Self reacts to all that it does not like and those reactions are recorded like any other event in our mindstream. The problem is that these reactions are so constant and often so intense that they amount to an almost constant accumulation of karma all day long and even in our dreams at night. And the amazing thing is that we are not even aware that this is taking place, so successfully do we ignore it.

The controversial poet and New-Age harbinger Aleister Crowley penned the phrase "To snatch at a gnat, and swallow a camel." This is effectively what we do with the torrent of reactions we record as karma each day. We are unaware of it all and yet it probably is the single greatest cause of "bad" karma that we consistently have.

As they say, "Karma burns twice," first when it occurs and adds to our obscurations and second when somewhere down the line, it ripens, and its imprint has to be removed, expunged.

Luckily there is an easy way for us to address this problem and greatly reduce the amount of micro-karma we record and this is "Reaction Toning," also called "Reaction Tong-Len."

REACTION TONING

Reaction Toning is a complete dharma practice, one that can be done (and is best done) off-the-cushion. Best of all, it does not interfere or add extra time to our busy schedule and day. Personally, I do this all day long. And it amounts to a lot of practice getting done, something very few people achieve since they do not have the time. It's Dharma-on-the-Go, so to speak.

And Reaction Toning is easy to learn, something we can do "on the hoof" so to speak. All that is needed is to begin to be aware of our reactions, and there is no lack of opportunity since we react, literally, all day long. What reactions are we referring to? Literally all of them. For example:

The not-so-friendly office worker that suddenly comes round the corner and confronts us with their presence, face-to-face. We may try to control our reaction, but just note it. Note the wince and the avoidance we can feel. What is that?

"That" is nothing more than our reaction, regardless of the cause. The cause may be our instinctual dislike for someone who has offended us (or they to us), but whether they did something to us on purpose or not is not important. We can't control the outer world, but we can recognize our reaction to it and begin to tone that down. As one of my favorite songwriters Seth Bernard penned, "Make friends with the weather." This does not mean we are unmoved by it, but it is very possible to transform knee-jerk reactions into appropriate responses that do not record karma. Think on that statement.

To do this requires that we first note the reaction when it occurs and then recognize the reaction as purely our own. We have to own it. Someone else may be causing it, but how we react is totally up to us. So, after recognizing we have reacted, we then own it as ours and acknowledge to ourselves that we alone are reacting. This is our reaction. We own it and because of that we can change and modify it. Once we have owned the reaction, that by itself may be enough for it to begin toning down. What we don't do it is note the reaction and then go off and think about

it, why, where, when, etc. We just note it, own it (that we reacted), and drop it.

Eventually we learn to spot it every time it arises until it no longer arises. Instead, we begin to respond to whatever input we receive in an appropriate way, whatever that may be for us. Or we may even do a little traditional Tong-len with it, taking in the worst from outside (from that other person or condition) and sending back out the best in us we can offer, but that is more elaborate than we need. Before we can work with others, we have to have a workable Self.

I find that merely recognizing and owning my reactions is usually enough right there to begin toning them down and de-emphasizing a particular reaction. The more often we do it, the less emphatic (or traumatic) it becomes. We make friends with it.

IMPRINT OR GROOVE

Our every negative reaction, let's say to a person we don't like, deepens the groove or trace in our mindstream connected to them. In other words, repeatedly reacting to someone (or something) negatively etches an ever-deeper groove in the mind that not only further obscures our mind, but also that someday will have to be removed if we want a clear

mind. Think how long and how often these reactions occur. It is scary.

Multiply this by the thousands of reactions we have each day and you get the picture, a torrent of micro-karma that steadily accumulates to our disadvantage. And this micro-karma is not reserved just for people we react negatively to. Our reactions descend to even finer reactions. For example, we don't like that person's nose, scar, scarf, color, or hat. Those too are faithfully recorded in our mindstream. "No reaction is too small" might be the motto here.

In other words, our daily reactions amount to thousands of tiny razor cuts, moments when we automatically wince, that record themselves as karma in our mindstream.

And the amazing thing is that with just a little work we can tone down and eventually remove those reactions and stop recording so much karma. And the byproduct of that is that our mind gradually clears up and we become increasingly more aware. In other words, this is a method to remove the effects of our "bad" karma and to stop recording it. And that is something to consider.

Another plus is that this technique is not rocket science. Anyone can do it and getting started is as

easy as your next negative reaction, which probably will be coming along any second. And unlike many forms of meditation training, we can see and experience our progress with Reaction Tong-len right away, on the spot. It is a get-paid-as-you-go practice. As we come to terms with each reaction, we can allow the mind to just rest in the space or gap that appears as we own our reactions and they lessen in strength. We embrace them as opportunities.

And since the process is pretty much instantaneous, we are not losing any time. In fact, we gain time because we are not embroiled in all the wincing, bobbing & weaving, and dodging that we usually do when we react negatively to something. We accumulate time and awareness as we go along.

As to how this method differs from its big brother standard Tong-Len, Reaction Tong-len is all about the Self and does not involve others as so many dharma practices do. The Buddhists are very clear that until we enlighten ourselves, we cannot enlighten others. Reaction Toning is like that old kid's game of Pick-Up-Sticks, gradually removing our own obscurations, one-by-one. And what is being removed through Reaction Toning is just that which separates us from others, all of the harsh criticism, bias, prejudice, etc., which is mostly directed at other people. So, Reaction Toning is about removing the "other" in our own self, which translates to an ever more inclusive embrace of everything "else" -- the end of dualism.

Mar 15, 2021, 7:01 PM

MEASURING DHARMA PRACTICE

When it comes to dharma practice, what does it mean to be getting anywhere, other than here and now? Advanced dharma for whom? If it is for me, then it has to be pretty simple. I continue to make my way across the web of the mind, as best I can. I don't know how deep the water is or how far I have swum, or how far I have yet to go. What does it matter at this point? I am immersed and swimming. That much I know. Trying to get a witness to where we are at, when we don't even ourselves know where we are at, is difficult, if it is even possible.

I do my best to describe or define the landscape or territory I am in or passing through and compare that to what I find in the dharma texts, but that often doesn't help, at least until I have no need of it anymore. By then, down the line, I may recognize that my experience lines up or seems like this or that textbook description. Mostly, it does not.

Only way late in the game, so to speak, do I sometimes realize, “Oh, that’s what they are talking about and trying to describe.” However, almost always, that textbook experience, as seen through my personal filter and what I experience are too far apart for a direct match. Yes, I get it, but only later, when I no longer need it. As for using the textbook dharma experiences as a guide, forget about it. I am better describing for myself where I am at and figuring out its utility, than I am following a map or guide.

Sure, big segues, leaping across a large gap, which I can see is a real event, but even that, those big events, take time to describe and make sense out of. Trying to match my experience with the textbook descriptions is almost ludicrous. It could well be that the individual yidam (or whatever you wish to call it) is so unique to each of us that matching what comes through our filter with what the books say is not very helpful. I have seldom found it so.

And so, progress or evolution in dharma practice is quite an exciting thing, just figuring out where one is at. I write out my experience and when discussing that experience with another dharma student, one with real training, they point to a chapter in a book and sure, what is in that book is vaguely what I am experiencing, but at like a distance of 300 miles or so from identification.

And, as you might expect, the textbook description is worded in “now do this” and “now do that” framework, when my view is more, “I am seeing this” or “It is like that,” sort of thing. Matching them up takes, well, some imagination. It’s something like trying to put a square plug in a round hole. They don’t easily fit, yet given enough thought, they kind of can be made to fit. Again, I find it remarkable that this is so difficult. It is certainly not cookie-cutter-like, where I can immediately identify my dharma experience with the textbook description. There seems to be little choice.

Mar 17, 2021, 2:02 AM

THE WHITEOUT

I like the term “Vivid Awareness” to describe what I call Insight Meditation, and that came out, not only from the book of the same name by Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche, but from the teachings of Khenpo Gangshar as taught to me by both Thrangu Rinpoche and my own root guru Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche, plus I transcribed three quite extensive teachings on Khenpo Gangshar by Khenpo Karthar Rinpoche.

And “vivid” it is, and I have practiced this kind of Insight Meditation for over 13 years quite consistently. However, it seems that the more I universalize my

use of Insight Meditation, the more “everything” is more vivid, yet by the same token, the less startling or unique it is. Why? Because if “everything” is unique and new, then after a while, it is no longer unique or new. That’s why. It becomes an everyday rarity, so to speak.

And that effect, the equalization of vivid awareness, has certain obvious consequences, which I would like to talk about. We yearn for this kind of vivid “seeing,” but what happens when we have it more and more of the time, until it loses its startling sense of contrast with ordinary thinking?. It seems that, as Insight Meditation universalizes, Insight Meditation loses none of its certainty, but it does lose, as mentioned, some contrast and the duality that comes along with that.

And as that contrast diminishes, and each occurrence becomes less unique, our sense of preference evolves into “no particular preference,” and this ushers us into a realm of a changeless lack of preference. If we have no preferences, then we could say that everything is of equal preference. And this is indicative, but of what?

Well, certainly it is a distant cousin from what in dharma is call “one taste,” not that I know exactly what that is. If all sides or directions are equal, then any direction is beyond preference. And a corollary to

that might be that a lack of preference in any direction highlights where we currently are in the here and the now. That's the idea. As Chuck Berry put it, "No particular place to go," which points to right here and now.

This lack of preference as far as directionality is concerned can be confusing, at least at first. If there is nowhere we feel like going, where do we go from there? Perhaps we don't. That's what I mean by a true change of direction, an entire shift in level rather than just some further other direction. What does that mean?

It means not living by contrast (duality) alone, by comparing, which is inherently dualistic. How do we discriminate without contrast, without discriminating? Insight Meditation, which is a form of nondualism, even includes dualism within its embrace.

Mar 18, 2021, 3:24 AM

GONE WITHOUT GOING

Meaning that it is already gone; better yet, it never existed. Or, as the old blues line says "You can't lose

what you never had.” What are we talking about here?

This need of ours to exist in some permanent way. It's a nice idea, but it doesn't seem to fit the facts, and it leads to endless attempts at reification. What we call our Self is, to my understanding, non-existent. By that I don't mean that there is no assemblage, something going on there, but if you examine the Self, it is just an assemblage of all our attachments (likes and dislikes), and these attachments are just the glue that holds the Self together. And there is no blame here, yet it obscures.

In the logic of dharma, what we call “Being” has never actually been. Yes, our being appears to be becoming, but it never has arrived. It's like a hologram, in that it is not real or permanent. That angst or sense of “not being,” of not actually being, no matter how much we wish it, eats at us, but is never fulfilled. We are empty of permanent being and always have been.

And by being, I mean permanent being, the kind that cannot be denied, and which would move from lifetime to lifetime, and around which we could gather an eternal Self that persists. Some religions say that we as a person exist, but the dharma does not say that. As mentioned, the best the dharma can say is that our being is becoming, an appearance, but has

never been or existed, and neither does this patchwork quilt of a Self hold together (for very long) that we struggle to put a good face on.

Mar 19, 2021, 4:46 PM

TAKING NOTE

“Taking Note,” and not “Note Taking.” Something that is very important in dharma practice and in the evolution of our dharma progress is “taking note” as to what is going on around us. I don’t tend to expect anything as far as results from the observing; perhaps I used to. Instead, I do tend to document or “barely note” what is happening or has happened, as best I can. This idea of “taking note” or noting is not just incidental or a sidebar. Rather, it is the dharma path itself speaking directly to us, as far as I can tell.

It is important to recognize and realize that it is exactly enough just to take note as we go along, rather than to take note and then dwell on something, i.e., think about it or follow out what thoughts that “note” might bring forth. Instead, just take note and drop it.

In fact, just taking note and then dropping it in itself, IMO, is magical in that is all that is required. Take note, note it, and move on, without a second thought or anything more than a moment's notice. Perhaps the word "note" is not the best term, since I don't take note and record anything. There is nothing to record. Barely witnessing is enough, a simple glance; the rest takes care of itself, which is the point here.

This is especially true of noting my reactions. I just note that I have reacted, recognize and own that this is my reaction, and then allow life to continue on, without a pause on my part to do anything more whatsoever. That simple exposure, like exposing a film negative to light continues to develop on its own and registers perfectly, if let alone; and over time, the notes are like a string of flashbulbs in the dark. The rest seems automatic, the development part. Take note, own it, and the development will take care of itself.

Mar 20, 2021, 4:33 AM

THE VALUE OF DUALITY

Trying to express Mahamudra or Dzogchen, the ineffable, in words is not just a hopeless gesture, but a long tradition as well.

It's a way of using the contrast between the effable and the ineffable to light the way, at least until the dying or diminishing of that light of contrast through increased familiarity wipes speech and words from our mind and leaves us mute with one-taste. It seems that kind of exhaustion through familiarity is required for our eyes to open.

IMO, so much turns on the interval of comparison, rolling the effable and ineffable back and forth, again and again, like a piece of grit between our fingertips, revealing the difference which, while perhaps not directly realization itself, nevertheless directs and holds our attention, keeping us on point, until the last glimmer of hope for any difference vanishes and one-taste is established. As mentioned, that kind of exhaustion is priceless.

Nonduality contains duality within its embrace and savors it. Thus, this contrast between duality and nonduality is our only means of awakening to the advanced practices and its diminishing difference is certainly not worth worrying. Instead, it is a blessing.

Duality, which seems the greatest of divides, eventually collapses, and is realized as also essential, the only natural means to further our enlightenment. We use and need it.

Mar 20, 2021, 11:38 PM

GETTING COMFORTABLE WITH DHARMA PRACTICE

Remove the obstructions, like the old game of Pick-Up-Sticks, where each stick is removed until there is nothing. And it is easy to fall into thinking that what has to be removed is just the unessential. However, often what is unessential does not seem unessential to us. Our attachments, at least at first, certainly don't appear as unessential. Nevertheless, they will be removed, one way or another, sooner or later.

And this includes something as sacred as the impediments to dharma practice itself. All we have to do is carefully look at whatever we call our day-to-day dharma practice. And within that, observe where there is resistance that itself is a blockage of one kind or another. Simply put, do we actually like doing our daily practice?

Free that up is what is required, if only so that it can settle once again into a more comfortable grip or

manner. Find the sticking spots in practice and smooth them out. We don't want to throw the baby out with the bathwater, but we also don't need the bathwater. So, extracting the one and not the other is the idea.

The history as to how each one of us ended up with our particular form of dharma practice can be looked at to see what we don't like. And by "don't like," I mean resistance, blockage, anywhere we find ourselves resisting or pushing to the point that we are losing energy. Forcing ourselves to practice when we don't want to would be a good example. A lot of people do that and feel it is fine to force ourselves, but the aerodynamics are lousy.

How do we know whether a point of resistance is something we just have to push through because we are lazy or whatever? Fortunately and unfortunately, that is something that each of us has to figure out all by ourselves. For myself, my rule-of-thumb is that if I find myself gritting my teeth and persevering regardless of how I feel, that is worth investigating. I try to keep in mind that my natural inclination is to move toward realization, if left to my own devices.

However, often my own devices are somewhat of a patchwork quilt, something that I have cobbled together or more likely just ended up with, from doing the best I can. Dharma practice is not something that

we resist doing, but just the opposite. Our dharma path has to be an avenue we can travel happily. If it is not, don't cling to an unhappy practice, but relax, let go, and see if we can find a more comfortable grip on the way we practice. It often is as simple as that.

And don't fear losing interest. You can't lose what you never had is an old saying. If you don't have a "happy" practice, reshuffle the deck until you do. You may not know what is good for you, but you do know how it feels from moment to moment. Arrange those moments differently. Back off and reengage until you find a comfortable grip on your dharma practice. Don't be afraid to experiment.

Mar 23, 2021, 3:59 AM

TAKING THE PLUNGE: INSIGHT MEDITATION

[I am kind of wandering off the reservation of providing short, perhaps entertaining, articles; actually, I wandered some years ago. I understand that few are interested in these long pieces, just as I am not interested in writing articles that don't interest me. Perhaps one or two of you will enjoy this long piece.]

I have been trying to express the following clearly, for years. This attempt won't be succinct; however, I hope it is clear enough to be understood. I will be looking at two separate practices that are often bundled together for reasons I will point out. They are:

(1) The Pointing-Out Instructions as to the Nature of the Mind so that that nature is recognized.

And ...

(2) Insight Meditation (Vipassana) as taught in the Kagyu Mahamudra Training.

In learning beginning meditation here in the West, most often two types of meditation are described, Tranquility Meditation (Shamata) and Insight Meditation (Vipassana). Eventually, both forms are necessary to know, but there is a great divide between these two forms of meditation and how they are learned, a difference that I feel is important to clearly understand.

While Tranquility Meditation (Shamata) is pretty standard across a wide range of spiritual disciplines, not just Buddhism, Insight Meditation varies dramatically in what it is comprised of, the way it is

taught, and how it is used. In this article, I am talking about Insight Meditation as it is taught with Kagyu Mahamudra practice.

And a big difference is that in Mahamudra training, Insight Meditation generally follows after and is a byproduct of the critical dharma event that is called “Recognition,” being the recognition of the true nature of the mind (familiarity with how the mind works), as pointed out through what are called the “Pointing-Out Instructions” by a qualified guru to their student, such that the student recognizes the mind’s nature to the satisfaction of the guru. It is only then that Insight Meditation of the kind discussed here is enabled and possible. No matter where you are at in dharma practice, it can be useful to hear about this more advanced practice anyway.

Insight Meditation is said to be an “analytical meditation technique,” or so the dharma textbooks often say, but do read farther than just that thought. IMO, the word “analytical” here is misleading as to what Insight Meditation actually is all about. And Insight Meditation (Vipassana), at least the kind taught by the Kagyu as part of Mahamudra training, is not something we just go and learn, like sitting practice and Tranquility Meditation (Shamata). As mentioned, in my experience, Insight Meditation is the natural result (or the byproduct) of an event called “Recognition,” again, that being recognition of the true

nature of the mind as pointed out by an authentic master to the student.

Perhaps we need a term other than “analytical,” yet I’m not sure what that would be. The meaning of the word I’m looking for is “Certainty,” so we could say that Insight Meditation is a technique for “Certainty.” And I say this because people fall into thinking otherwise, based on hearing the word “analytical” connected to Insight Meditation, which to most folks means “conceptual” (as in dualistic), while actual Insight Meditation is 180-degrees different from that. There is an explanation for this.

And so, in what way is Insight Meditation “analytical?” Well, aside from the fact that I don’t believe it is, what are these folks trying to say by calling it “analytical?” Here is what I believe is the answer.

What I would call “analytical questions” are part of the introduction to what are called the “Pointing-Out Instructions” as to the true nature of the mind, which questions themselves are preliminary to the event called “Recognition,” the recognition on the part of the student of the true nature of the mind. And these involve such questions asked you by your teacher as:

Is the mind located here or where?

Does it have a color or a particular shape?

Is the mind that is still the same mind that is moves?
... and so on.

My teacher taught this as “The Analytical Meditation of a Pandita.” In fact, when Rinpoche taught this to us, he warned that he would ask us a question and we were to go off, after that day’s teaching, and examine that question the rest of the day, also that night, and until the next day’s teaching began, at which time (Rinpoche warned us) that he would ask some of us to come up to the front and be examined by him personally as to our what we found. To give an example, one of those questions was simply:

QUESTION: Is the mind the color “Red.”

And Rinpoche did just that. There was a bit of fear and trembling on our part to be put under examination by Rinpoche. And Rinpoche went on to say that in Tibet, they did this same kind of examination, except there was much more time set aside for the student to consider it, like three days and nights for each question. And when you came back after three days, the rinpoche would then ask you to report what your had found, and them would ask something like: “Is the mind the color “Blue,” and this would go on like that, color after color, day after day, and so on. And in Tibet this kind of examination would go on for three months straight, so this was not just an idle waste of

time. And these were some of the best and brightest monks. What are we to think this is all about?

I can tell you how I thought at the time, which reveals some of my own ignorance. I did not need to spend all day and the night thinking about such a simple question. Instead, I just thought that the mind is not the color “Red “or any other color. And this was my answer and what I said to Rinpoche the next day: the mind has no color.

Unfortunately, but not unusual, I had missed the entire point and learned about nothing from the exercise. And it took me a while to wake up to the fact that what I did was not what Rinpoche had asked us to do. He didn’t ask us to think it conceptually, off the top of our head. What he had asked us was to spend that time, almost 24 hours, searching our mind, high and low, to determine for ourselves if the mind was the color “red.” I thought I was saving time, but actually I was missing the boat entirely.

It was not “thinking” that Rinpoche had asked us to do, but rather to exhaustively search in our mind to find out for ourselves the answer to his question. After what was too long, IMO, I did figure out what it was that Rinpoche asked, and why. The “why” of it was for us to become familiar with our mind by actually spending time in there searching it, as he had

requested. And I finally started doing that, which made all the difference.

What Rinpoche asked was more like physical exercise, stretching my mental muscles more than I ever had. I actually strained and flexed these mind muscles until they ached. The first metaphor that came to my mind back then, was that this was like going into our mind and erecting, or setting up a large circus tent. I had experienced large tents many times as a kid when the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus came to town, with a train literally a mile long, and scores of elephants that paraded from the train station to the local fairgrounds. I had watched the many elephants, with their harnesses, pulling the huge tent pulls into place, but I digress.

Anyway, in the mind, stretching my mental muscles through searching was like erecting a vast tent in the mind, putting up the poles, and pushing and pulling to force the mind to stretch and expand in response. My point is that it takes this kind of pulling and stretching the mind to exhaust our searching, the need to search, and make the mind pliable after never having been exercised. We need to get to know and become familiar with our own mind as something other than a thinking cap, a mental machine. That kind of physical stretching is what is required to prepare the mind for the pointing-out instructions, IMO. We have never done it up until now. We just “think” instead and avoid

all that. It is like never physically exercising. How healthy would that be?

Indeed, that part (and those questions) is indeed analytical. Yet, in my experience, those kind of questions are just foreplay to actual Insight Meditation and not part of Insight Meditation itself, not even close. Those sorts of questions are just warm up exercises to help the mind become more pliable or workable for the student, yet somehow the idea of Insight Meditation itself as “analytical” arose, probably from those type of questions. And here is the important point:

In my experience, as mentioned, actual Insight Meditation does not begin until AFTER what are called the “Pointing-Out Instructions” have pointed out the actual nature of the mind to the student and the student has got it, achieved what is called “Recognition,” being the recognition and familiarity with the true nature of the mind. And, yes, we can call that series of preliminary questions prior to “Recognition” analytical. That I would agree. Yet that, as mentioned, is purely an introduction and not itself a form of meditation or part of Insight Meditation. And, it is but one doorway to Insight Meditation. And all of this led up to the second part of the training, which Rinpoche called “The Resting Meditation of a Kusulu,” which involves allowing oneself to rest in the space created by the exhaustion of searching the mind.

So, yes. If you want to call those initial questions analytical, I would agree, but that is far from what Insight Meditation is all about. For one, this introductory analysis and their questions is dualistic, consisting of subject and object, concepts, and thinking, while Insight Meditation itself is non dualistic, a total immersion in the moment, more like the image shown here.

We could say that Insight Meditation is “Vivid Awareness,” because that is exactly what Insight Meditation is, IMO, an awareness that is so vivid that it reveals certainty, and is definitive.

People get caught and hung up coming in the door through the pointing-out instructions with this idea that Insight Meditation itself, because some textbooks say so, is somehow conceptually analytical. Yes, Insight Meditation gets down to the nitty-gritty, but viscerally and directly rather than conceptually and with thought. How to express this?

To repeat, when I hear a dharma person saying that Insight Meditation is an analytical form of meditation, I am disappointed. And this is because I don't regard Insight Meditation that way at all. And this is quite straight-forward to explain.

First, Insight Meditation is vivid clarity that is certain to the point of being definitive. What does that mean? To me it means that whatever the focus of Insight Meditation, it is vividly clear to the point of certainty. It is totally direct without any elaboration whatsoever, no second thoughts, guesses, or wondering. It is what it is. Period. And it is totally variable, depending on how it is used in our practice.

And I find that Insight Meditation is progressive in the sense that the whole (context) of whatever the focus, is a part of what is being gradually revealed, like the fabled Atlantis rising from the sea into view. We are progressively seeing more and more (and not less) of the nature of the mind, holistically as one piece, and also not going back and forth (cycling) like so many experiences, with their ups and downs. Insight Meditation is progressive, a one-way street, as I know it.

Perhaps this would be clear if we went over what is meant when we say that Insight Meditation is nondual, which means that it is not about duality, conceptuality, and thinking, which have a subject on the one hand and an object on the other.

Insight Meditation includes looking at the nature of the mind or of something, and simply resting. Insight Meditation is the immersion, the seeing itself. As to what is seen as certain, this varies. It's like Insight

Meditation plunges us into nonduality, and in that nonduality we lose our conceptual mind, and what floats up from that immersion arranges itself and makes a certain sense to us when we reemerge from Insight Meditation.

A nondual practice like Insight Meditation itself has no subject and object, and that by definition. All duality is embraced as one, a nonduality, with everything that was dualistic included and interdependent rather than separate.

What happens when we are immersed in Insight Meditation is that we are in over our head, so to speak. We can't think or conceptualize and are not aware of ourselves as a subject and something outside ourselves as an object. It is immediate immersion. It reminds me of suddenly filling an empty bathtub filled with kids toys with a barrel of water. All the toys are suddenly able to float and move around, as they will.

In that analogy, the Insight Meditation is the sudden immersion with water... and the result of the toys moving freely, a byproduct of the immersion, a response.

In a way, its like suddenly turning off all thought, worry, sense of Self, and division into subject and

object by way of the complete immersion in the present moment. With the onus of thought not available, through this sudden immersion, we can experience the present moment in a fresh and unencumbered manner. The result is that whatever subject we are involved in, surrounded by, or looking at is somehow experienced in pristine clarity for what it is. That's the "Certainty" part of Insight Meditation. Everything is crystal clear during Insight Meditation and even in retrospect, to some degree.

And so, as Insight Meditation is invoked, again and again, repeatedly, moment after moment, with each instantaneous immersion, we lose conceptual grasping, attachment, and float free of that. And, as we withdraw or come out of the immersion of Insight Meditation, the result is that whatever we were immersed in becomes (or was for that moment) increasingly clearer. From that we find or assume certainty.

The idea is that without the encumbrance of our habitual dualistic thought and conceptuality, we experience in-full the pristine clarity of being free from those dualistic habits and the web of thought they entail. Perhaps a couple of real-life examples will help.

I first experienced Insight Meditation as a photographer (a story in itself), out in the field,

crawling around in the wet grass at dawn, camera in hand, and looking through ever finer lenses at small dioramas and critters. This was a total surprise to me, as I assumed Insight Meditation would happen on the cushion while meditating. One moment I (the subject) was looking through the lens at a small frog or bug (the object)... and the next moment, instead, I was seeing the “Seeing” itself and resting in that “Seeing,” with no subject or object, but just sudden total immersion and no thought at all. The thoughts came after I reemerged, so to speak, and I was better off for the immersion. Way better off.

And a second example would be invoking Insight Meditation while writing articles such as these. One moment I am pondering the idea or thought at issue and the next I am plunged or immersed in the moment directly and 100% engaged, again, with no awareness of subject or object, but at the same time taking in the whole gestalt of the moment with no interference or second thoughts, no confusion. And when I emerge, I am then free to note and write down what I saw and experienced. It’s a bit like ducking for apples in the immediate moment. Or the Wordsworth quote “... Trailing clouds of glory do we come...” out from that immersion.

And this can be a single moment or for repeated moments, touching in, again and again. Equally, it can be complete immersion for a longer period of time. For instance, I can look up and see that 45 minutes

has passed, while I was fully engaged, but I have no memory of the passing of time.

I should also mention that the immersion experience itself, aside from being productive, is also very healing. It is time out from being mentally fraught, worried, or conceptually exhausted, giving our mind of Self a chance to heal and recover. Additionally, it is a very peaceful and addictive experience. And it is also, so the dharma texts say, that we do not accumulate karma while in Insight Meditation.

Insight Meditation is very sacred to me. I also find it very useful.

Mar 24, 2021, 8:45 PM

IT IS ALL GOOD

The deeper we are in the shadows, the brighter the light appears. This is kind of inescapable, seeing the light by its contrast with the shadows. Conceptual understanding remains superficial until it becomes certainty through Insight Meditation, through seeing its actual nature and context. Thus is the process of realization, and habitual duality its fuel.

Realization is inclusive, removing all barriers, like the line by Sir Edwin Arnold, "The dewdrop slips into the shining sea." What separates is not lost through inclusion, but remains distinct, just interdependent.

What does realization feed on, if not duality? Does realization then realize itself? Or does realization realize what is not realized, in which case duality, the unrealized, is essential. And what happens when all that is unrealized is finally realized? After all, how precious is duality?

Duality does not seem like something we dip into and then walk away, but rather something essential that we return to again and again because it is there, until what? Until full realization would be my answer. Where would we be without something that we need to know the nature of?

We recognize the nature of thoughts, meaning we doubt and don't already know the nature of them if we have to recognize them. How long does that go on? If the nature of a thought is the same for all thoughts, how long does it take for us to realize that with certainty? Is that the certainty that we seek? And what then?

This process of realization, does it go on until enlightenment, until everything that is unrealized is

realized? If so, then we feed on, and in some sense, require duality until we are fully enlightened if only to guide us by contrast with realization. And so, in that sense duality is essential to this process. Samsara is just unrealized Nirvana, so to speak, or so the pith text point out.

I guess my point is that we need not be ashamed of our attachment to duality. As the poet William Blake put it, "Eternity is in love with the productions of time," the "productions of time" being synonymous with samsara. And the delight of Insight Meditation is recognizing the nature of duality, over and over again, for as long as we are unrealized to that degree.

The truth is adamant, crystal clear, or diamond-like, and can be realized by each of us. Insight Meditation delights in putting all that together, moment by moment. Mahamudra is the dynamo process of realization. For me, the point of all this is that there is no impurity or unessential anything. Like the bodhisattva Kuntuzangpo (Samantabhadra), it is "All Good," already pure and perfect. That's the takeaway, IMO. Seeing the nature is being the nature.

Mar 25, 2021, 6:17 AM

SELF DOUBT AND IMPERMANENCE

I woke up too early. It's the middle of the night and pouring rain outside, with the temperature heading toward freezing. And sure enough, I stumble over poems like T.S. Eliot's "The Wasteland," with lines like these about spring:

"April is the cruelest month, breeding
Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing
Memory and desire, stirring
Dull roots with spring rain."

Thank goodness for the dharma, yet even with that we have to work through our doubts. Of course, we all have Self-doubt at times, questioning that odd collection of attachments (positive and negative) that we draw around ourselves like a cloak and call our personality. We even have a name.

I used to wonder if I, as this person, was going anywhere from life to life, but I gave that up long ago. Of course, all of the dharma teachings do not beat around the bush about the future of the Self, this person. It will be dropped at death's door like cast off clothing. What continues on after death and into the bardo, we could (and should) have a discussion

about, but here, today, I'm just talking about the future of this "person," and saying a few words about what we call our Self or personality.

Of course, I have watched my Self change all these years, almost from day to day. The same Self that orbited around a new bike as a five-year-old, then orbited around my first girlfriend as a teenager and on and on, not unlike a kaleidoscope.

It's what holds the Self together, that I have always wondered; what's there when you peel back all the layers? Like the old game of Pick-Up-Sticks, or the layers of an onion, when you dig through all that, there is nothing left existing at the center, no permanent being called "Michael" that goes from this life to the next. In fact, as I like to tell myself, all of these many attachments I have, themselves, are just the glue that holds this Self all together, yet are empty of permanent being. These attachments are but the centerfold. Take away those attachments and we have something like a hologram, empty indeed of any permanent personal being, so the dharma states. That kind of permanent "being" has never been established for any of us, but is just a dream we had or are still having.

And what's beyond the Self and all our attachments? Rather than something permanent and personal, it is whatever awareness we have been able to realize up

to now, yet still driven forward from life to life by our remaining desires, what is called our karma. And, as for this personality that I call "Michael," when all is said and done, there's nothing to it and no one at home as far as someone or something permanent that transmigrates from life to life. "Personality" is something we put on, like makeup, with each new rebirth. That is my understanding.

And yes, I have my grounding moments as we all do, not to mention this poem I wrote years ago about the Self, these attachments, and this cloak of personal impermanence. I called the poem "Phoenix," because, unless we can be enlightened and arise from the ashes of the Self at death and the bardo, we do continue on, nameless, driven by our relentless desires -- karma. And here I am, in the dark of this rainy night, reading my own poem about personality, a distant message I wrote and left for myself along the way. There has to be some humor here.

PHOENIX

Personality,
Bright beauty of the night,
That terrible crystal,
Burning in the darkness,
At the very edge of time.

Watching,
In rapt fascination,
Fires,
Impossible to ignore,
Forever frozen,
On the face of age.

It is a dark light,
Indeed,
Funeral pyres,
Signifying nothing,
But impermanence.

This is a fire,
That does not warm.

Mar 26, 2021, 12:44 AM

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: IMMERSION

[This is a little longish, but it centers on the relation between the stability of our Tranquility Meditation (Shamata) and the strength of Insight Meditation (Vipassana).]

As far as I can tell, I am about as expert with words as I am going to get, and that's thanks to the help of Insight Meditation (Vipassana as taught as part of Kagyu Mahamudra), which reduces everything to a kind of vivid awareness and certainty. Insight Meditation is something that (probably) you and I don't reside in all the time. We have to learn to sustain Insight Meditation.

If we can practice Insight Meditation, we tend to immerse and go into it and come out of it, and that immersion and our extraction from it is not just nothing, but contrasts for us the clarity of Insight Meditation with our "ordinary" view of life as we go in and come out of it, over and over and over again.

That alternating current or view of this "contrast" amounts to a kind of "light" that we can see by, that comparison of Insight Meditation's clarity and our normal lack of it. There is a contrast between the two views that is remarkable. Certainly, in my experience, Insight Meditation informs my ordinary more-confused

mind, and for the better at that. I get something out of it. However, that contrast or “light” (over time) has diminishing returns, and thus grows dimmer, meaning there is less contrast all the time, as I understand it, by the fact that Insight Meditation (being preferred) increasingly dominates our view, and that is because it is a better or more true view or sense of vision. In other words, over time, our view evens out and stabilizes, until we are doing Insight Meditation, much or even most of the time off the cushion, in what is termed post-mediation.

And so, everything that at first appears unique, gradually normalizes and evens out to a stable state, or perhaps we could say: to a gentle roar. As for me, I “see” through the process of writing about just where I am in the present moment, which is why I write so much. For me, writing is a habit that clarifies. There is nothing magical about truth. At first unique, in time truth and the clarity of truth becomes an everyday rarity that we become used to. I can’t help but wonder what replaces that original “contrast” or comparison between the vivid clarity of Insight Meditation and what was my normal or ordinary mind?

If nothing else, the diminishing contrast (yet increasing Insight Meditation) becomes a stable platform for I don’t know yet just what. As I have written elsewhere, it is like trying to see in a whiteout, the lack of contrast in a blizzard or snowstorm because of diminishing shadows. If we can no longer

see with our eyes based on contrast, so to speak, we will have to develop others, perhaps through feeling our way.

All of these different levels as described in the mind training texts seem so subtle, but that probably is just because we view it from such a distance and “through a glass darkly” at that, so to speak. In reality, these different “bhumis” or levels are obvious and clear as a bell, once we arrive at them. If they appear as pure fog as we read about them just now, this just indicates that our sensitivity is not yet fine enough to distinguish them, one from the other.

I don’t know what the final answer is, but I have learned enough to understand that just as one chakra or life-level bottoms out, so to speak, meaning that it equalizes into what might appear as a static state or level ground, this just serves as a platform or ground from which to build upon and thus we move on. Yet, it takes time and will not be hurried. “No wine before its time,” as the old Orson Wells pitch put it.

So, if we can’t stand to wait, we still have to wait until we can see to act. That’s my view. For me, it’s like trying to read in one of the many pith dharma books I have. They are so compact, so “pithy” that they are not an everyday read. Some days, they open up and I understand something, while on others they are all Greek to me. This, I believe, depends on the state of

my Shamata (Tranquility Meditation). If my Shamata is stable, then Insight Meditation sees, but if my Shamata is shaky, Insight Meditation is intermittent if there at all.

I assumed that the intermittency was perhaps just due to my advancing age, and I am sure, to a degree it is. Yet, there is probably another factor, the inability (on certain days) for my Shamata to be stable, with the result that I may be immersed in a thought or idea using Insight Meditation, but somehow pop out of that Insight Meditation, and can't even remember what I saw when I was in it, at least enough to finish the sentence I was writing. My "popping out" of Insight Meditation through distraction blew that more subtle area I was monitoring right out of the park.

When I enter Insight Meditation, I am immersed completely, and that pretty much by definition. Remaining in Insight Meditation seems to depend on practice and perhaps by the shakiness of the day. I can pop in and out of Insight Meditation, not so much by accident, but as based on the stability of my Shamata (Tranquility Meditation). It's like trying to tune in a radio station, but fine tuning that station can be subtle, and we can alternately lose or find the station or insight we have in mind. When we are immersed, we can see, but if we pop out of it, we may or may not remember what we were seeing before we popped out.

The stability of our Shamata is crucial as far as dictating how long we can sample the vivid awareness of Insight Meditation. If our Shamata is strong, Insight Meditation can be maintained for a longer period of time. If not, then our Insight Meditation is intermittent or not possible at all. This is where dharma practice comes in.

Again, as mentioned with the analogy of finetuning a subtle radio station, the slightest movement (here read: distraction) and we lose the station and perhaps have to find it all over again.

And practice is not some slavish or crude technique, but one driven by our interest in the subject at hand and our ability to surrender and stabilize in the present moment. Perhaps, this discussion is just a clever way of masking my aging memory, yet I doubt that it is as simple as that. It probably is more because of my lack of the ability to hone the technique of Shamata as far as fine tuning is concerned.

And what interrupts the Insight Meditation is distraction, being distracted from being unwaveringly attentive to Insight Meditation. Is distraction just an ingrained habit? As a hedge against this subtle distraction, I have made it more of a habit to write down where I am at, sooner than later. If I have a thought and am distracted, unless I write it down the

moment I am distracted, more often than not, if I come back to it after the distraction, I can't remember where I was or what I should have written down, and have half a sentence written, with no idea of what the other half would have been. That station I was tuned into is that subtle.

Just what is it that distracts me and why am I distracted if what I am having insight over is so fascinating? It's not a question of blame or fault, but rather one of remaining unwavering at attention. In other words, just stay with the insight and don't give in to the distraction or imagine that you can return to just where you left off. Not likely in my case. This is food for thought.

And so, the takeaway is that our Insight Meditation is only as good as the Shamata it stands on. And that because Shamata is required for Insight Meditation to work. My favorite way of explaining the two, Shamata and Insight Meditation, is that it is like trying to thread a very fine needle with shaky hands. Shamata takes the shakiness of the hands, so Insight Meditation can thread the needle.

THE EDGE OF NONSENSE

What is the sense in living at the very edge of nonsense? Is the near edge of nonsense, which barely makes sense, any fresher than anywhere else? Yes, I believe it is and I like to hang out there, where the view is chasmic. I like that sense of vast space.

And nonsense kind of defines sense if we walk the perimeter. Certainly, my favorite poet Gerard Manley Hopkins (along with Shakespeare) walked on the wild side of language, eliding consonants and vowels together until they hummed and sung their own tune. To me, the sound of language spoken speaks through and beyond words a song both subtle and sublime, if you will hear it.

This reminds me of a poem I wrote many years ago that is an example of what I call a “mantra” poem.

OUTSETTING SONG

That song is sung,
That singing,
Sets inside itself,
Outsetting song,

That sings,
And singing.
Sets itself,
In song.

Song that sang,
Which sung,
Is singing still.

Mar 27, 2021, 1:44 PM

THE DEPTH OF IMPRESSIONS

The winds of change or the changing winds blow one way today and another tomorrow, like a rollercoaster. I'm tired of being a victim of my own whims, yet what can I do. There is what I call a "pendulum swing," which is basically cyclic, a spiral, but it manifests as ups and downs on either side of what could be called a happy medium, which ideally would be me.

It is most manifest in my own writing, like articles written for posting here. An article I write in the

evening, by morning is sometimes no longer acceptable by me, and vice versa. What I don't like last night can be acceptable the next morning. And the gap and tolerance of the two extremes is not wide, nevertheless it is wide enough for acceptance or rejection and that's enough to matter.

It just goes to show the degree of my fickleness, what feels right or can be off enough to require rewriting (at least tweaking) or sometimes outright rejection.

This is how expensive in terms of time my feelings can be. It's not enough that you and I can disagree; I can't always agree with my own self with something I was happy as short as a day ago.

And the funny thing, what is humorous, is that these differences don't amount to a hill of beans, as they say. And so, it's not what I write that is important, but rather how I feel about it. And by that, I mean whether I feel I am in synch or in touch with my own intuition and sense of truth. However, and here is the funny part, that truth is like a moving goalpost, changing from day to day.

So, its not like there is an outer truth that I could show to the world, but rather I have an inner sense of being on my own contacts, true to myself. Yet, as mentioned, that is a moving target, always changing.

So, there has to be humor in there somewhere, because it does not strictly make sense.

My being true to myself is something only I know and that truth is of this present moment; its use-by-date is sometimes shorter than even one day. And the fact that a day, week, or month later I have moved on, changed, and have a different view today (in this present moment) does not seem to bother me at all. That inconsistency troubles me not a bit.

So, the takeaway seems to be “To Thine Own Self Be True” in the present moment and let time view it however it may, because as the W.B. Yeats line says so perfectly:

“The mountain grass cannot but keep the form where the mountain hare has lain.”

As they say, “That’s what I’m talkin’ about.”

Mar 28, 2021, 1:34 PM

WE BECOME WHAT WE WANT

What we “want” is a big deal, especially in astrology where something in our chart that we want or lack can be fascinating, compelling us to do everything we can to fill that empty space or void. Especially in teaching about the balance of the Four Elements in classical astrology (Fire, Water, Air, and Earth). Those elements that we have no planets in, we lack or want and seem to bend over backward trying to fill the gap and emptiness. In my case I am mostly earth and fire, with only one planet in an Air Sign, Jupiter in Gemini in the 7th House, so writing (Gemini) for others (7th House), and Jupiter (Life Path or career) makes perfect sense.

I have always liked the idea that “We become what we want” or lack, as in, we try to fill in the gap or turn toward what we want. As for where do we get the “turn toward? This from the less common definition of becoming as “Doesn’t that dress becomes her,” and the sense of orienting or turning toward. With the dharma teachings, we understand that our being, in any permanent sense has never “been,” but at best is only becoming (seeming to resemble being) and will never arrive as a permanent being. So, we are somewhat empty of being, like a hologram. And so I puzzle over the fact that we can’t lose what we never had, yet we feel something is missing.

Mar 29, 2021, 7:01 PM

CAN WE MAKE AN EFFORT TO RELAX?

I believe my Insight Meditation practice is, how to say this, well, “rounding up,” so to speak. It is no longer a problem, at least as long as I mind my own business and don’t tinker with it.

In other words, in my dharma practice, Insight Meditation is leveling off, normalizing, and showing no impediments, provided, as I mentioned, I don’t make any efforts to alter it or get distracted so that I pop out of it. While it is not a big deal, it is somewhat of a big deal, at least for me.

If nothing else, it marks the end (or settling down) of thirteen or so years of learning how best for me to practice Insight Meditation. And I mean concerted effort, with it on my mind most all of the time, unless I stop to think. And so, just what am I describing here all about and feel like, the normalizing of Insight Meditation?

I could say it’s a “new normal,” yet I don’t like that phrase very much, because it was used at the hospital to describe how I should respond to the major stroke that I had a couple of years ago, “get used to a new normal.” Of course, I knew what they meant, yet

to me at the time, this phrase seemed like a cheap shot and not at all descriptive of what I was actually experiencing. It reminds me of the first time I took LSD, back in 1964 in Berkeley, California, and a friend tried to put on some music and light a candle, while others watched me trip out. Not exactly what I had in mind, and I was soon out the door and totally involved in touring my own mind, warts and all.

“New,” Yes, but “Normal,” No, not so much, because to normalize the space or experience that opened up from the stroke experience could not be normalized short of enlightenment, which is a far trek from where I am at today. Yet, as The Bard wrote, “Distance is now near,” or nearer, nevertheless.

On the day-to-day level, I use Insight Meditation in what is called post-meditation, meaning by that, most of the day-to-day time, rather than just when I am sitting on the cushion. And I do Insight Meditation with whatever I am doing, and as that is mostly writing articles these years, and I do Insight Meditation while I write, yet it took me a long time to be able to write and meditate at the same time, so writing with Insight Meditation is something I wanted to be able to do and I worked at it until I could. It took over a year of great effort for me to even begin to do that -- write and also meditate.

So, here I am (even now, this second) fiddling with words and also being mindful. Yet, “mindful” is not the right word, because it sounds like I’m making an effort to “think,” while Insight Meditation is, in my experience (and by definition), effortless. It took effort to learn to do it, but itself, Insight Meditation is effortless. It’s like the old admonition “Hurry up and wait,” but more like “Work hard to relax and let go.” It’s an oxymoron, but also something like haiku.

Whatever the case, this kind of meditation requires me to settle down, mostly relax, and at first stabilize the mind. And on that foundation or stable platform, Insight Meditation can arise or can be launched. Insight Meditation stands on or is based on the degree of stabilization (Shamata) we have. The two work together as a dynamic duo, so to speak, Tranquility Meditation (Shamata) and Insight Meditation (Vipassana).

I immerse myself (or allow myself to be immersed) and slip into Insight Meditation, which is more like relaxing (rather than willfully plunging) into the waters of awareness over my head, meaning going beyond conceptual thought in its role as a hindrance. That immersion in the freshness of the present moment is itself liberating, freeing, and healing – all at once.

It’s something like plunging into a pool from a diving board, yet as mentioned, not by will, but rather like

allowing myself to fall into Insight Meditation, in the sense that there is no going back once you have left the diving board and “thinking” won’t help you now, and “thinking conceptually” is soon lost as you plunge beneath the waters of Insight Meditation. Then again, it reminds me of when I used to board a plane and it took off. There was absolutely nothing I could do at that point other than accept my situation and go with it. It was beyond my control. Insight Meditation is something like that, almost like learning to float. The effort is to not make an effort, so to speak.

Of course, it is much more nuanced or “real time” than that, than words can describe. I am plunged into Insight Meditation, yet still can “Think and do,” yet not be buffeted by a conceptually busy mind whirling around in my head like a bunch of mosquitos.

Insight Meditation is direct vivid awareness while in the process of revealing the certainty of whatever I am focused on. Yes, I am focused, meaning there can be a subject and an object, but no sense of separation of the two. It’s not actively dualistic. With Insight Meditation, everything is included within its embrace. yet everything is interdependent or “One.” The idea is one of “revelation,” of certainty being revealed incrementally or sometimes all at once.

A hopeless effort here, but perhaps something leaks through.

Mar 30, 2021, 7:31 AM

CAST IN THE FORM OF DHARMA

As to dharma, I have been on my own for so long that it seems like home to me. I had the best possible instruction from an impeccable dharma teacher, yet perhaps never enough one-on-one time with Rinpoche. For example, we would meet with Rinpoche for a personal interview once a year at our monastery in the mountains above Woodstock, New York at the 10-Day Mahamudra teachings for perhaps fifteen minutes. So, if Margaret and I pooled together our 15 minutes, we had a half hour with Rinpoche, shortened by the fact that everything had to be translated which took up a lot of time. We would ask the translator, who would ask Rinpoche, who would answer to the translator, who then would relate to us what Rinpoche said. That took about half the time just there.

As mentioned, we had minimal personal communication with Rinpoche. Of course, for 31 years we had the 10-Day Mahamudra intensives, sitting with Rinpoche morning and afternoon for ten days for 31 years of instruction, not to mention the scores of empowerments. That was incredible. Rinpoche also made many trips to our dharma center

over the years, and we got to spend more time with him then.

What I am getting at here is not a complaint or a whine on my part, but rather a simple observation. Being taught well, but still left quite on my own as far as implementing the teachings, seems to have had one clear result, and that is that it was up to my own devices to implement all these dharma teachings.

And in that process, it seems to me that I have come up with (which each of us must do) my own particular path or way of understanding the dharma. As far as dharma is concerned, when it comes to the status of my personal practice, until now I have always looked forward to the future of that practice and almost never at the present state of it, as to what I have become all these years up until now.

Of late, why this is coming up now I don't know, yet I am getting more of a sense, not just as to what I have not yet accomplished, which I am used to, but rather as to just where I am and what I have become or actually achieved. It is a bit of a surprise, because it's a kind of confirmation, and that IS new to me.

What it seems is that I am actually grounded to a considerable degree in practical dharma based on my own experiences and their gradual realization. Whose

experience other than my own have I had? Couple that with there being very little exchange between myself and dharma friends, not to mention the lamas I knew (I supposed they knew what I was trying to learn), I had mostly to figure it all out on my own, as best I could, and this as gathered from my dharma experience and my own mind. It seems folks don't like to talk about their dharma experiences with one another. Not me. From my trips to Tibet, I knew the monks there seriously talked with one another. Why not Americans?

And now, many years later, as I try to match up my experience with the experience of others as best I can, I feel, as mentioned, that I mostly have learned on my own rather than from a group or from other individuals. As mentioned, many dharma students do not like or want to talk about their own practice, yet I never felt that way. I would have loved to compare paths and learn from one another, step by step, yet for the most part that did not happen. Everyone I knew kept that to themselves. Why, its hard to understand.

It's happening a little more now, some dharma exchange with others and this is why I am writing this. I find that different folks have different approaches to the dharma. Our individual dharma is not cookie-cutter by any means. I'm sure this is all understandable; I just had not realized how different each of our paths are and could be from one another,

although I'm sure there is also a lot of evidence that we are similar in many ways as well. We are all going for the same eventual result, just by different roads.

I find that I am much less abstract than I thought or imagined and generally more pragmatic, rooted in practical experience as threadbare as that may have appeared to me. I seldom stray far from my own hands-on experience because conceptual dharma alone often makes little to no sense to me. I am not advanced enough "practically" to understand it, and theoretical understanding, while interesting of course, is not something I can hang my hat on. For me, it is all about practicality.

And it seems that we each are in our own little world of dharma, using what makes sense to us, and straying too far from that it is fruitless. I don't go there, not because I did not try, but because nothing came of it. What I know is based not only on my own experiences themselves, but from what I have realized from those experiences, what actually works for me.

Please don't get me wrong. I am not by any means a finished dharma practitioner, yet I feel I am generally now functional and have all my fingers and all my toes, so to speak. I'm good to go, and I believe I can be useful to others. I'm not what I imagined that I would be or was supposed to be, as gleaned from

reading the dharma books, yet as mentioned, I am functional. In some way that is not entirely clear to me, I have finished basic dharma training, at least enough to give myself my own blessing, and not protest or apologize. That's a first. And, of course, all of Rinpoche's students are filled with his blessing.

I have come to see that dharma is everywhere and in everything we do. Whether it looks like dharma to anyone else, it is dharma as I know it. I feel like I'm one of those rupas (statues) from Nepal that result from the lost-wax process, a mold filled with wax, where the wax is then melted and replaced with bronze or some metal, producing a statue. At this point, I feel released from the mold, intact, but I still have much of the finer finishing to be done. However, I am already filled with Rinpoche.

And no, I'm not at any very high dharma level, nor need I be. I am content, which for those who understand the word is saying a lot. I am imperfect, but perfectly imperfect, if that makes sense. "I am what I am, and that's all that I am," said Popeye the sailor man.

It's a long journey for any one of us here in Samsara. And for all my imperfections, I am unbreakable, because the dharma I hold within me is adamant, unbreakable.

Mar 31, 2021, 5:56 AM